

Delusional Cities: beyond the projected identity of urban space*

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Abstract

Narratives intermedate the perception of place along with image, which is according to Burgin an integrated part of the “cultural promotion” and “city marketing” process (1996). In this manner, social and cultural meanings of place are re-modelled with relation to significant events or icons and, therefore, a more enchanting and attractive portrait of the city is promoted to be explored and experienced. Cities introduce a representation based on an idealised projection of their reality while exposing “key attractions”. As such, their projected image may have a greater influence than the reality in shaping the views of visitors, investors or even residents. The advertised portrait of the city has the power to reshape its appearance, as it is usually perceived, into a misleading one. Such chimera physiognomies of cities are often, if not in every case, presented in a captivating manner.

This paper relies on the remarkable quality of narratives to go beyond the fabricated image of the city and to engage with the real identity of place while profiling the visual and experiential layout of the city. The investigation focus is primarily placed upon the mode in which historical and spatial humanities theoretical knowledge along with narratives of place can enrich the morphological study. The interaction between architecture, people, and narrative codes in the city spaces and on the way spatial layout relates to them is therefore explored. Particular emphasis is laid towards the manner in which spoken narratives of place can provide us with perceptual tools to shape the complexity of the urban phenomena and its cultural meaning.

In doing so, we can start overlaying memories that are situated “beyond the city” and as such are brought to light and merged with maps of “lived experiences”.

Keywords: *identity, city, narratives, perception, participatory planning.*

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Cities are environments of lived narratives of place; yet contemporary cities bury also a series of spatial memories relating to specific places. As such, urban landscapes are far from being flat environments that can be laid out as evenly as maps. This paper considers “oral histories” embedded in urban communities as a model of thinking about city narratives that goes beyond the conventional representation / *mapping* of place along a fixed spatio-temporal matrix. Instead, it allows us to investigate the contoured and multi-dimensional relationship between space and narrative in dynamic sequences of time, architecture and people.

Relying on scholars such as Bakhtin¹ and Polkinghorne,² this research focuses on investigations into the “spoken” / oral side of “soft city”³ as a tool for unfolding the urban landscape. This understanding considers the city also an archive of spoken histories of lived experiences, structured around meaningful spatial landmarks, some of which have almost disappeared over time. Therefore, my objective is to investigate narrative points of convergence between oral and physical fragments so that they evoke and reveal spatial memories allowing us new insights into a community-based past.

Ultimately, this research aims to investigate whether such a method can be complementary to existing urban regeneration modes of thoughts or strategies. It recognizes that stories take part in an urban discourse and that it becomes important that we begin to stitch oral and physical city fragments back into a collective memory of a place. In doing so, we can start overlaying memories that are situated “beyond the city” and as such are brought to light and merged with maps of “lived experiences”.

In recent years, cities from all Romanian regions have undergone a phase of territorial growth and development based especially on assimilating the surrounding areas. As such, national or international investments in projects that regard the community are made. As a consequence, degraded parts from these cities and from the surrounding areas, have been the target of projects of urban rehabilitation, of integrated projects which regard economic, social and environmental aspects which are going to be implemented in the next years. These projects focus on the rehabilitation of urban and transportation infrastructure, on creating new touristic facilities and modernizing existent ones or on creating social housing. Issues that regard the interrelation between those areas are simultaneously

¹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas, 1981).

² Donald Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (New York: State of University of New York, 1988).

³ Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (Fontana/Collins, 1974).

trying to be solved while also relying on a polycentric approach which is considered to be more equilibrate development of those regions.⁴

These projects that target the rehabilitation of urban structure also involve demolishing the degraded buildings which are not included in the local, national or international (UNESCO) heritage.⁵

However, this is an approach which rarely considers the true character of the city and which could also lead to accentuating the already existent fragmentation or discontinuity visible in the urban fabric, as a result of the rapid succession of urban projects and policies throughout the last decades. A consequence of this continuous development is the displacement of existing communities and creating consistent gaps in their dialogue. The *spoken* narratives of urban space can be still leaving traces which can be used while meaningfully engaging with local ethnical minorities. This exercise to locate them in space and time focuses on “shifting experiences of the locality, and traces how identity has been shaped by transforming geographies.”⁶ Understanding place can be regarded as a process of “incorporating a lived engagement” and further exploring the “triadic relationship” between the geographical ensemble, people-in-place and its character.

