Narrative Environments and Social Innovation

Tricia Austin

Course Leader MA Narrative Environments, The Spatial Practices Programme

ABSTRACT

This article introduces and describes an emerging discipline, the design of narrative environments. It suggests that designers of narrative environments are story listeners, story tellers, and that they also enable others to tell and exchange stories in physical spaces. The text argues that the design of spatial narratives offers distinctive kinds of immersive storytelling experiences that differ from watching a narrative on screen, reading a book or watching a play because audiences literally enter and participate in the spatial storyworld. The article concludes by suggesting, and illustrating through an example, that the active, physical participation of audiences in a narrative can lead to novel and resilient forms of co-creation and social innovation.

TAGS

Narrative, Environment, Active Audience, Participation, Social Innovation

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Central Saint Martins
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It could be argued that all spaces tell a story, for example, the seashore tells a story of erosion, a busy high street tells a story of consumerism, or a French village fete tells the story of a rural community. If so, all environments would be narrative environments and this definition would be too broad to be useful in developing the practice and theory of the design of spatial narratives. Therefore it is suggested here that narrative environments be defined as places which have been deliberately designed to tell a story or enable a story to be told. In so far as narrative environments are deliberately designed they correspond to literary stories which are purposely crafted to convey an idea or message (Aristotle, 1989; Bal, 1997; Chatman, 1978; Lodge, 1992; Kermode, 1983; Porter Abbott, 2002; Propp, 1884). In other words, just as stories are not daily life, neither are narrative environments. They are intentionally structured content-rich spaces that communicate particular stories to specific audiences (Potteiger & Purinton, 1998) and induce an emotional impact and/or an inquiring or critical frame of mind in the audience/interpreter. Hence narrative environments may be described as heterotopias (Foucault, 1984) or 'other' spaces that exist outside the everyday.

Narrative environments communicate both explicitly and implicitly. Explicit communications are evident in, for example, exhibitions, heritage sites, churches, temples and designed events that have been created to house and communicate particular content through images, texts, objects and face-to-face dialogue. Implicit communications, expressed through culturally and socially produced codes of form, scale, colour, light, sound, materiality and of course the behavior of others, could include gardens, playgrounds, markets and shopping zones; public realm where communities of interest may convene; architecture or landscape that deliberately signify political and social values; and city quarters that function as visitor destinations. Whether the spaces communicate explicitly or implicitly or both, they affect us. Spatial narratives can enable learning, prompt interaction, support commerce, shape communal and cultural memory, promote particular values that embody and play on power relations and orders of knowledge (Foucault, 1970; Hooper Greenhill, 1992; Lefebvre, 1991) Hence narrative environments, or, if you like, deliberately designed story spaces, are powerful sites for discursive practice and social innovation.

Many questions arise: what are the intersecting lineages of the practice? How do designers construct spatial narratives? What theories do they rely on? How do narrative environments engage audiences and communicate, or indeed, enable audiences to communicate with each other? In what ways do spatial narratives differ from other narrative mediums? How can spatial narratives be used in social innovation? This article will respond briefly to each of these questions in turn.

Lineages

The last 50 years have seen discussion of the narrative experience of space in several related fields, architecture, cultural criticism, exhibition design, user experience design and service design. In 1970s architect Bernhard Tschumi started to write

a series of reflections on architecture as the 'pleasurable and sometimes violent confrontation of space and activities' (1996). He rejects the view of architecture as static and functional. He proposed a definition of architecture as experiential sequence and disjuncture. In 1990s the narrative architecture movement, NATO, emerged in the UK foregrounding the experiential dimension of architecture (Coates, 2012) and emphasizing that everyday popular culture is key to the experience of architecture. In 2004 cultural critic Norman Klein published a provocative book 'Scripted Spaces from Baroque to Las Vegas to Disney' examining how the spaces can create awe and emotional immersion encouraging audiences to surrender to the script, in other words, encouraging audiences to allow themselves to be swept up into fantasies that play out dominant socio-political discourses and value systems through the physical environment.

