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Placing Urban Writings

Narrative Technology and Possible Futures for the European City

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Placing Urban Writings
Narrative Technology and Possible Futures for the European City

Jorge Mejía Hernández and Onorina Botezat
WORKING GROUP 1

Stories and Cities

How can stories be used for the development of cities? Over the past four years, we have looked into this question from different perspectives as a multidisciplinary network of researchers from nearly all European countries. The objectives of our network were formulated as follows:

> *Writing Urban Places proposes an innovative investigation and implementation of a process for developing human understanding of communities, their society, and their situatedness, by narrative methods. It focuses particularly on the potential of narrative methods for urban development in European medium-sized cities.*[1]

This programme was carried out through several activities, organized by four independent working groups, focused respectively on the commu-

nicative, theoretical, methodological and operative aspects of the topic. Our focus on communications required that we zero in on the question of exchange.[2] To study how stories can be used for urban development, we started by recognizing them as a particular form of exchange. From this perspective, we could establish a clear relationship between the two main aspects of our study, where stories are means (of exchange) towards an end, which is urban development.

Rather than studying them separately, we became interested in knowing how the means and ends relate to each other. Among other possibilities, we found that a useful methodology to study interrelated means and ends is implicit in philosopher of science Marx Wartofsky's definition of models. Normally, we think of models as

> *. . . imitations, diagrams, scale versions, or pictures of something already existing. However, they can be more than this, as in prototypes, plans, hypothetical constructions of various sorts which serve as guides to action . . . Models are the highly specialized part of our technological equipment whose specific function is to create the future . . . In this sense, models are embodiments of purpose and, at the same time, instruments for carrying out such purposes.*[3]

Wartofsky's inscription of models within our future-making technologies required that we make a clear distinction between narrative techniques and narrative technology. Put simply, narrative techniques can be understood as the different ways in which stories can be told (that is, the discrete instruments and methods used by storytellers to craft and communicate experiences and events). Narrative technology, on the other hand, refers to the branch of knowledge that deals with all those techniques jointly. For instance, while Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Reprieve* develops a cinematographic technique to move seamlessly between characters and actions, the novel itself is part of a larger technology of the novel as a distinct narrative form.[4]

Besides allowing us to realize that narration operates simultaneously at the technical and technological levels, Wartofsky's definition of models also seemed particularly relevant to our work because it allowed us to keep the 'human understanding of communities' we strove for clear from determinism. A deterministic approach to urban development presumes that citizens have little effect on the future of their city, which is believed to be shaped elsewhere, by someone else, or in advance. On the contrary, Wartofsky's models intend to

> *characterize the normal process of creating the future, by bringing it down from the scale of cosmic crisis to that of daily and local necessity. I do not think there is a millennial solution to the future; but I do think that the pattern of our ordinary planning and striving prefigures whatever larger structures there are in terms of which long-range creation of the future can take place.*[5]

From this vantage point, we could see the singular hopes and actions of many different individuals as alternatives to prophecy or utopia, which Wartofsky refers to as 'larger structures in which long-range futures take place'.[6] Contrary to utopias, where means are made subservient to ends (or neglected altogether), Wartofsky's models make possible futures (*telos*) inseparable from the instruments and methods (techniques) required to get there.[7] Seeing them as models required us to reflect on how the cities we imagined have been made or should be made in the future.
Accordingly, the telos for our work was defined in relation to an undesirable (albeit changeable) situation that reflected strongly on different cities and an available resource that seemed useful to confront that situation. The resurgence in Europe of dissociative movements brought back a politics of cosmic crises (with their equally cosmic solutions, naturally). At the urban level, over the past decades, many local and national governments have used such politics to enforce across-the-board master plans and impose different types of uniformity on their cities.[8] The many negative results of

such master plans include the decrease in the quantity or quality of public space, the displacement of affordable housing from central to peripheral areas, the decimation of productive economies for the sake of a supposed planetary benefit, a new wave of programmatic functionalization or clear-cut zoning, and what is usually referred to as 'overtourism'.[9]