Essentially, its unique atmosphere is completed by the “sensibility” or the “lived quality that radiates from the physical environment to the experiencer”.⁷ Places as “complex constructions of social histories, personal and interpersonal experiences, and selective memory” are further explored, and capture and embed the emotional engagement of people and the space they inhabit.⁸ In terms of my research the question that rises is how one can engage with the *spoken* micro narratives of place while relying on physical urban identity. Moreover, ways of grasping lived experiences of place by means of oral histories and spatial narratives are central to this approach. Narratives as embedded in local communities can have an important role in strategies to be further included in the

⁴ Ministerul Dezvoltării Regionale și Turismului, Autoritatea de Management pentru Programul Operațional Regional 2007-2013, Poli de dezvoltare urbană, accessed February 21, 2013, http://www.fonduriue.ro/res/filepicker_users/cd25a597fd62/Finantari/POR/DMI-1.1.B/Ghidul_Solicitantului-PDU%20iulie%202011.pdf, 6-7.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 54.

⁶ Bradley Simon, *Towards an Archaeology of the Voice: geo-locating oral history within a context of urban regeneration*.

⁷ Seamon David, *The Role of Place Identity in the Perception, Understanding, and Design of the Built Environment* (London: Betham Science Publishers, 2011), 13.

⁸ Kahn Miriam, *Your Place is Mine: Sharing Emotional Landscape in Wamira, Papua New Guinea* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series, 1996), 167.

planning process. Community members are encouraged to share their experiences of place in order to contribute to a more perception oriented planning process. *Spoken* narratives of place have to strength to shift the traditional interests in the planning process towards subjective perceptions of the inhabited space and to highlight the relationships between space and social and cultural processes. This interest that emerged among planners in engaging oral histories in the process of urban planning can also be employed both in relation to heritage issues and future sustainable identity of the city.

The city reveals itself gradually, while the interaction is established at a touchable and objective level. What one meets is an exposed, accessible, open or public version of the city, defined by regulations and social contracts. This is the one which can be effortlessly portrayed and represented. However, once one begins to know and thoroughly connect with the material side of urban environment, the boundaries between the physical and the experiential, between the “hard” and the “soft” or between the public and the individual city, start to merge and dilute into one another.

As such, the city of *spoken* narratives is located beyond the “hard-edged” landscape of the city, in the realm where experience and memories are contoured.⁹ This unpredictable city has its origins bounded / confined in specific rituals or customs and encourages the individual to develop “a superstitious, speculative relationship with his environment”.¹⁰ However, this interpretation goes beyond the city pictured as a “rationale” structure (schemata) into its “irrationality” which is considered “a sign of decadent deviation from its intrinsic cityness”.¹¹ This is the side that people daily experience and which harmonizes a sequence of interrelated physiognomies and identities. A plurality of personal urban subjectivities is hidden within the “soft” side of the city along with the space of “perceptual orientation” shaped in the mind of each inhabitant which is gradually filled with experiences and meanings.¹²

This “private city” is one of the multitude that exist as “sequestered places with clear boundaries” while their layouts correspond to those of ethnical and professional minorities.¹³ These sites of frozen memories endowed with a “sense of historical continuity” are investigated / regarded from the perspective of

⁹ Raban, *Soft City*, 144.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 171.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 160.

¹² Dear Michael J. and Steven Flusty, *The Spaces of Postmodernity: Readings in Human Geography* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 216.

¹³ Raban, *Soft City*, 169.

“embodiment of memory” and as spatial triggers for narrative experiences.¹⁴ Their examined physiognomy is outlined by merging together the oral “collective remembered values”¹⁵ archived in church’s, family’s or community’s consciousness. The “acceleration of history”¹⁶ leads to massive fractures and discontinuities in the flow of everyday living in those areas. They are not regarded as places / sites that “stop time” or “block the work of forgetting,”¹⁷ but as sites “forever open to the full range of its possible significations”.¹⁸ They are not regarded in a nostalgic and idealised mode, but as latent possibilities of understanding and approaching it folded within / beyond the physical realm. “Experiential and expressive”¹⁹ ways of relating with areas of the city endowed with “a particular self”²⁰ are, therefore portrayed.