In the meantime, in the mid 90s, story-driven exhibition making became established. Multidisciplinary design teams established interpretive design for exhibitions as a commercial industry. There are several high profile companies now working is this way in Europe and America for example Kossmann Dejong in the Netherlands; Atelier Bruckner and Duncan McCauley in Germany; Metaphor, Event Communications and Land Design Studio in the UK; Ralph Appelbaum Associates in the USA. Many of the story-driven techniques and approaches developed in exhibition design have also been taken up by companies designing brand and leisure spaces, for example, the Shangri-La festival experience. More recently user experience design has stimulated research into audience drivers, engagement and interactions. It should also be noted that sequences of user actions are also central to service design. All of the above differ in their specific markets, audiences and intentions but their conflation of story and space is germane to the practice of the design of narrative environments. The designers of narra-

tive environments may practice in many different sectors but there is a discernable trend in the last 5 years showing new design collectives pioneering story-led socially engaged design and innovation. Examples include The Decorators based in London, Daily Tous Les Jours, based in Montreal, and Snark-spacemaking based in Italy. This approach seems to have struck a chord with many design students who are interested in how spatial narratives can address social justice and involve participatory and co-design processes.

The process of construction of spatial narratives

Turning to the question of the construction of socially engaged narrative environments, they don't just appear of their own accord. They are envisaged, discussed, debated, designed, and funded by individuals or communities, companies and governments. It can be argued that narrative environments are produced by an alignment of multiple stakeholders in a complex set of steps that are negotiated in order to transform an environment but also to produce socio-economic and cultural impact. Narrative environments are created by multidisciplinary teams because the design process involves many steps and layers. Teams initially research content, audience, location and context to produce initial propositions. Teams may fold narrative onto space by adapting or developing relatively stable architectural structures and spatial arrangements; they may produce more temporary printed graphics that appear in and around the space; they may include still and moving image in the space; they may use sound and light effects; they may add fast changing digital layers, usually accessed through mobile technologies; but throughout they are anticipating the most fluid and unpredictable dimension, the behavior of people in the space.

It is important to see designers here, not just the aesthetes who put a "face" on others' ideas or stories but as active co-authors with clients and com-

munities contributing to the shaping and articulation of spaces. Indeed the designer of narrative environments, being content driven, is particularly well positioned to engage with societal issues. The example below of E8 Plus Hackney shows how a student, Luca Ponticelli, on MA Narrative Environments at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, responded to social divisions in his local community. He generated his own brief and synthesized spaces and stories and involved a network of people in finding ways to raise awareness and ameliorate the situation.

To sum up this section, the design of narrative environments draws on methods and skills from architecture, urban design, interior design, communication design, interaction design, exhibition design, user experience design and service design but, as will be explained below, the design of narrative environments differs from all of these in that it derives its foundational principles from narrative theory and practice. It uses these principles in conjunction with spatial theory and critical thinking to evolve new design propositions.

The theoretical landscape

The theoretical landscape is broad and rich. The design of narrative environments draws from Aristotle's Poetics and discussions of agon in ancient Greek literature. Dramatic conflict or "friction in the place" is a key driver in developing and telling the story. Greimas's actantial theory contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of stories in space. Mikhail Bakhtin offers a vision of the dialogic space why is key to spatial narratives. Seymour Chatman's theories of story and discourse enable designers to analyse story elements as does Roland Barthes study of narrative structures. Paul Ricoeur's theories of time and narrative remind designers that they are designing not only spaces but also spaces as they unfold over time. David Bordwell's theories of narrative schema are useful in understanding that

audiences recognize particular structures as stories. David Herman's poststructuralist theory of the storyworld and Marie Laure Ryan transmedial narrative theory allow for the theorization of non-linear spatial narratives and a focus on the way narratives fire the imagination and transport the reader/interpreter/visitor to another realm.