In contrast to these and other ill effects of one-party planning, previous research on the interrelations that exist between architecture and literature afforded us three leads to study the past, present and possible futures of the European city.[10] Based on that research, we hypothesized that the good quality of life in many of those cities is the result of the inhabitants' ability to recognize meaning in their built environment, but also to appropriate it piecemeal by projecting their own ambitions and hopes onto it. Furthermore, it appeared to us that it is essentially through said meaning and appropriation of their surroundings that those inhabitants are able to integrate with each other productively while preserving their singularity.[11]

These three conditions – meaningfulness, appropriation and integration – are not easily attainable when urban planning is conceived as a top-down, centralized or univocal response to a cosmic crisis. On the other hand, we realized that all three conditions are essential to great stories. Writing about Henry Miller, George Orwell invites us to:

> *. . . read him for five pages, ten pages, and you feel the peculiar relief that comes not so much from understanding as from being understood [emphasis original]. 'He knows all about me,' you feel; 'he wrote this specially for me.' It is as though you could hear a voice speaking to you . . . with no humbug in it, no moral purpose, merely an implicit assumption that we are all alike. For the moment you have got away from the lies and simplifications, the stylized, marionette-like quality of ordinary fiction, even quite good fiction, and are dealing with the recognizable experiences of human beings [emphasis added].*[12]

Indeed, stories – especially the better ones – have a distinct ability to convey meaning, foster empathy (that is, the ability to 'put oneself in someone's shoes') and encourage mutual understanding among strangers. But can similar relations be established between inhabitants and buildings, or between the different parties involved in the construction of the city? And if so, how?

Possible Futures

Architecture and the other disciplines that specialize in the production of buildings are by nature polytechnic. Even the simplest construction requires diverse technologies, such as those needed to defy gravity, protect from adverse climatic conditions, provide electrical power and running water, or communicate status or beliefs through style.[13] Likewise, even the simplest of stories operate at different levels, based on the choice and use of specific narrative techniques.[14] On these grounds we set out to study the ways in which narrative technology can be used to develop meaningful, appropriable, and integrative built environments.

We are aware that the mere claim that one aims for meaningful, appropriable and integrative cities remains a vague and probably banal proposition, unless joint sense is made of these qualities and criteria are established to evaluate them. In other words, a theory was required to explain the city and justify a course of action for its future development in relation to the principles we defined for our work.
To some extent, the telos of our network is founded on an architectural theory that melds piecemeal engineering with the ecological sciences. Regarding the first, we can refer to the article 'L'Ambiente Come Artefatto' (Environment as Artefact) that was published in the Italian architecture journal *Casabella* in 1971, which recognizes cities as:

> *. . . organizations of form that are the (often unforeseen) result of many human actions, as environments that must sustain a wide range of (often unforeseen) human actions. Such an organization of form, in contrast*

to an object that is the result of a deliberate design, has been termed an 'artifact'.[15]

The diversity of those many human actions is further considered through an ecological framework, the description of which can be found in the introduction to the book *On Streets*, published in 1978:

The notion of territoriality, transferred from ethology, has played an increasingly prominent role in human ecology, and in more narrowly defined studies of architecture. As in A.E. Parr's definition of territory, 'space which an individual or close-knit group will defend,' the concept necessarily involves a principle of competitive exclusion. Ethologists, however, have pointed to two extreme types of territory or 'niche specificity.' 'In one the animal . . . requires to be spatially separate from its closest allies and competitors . . . In the other the various species are structurally specialized to use different resources; they do not need to have behavioral mechanisms fixing them in place and in fact cross each other's paths.' Ecological sympatry, the sharing of the same region by different kinds of organism [sic], is thus a concomitant of the description of territories.[16]

Both fragments converge in a theory that explains the city as the sum of many ordinary plans, conceived by different people in order to deal with their daily and local necessities. That theory also defines the principles on which the practice of that city is based: a series of sympatric relations between diverse (even antagonistic) individuals, who contribute and use disparate resources. Together, ordinary planning and sympatry justify a course of action for the future development of cities, which is to foster and protect urban resilience, understood as the city's ability to adapt to changing situations.

