

OBSERVATIONS

WHAT IF WE USED NARRATIVES AS A TOOL

ALL ABOUT THE BENEFITS
OF A STORYLINE IN YOUR
DESIGN PROCESS



What if we used narratives as a tool?

The term *narrative architecture* refers to the concept that buildings have something to say, or that something is communicated through them. The term carries the implication that architecture cannot hide its context, nor the inherent message inscribed in it by the architect or the society that produced it (even if the message was placed there unintentionally).

This idea is linked to the *architecture parlante* Claude-Nicolas Ledoux referred to, when he makes the case that the design of buildings should reflect their purpose. The aim of *architecture parlante* as I understand it would be to make architecture readable. Furthermore I would even go so far as to say that the final goal is to make the architecture understood by the public that encounters it. Ledoux's thought was influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas of an egalitarian society. While the former did not entirely remove hierarchy from his designs and concepts, I would argue that transparency still is one of the main objectives of his architecture.

But I would claim that the term *narrative*

architecture is misleading. The examples that we identify as such rather describe a *narrating architecture*. Regardless of the name we choose to assign to this concept, this is not what this text will be about. Instead, it is about how narratives are used as a design tool for architects - from the first spark of an idea up until the point of presenting this idea to others.

We experimented with this concept as a group of students, a studio at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, in the wintersemester of 2020/2021. The design studio was called "(Cautionary) Tales of Disappearing Offices" and organized by Prof. Cepl and Dr. Perera. The Tale in the title already announces the narration. For most of us, it was the first time that a narrative was brought up so early in the process - before the individual topics had even formed. I want to use this studio to reflect on how narratives aided our design process. Of course, the assessment of the influence from one on the other can never be completely certain. We have no way of knowing what the alternatives might have been, as students only followed through in the one way they chose.

What if city centres were empty during lunch breaks?

Public spaces would be populated more evenly (no noticeable peak time)

Animals that live in these spaces would have a better chance at adapting to the more regular presence of humans. They wouldn't be driven out over and over again.

one wouldn't be so (physically) close to people from different backgrounds anymore

less interaction and exchange of ideas

less interaction and exchange of ideas

social tension

division

unrest and revolt

civil war

political reactions

violent suppression

referendum

end of the democracy

From the question "What if city centres were empty during lunch breaks?" several linear strands developed. Determining one consequence was followed by the next and so on, until it unfortunately ended with either civil war or the end of democracy (it was the late summer of 2020 after the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, racial injustice caused global solidarity protests and climate change was still not met with an appropriate reaction by decision makers - the possibility of positive outcomes looked tiny from right there).

What if the architecture is the narrative?

From the first meeting on, students were guided towards developing a scenario for the future by making up a story. The focus was placed on office spaces and work in order to frame the context of our assignment. In an associative exercise, each student followed one “What if...?” sentence referring to the future of offices in the cities until it formed a scenario. These sentences were made up spontaneously. This gave us license to begin from a place in which the outcome is uncertain - allowing the narrative to take the lead. From that first question, we traced the chain of dominos which introduced a linear quality to the process - a key characteristic of narration. The process was not haphazard but followed reactions that built upon each other. Nigel Coates puts this linear quality in the context of other ways of presentation by saying:

“With roots in the Latin verb ,narrare‘, a narrative organises events of a real or fictional nature into a sequence recounted by the ,narrator‘. Along with exposition, argumentation and description, narration is one of four categories of rhetoric.”⁷

Designers can turn this rhetoric into a framework for their ideas and for their designs - much like sequences of argumentation would help organize the structure of a speech or like the rules of description are intended to generate the most objective reproduction of whatever it is you are describing. While we have already defined what narratives are,

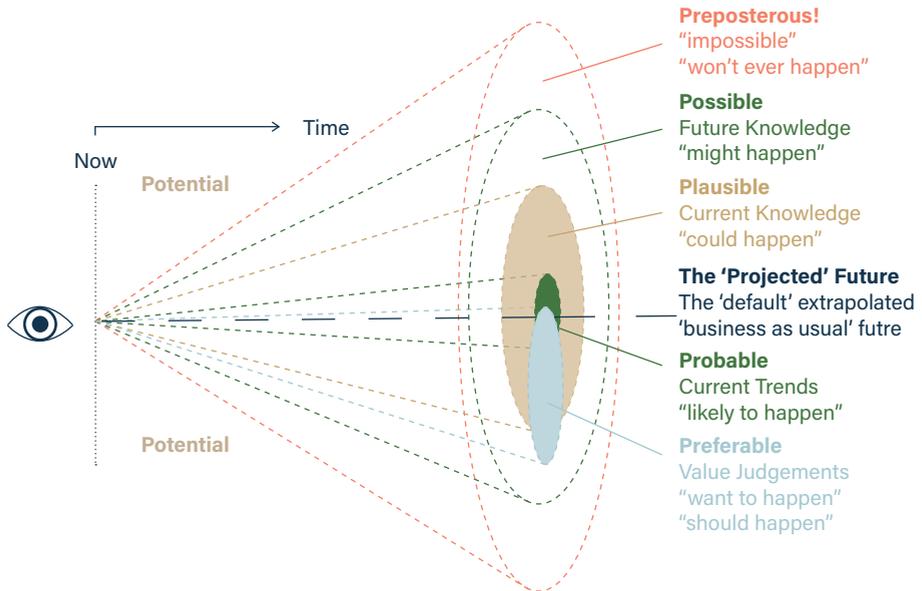
I would also like to refer to the explanation of “narrative” as found in a German dictionary. It is described as “a [connective] story that makes sense of something ([verbindende] sinnstiftende Erzählung).⁸ According to this, a narrative would be equivalent to something explanatory. This brings up the question of why design would need a tool to explain itself in the first place? In our case, it was certainly a tool to explain the connections between formerly abstract topics to ourselves, aiding us students to digest the input.

