Article

From Narrative Objects to Poetic Practices: On Figurative Modes of Urbanism

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Abstract

In the context of increased interest in literary methods for spatial design, this article argues for a reconsideration of narrative methods for urban planning. It holds that when narrative is taken not as a reified object but as an active mode, in which a strategy for organizing the phenomenal world allows for form to be created from and within the profusion of signs, the importance of heterogeneous non-narrative elements comes into full force, in particular around figurative or metaphorical language, even or especially within the narrative frame. Drawing on work from Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò on and around the "porous city" figure and the Greater Paris international consultations, the article makes a case for a narrative of poetic practices. By identifying the polysemic agency of the poetic function, the territorial figure becomes not a comparison between two terms, but a complex linking of similarities in multiple dissimilar states, creating an effect of rapprochement with new possible futures.

Issue

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, calls for literary methods in spatial design (Havik, 2014) have brought together a diverse group of practitioners, scholars, artists, stakeholders, and community members seeking fresh approaches to planning and renewed understandings of urban situations. In many cases, the justifications for this interest have been as diverse as the parties involved, ranging from concerns for a more adequate representation of the qualitative dimension of urban space to a pursuit of social justice made by breaking with conventional top-down planning modes. The full range of activities around literary practices in design could be characterized in multiple ways: as reactions against data-driven and rationalist planning methods, as a necessary revitalization through encounters with other disciplines, or as still another twitch in the long tail of post-modern thought around the collapse of grand narratives. All of these characterizations may be equally true, but in the

conscious return to the writing of urban space, I am reminded of Pérez-Gómez (2016, p. 201), locating the problem with conventional modes of architectural representation not in their remoteness from real situations, but "in the nature of their disconnect from language" and so from the linguistic imagination.

Renewed attention to the linguistic character of spatiality has concentrated particularly on narrative and has been manifest in new publications, such as the *WritingPlace* academic journal, and new research activities, such as found in the COST Action CA18126 Writing Urban Places. The latter argues for "the value of local urban narratives—stories rich in information regarding citizens' socio-spatial practices, perceptions and expectations" (COST Association, 2018) and can be situated within broader trends seeking to create meaning, empower communities, and provide tools for local stakeholders to (re)appropriate the built environment through creative and alternative practices (Awan et al., 2011; Carrière & Schalliol, 2021; Courage & McKeown, 2019),

but with a focus on narrative strategies and the peculiar affordances of storytelling in design contexts. Overall, we can see in these recent developments a centering of narration that attempts to take into account everything from narrative practices for critical knowledge production (Rendell, 2010), to the transformative role of narrative for reimagining urban situations (Niculae et al., 2021), with a strong emphasis on research and significant outstanding questions in terms of its pertinence in operational planning modes.

How exactly does narrative function in relation to planning to make meaning or produce knowledge from, within, or of the built environment? What is the relationship between how narrative represents urban dynamics and how it invents them? By what processes do narrative practices affect spatial change, and to what extent? What aspects of a narrative allow it to empower a community, rather than fall prey to appropriation?

In this article, I intend to avoid essentialist arguments about the nature of narrative to look rather at how planners engage it as a mode of comprehension and production, in senses both implicit and explicit. The aim is to see how narrative, as conceived and/or embodied in theory and practice by urbanist figures such as Bernardo Secchi (Milan, 1934–2014) and Paola Viganò (Sondrio, 1961–) provides a specifically strategic ordering of the phenomenal field across temporal scales. I hypothesize that a reading of these planners that understands narrative as primarily modal and strategic will reveal the character of such practices to be neutral in themselves, as their effective value is deeply dependent on how the practices deploy non-narrative elements. Notably, I would like to argue for a poetics of narrative practice in planning, in the sense that the production of new urbanities can be conditioned by the *poiesis* embedded and operating within narrative structures. The hope is that such a reading will affirm contemporary interest in narrative methods for urban planning while opening up a reflection on the critical value of the poetic practices in the production of future situations, all while maintaining awareness of certain tendencies within the narrative mode toward totalizing positions.