Urban resilience can be grasped and explained by different means, such as the texts where we've read about this theory, or the different drawings and three-dimensional scale-models architects use to practice this or any other theory in design. Like these, and the many other forms of communication people use to make cities, stories have a number of advantages and disadvantages. Here we will focus on a single one of those advantages, namely, their ability to convey evidence of previous and potential understandings. Aldous Huxley offers us a good distinction between knowledge and understanding in the following terms:

Knowledge is always in terms of concepts and can be passed on by means of words or other symbols. Understanding is not conceptual, and therefore cannot be passed on. It is an immediate experience, and immediate experience can only be talked about (very inadequately), never shared. Nobody can actually feel another's pain or grief, another's love or joy or hunger. And similarly nobody can experience another's understanding of a given event or situation. There can, of course, be knowledge of such an understanding, and this knowledge may be passed on in speech or writing, or by means of other symbols. Such communicable knowledge is useful as a reminder that there have been specific understandings in the past, and that understanding is at all times possible.[17]

Normally, the means we use to communicate our plans for the built environment fit Huxley's definition of knowledge. Drawings, models, technical texts and other instruments of architecture help us abstract aspects of buildings and cities and pass them on to others unambiguously. Building beyond a minimum degree of complexity would be unimaginable without this ability. However, our experience of the environments we project and build is first and foremost direct, and therefore fits Huxley's definition of understanding, meaning that it cannot be passed on to others. An important part of what buildings and places say to us, the ways in which we make them ours, and how we associate with others by doing so, is also direct. While there are

aspects of the three goals we set for ourselves that can be known, it is clear that others remain within the realm of understanding.

As Huxley notes, stories cannot pass on direct experience. Mindless of how well-crafted a story might be, it will never allow us to actually feel the amazement of others as they are bathed by the cleansed light in a Gothic cathedral, their fear of walking down a dark alley in the bad part of town, or the joy of sharing food and drinks with loved ones on a sunny terrace. What stories can do, especially when they are of the excellent kind, is to record as clearly and convincingly as possible that those understandings have indeed taken or could take place and remain possible, and by doing so remind us that our ordinary plans and the environments we generate will inevitably lead to new and hopefully desirable understandings. In other words, stories of (or about) the city, or 'urban narratives', allow us to record previous and promote new understandings of life in cities. But how does that happen? And, most importantly, what effect could that distinct capacity of stories have in relation to the kind of city we are striving for?

Urban Narratives

Trying to understand what it is about stories that allows us to imagine ourselves in situations that are unknown to us, as well as to empathize with the strangers who partook in those events, we collected a handful of urban narratives from within our network. A first step in this direction had already been taken on 12 May 2021. Under lockdown, our working group organized an online seminar on the topic of communication. The title of the seminar was 'Integration through Discourse', followed by the double question 'How do we communicate, and why?'[18]

Our goal then was to reflect on our own discourse through a public conversation carried out by different people focused on a known topic.[19] During a four-hour long programme, we tried to examine the different instruments and methods that made our discourse possible, but also asked ourselves

if those instruments and methods made sense in relation to our network's telos. Among other positive results, the event revealed an urgent question. Before asking how and why we communicate, shouldn't we first know *who* we should be communicating with?