This distinctiveness of the city is explored at an emotional level and seeks to establish a correspondence between narratives and the experiential dimension of the city. Therefore, the understanding provided intends to surpass the perception of place / city realm as being defined by clear boundaries and endowed with fixed identities.

An enchanting portrait of the city can be shaped as a superimposition of personal mental and emotional projections of the same physical realm. The “mental city” is stitched together by “rational forces” that shape communities.²¹ As such, the character of the “soft city” is partly given by the permanent co-habitation of several ethnical minorities. This cultural heterogeneity along with the particularities of specific dwelling is woven as a “patchwork quilt of differently coloured neighbourhoods and localities”.²² The minority-based “city-within-a-city”²³ is explored as a realm from which specific narratives emerge.

Spoken narratives of place are located on a particular layer of the “soft city” where time and space fuse and create a “distinctive correspondence”.²⁴ The “chronotope” defined by Bakhtin (1981) as “the intrinsic connectedness of

¹⁴ Pierre Norra, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representation*, 26 (1985), 7.

¹⁵ Norra, “Between Memory and History,” 7.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 19.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 24.

¹⁹ Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series, 1996), 11.

²⁰ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 105.

²¹ Raban, *Soft City*, 168.

²² *Ibidem*, 184.

²³ *Ibidem*, 167.

²⁴ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 105.

temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”²⁵ can be extrapolated and sequentially interpreted in terms of urban scenes. As a consequence of their particularities of living and dwelling the areas inhabited by ethnical communities conjoins “isolated aspects of space and time”.²⁶ Space is asked to respond to the dynamism of spatial events that history forces upon it while time is condensed.²⁷ This aspect is essentially important to approach by reason of the image of man being “intrinsically chronotopic”.²⁸ Understandably, the stories of place migrate once the community is moving or starts to dilute, and the boundaries whether they are *seen* or *unseen*, are “increasingly smudged by vagueness, erased by chaos, or clouded by uncertainty”.²⁹

Narratives are regarded as “discursive or nondiscursive modes of expression through which everyday senses of place are locally articulated”.³⁰ They are “discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way”.³¹ Narratives are organized according to temporal and topological relations linked to human actions into “interrelated aspects of an understandable composite”.³² Therefore, events that they bring together can develop a separate meaning along with the contextually related one.³³ Narratives produced through the art of storytelling are an integrated part of our society and of our lives and they fill with meaning our lived experiences. They encourage the keeping of our memories and of a permanent connection (relation) with our past. Additionally, narrating is a practice that interconnects people, places and temporal sequences. In the particular case of *the cities* of ethnical minorities in Suceava their understanding and their relation established with the people who inhabit them has to be placed in the realm of the mythical. These are the spaces time is delayed and whose features and mentality are rooted in the rustic.

Particular emphasis is laid towards the manner in which oral histories can provide us with perceptual tools for grasping *unseen* aspects of the urban phenomenon. Narratives can also be regarded as complementary mechanisms to transfer and share knowledge confined into the realm of perceived memory or as

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 84.

²⁶ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 84.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 84.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 85.

²⁹ Feld and Basso, *Senses of Place*, 5.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 8.

³¹ Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, *Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), xvi.

³² Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, 13.

³³ *Ibidem*, 21.

possibilities to describe and interpret particular ways in which “people encounter places, perceive them and invest them with significance”.³⁴ Their remarkable quality to carry on information is, therefore, essential for profiling the visual and experiential layout of the city.