2. Reading Form in a Profusion of Signs: From Narrative Objects to Narrative Modes

In a collaboration that began in the academic context of the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia in the 1980s and expanded into practice with the founding of an architecture and urbanism agency Studio, in 1990, Secchi and Viganò developed interscalar and interdisciplinary approaches to design that have impacted both our lived narratives of urban spaces and the professional narratives of urbanist practice. In terms of narrative methods, their work on the International Consultations for Greater Paris is of particular interest, including retellings of lived experiences by inhabitants in comic book or storyboard forms, the writing of "micro-stories

of the future" for new urban development strategies, and the elaboration of broad territorial development scenarios for a "post-Kyoto" Parisian metropolis (Secchi & Viganò, 2011, pp. 38–39, 2013, pp. 46–47). These explicit instances fit an understanding of narrative methods for which I will give a working definition as strategies for spatial intervention that make principal use of the logical structures of narrative, as well as the particular affordances of story forms as a means of knowledge and design production. In Secchi and Viganò's work, these methods help give accounts of territories as they exist and have been planned and practiced, while also contributing toward projections into possible futures. At the same time, it is critical to situate these explicit practices within a broader comprehension of narrative, developed in theoretical writings and carried into practice, so as to see the full extent of the narrative mode in their work.

When Secchi (2000/2011, p. 18) writes that urbanist practice has almost always acquired meaning from within a narrative, his phrase carries a compound sense: One can understand how professional narratives position a practitioner's methods in contrast to other planning approaches, but also how a territorial narrative as told by practice is mean-making for both the territory and the practice itself. As a theoretician, Secchi tells a compelling story of the history of 20th-century urbanism and the urbanist-cum-investigator, scenario writer, communicator, and mediator—It seems almost inevitable that he simultaneously defines his practice, explicitly and implicitly, as deeply narrative.

Central to Secchi's understanding of the role of narrative in urbanism is his conception of the built environment as it is discovered by the urbanist. He describes how the majority of the earth's surface is marked by a multiplicity and a plurality of signs intentionally printed by those who preceded us (Secchi, 2000/2011, p. 13). One can see that what he describes is a profusion of signs, layered in Corboz's (2001) conception of the territorial palimpsest, and from which the urbanist must draw in order to craft a persuasive story for the continuous and conscientious modification of the state of the territory and the city (Secchi, 2000/2011, p. 15). This layered mass of remnant signs is an image of abundance, but also one of chaos and disorder, at least up until the practicing urbanist finds a means to trace a new line of development in or for the territory. The urbanist narrative, in Secchi's telling, would be made *from*, *within*, and gazing *beyond* the mass of signs toward a new future situation; it is an act of organization, of ordering.

Since the 1970s, the debate in literary theory and the humanities over what narrative is, how it is coincident or not with story, which objects hold narrativity, and how narrative representations can be said to represent reality or truth values has provided countless attempts at defining the narrative object. In parallel, devotees to the narrative cause have argued that storytelling is a quintessentially *human* act (Gottschall, 2012) and in some cases even can be seen as an evolutionary adaptation (Boyd,

2009; Gottschall & Wilson, 2005). Across these attempts to grapple with narrative, with a few rare exceptions (Fludernik, 1996), we find notions of event, sequence, and causality. Even theoretical work attempting to question the primacy of coherence in narrative ends up re-presenting it in a "latent" form, re-emerging in phases of interpretation (Freeman, 2010, pp. 167, 180).

In the case of urban planning, is not necessary to essentialize the causal sequence of narrative in order to consider its strategic value. As Sartwell (2000, p. 9) describes it, the narrative "strategy for organization" would be one that "gives form, or displays form, or imposes form." In a pointed critique of the dominance of narrative in contemporary thought and scholarship, Sartwell argues that a human desire to pursue meaning in coherence, as a sort of coping mechanism for reality, leads narrative thinkers to impose formal linguistic unity on what he qualifies as a predominantly nonverbal reality. Not only critics of story, though, but also leading scholars reference a particularly *strategic* aspect of the narrative act. Fludernik's (2009, p. 2) introduction to narratology explains that "narratives are based on cause-and-effect relationships" which are "applied to sequences of events." Though she also offers accounts of narrative theories that place less importance on sequentiality, Fludernik (2009, p. 2) states, or even admits, that "narrative provides us with a fundamental epistemological structure that helps us to make sense of the confusing diversity and multiplicity of events and to produce explanatory patterns for them." In both cases, in Sartwell's (2000) critique and Fludernik's (2009) introduction, narrative offers strategic tools for sense-making within fields of experience.

