Narrative in design process
ARC6989 Reflections on Architectural Design

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Introduction:

The architectural design is a complicated process, and there are many ways in the process for designers and design students to develop their projects. In this essay I’m going to show the methodology our studio has taken during the design process to develop the project. Then I will focus on the narrative part that has been mentioned and strengthened a lot of times from the beginning of our studio. It ran through the whole project and links each period of the design process together to develop ideas and works as a communication tool. In this essay I will discuss how it works as design tool and communication tool, how it work together and combine with other methodologies during the design process.
“[…] One day, the child just went back from school, and playing in the street nearby their home with some of her friends. Her mum was on her way back from shopping, she encountered another woman living in their district, and chatted with each other in the street for a while, then she kept on walking, seeing her little daughter playing games in the street. She told the little girl to come back home after half an hour, and then went back home. […] In the evening, the family went for a walk after dinner. They walk through the central green space of the district, and saw some activities taken place such as an man playing guitar in the green nodes along the street, several women gathered together to have an outdoor dance class in the open space, etc. The pedestrianized streets worked as the linkages of activity nodes and places of interest […]”

This is the narrative I wrote at the very first period of the process of our studio work. Since our studio works on the theme of ‘neighbourhood’, we were asked to write a narrative at the beginning of the project to describe our ideal neighbourhoods according to our previous experience. During the design process, our studio has taken a series of different methodologies that is quite different from my previous experience. To start with the narrative and focus on it in this essay because it is the most interesting part that ran through the whole project and interact with other methodology we have taken.

Architectural design as a process:

Before discuss about the specific methodology in the design process, I would like to mention the concept of architectural design as a process. In the book ‘How Designers Think’, the author claim that we should not only focus on the end products of design, and consider ‘design’ as a process. The design process usually consists of a series of activities, it starts from getting a design problem and finally develop a solution. In the process, designers have to deal
with both precise and vague ideas, call for systematic and chaotic thinking, need both imaginative thought and mechanical calculation. As a designer, we should concern with how the process works and carry on. [Bryan Lawson, How Designers Think, p.4]

The Methodologies of the design process of our studio:

As it has been mentioned above, we should treat architectural design as a continuous process both in the students' project in school and in the real project, to. So how this process carry on and developed is very important of the project. There are many ways to develop the design during the process. As in our studio work, the way to develop ideas during the process is quite different and intriguing.

Our theme is about neighbourhood, and our task is to define and develop a radical new neighbourhood, which will be gathered by the studio as a whole. It is a whole project and consists of everyone's individual work related to different aspects of a neighbourhood. So a lot of group works were included in the design process, incorporated with individual responses, research interests and lots of different design thinking and making.

A series of creative methods and tactical processes has been taken as the studio methodology which includes the art practices, narrative development, mapping as a transformative tool, interdisciplinary working, working with new futures thinking and new economic practices to explore how transformation can happen through the processes of collaboration and participation.

The whole process is like circulation from individual work to group work and back to individual work then to group work, finally we will work out our whole new and future neighbourhood. Narrative plays as the enlightenment, catalyster and also communication tool to link different part of the process together.

The Process Map is shown in the next page
**MAP OF THE DESIGN PROCESS**

- Research Theme
  - Group process
  - Individual process

**GROUP MODEL**

- Group scenario play: A role play to test the idea
  - The role included:
    - Local teacher, industrial leader, teenager, older people, shop owner, health professional, unemployed person, disabled people, local farmer, officer of the town council

**CONCEPT MODEL**

- A new future neighborhood narrative
- A new whole neighborhood project consists of everyone's individual project
- Keep on develop the project for more details

**KEEP ON DEVELOP THE PROJECT**

**COLLAGE OF THE MASTER PLAN**

**NARRATIVE: ONE DAY IN THE GREEN NEIGHBOURHOOD**
Narrative In Architectural Design Process:

Narrative plays a very important role and ran through the whole process. It makes the development of ideas in a fluid and engaging way. So I’d like to raise several questions to show why and how to integrate narrative into the design process.

