

Elisabeth Haefs

Cultivation Builds Community:  
Narrative in Urban Planning for Community Gardens



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# 1 Introduction

This dissertation presents an attempt to analyse narratives in urban planning documents (plans, brochures, flyers, marketing texts, and image films) from the cities of Portland, Oregon (US) and Essen (Germany). The *City Scripts* research group provides the context for this endeavour.<sup>1</sup> The central objects of the analysis are municipal texts concerning the promotion, planning, and implementation of community gardening. In this specific subset of sustainable and inclusive urban planning, community gardening is frequently cast as a utopian space promising manifold benefits to its participants and to the surrounding urban fabric, the principal among those promises being community building.

The academic relevance of this approach arises from the increasing study of narratives outside of the Literary Studies repertoire, which usually concerns itself with literature and other forms of literary texts. Especially in the related field of narratology, much of the conducted research is not only concerned with classical narratives, but with phenomena and processes of everyday life and fields outside of literature, such as law, medicine, or science. Narrative, as a basic human communication tool, permeates all aspects of human experience and, simultaneously, encodes human experience. Consequently, the spatial turn in the humanities and social science, and the narrative turn in geography, social science, and in the humanities as well (see Kreiswirth; Bal; Sandercock 2003, 2010), establish the foundation for this dissertation. In short, the spatial turn denotes the paradigm shift of critical thought towards the conditions and the production of spatial characteristics as anticipated by, for instance, Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja (Döring and Thielmann 7-8; Lefebvre; Soja). The narrative turn, then, implies an interdisciplinary turn towards narrative as method and research object, as the “study of story has been effectively dislodged from its original academic home in the humanities” (Kreiswirth 378).

This dissertation is also a reply to the equally increasing examination of urban space as an environment that fundamentally shapes, and is shaped by, human dwelling and human experience. Usually researched by geographers and sociologists rather than literary scholars, the urban sphere has come into focus as the space where more than half of humankind lives, a development which is projected to increase in the future, as “68% of the world population” will “live in urban areas by 2050” (United Nations). Due to this dissertation’s focus on narrative in pragmatic urban texts that plan and

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1 The research group *Scripts for Postindustrial Urban Futures: American Models, Transatlantic Interventions* ([www.cityscripts.de](http://www.cityscripts.de)) was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (VolkswagenStiftung) and based at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Ruhr University Bochum, and the Technical University of Dortmund. It explores the imaginative strategies and narrative scenarios developed by the centres of old industries in the US and Germany to shape their futures. This dissertation is the product of one of the seven doctoral projects of the research group. (Field) research on gardens and cities covers developments until the end of 2022.

promote community gardening, it can be firmly integrated into the field of Literary Urban Studies.

As Mitchell McLarnon declares, community gardens “don’t magically sprout bountiful benefits” (McLarnon). In this short verdict, the educational scholar not only plays with the typical gardening language of ‘sprouting’ and ‘bounty’, but he also touches on the variety of themes and expectations linked to community gardening in the urban realm. Community gardening is expected to alleviate food insecurity, address environmental injustice, and build an inclusive community on the way, among many more high goals set for these green plots in the city.<sup>2</sup> Although not exclusively, this applies especially to Western postindustrial cities which have lost their lifeline industries and look to new possibilities of crafting their futures and characterising their city’s uniqueness. One of the main tools to achieve such new visions – by emplotting alleged ‘saviours’ of the city, such as the garden, smart housing, attractive rebuilt waterfronts, or creative city quarters,<sup>3</sup> within the planning documents – is narrative.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, this dissertation is an attempt to untangle the narrative structures which influence, and are employed by, urban planners from Portland and Essen in their crafting of communication – in the form of planning texts, images, and videos – that promotes community gardening. The analysis will focus first on the (narrative and physical) creation of the garden space (chapter five) and, second, on the narrative idealisation of community building within this space (chapter six). More precisely, documents which involve the planning of municipally supported community gardens will be analysed according to their implicit and explicit narrativity, focussing on questions of exclusion, inclusion, and community building.<sup>5</sup> Thus, I argue that municipal community

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- 2 Forms of community gardening range from bottom-up activism to municipally supported gardening. In this dissertation, the latter will be investigated. For a comprehensive and historical review of community gardens and allotment gardens as expressions of urban agriculture in countries such as the US, the UK, Germany, and Poland, see laquinta and Drescher.
  - 3 For a largely ethnographic analysis of the “creativity script” as utilised by the city of Frankfurt, see Dzudzek.
  - 4 Narrative can be considered a (or *the*) primal human communication tool. For instance, H. Porter Abbott observes the emergence of narrative consciousness in humans from a narratological perspective and describes that “the gift of imitation precedes language by a wide gap” (Abbott 2000, 249). “Whatever its manifold advantages for species survival, it is also almost certainly the case that narrative, even in this its most rudimentary form, would have begun the creation of a fundamentally new mode of awareness. By placing representational action patterns in a sequence, it would have occasioned the first step out of the total immersion in the present moment that Donald and others attribute to the consciousness of apes” (250). Furthermore, “[m]imetic narrative opened the way for hominids to overlay the natural order within which they lived and died with another, event-based order, which they alone devised” (250). For the concept of *homo narrans*, see Koschorke 1-4.
  - 5 Narrativity denotes the “quality of being narrative, the set of properties characterising narratives and distinguishing them from non-narratives” (Prince 387). Due to this focus

garden documents often carry notions which imply inclusionary and exclusionary practices, especially those documents concerned with the founding and the creation of a community garden (chapter five). Moreover, I argue that the way community gardening is emplotted in urban planning documents conceals and simultaneously perpetuates a central narrative about community gardening, namely a minimal narrative I call “Cultivation Builds Community” (CBC, chapter six).

