



City stories

Description

I am investigating the potential role of conversational AI in the city. Some planning theory asserts an inevitable link between words and urban space. Planning theorist Lieven Ameel summarises this state of professional urban intervention in a 2017 article.

The paradigm shift from a top-down kind of planning towards a more dialogic, participatory and discursive form of planning also includes a move towards the acknowledgement and increasing use of diverse urban narratives [319].

Planner and theorist James Throgmorton advocates that we think of planners (and others involved in planning) as authors who write texts (plans, analyses, articles) that can be read (constructed and interpreted) in diverse and often conflicting ways [127].

His book *Planning as Persuasive Storytelling*, and follow-up articles, identifies key narrative elements in the planner's craft: authors, characters, settings, and plots.

These planner-authors have to build conflict, crisis, and resolution into their narratives, such that key antagonists are somehow changed or moved significantly [127].

As authors, planners draw not only on the imagery and rhythm of language, but also the language of statistical models, forecasts, GIS-based maps, three dimensional architectural renderings and virtual reality models, surveys, advisory committees, and other persuasive figures of speech and argument, or tropes [127]. By these and other linguistic means planners seek to persuade readers and influence the course of events in the city.

The main audience of Throgmorton's argument is professional planners, but we may presume that the same narrative processes apply to all participants in urban change, including elected officials, developers, commercial interests, citizen groups, and individuals.

This story-telling orientation is not without controversy. Throgmorton notes the countervailing presupposition that practicing planners

can be neutral, objective, rational adjudicators of the public interest, and that their texts have a single literal meaning (the one planners intend) that any intelligent person can grasp [128].

Such traditionalists would argue that deviation from evidence-based validation into the territory of story-telling invokes the possibility of falsehoods, figments of imagination: “making something up, writing fiction, telling lies” [131].

But for Throgmorton, story-telling serves as a vehicle for establishing meaning that seeks to bring people round to particular points of view. This linguistic reframing enriches the planner’s role.

To ask about meaning and persuasiveness rather than truth is to shift attention from technical accuracy to a combination of accuracy and normative evaluation [131].

This approach to professional expertise constitutes a distinctly [hermeneutical](#) position that I have rehearsed elsewhere. Observations, evidence gathering, calculations, mapping and technical practices are subject to the processes of interpretation “in their selection, adoption, methods, the weight we attach to them, and their application.”

AI story-telling

At least in their current iterations, conversational AI platforms are good at creating stories. See post: [I took my AI on a holiday](#). In that post I recounted how chatGPT constructed a plausible story about an indentured labourer working in a cotton plantation in Mauritius; and another story about the last remaining dodo.

A few months ago I ran a class in which we invited groups of students to recruit chatGPT to construct stories featuring the group members by name, to assign roles to them and weave a story about their complicity in some global catastrophe. ChatGPT delivered imaginative stories with the same alacrity as if prompted to write code in Python.

Tutored by its data sources and no doubt some fine tuning, the stories had a particular flavour. Even with such dark prompting, the stories inevitably ended on a note of optimism about global recovery and a brighter future.

How might urban planners and decision makers marshal AI story-telling in the service of some “useful and meaningful urban mediation or intervention”? I’ll leave that question to hover for the time being.

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Note

- The featured image was produced by Dall-e, prompted by: Please provide an image about writing the post-apocalyptic city, as if writing a story. Don't include human characters.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence

Tags

1. hermeneutics
2. narrative
3. story telling

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