Truth be told, the seminar showed that we were mostly talking to ourselves. With a single exception, all participants were academics, which had evident effects on the selection of topics, but also on the way the conversation was carried out. In some cases, there was actually no conversation, but lecturing. We thus recognized that the fulfilment of our telos required exchanges with different kinds of citizens and the institutions that represent them. Reflecting on her book *Open Architecture*, historian Esra Akcan shows how the voices of citizens, scholars and institutions can be productively interwoven:

> ***By paying attention to immigrant appropriations of domestic and urban spaces, we can register architectural design as something that constantly evolves in time, and acquires new forms and meanings with the contribution of resident architects. By honouring the residents' stories equally with those of the architects, we can admit that architectural history does not end when a building leaves the hand of the professional architect.***[20]

Besides reaching out to local media (such as regional newspapers, radio stations and TV channels) as a means to engage with a larger, non-academic public, we also appealed to some of our colleagues, not as experts but as citizens (or as residents, in Akcan's terms). Beyond the specific knowledge every scholar has developed, it is also clear that they inevitably understand the city directly, in ways that cannot be codified into disciplines. So what does the city look like, from that perspective?[21]

Esteban says:
I come from Medellín, which has this awful image related to violence and drugs. Since I've been in Paris, Medellín has evolved in my mind. Every time I return, I explore it again, as I have become a foreigner in my own city. I discover the new city that was born during my years here, in France; a new Medellín that was born in my mind. I don't want to say that it's a nostalgic experience, it's just something I appreciate in a different way. Paris is a very dense city, and it's always changing. There's always something to discover, not only in the centre. I've become a fan of the suburbs, because it's there where you can find real differences, real changes, real conflicts, not in a pejorative way but rather as movement. I started exploring the suburbs as a hobby and then realized that, by doing so, Paris grew on me. Every time I cross the ring that divides city centre from periphery, I feel elsewhere, and I know I'm going to discover something new every time.

Jeremy says:
I've lived in Strasbourg for over a decade, but I was born in New York City and raised in Hudson Valley, in a small city called Middletown, one of 50 – if not more – Middletowns that exist in America. I grew up thinking of Middletown as quite unremarkable. Very recently I've been having memories of being a boy, not yet a teenager but a boy, and crossing a certain part of that landscape on bicycle, on foot, on rollerblades. There used to be a railroad track behind my best friend's house, a little service rail that was supposed to carry freight to some tiny factory. We were following that line across town. It was reminiscent of the movie *Stand by Me*, without the dead bodies, although we really wanted to find one at that age. My attempt to be independent in a small city in upstate New York was about getting out of my immediate neighbourhood and going to the two or three other neighbourhoods across town. In hindsight, it was maybe a kilometre, but at the time it seemed huge. Two years ago, I moved to the edge of Strasbourg and when I go for a run I leave Strasbourg, I cross the city line into some German-sounding villages that are to the northwest. At the same time, I'm also at

a 12-minute bicycle ride from the Central Station and my work. In many ways it's bigger than Middletown, but it feels like a very small city, especially because I made my way to Strasbourg through Brooklyn and Edinburgh and other places that were more intensely populated. Strasbourg feels like a village that kept on eating Alsatian food and so has taken on an obese size. I can make a comparison to my accumulated memories of Brooklyn becoming less and less a place of interest. The field of possibility shrinks every time I go back. There's no residual space to inhabit there as a thinker, as a maker, as a creator, unless you happen to be wildly wealthy.

Karima says:
I was born in Brussels and when I had the age to travel, I was really eager to go to London, where I worked and lived for about ten years. Then I decided to come back and it was great, because after living all those years in a busy town, I could step back and rediscover my city. Lots of things had changed. I decided to live in Ixelles, where it is busy, but not too much, where you can do things within walking distance, really close to the woods. I didn't have a terrace or garden in my previous places, so I really enjoyed the feeling of living in the country without living in the country, and at the same time not having to take lots of public transport for long journeys like I used to do in London. Now we live in the country, not far from town. We commute by train for an hour, maybe an hour-and-a-half, it depends. The kids are big, so, now, we're free to improvise and stay after work in the city for theatre, drinks with friends, exhibitions. My father was a farmer originally and it's kind of ironic that he left Morocco to settle his family in Brussels, and that after experiencing the big city, now, I'm also back in nature, yet not completely cut off from what the town has to offer. Brussels is well-sized, it's kind of human-sized. You can do things, you can discover other quarters without having to organize yourself or plan in advance. There are 19 *communes* in Brussels, like little boroughs, and each of them functions like a village. The other thing about Brussels is the quality of life. Here you can still have access to things you can't have in big cities, where you would have to have a lot of money

to be in the centre. Here you can still have a little garden without having to be on a huge corporate wage. And even though it's not like it used to be 20 years ago, you can still find a mix between different communities, with students mixed with old, retired people.