In the design of narrative environments narrative theory is aligned with spatial theories of perception, action and political contest. Philosopher and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, provides an argument for perception as the primary entry to understanding and acting in the world. Henri Lefebvre provides critical insight into the power relations at play in the construction of physical, social space. Doreen Massey's association of space and temporality, that is the concept of space and place as alive with agency and constantly changing is also pertinent. She makes a case for space not to be seen as static but as constantly evolving, subject to multiple interpretations and contestations, an arena of political collisions and contrasting stories. Another related perspective is provided by Schneidler and Till's research that references actor network theory and develops a case for spatial agency.

Environmental psychologist J.J. Gibson provides theories about how people 'read' spatial narratives. Psychologist Jerome Bruner links narrative and identity and shows the foundational nature of narrative in human thought and action. A wealth of theories on performativity (Parsons, 2009) consider how environments invite, offer, regulate and discipline audiences as they play out a narrative and prompt discussions of how interaction between people, places, objects and images produce, reproduce, maintain or shift, critique or undermine identity. From these perspectives spatial narratives envisage space a vibrant, fluid and active medium for communication of content rather than an immobile and inert setting.

Story and Telling

Story or content can revolve around any topic of theme that the author(s) consider important and/or appropriate to the brief. However a topic is not strictly a story. A topic could be a straightforward description or fact. A story has a particular dynamic structure. Literary theory has a great deal to offer in terms of unpacking the structure of story (Porter-Abbott, 2002) suggesting that a story comprises of at minimum two elements, firstly characters or entities and secondly events. Characters tend to be people and entities are non-human phenomena that cause change, for example, a storm that drives a ship onto rocks. In the design of narrative environments, characters and entities can be substituted by cultures and values and be given form as buildings, objects, images, sounds, text or indeed the visitors and inhabitants, and all or any of these "perform" the story.

Story enables us to envisage design content as dynamic, comprising of elements that contrast, provoke and play off each other over time, creating some sort of change and transformation. If this dynamic aspect of story is mapped onto a space, different characteristics of the material world, objects and images in that space can act as the characters and events and be used as counterpoints, changes can literally be embodied by physical change and/or change to the behaviour of people gathered in the space.

From content we move to telling, the process of giving form to the story. Telling comprises of constructing the storyworld, enthralling the physical senses of visitors, devising evocative metaphors and embodying one of many of narrative devices, for example, framing, concealing and revealing, sequencing, substitution, and amplification. This is the "magic" process of interpretation, invention and communication that is typically associated with design. Telling is not, however, just a question of how to give form or voice to ideas, the form will always express the author/designer's value system.

Thus the form of the structures, images, sequences can be read at multiple levels for their immediate message but also for their underlying assumptions and belief systems.

Engaging and activating audiences

Spatial narratives differ from other narrative mediums. While immersed in watching the screen or reading a book, you are, in many senses, always 'outside' the story. By contrast, you can walk right into a narrative environment, becoming physically, emotionally and intellectually immersed in narrative space. The argument here is that space as a narrative medium differs from the narrative medium of literature, film and theatre. Spatial narratives are distinctive because whole body immersion in spatialised stories heightens the sensory dimensions of narrative and simultaneously reduces fixed linear sequence expressed from a single viewpoint. In practice narrative environments transport visitors into a storyworld and prompt experiences that trigger new thoughts, emotional changes and even bodily changes to heart rate and breathing. However because of the nature of spatial behaviour visitors/audiences/inhabitants/users will tend to go where they like and construct their own narrative threads from the overall framing narrative.

Theorist David Herman suggests even literary stories do not achieve their power simply through a linear sequence of events but through the construction, by the audience, of a storyworld based on cues provided by the author showing the who, what, where, when, how, why framework of the story.