What is a narrative?
Narrative always appears in words with the phrase “written narrative” or “oral narrative”. It has some relationship with story which is a sequence of events. But it is not just a story and it is more about the telling of the story. A narrative re-tell events, but leaves some the insignificant perspective and perhaps emphasizing others. Thus the narratives shape history.

In Prue Chiles’s essay (who is our studio tutor and interested in adopting narrative method in design process) “On Narrative”, she mentioned that narrative approach is sometimes a good way to develop ideas in a fluid and engaging way, they can be very personal or concern a whole city.

Narrative can be constructed and understood in many ways. The form of narrative varies a lot, it could be a small description of the most ordinary living scene, while it can also be an interesting and completed story. The narrative is also multi-layered, and ranges from a whole city image or just the simplest scene of people’s daily life.

Usually, the narrative is deprived from the people’s experiences and memories, it could be conducted by the designer himself or by the people at that site. It helps us understand, for example, in our neighbourhood project, how people live in their homes and what is memorable to them.

Narrative could also be forward looking, construct the one of the future through storytelling and scenario playing, but also more passive descriptive—the uncovering representation of personal and social lives within the city.
Why use narrative as a design process?

“There is no design in silence. All designers, like all designed objects, “tell stories,” sometimes deliberately, many other times without much degree of consciousness. Design is permeated with narratives because it is constituted within a field of discourses: formal, psychological, ideological, theoretical.” [Luis Porter & Sergio Sotelo, Design by Narratives]

“Many architects have something to say, a story to tell. There are a variety of means architects employ in expressing their own, or their client values, thoughts, wishes, beliefs, and desires. They often communicate a unifying theme elaborated throughout the “plot”. Some of the storytellers of our discipline choose to relate the entire story in a single design, while others “write” continuing sagas in which each building is a sequel to the last. Others, whether consciously or not, allude to earlier work by masters or to vital vernacular traditions. The architect’s tale can be as captivating and powerful as the writer’s. The best narratives give building added meaning and encourage people to become involved with and to cherish works of architecture”. [1988) Journal of the Collage of Architecture and Design “Narrative Architecture”]

The designers usually develop the project and express themselves only by visual language and seldom use written and oral expression. But in fact, every design is defined by social narrative, and the behavior within the design spaces will be influenced to a large extent by the social narratives. [Luis Porter & Sergio Sotelo, Design by Narratives]

Another fact is that some popular approaches often lacks the narratives of history, collective memory and identity that make a place. “It ‘builds an image (only) of community and a rhetoric of place-based civic pride and consciousness for those who do not need it, whilst abandoning those that do to their underclass fate.” [David Harvey, the cultural geographer]
Since architecture is not an independent individuality, it belongs to the site, the history of the place and also the cultural context of the area. At the same time architecture has an affective impact on the relationship between people with their surroundings so human experiences can play a very significant role in the design process to create a meaningful place.

**How does narrative help in the design process?**

Generally speaking, from my point of view the narrative can be used in three aspects during the design process, that is: help designers get a better understanding of the project and the site, work as a design and exploration tool to intrigue something interesting, to make a better communication between designers and others.

There are already existing narratives for a city or a community consists of people’s memories and experiences can help understand something bigger than our individual existence and make us part of the site context. Also through some community involvement to develop the narrative with the local people can help us understand the site better.

During the design process, narrative design method could help the designers respond to the site, bring in the history, collective memory and identity that make a place. Design by narrative can also add meaning to the project. Adapting the narrative as a design tools or an exploration tool could intrigue something interesting and also add meaning to the project. At the same time designers’ personal reality, thinking and ambitions has been permeated into the final outcome of the project.