Mennatullah says:
I was born and raised in different parts of Cairo. Other than Jakarta, I've never visited a more intense city than Cairo. I love living in big cities! I studied in Stuttgart, which most Germans would consider a big city, but for me it was very small. For further studies, I only wanted bigger cities, it was an important factor. I like the differences between the different parts of a big city. In each neighbourhood, you can feel the lack of homogeneity. Sometimes it's mind-blowing, it's too much, especially after living some time elsewhere. Sometimes it's hard to comprehend all that's going on, but at the same time you can live in your own bubble, without really having to see what's happening outside. Now I live between different cities. Coming from Cairo, it's like juggling with different parts of the city, but now with different parts of the world.

Mickael says:
I was born in Maubeuge, which is a tiny little town in France, next to the Belgian border. I recall it being nice but cold, green, and having friends. I came to Brussels at a very young age, to live in a neighbourhood outside the city centre. It was also green, very pleasant, and I remember commuting to school on a bus, again with friends. The neighbourhood was Watermael-Boisfort, in the southern part of Brussels, which is known to be more of a village-like neighbourhood. It's not as hectic as the centre of Brussels. Neighbourhoods in Brussels have a very strong identity, also at the administrative level. Management is done at the level of the *communes*, as they are called, not at the level of the whole city. We are still a bit medieval. Neighbourhoods that used to be little cities still keep a lot of power in local politics. It causes a lot of friction because coordination and public infrastructure become big issues, but at the same time it creates a lot of dialogue. Consensus takes a lot of time. For an outsider it might seem chaotic, but I find this the perfect environment for creativity to step in. Behind all the chaos, and the impression that it's not a fully modern city, I see a place where new ideas can actually be imagined. Brussels is also changing constantly. People criticize the fact that it's always under construction. Everything takes a long time due to the difficult planning, which could be seen as a lack of efficiency, but it can also be seen as a very open city that is ready to hear many opinions before actually engaging in something concrete.

Narrative Technology
Brussels, Medellín, Cairo, Paris, London and New York do not fit the range of mid-sized cities that we initially tried to focus on, especially if you think of them on a map, the number of their inhabitants, the intensity of their public transport networks, or their GDP. The above stories, though, allow us to revise our initial focus on a particular kind of city, and recognize that size is always relative. As we can see in these stories, the bigness of cities can be acknowledged and confronted through different means. For instance, large territories, dense inhabitation, and busy movement can be fragmented into much smaller pieces, which Mickael and Karima refer to as villages, and Mennatullah calls bubbles. Could this fragmentation explain how all narrators seem to find meaning and achieve different degrees of appropriation of the cities they told us about?

In relation to our telos, stories would indeed make it feasible to attain this kind of fragmentation, which was also implicit in our original goals as a network.

> *By recognising the value of local urban narratives – stories rich in information regarding citizens' socio-spatial practices, perceptions and expectations – the Action aims to articulate a set of concrete literary devices within a host of spatial disciplines; bringing together scientific*

> *research in the fields of literary studies, urban planning and architecture; and positioning this knowledge vis-à-vis progressive redevelopment policies carried out in medium-sized cities in Europe.*[22]

Indeed, our focus on the experience of local and concrete citizens of the city would denote that, far from deterministic readings of the past (or utopian visions of the future), stories could allow us to appraise human experience piecemeal. According to Orwell, this individual, piecemeal experience is actually the *sine qua non* of literary prose.