Considering narratives from spatial perspectives articulated with human sciences approaches of place, this study seeks to employ them in exploring a different level in the interaction between people and physical environment. The interrelationship between city narratives and the specific spatial triggers which generate them of the urban space is further explored. Therefore, narratives are conceptualised as tools to reveal *spoken* elements that subtly /ethereally shape the city and which further contribute to unfolding spatial and temporal distant realities of the city, not only by influencing the way it is visually represented, but also by shaping the “imagination of place” as “immutable elsewheres”.³⁵

Stories are told in order for people to share or to teach one another personal and collective beliefs or values. When elaborating / shaping the “narrative paradigm”, as a “dialectical synthesis of strands in the history of rhetoric,” Fisher states that all acts of meaningful communication are a form of storytelling.³⁶ Therefore, he argues that narration deserves to be accepted as co-existing with the rational world paradigm.³⁷ The oral tradition is a mean of sharing knowledge, or employing White’s terminology, “fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture specific”.³⁸

Spatial narratives and digital storytelling

The accelerated evolution and improvement of digital media in past decades has essentially impacted on the practice of storytelling. The digital narratives develop new characteristics along with the known ones. Their ability to combine expressive capabilities of technology as still or moving images with sound, text and interactive features, amplifies the experience for both the author and the audience. The strong emotional component of the narratives is emphasized by the increased interactivity with which it is endowed. As such, the secondary focus of

³⁴ Feld and Basso, *Senses of Place*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 11.

³⁶ Walter R. Fisher, “Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” *Communication Monographs*, 52 (December 1985), 2.

³⁷ Fisher, “Narration as Human Communication Paradigm,” 3.

³⁸ White Hayden, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 1 (Autumn 1980), 5.

this paper is to assert and emphasize the importance and suitability of employing spatial narratives in the process of (re)investigating and (re)designing city landscape. *Spoken* narratives of place along with the digital media and the modern digital *mapping* methods and technologies can generate alternative maps or means of representing the urban space which encourage a more poetic, sensitive and intuitive response. The new media technologies allow one to experience the visual mapping process beyond its analytical and informative dimension.

Arie Graafland³⁹ explains that from a general standpoint, *mapping* is a cultural activity which brings together relevant aspects of perception and cognition. It works as a means for understanding spatial phenomena and also as a research tool for understanding relationships or distribution of patterns. As such, *mapping* embodies both scientific data and artistic expressions in a format with an extraordinary potential. Aspects of *mapping* have undergone long debates throughout history, and questions regarding relationships between the physical reality and human's world have been an important matter within human evolution. Maps have played a fundamental part in human existence, no matter if they stand for reflections of man's relationship with the surroundings or as a product of humankind's supremacy over a particular territory. *Mapping* is regarded as "a productive and world enriching agent,"⁴⁰ particularly in the fields of practice and research mentioned above. New trends in the field of urban *mapping* according to which the creative nature of maps is privileged, can be, therefore, explored. The presented approach is aimed towards revising the mapping practices by going beyond their true and objective nature. Employing James Corner's terminology, *mapping* is regarded as tool "that both reveals and realizes hidden potential".⁴¹

In this respect, Graafland⁴² argues that in a world which changes at such speed and complexity that little remains certain or stable, *mapping* unfolds potential, reconceptualises the territory and uncovers realities previously not seen or unimagined. Explaining relationships has been one of the most influential requirements in the act of *mapping*. This has influenced and further emphasised the importance of *mapping*, as a method to evaluate, relate, highlight similarities,

³⁹ Arie Graafland, "Mapping Urban Complexities," in *Architecture, Technology & Design. Urban Reading Series*, 3-12 (Digital studio for Research in Design, Visualization and Communication, 2012), 7.

⁴⁰ Amoroso Nadia, *The Exposed City: Mapping the Urban Invisibles* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 99.

⁴¹ Dennis Cosgrove ed., *Mappings* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 213.

⁴² Graafland, "Mapping Urban Complexities," 7-10.

render visible differences and emphasize possible crossovers between any object, living and dead.

Ultimately, my research interest lays into exposing heterogeneous criteria possibilities based on which “previously unseen or unimagined”⁴³ realities from the urban landscape can be read, uncovered, unfold and further represented. “The experimentation in contact with the real”⁴⁴ which defines the changes which take place in the mapping practice approach is further discussed in terms of urban space oriented *spoken* narratives. The gradual revealing of oral histories in the urban context can be regarded as a complementary method for conceptualizing and sketching the portrait of the city, especially of the areas inhabited by the ethnical minorities. Along with statistical data, physical fragments / landmarks from city plans can be interpreted as emergence points for these narratives. As such, the change of polarity of the inhabited areas or their shrinkage can be understood in terms of narrative spatial triggers.