Narrative can work as a communication tool between the designer and others. Since narrative translate some professional codes and more appealing so it is much easy to be understood than some complicated professional graphic or analyze. It can be easily remembered and are bound up with memories. Almost everyone can place themselves somewhere within them. By a simple
narration, people can have a clear idea about who will use this place, what the space looks like, what happens in the space.

**Case study:**
Integrate narrative into the design process can be a good way to develop the project both in design education or some real projects. There are some existing example which shows their way to integrate narrative into design process both in educational level and in real project.

In the article “Narrative Design: Meaningful Places for People”, the relevance of Narrative in Spatial Design Education has been discussed at the educational level. They are trying to shift away from the purely thematic/trend based approaches in architectural design education. So a series of “experience-driven design” briefs has been explored with students at different levels and Universities in and around London. The ability of infiltrating the dweller’s experience and transforming their daily life-stories has been highlighted. The students were asked to build out some of these narratives in their design and focus on one key narrative or experience of their personal life in order to come up with ideas and a quick solution of how to translate those stories into communicative architectural designs. By doing this, each students’ awareness regarding the direct relationship exist between people and the places people live in and through has been set. [Luis Porter & Sergio Sotelo, *Design by Narratives*]

Another example about narrative in design process is a real project “the regeneration of North Sheffield in South Yorkshire” and was described in the essay “What If? A Narrative Process for Re-imagining the City” written by Prue Chiles. In the design process, narrative was described as a device to help the design team develop a set of background ideas, an identity for a place a ‘there’ for somewhere that was not there
before. A great deal of research, community involvement and inventive mapping has been taken to find the city-wide narratives which helps to understand what people really need in this area and also make it a meaningful place. Ideas moved from neighbourhood level to area to city-wide level and back again, and a dynamic top-down bottom-up narrative began to appear. In this case narrative worked as the tool to get ideas from the people at that site, and also communication tool to show to the existing residents to exchange ideas and developed a narrative for a more sustainable future, with new forms of energy, refurbishment of their homes and other ideas to improve their environment.

This represents a large step towards a truly top-down/bottom-up regeneration process and hopefully a new story. [Prue Chiles, ‘What If? A Narrative Process for Re-imagining the City’]

**Narrative in our own studio process:**

Finally come back to our own project to see how the method of narrative works for the project. There are several narratives we made during the design process as mentioned before.

The first narrative was developed at the beginning of the project about our ideal neighbourhood. It was made through memories and personal experiences based on the junk model we made before, that worked as a catalyst for the regeneration. The interesting thing is that it was written according to our own experiences, so different people have different ideas about neighbourhood. What interested us most, what we really want to pursue in the neighbourhood has been reflected in the narratives. It was also the
starting point of the project. Latter process was developed within the narrative and the narrative did not end at that point, it carried on, changed and improved with the development of the project.

In the next stage after choosing our site, every one have found their own interests about the project according to the situation of the site and also their previous narrative. A group scenario has been played to check the rationality and practicability of the project. During the scenario, every one played one role of the neighbourhood. It then became part of the continuous narrative of our group and made us consider the project from different aspects.

Then individual project had been developed. In the concept model of my project, a narrative was written together with the concept model about the project to show the general ideas of the flowing green.

The image below shows the formation and function of the architecture in my project. The narrative shows the development of the ideas and who will use this place, what this place looks like and also what can people do in this space.
Conclusion:

Though our project is not finished yet, it will end up with the new neighbourhood with the new narrative in the future. With integrating the method of the narrative in the design process which works as the starting point of the project with our first interests and then developed continuously and also lead the development of the project. Then a fluid and engaging process has been made, and a new narrative future will developed. From all that discussed above we can draw a conclusion that narrative is an efficient and helpful way to develop the project. It plays a very important role in every period of the design process, and has been drawn more and more attention both in real project and educational project in school. During the design process different periods of the process has also been linked by the narrative, meaningful place could then be developed.

Bibliographies:


Luis Porter & Sergio Sotelo, ‘Design by Narrative’, (Simon Fraser University, Julio 12 A 17 2004).