> ..it would be difficult to account for the for the immersive potential of stories by appeal to the structuralist notions of story, that is, strictly in terms of events and existents arranged into a plot......Interpreters of narrative do not merely

reconstruct a set of events and existents but imaginatively (emotionally and viscerally) inhabit a world in which, besides happening and existing, things matter, agitate, exalt, repulse, provide grounds for laughter and grief... (Herman, 2004, pp.16)

In narrative environments cues, states and events take the form of buildings, objects, sounds, images, digital information and other people's behavior and they meld together into the story and storyworld. The visitor who enters this story world is not conceived of as passive receiver but as an active participant actively moving, interpreting, speaking and producing their own experience in mental space, physical space, social space and across social media in virtual space.
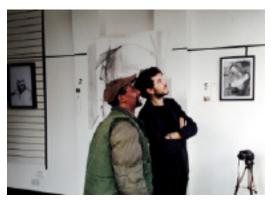
Narratologists may argue that narratives are secondary imaginary worlds separate from the here and now and as such cannot be experienced bodily. The argument in this article is that the design of the environment does indeed create another world, different from daily life, that the audience will anticipate this experience and knowingly enter the space and will treat the space as a temporary separate world or heterotopia. So, for example, museums take visitors temporarily to a different world where time or events are compressed, ordered and communicated in order to assert or critique particular socio-cultural or political discourses.

Case study

Now let us address the final question, how can spatial narratives be used in social innovation? The case study below E8 Plus Hackney devised by Luca Ponticelli in 2014 has been chosen to address and unpack this question.

Ponticelli undertook this project while he was a student on MA Narrative Environments at Cen-

tral Saint Martins. He researched and co-designed a hyper-local experiment in community cohesion, which aimed to challenge stereotypes of homelessness through art, design and storytelling. He co-produced a pop-up exhibition as a hub for interaction between diverse audiences and prompted visitors to see the local area through the eyes of the homeless community.

Luca Ponticelli and one of the co-creators of the exhibition
@Benjamin Mallek

The six month project was initially inspired by Ponticelli's by first hand observations. Having rented a flat in Hackney, East London, E8, he began to notice how different communities inhabited the same space but lived very different lives. In particular the incoming community of young artists and designers were living in stark contrast to the community of local homeless people. The youngsters were a sign of the gentrification of the area while the homeless community had lived there for many years. Ponticelli developed an initial research question: 'Can art and design be a catalyst to create interaction between the growing numbers of young artists/designers and homeless people of E8?'

Ponticelli had read about homelessness and poverty but was struck by the reality of people's lives in Hackney. He started volunteering at the Hackney Winter Shelter, a dormitory for homeless people, cooking breakfast every Saturday morning, and he gradually got to know the community there. He

soon discovered the Soup Kitchen on Mare Street, Hackney where he introduced himself and his main collaborator Sead Baliu, a video maker, and they joined the Soup Kitchen distributing food, and clothes. Thus Ponticelli and Baliu were able to further develop dialogue with the homeless community and establish trust.

The Soup Kitchen @Luca Ponticelli

Ponticelli then started to develop a strategy to link the homeless community and the art and design community. He asked for volunteers from each community to create eight mixed pairs. Each young artist/designer met with their homeless partner to listen to their story and find visual ways to express their partner's history and perspective on the local environment. The pairs in the project are named as Audrey and Brian, Freya and Mark, Joli and Monica, Blue and John, Kenny and Lisa, Zabou and Mike, Carl and Kevin, Alice and Sherief. Over the following months, the pairs met in a public square by the Saturday Soup Kitchen and co-created a series of art pieces.

Alice and Sherief meeting @Benjamin Mallek

Ponticelli sought a space to exhibit the work and create a hub for the two communities to come together as a group. He found a pop-up space the 'Hackney Shop' in Morning Lane, owned by the council that was being made available for free to encourage local artists and designers to showcase or sell their work to the general public. The gallery was in the heart of the area occupied by the homeless community not far from the soup kitchen.
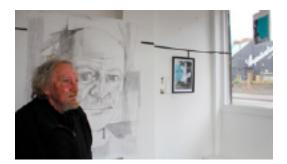

The Hackney Shop @Benjamin Mallek

Ponticelli and Baliu then started to plan the exhibition. They enlisted the support among their network to help with the design of the exhibition, the related events and communications. Several people came forward including two spatial designers, Soumya Basnet and Manasi Pophali; a photographer, Benjamin Mallek; and a web designer, Gigi Hung. The exhibition was called, 'A Journey through Mare Street'. It showed the artworks produced by the eight pairs of volunteers and a map of Mare Street locating the environments that were important in the stories and inviting visitors to 'see through the eyes' of the homeless partners in the pairs. The gallery layout and display also used concept of the map as an organising principle for the space. The exhibition aimed to both celebrate the stories of the homeless people and stimulate a critical perspective on social inequities in the rapidly area undergoing rapid gentrification.