> *Literature as we know it is an individual thing, demanding mental honesty and a minimum of censorship. And this is even truer of prose than of verse . . . The atmosphere of orthodoxy is always damaging to prose, and above all it is completely ruinous to the novel, the most anarchical of all forms of literature . . . The novel . . . is a product of the free mind, of the autonomous individual.*[23]

We can certainly see this fragmentation at work in the five narratives above, where urban life is described as a series of discrete, yet ever-changing realities, even when it takes place within a vast and basically ungraspable territory. Time braids itself into long and short cycles and uneven rhythms, like when Jeremy shifts seamlessly from the railroad tracks of Middletown to the borders of Strasbourg, decades apart. Furthermore, all conflicts and contradictions that are inherent to social life in big and small cities are described as opportunities for constructive disagreement, carefully crafted opinions and consensual compromises based on trust – all conditions for sympatry. As Mickael notes: 'It is not sure where Brussels is going, but it's going ahead! This is what I love about Brussels, and what I sometimes miss in other towns that seem a bit too sure of what they are.'

The openness and doubt that are common to these stories appear to shield us from the allure of total planning. Esteban, for instance, would be much

less likely to rediscover the suburbs of Paris every other day if, instead of a messy clustering of vibrant neighbourhoods, those suburbs looked more like the ideal cities of the Renaissance, or the totalitarian dreams of a socialist dictator. But unless we somehow articulate the indeterminacy and ambiguity recognized as value in his narration, ineffectuality could just as well ensue. In other words, Esteban could find it just as hard to discover anything of interest or value if Paris or Medellín were vast brownfields, suggesting that meaningless, in-appropriable, or disintegrative cities and stories can result as much from too much planning as from weak structure.

In urban terms, we usually refer to lack of structure as sprawl, with rambling as its narrative counterpart. It does not seem far-fetched to presume therefore that the technology we are looking for in both stories and cities – those 'literary devices within a host of spatial disciplines' mentioned above – should be able to position our telos as far as possible from the extremes of total planning or sprawl, full prescription, or rambling.

To see how stories can help us adopt this well-calibrated position we can start by identifying one of their fundamental capacities. Contrary to rambling, they must make *sense*, or allow us to *understand* the experiences or events they relate to. From its origin, the term we use to refer to this particular quality (the Latin *sēnsus*: sensation, feeling, understanding) conveys a distinct technical feature of stories. Stories can arouse our feelings and sensations as much as they can render comprehensible what is being communicated. Neither rambling nor univocal text (think of an instruction manual) are able to fulfil both conditions of sense simultaneously.[24]

Like stories, meaningful and appropriable built environments must also make sense, by being comprehensible and being able to arouse our feelings and sensations. Our equation of sprawl to rambling suggests that below a degree of consistency or coherence, built space turns unintelligible. Too much prescription, on the other hand, leads to environments that fail to

stimulate our minds and senses. In addition, to a great degree, stories make sense because they structure events and experiences as a *sequence*. This simply means that they establish a particular order that can be followed by our mind as much as by our senses. Some sequences are linear while others meander intricately, some extend broadly while others barely cover instants. In all cases, though, a narrative sequence imposes a temporal restraint on reality that certainly favours our understanding.

Again, it isn't difficult to establish parallels between this technical capacity of stories and the built environments we are striving for. Human actions necessarily unfold in rhythms and time-lapses that are often neglected or oversimplified by extensive or comprehensive planning. Absent these sensitive timeframes, too much planning results in predictable outcomes and boring sequences, characteristic of both humdrum stories and cities. On the contrary, fecund architectures and texts manage to unfold time in ways that remain clear but are not entirely predictable, disclosing and revealing events at a pace that remains within the limits of our understanding, while keeping us alert and curious. Karima, for instance, is able to weave her story of decades (ten years in London, ten years after returning from London) into the longer process of her father's move from rural Morocco and the much more regular meetings with friends for drinks after work.