To linger on the topic of storytelling for a bit longer, Russian director Lew Kuleschow argued exactly that: our brain constructs stories even out of disjointed sequences of input in order to make sense of them. Following this, he experimented with montages in film, connecting unrelated images in order to see what viewers would make of it. In our studio, making logical connections was not only a way to convey the stories to an audience but also to oneself. This process led us to explore unfamiliar fields of future scenarios, parallel realities and spaces that we could not yet know. Keeping the overview by following a linear path was going to help students to stay inside the frame and not get lost in the endless possibilities.

Keeping it framed

In order to cope with this initial uncertainty of where the starting point would lead, we established that the outcome of our narrative was at this stage, unknown. It was this that made the process of design possible in the first place. To prohibit the project from

7 types of alternative futures



going off the rails, a certain framework was needed. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, who we will consult later on speculative design, call this starting point a "justified base"⁴⁹ with explorative toppings - in our studio, this base was a value framework which was the precondition for our designs. Once this base was laid out, the playful and experimental process kicked off. Playing around with different variations of outcomes comes naturally to most architecture students as we are trained to draw variation over variation, and in the exchange with our teachers and peers, new ideas arise. Various formats started taking shape, from a board game and a card deck to a comic and a postcard or an opera and a short movie.

Inside this framework, the students were supposed to push scenarios to a breaking

point, hoping that this would uncover a new order that was unforeseeable had we not chosen that particular path. Thomas Fischer has spoken about "constraint reversal" which means that instead of outlining a desired goal, one defines no-go zones that one wishes to avoid. This creates a large space of exploration and all discoveries made in this space can be considered valid - a soothing thought when starting a project in an unknown area. For us, the only no-go zone was in the field of 'preposterous' futures (see diagram above), aiming at placing them in the 'plausible' area of this visualisation.

And how did we move inside this framework? How could students move toward visualising ideas that are far beyond our reality? I like to see narratives as a soft introduction to speculative design. Instead of asking

students to simply go ahead and apply a design method which they have perhaps never been in touch with before, narratives present guidance: a well-known framework in which students can move more freely. Dunne and Raby explain that speculative design is not bound to commercial logic. It should ask questions, provide new perspectives, step out of the everyday and look at things afresh.¹⁰ It is precisely this freedom of testing that architects are only really permitted to do in academia - once we left the haven of university, the profession allows for little erring. In a juxtaposition that can be found on the opposite page, Dunne and Raby portray the different qualities of *regular design* vs. *speculative design*. The authors don't want this list to be understood as 'versus' but rather something that other lists of possible qualities might be added to in the future.

The four aspects that apply most to our studio are highlighted. First, we'll look at the contrast of *regular design* 'for how the world is' and *speculative design* 'for how the world could be'. This aspect was perhaps the trickiest because it meant first designing the possible world itself, before we could begin designing for this world. Taking my project as an example, in the end, thinking of all the foreseeable consequences for the future of work took up so much time and effort that designing for this world was just an add on in the project - most of it is only outlined or suggested and handed over to the readers' imagination. The project offers a stage upon which clashes become visible, but it is up to the reader to visualise the results. Next on Dunne's and Raby's list is 'research for design' (*regular*) and 'research through design'

(*speculative*). Speculation is a research tool that we experimented with. Especially in the context of the wicked problems which we tried to tackle with our projects, speculative design might be the only tool that can be safely applied. Next, *Regular design* 'makes us buy' and *speculative design* 'makes us think'. Today, we become more and more aware of the fact that we actually pay for far more things than just goods with far more than just money - if not with financial commodities, we pay with data. Users (which is everyone, really) become the product, as McKenzie Wark explains.¹¹ The projects of our studio don't present any outcome that could cause a wish to purchase, build or produce. Instead, they trigger further thoughts on the topics they investigate. Egor Gavrilov's story about The Creatives, for example, makes one question the hospitality of cities by suggesting that people who wanted to live out their creativity full-time moved out of them. Or Victoria Grossard's deck of tarot cards raises questions about whether you are really as much of an atheist or agnostic as you thought. Maybe you have been faithful to the church of work all along.