The map of Mare Street designed to show the perspective of homeless people @Benjamin Mallek

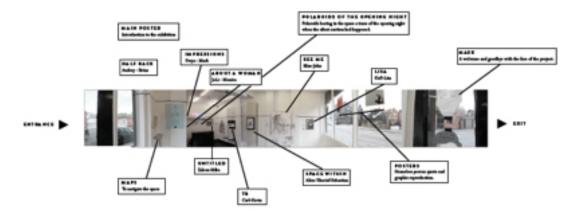The exhibition opening May 2014 @Benjamin Mallek

Kenny next to his portrait @Benjamin Mallek

Luca Ponticelli and Sead Baliu and Val Stevenson, one of the organisers of the Soup Kitchen @Benjamin Mallek

The exhibition was promoted by Ponticelli and Baliu across various social media including Instagram and Facebook. Three local newspapers The Hackney Gazette, The Voice and Hackney Today covered the exhibition. QR codes were placed in the key locations in Mare Street so passers by could down load and see the artworks and stories in situ. On the exhibition's opening night, a silent auction was held for the art pieces. The proceeds went to the Saturday Soup Kitchen to help them become a registered charity and improve their activities for the benefit of the local homeless community.

The case study shows how spatial narrative can be is used as both an inclusive creative tool, and a critical tool. It exemplifies the role of the designer as researcher, as co-author, as a story listener and a story teller, as a creator of space but also of interactions, as a designer of systems, as politically aware and socially motivated, and, design as active intervention.

Exhibition plan @Luca Ponticelli

About the Author

Tricia Austin is a Ph.D supervisor and Research Leader of the Spatial Practices Programme at Central Saint Martins (CSM). She is also Course Leader of MA Narrative Environments at CSM. She is co-author of New Media Design, 2007, Lawrence King Publishing, UK. Her paper "Scales of Narrativity" is included in Museum Making published by Routledge in 2012. She has lectured in Europe and Asia and led a number of collaborative narrative environments projects with universities and governmental organizations across the world. Tricia led CSM's partnership in the EU funded, two-year EU-PA project <eu-pa.net> which facilitated design installations in cities across Europe exploring culture-led city regeneration strategies. Most recently Tricia curated the Museum of the Future exhibition at the OCTloft Shenzhen Festival, December 2013 - March 2014; she curated the international summit on exhibition design, 'Chaos at the Museum' <re-xd.org> April 2014, in collaboration with Prof. Tim McNeil, UC Davis. She published 'Designing Narrative Environments' in the Journal of the National Academy of Art. Vol 35, Number 4, August 2014. In January 2015, she presented a paper 'Spatial Storyworlds' at the symposium 'Against the Grain - on the narrative characteristics of architecture' at Bureau Europa, Maastricht, Holland.

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Links

Atelier Brückner http://www.atelier-brueckner.de

Daily Tous les Jours http://www.dailytouslesjours.com

Duncan McCauley http://www.duncanmccauley.com

Event Communications http://www.eventcomm.com

Kossmann Dejong http://www.kossmanndejong.nl

Land Design Studio http://www.landdesignstudio.co.uk

Metaphor http://www.metaphor.eu

Ralph Appelbaum Associates http://www.raany.com

Shangri-la experience http://www.glastonburyfestivals.co.uk/areas/shangri-la

Snark-spacemaking http://snarkive.eu

The Decorators http://www.the-decorators.net

MA Narrative Environments http://www.narrative-environments.com