The last technical capacity of stories we will mention here is their ability to *proportion* reality. One can attribute extension in space or time to basically any object or event in and of itself, but as soon as two or more objects or events come in contact with each other, the relationship they establish is necessarily proportional. It is not by chance that the act of relating is synonymous with narrating or storytelling.

Relating means telling or giving an account of events or circumstances, but it also means bringing them into an association or connection. In great stories and beautiful cities, those connections achieve a degree of

harmony that is often referred to as proportionate. In other words, the different objects, experiences or events that narrators and constructors alike bring together in their work, remain within a particular range (beyond which they would become futile, unbelievable or shocking). Attempts to make beauty completely relative, and therefore ethereal, ignore the robust proportional systems that underlie some of humankind's most cherished aesthetic achievements.[25] Mention of commuting, walking, biking, running and rollerblading in the above narratives offers us a sense of how the city is proportioned in different ways, depending on the instruments we use to proportion it.

While proportional systems establish ratios among two or more objects of different magnitudes, when one of the interrelated objects is deliberately fixed, proportion turns into something else. From the Latin *scālae*, meaning ladders or stairs, *scale* is usually understood as a progression in quantity or a degree based on a fixed variable, such as the even height of each step in a flight of stairs.[26] Architectural drawings and models, for example, start from a fixed unit of measure, such as the metre or the foot, to re-present real or conceived objects.

Clearly, all the abovementioned technical features of stories are essential to our telos because they jointly refer to a fixed magnitude. For stories to be understandable, their sense, sequence and proportion must remain within the quantities and qualities that are distinct to creatures of similar anatomy, perception and intellect. Granted that stories are made by and for human beings, they remain bound to a *human scale*, which is what allows us to appraise the events or experiences they relate in proportion to ourselves. And while we can abstract reality and systematize it (know it, in Huxley's terms) in relation to magnitudes way beyond ourselves (utopian, deterministic, totalitarian, and therefore in-, sub- or super-human scales), we also inevitably remain bound to the scale imposed on that same reality by our bodies, and the direct experience that they offer us.

In response to our initial question ('How can stories be used for the development of cities?'), Karima's observation that 'Brussels is well-sized (because) it's kind of human-sized' is revealing. Unlike other future-making technologies that operate at the scale of the cosmic crisis, urban narratives, through their different techniques, are useful for the development of meaningful, appropriable and integrative cities, simply because they offer us the distinct technology of scale required to recognize, foster and protect past, present and future human understandings. And because they allow us to continue conceiving and practicing them in fundamentally human magnitudes (piecemeal, ordinary, local and diverse), urban narratives should always have a key place among the technological equipment we use to analyse our past and project our present into the future of our cities.

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1 About the Action, *Writing Urban Places*, writingurbanplaces.eu/about/.

2 Within the internal part of the network, we participated in Working Group 1 'Science Communications', which was 'responsible for the overall communication and output of the initiative, via the dissemination of the status and results of the projects and the deliverables of the different WG's through the website and beyond the network. This implies dealing with the output of the project, in terms of reports, academic journal, website and conference proceedings, guaranteeing internal and external communications.' *WG1 – Science Communication*, Writing Urban Places, writingurbanplaces.eu/about/team/wg-1-science-communication/.

3 Marx W. Wartofsky, 'Telos and Technique: Models as Modes of Action', in: Stanford Anderson (ed.), *Planning for Diversity and Choice: Possible Futures and Their Relation to the Man Controlled Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 261.

4 Richard Menke, 'Review: The Technology of the Novel: Writing and Narrative in British Fiction, by Tony E. Jackson', *Victorian Studies* 53/1 (2010), 158-160; Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Reprieve*, trans. Eric Sutton (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

5 Ibid., 260.

6 bid.

7 Referring to the Marxist utopianism's disregard for technique, Frederick Crews notes: 'Instead of the anticipated triumph of a specific class which was alleged to be the unified subject-object of history, we now get the merest hints of a soporific Marcusean paradise for all – and no proposed means of arriving there.' Frederick Crews, 'Dialectical Immaterialism', in: Frederick Crews, *Skeptical Engagements* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 153.