The importance of narratives for urban planning has been acknowledged by James Throgmorton (2003), Leonie Sandercock (2003), and Lieven Ameel (2016, 2021), among others. However, the intricate working of narratives, figures, and media within urban planning concepts is not easy to determine in detail. The *City Scripts* research group – in an interdisciplinary approach to apply Literary Studies methods to the object of urban planning – investigates how these elements fundamentally inform the planning of postindustrial cities in the US and Germany, how these cities are shaped and prepared for the future, and where the underlying stories originate from and lead to. Essential to this project is the concept of the “city script” as being descriptive and prescriptive at the same time, as well as medial frames, figuration, and narrative elements (see Buchenau and Gurr 2016, 2018, 2021). Exemplary overarching and global city scripts are, in the case of this dissertation, the inclusivity script and the sustainability script. The scripts concept allows for an analysis of processes of emplotment in urban self-description – in terms of implied and explicit narratives and narrativity, procedural knowledge, rhetoric, and possible ‘real-life’ consequences. Scripts, and especially the minimal narrative of CBC (chapter six), constitute the anchor point where sustainable and inclusive urban planning and community gardening come together, displaying the normative power of scripting how gardening is supposed to automatically build community and to ‘improve’ the ecological and social urban fabric.

## 1.1 “From Green to Grey to Green”: Transatlantic City Scripts

The multidirectional and global travel of urban planning concepts has been well documented in recent scholarship. For instance, Jens Martin Gurr traces the script of the Garden City from its initial idea by social reformer Ebenezer Howard to a benign green urban planning concept which has been implemented, among other countries, in the UK, Germany, and in the US (Gurr 2021a, 169; see also Hall 2014, 91-148). In this context, Gurr emphasises that the “global diffusion of blueprints for the future of cities is a major factor in global policy development, and numerous attempts, frequently with an urban focus, have been made to identify key actors, mechanisms and contextual factors crucial to its understanding” (2021, 164). Most importantly, he identifies a lack of scholarship concerning the narrative dynamics contributing to such policy diffusion

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on “narrativeness”, as H. Porter Abbott calls it (2011), narrativity is especially useful for discovering narrative qualities in otherwise non-literary texts (see also Ameel et al. 63-67).

(167). For this dissertation, the narrative dynamics of ‘green’ and ‘inclusive’ urban planning concepts that include community gardening and that travel between both sides of the North Atlantic, or more precisely between postindustrial cities in the US and Germany, are of main importance.

Considering the spatial and the narrative turn, it is no surprise that scholars who study how cities are planned and prepared for the future have increasingly focused on how storytelling contributes – with positive as well as negative outcomes<sup>6</sup> – to urban planning. As Buchenau and Gurr observe, “[g]ood stories, strong images and connective media [...] are the ingredients increasingly used by municipalities, urban developers, creative industries as well as NGOs in the fields of culture, society and the environment to embellish – or even develop in the first place – their plans and schemes for urban life after deindustrialisation” (Buchenau and Gurr 2021, 153). The *City Scripts* research group in a way inverts the narrative turn, allowing ‘classic’ humanities scholars from American and British Studies to turn towards non-literary, pragmatic urban planning texts as research objects, thus leaving the field of literary fiction behind. The focus of this approach – the city script – is defined as follows:

Scripts are artful combinations of narrative, medial as well as figural acts of framing, inscription, description and prescription. In their combination of stories, tropes and media, scripts serve three contending functions simultaneously: they activate procedural knowledge, they serve as self-description, and they provide blueprints for the future. Thus, scripts establish contingent connective tissues between the past, the present and the future. (Buchenau and Gurr 2021, 143)

An exemplary city script is incorporated in the condensation of Essen’s history as moving “from green to grey to green” (trans. Buchenau and Gurr) as described in the city’s marketing campaign in celebration of its title of European Green Capital 2017 (144). Buchenau and Gurr further analyse the application for the title and, in a demonstration of how scripting works, deduce that what “is emplotted here is the seamless conjunction of *procedural knowledge* gathered in the history of (post-)industrial transformation; *self-description* capturing the present-day regional and international role of the city; and a *blueprint* for the future envisioning the fully sustainable city” (144, original emphasis). This threefold effect demonstrates the powerful and impactful nar-

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6 Buchenau and Gurr also underline the possibly negative consequences of narrative urban planning: “At their worst, [such narratives] unleash anxieties and build scenarios that propel further segregation, conflict and economic disintegration. In an era in which shrinking cities trouble the former Western centres of industrial production, bringing fear especially to the homelands of car and steel manufacturing, the faith in the imaginative forms of procedural knowledge, self-description and blueprint for the future we refer to as ‘scripts’ is not only unflinching, but even strengthened” (2021, 153). Moreover, such “scripts for postindustrial urban futures energise real and complicated power dynamics. They work to contribute to a paradigmatic shift that urban planner and geographer Michael Batty has described as ‘transition from a world based on energy to one based on energy to one based on information: from an industrial to a postindustrial world’” (153).