Storytelling and planning discourse

As previously presented, this paper discusses an innovative and narrative based approach of place making along with community engagement in the planning process. Planners turn to social sciences or humanities in order to explore modes for socially sustainable developments. However, this use of narratives in the planning process has some precedent but has rarely been situated in the field of humanities.

In a fragmented city, the use of narratives provide a way of connecting with real identities of place along overcoming the difficulties created by the distant layers highlighted by different architectural and morphological expressions. More importantly, they provide professionals with conceptual tools and means of revealing and understanding the plurality of lives which engraved stories and memories in the city fabric / layout. This approach also emerges as a reaction towards traditional cartographic practices employed in the urban planning process which fail to address and represent the invisible or the hidden elements that shape the identity of our cities, but which are “elusively pulsating in the interstices of maps and of the morphological design of the city”.⁴⁵ This further explains that is important to find a comprehensive way to read and to represent the complexity of

⁴³ Cosgrove, *Mappings*, 213.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 214.

⁴⁵ Leonie Sandercock and Giovanni Atili (eds.), *Multimedia Explorations in Urban Policy and Planning: Beyond the Flatlands* (London and New York: Springer, 2010), xix.

urban space as a juxtaposition of physical and experiential layers which interconnect “different situated and embodied subjectivities”.⁴⁶

Alternative modes of investigation are therefore required to reawaken the emotional and poetic connection to place. As such, place making can be reshaped while combining historic and storytelling elements which bring into light invisible / forgotten parts of the city. Essentially, Sandercock and Attili state that urban planning cartographies are missing the relational dimension of the city, “the plural worlds and multiple stories of irreducible inhabitants whose lives are characterised by relations, expectations, feeling, reminiscence, bodies, voices and histories, all layered into living urbanities”.⁴⁷ As such, the objectified city understood through the quantitative, panoptic and standardised views employed by traditional cartography is sterilised, frozen and vivisected.

Ultimately, my overall research argues the importance of lived experiences of place to be integrated into future planning practices. Digital storytelling can provide a provocative and stimulating experience of oral histories. While encouraging residents to bring change within their local community, one can inspire or re-invigorate a contemporary and participatory interpretation of values. In this respect, urban narratives of place can work as a complementary tool by means of which one can understand the surrounding reality and can reveal forgotten fragments of physical memory around which life used to be structured.

The ultimate focus of the paper relies on approaching *spoken* histories of place as tools which emphasize the participatory dimension of urban planning process. They are also reliable means of developing and supporting a more experience oriented planning approach. Oral histories can provide a comprehensive way of connecting with real identities embedded in particular places of cities. These lived narratives of place can provide a reliable support when conceptualising aspects of the city able to encourage a poetical, emotional and subjective connection to place.

Storytelling and narratives can be used to reawaken memories of place by reasons of being intrinsic to planning process. Narratives can be employed as valuable resources to contemplate and develop hypotheses about the future of urban memory. My current research interest relies in addressing heritage issues by means of storytelling and narratives. The investigation is, therefore concerned with sites of memory that interconnect with residents’ life paths. It is challenging to encourage participants to process social and cultural aspects of the local heritage

⁴⁶ Sandercock and Attili, *Multimedia Explorations*, 41.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 41.

and also aspects of residential history. This approach also encourages the contribution the residents can make to emerging historical consciousness and it also leads towards a more accurate, sensitive understanding of the city and its cultural diversity. Another concern involves transferring narratives into formats useful in the planning process. Narratives not only support community place making, but also the construction of local planning policy and development strategies and also the assembly and interpretation of empirical data.

Developing a discursive method to activate lived experiences of place as a new approach in urban planning provides the opportunity to transform the former passive relation that users have developed with their city into a more dynamic, participatory one.

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