8 Among the most interesting cases of such total planning is the city of Skopje, which adopted a large-scale 'metabolist' plan after the devastation caused by the 1963 earthquake, and more recently has been subjected to another attempt to achieve an overarching stylistic uniformity through the plan popularly known as 'Skopje 2014'.

9 World Tourism Organization (UNWTO); Centre of Expertise Leisure, Tourism & Hospitality; NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences; and NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences (eds.), 'Overtourism'? Understanding and Managing Urban Tourism Growth beyond Perceptions' (Madrid: UNWTO, 2018).

10 Pedro Gadanho and Susana Oliveira (eds.), *Once Upon a Place: Architecture & Fiction* (Lisbon: Caleidoscopio, 2013); and Klaske Havik et al. (eds.), *Writingplace: Investigations in Architecture and Literature* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2016).

11 In relation to this network, these three categories were first proposed in: Jorge Mejía Hernández, 'Technical Annex 2017 (edit)', e-mail, 6 September 2017.
12 George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', in: George Orwell, *Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 12.
13 Giancarlo Motta and Antonia Pizzigoni, *La Máquina de Proyecto* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2008).
14 For an excellent example of said narrative techniques at work, see Estaban Restrepo, 'The Readjusted Arabesque: Narrating Architecture in Literary Text, the Case of Kafka's Bridge', *Writingplace Journal* 5 (2021), 8-29.
15 Stanford Anderson, 'L'Ambiente Come Artefatto: Considerazione Metodologiche', *Casabella* 359-360 (1971), 71-73. The term artifact, in quotations, refers to F.A. Hayek, 'The Results of Human Action but not of Human Design', in: F.A. Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 96-105.
16 Stanford Anderson, 'People in the Physical Environment: The Urban Ecology of Streets', in: Stanford Anderson (ed.), *On Streets* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1986), 3; Notes refer to A.E. Parr, 'In Search of Theory VI', *Arts and Architecture* (September 1965), 2-3 and G.E. Hutchinson, *The Ecological Theater and the Evolutionary Play* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 55.
17 Aldous Huxley, 'Knowledge and Understanding', in: Aldous Huxley, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1952), 33-68.
18 For the call of this event, see *Online Seminar: Integration through Discourse: How do We Communicate, and Why?*, Writing Urban Places, writingurbanplaces.eu/online-seminar-integration-through-discourse-how-do-we-communicate-and-why/. Recordings of the whole seminar are available at Communication, Writing Urban Places, youtube.com/playlist?list=PLXlMnpOPXf1d7CqhmgMQpcQc4NBlxC_KJ.
19 We specifically refer to public discourse in order to make a clear distinction with private conversation and other aspects of intimate individual life. While the effects of information technology on this distinction are certainly challenging for the preservation of privacy, and thus open new and extremely interesting discussions about the role and nature of narrative techniques and technologies today, the scope of this text does not allow us to elaborate further on this matter.
20 Esra Akcan, 'Writing Open Architecture as a Book on Human Rights (and Against Nation-States)', *Footprint* 31 (2021), 15.

21 All stories below were collected in two online conversations with COST Senior Communications Officer Karima Ben Salah and Science Officer Mickael Pero (held on 26 October 2022) and with action members Esteban Restrepo, Jeremy Hawkins, and Mennatullah Hendawy (held on 20 December 2022). All excerpts have been used with their permission.
22 *About the Action*, op. cit. (note 1).
23 Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', op. cit. (note 12), 39.
24 For interesting cases of pseudo-technical text that is in fact rambling, see: Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense* (New York: Picador, 1996).
25 Richard Padovan, Proportion: *Science, Philosophy, Architecture* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 1999).
26 See: Julio Cortázar, 'Instrucciones para Subir una Escalera', in: Julio Cortázar, *Historias de Cronopios y Famas* (Bogotá: Punto de Lectura, 2005 [1962]).