The way these examples engage the audience is in the last point I highlighted on Dunne's and Raby's list: by 'provocation' (*speculative*) in opposition to 'innovation' (*regular*). Presenting people with cautionary tales, with the possibilities of a not-so-desirable but imaginable future in the format of a narrative which they can identify with, is scary. It provokes a reaction - at least an opinion about what they just saw - which is more engagement than many regular designs get out of their audience. This process is still simi-

affirmative
problem solving
design as process
provides answers
in the service of industry
for how the world is
science fiction
futures
fictional functions
change the world to suit us
narratives of production
anti-art
research for design
applications
design for production
fun
concept design
consumer
makes us buy
innovation
ergonomics

critical
problem finding
design as medium
ask questions
in the service of society
for how the world could be
social fiction
alternative worlds
functional fictions
change the us to suit the world
narratives of consumption
applied art
research through design
implications
design for debate
satire
conceptual design
citizen
makes us think
provocation
rhetoric

lar to the speculative architecture of the 60s when architecture was first used as a critical medium - not just to find alternatives but to interrogate and question the kind of assumptions and values shaking contemporary life.¹²

Wicked!

Moving from the tool to the topic that our studio was concerned with: The future of workplaces and cities is far more complex than just finding new floorplans for the home office. It is tangled in countless connections from social issues to infrastructure, from everyday life to global politics. It therefore is a *wicked problem* as Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber defined them. According to them, it is neither possible to give a set definition of the issue, nor will it be possible to say whether we have solved it or not. The solution can only be judged as bad or good. This will be subjective again since there are multiple solutions and one must make a decision about which parameters one values more based on ideology and personal interests.¹³ By designing with a narrative in mind, students followed a linear path through a wicked and connected landscape of issues. We didn't try to tame them, but it certainly helped to tackle an attempt at re-solution.

The set goal for this studio was to turn "wicked issues into wicked possibilities".¹⁴ The wickedness of their outcome manifests in the manifold ways in which different aspects of our existence on earth were taken into account by different students. Victoria Grosardt concentrated on institutions as influential, semi-religious structures; Zoe Pianaro

developed a project around the change in time perception and time as a literal commodity. By being joined in this studio, we students were able to follow the others on their paths towards a suggestion of a scenario. While topics of interest overlapped, we could all benefit from watching the others take their ideas further in other directions. This would already close off certain paths to follow, as we could rest assured that this particular story would be told in the end and we could all benefit from the insight gained by listening to weekly presentations on their progress.

Instrumentalize the narrative

Maybe the noblest but also the most distant goal of these projects is that they are meant to have an impact. We took the freedom of experimenting in academia, paired it with the endless possibilities of speculative design and created a project that was still possible to be communicated, thanks to its legible structure. Now, the new understanding we gained could be used further to inform and form policies. "Through the process of naming and framing, the tales can assist to make the narrative leap from data to recommendations."¹⁵ as Dulmini Perera puts it. Consulting Horst Rittel once again, he writes that instrumental knowledge links facts [Sachverhalte] to instructions [Handlungsanweisungen] aiming at achieving goals.¹⁶ Similar to the *wicked problems*, he draws a line between two groups. On one side there are scientists. According to Horst Rittel, scientists can not instruct policies if they want to behave according to their professional ethos. They should explore in a reliable

and systematic way what is and not what should be. If a scientist was to give advice on policymaking, they would stray from the base of their qualification and be no different from ordinary people from that point forward. On the other side of that division are politicians. Their actions, just like all other responsible actions, are based on estimating and evaluating the possible consequences.¹⁷

Both ways - including scientists in the process of policymaking and excluding them - have a certain appeal. By separating scientists from policymaking, one benefits from the expertise of both fields: politicians are responsible for measures, regulation and foreseeing the consequences of certain actions, while scientists could contribute their specialist knowledge without taking the consequences into consideration. They can act without fearing the consequences of the

results. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic also showed that it provides a feeling of safety to know that people involved in decision-making actually know how to calculate the consequences. The most responsible epidemiologists limit themselves to discussing the plain facts about the virus' spread. Nonetheless, many among the general population cling to every hint of an instruction that can be deduced from their words.

In our case, architecture profits from being in between fields of study. The designs we created are not just a set of provocative assumptions. They are meant to attract politicians and citizens into a reflexive discussion about their actions and start a process of evaluation; evaluating plausible futures that were visualised with the help of a narrative.

Notes

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15. Perera, "Why Tell Cautionary Tales?," 23
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17. Rittel, *Instrumentelles Wissen*, 200

Images

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p. 7 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), VII

Further Reading and Listening

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