Returning to Secchi (2000/2011) and his vision of the urban environment as a profusion of signs left by past generations and (re)discovered by planners, one can see how theoretical arguments for the sense-making function of narrative apply to spatial practice. Secchi and Viganò (2013, pp. 31–37) make use in practice of a wide variety of methods, not limited to narrative practices, to confront, read, and reinterpret the city as an experiential field, and their work on Greater Paris includes no shortage of procedural and mathematical approaches. In certain explicitly narrative exercises, however, the practitioners reveal a tendency towards storytelling that can at first appear simply illustrative and yet suggests a deeper narrative underpinning. In one studio document for the Greater Paris consultation, titled "Social Porosity," Secchi and Viganò's (2013, pp. 38–39) studio presents what first might appear like a mosaic of 12 portraits of local inhabitants, each depicting a brief excerpt from an interview with the subject, with their statements presented in speech bubbles, much like a comic book or storyboard. While laid out in a non-hierarchical form, with no obvious sequence, each portrait first offers up a micro-narrative of its own. In one, a man recounts how the arrival of the metropolitan express line created a physical separation between social classes in the neighborhood; in

another, a woman claims an increased concentration of immigrants in the area has taken part in recent years in the displacement of the middle-class; and in another, a man tells of social conflict and shares that a boy had been killed a few years back. Though they can be read individually and in any order, a narrative begins to emerge across the full array: a story of neighborhoods divided by heavy infrastructure, unequal distribution of wealth and services, and the concomitant social tensions. Even with its non-hierarchical layout, Secchi and Viganò's (2013) "social porosity" storyboard draws a shared narrative from the broader field of experience that, while relying on inhabitant's testimonies, revises the standing images of mobility and equality in the French capital. It is worth noting here that Secchi and Viganò do show willingness and effort to include the knowledge, the experiences, and the daily lives of local inhabitants in their work, and that the personal testimony that provides material for the "social porosity" storyboard can be understood as a participative dimension of the work, if not clearly a democratically created and/or co-narrated text, nor taking the forms of a structured approach to co-design (Gaete Cruz et al., in press). At the same time, it begins to suggest how co-authored urban stories might be possible for narrative methods in planning, with multiple voices being represented in a non-linear form.

To pursue the value of shared agency, however, it is critical to understand narrative not as an end product, with a discrete set of attributes, but rather as a mode, whose logical structures sculpt fields of possibility and action. Bal (2017, pp. xx–xxi), in her seminal introduction to narrative theory, writes that "narrative is a cultural attitude…not a genre or object but a cultural mode of expression" and that her theory of narrative "cautions against the reification of modes as things." In so doing, she argues against any intrinsic value for the narrative object—including any sense of the inherent goodness or indelible falsity of story—in order to examine the effect of narrative as enacted and, it is important to note, as interpreted. As such, an authoritarian planning body does not earn benevolence or legitimacy or even efficiency by the simple virtue of making use of narrative in a top-down planning model, but neither does a grassroots collective gain competence solely on the basis of using story forms to share knowledge. In both cases, the narrative mode would carry certain affordances, such as the capacity to synthesize across diverse events, but does not establish an intrinsic value for the products of the methods used. As such, if we set aside a hunt for the attributes of a narrative object in exchange for an understanding of narrative as mode, which is to say as a particular structure for agency, we arrive at a narrative logic in practice, one that organizes the frames through which human beings forge intelligible forms *from* and *within* the wild profusion of reality, and, in the case of planning, in anticipation of possible futures. In this way, my interest is less in *what* story Secchi and Viganò are telling, and more in how their storytelling methods

impact our understanding of the material choreography of the city, conditioning our ability to intervene in situations to come.

As Bal (2017) suggests, such an understanding of narrative as mode would forgo essentializing claims about the pertinence of narrative methods in urban planning. And yet, in a recent study of narrative planning, Ameel (2021, p. 2) reminds us that "narratives that are created, told, and circulated in the context of urban planning eventually turn into the stone, glass, and concrete of the built and lived city; they guide and define the material realities" of the built environment. This idea hinges on "a view of narratives as frames of knowledge that describe reality but that also prescribe how we are able to make sense of reality, and how we are able to frame our possibilities to change the world" (Ameel, 2021, p. 4) The sense-making apparatus employed in the narrative mode conditions our understanding of the built environment, and in this way "narrative is not only descriptive but also prescriptive and normative—it not only reflects back on the world but also shapes the world by guiding the way we speak and think of reality" (Ameel, 2021, p. 26). To consider it another way, narrative may not have an intrinsic value, but the narrative frame operates as a field in which value is at stake, conditioning the space of possible action.

3. Porous City: Describing a Poetics of Narrative Practice

The Greater Paris of today is not porous, Secchi and Viganò (2011) declare in their work on the Greater Paris International Consultations, encountering in their study not just the city of Haussmanian boulevards and radioconcentric development, but also a geography of asymmetrical wealth distribution, a landscape broken by impassable barriers, a city checkered with enclaves, and space dilated by "*terrains vagues*" (Secchi & Viganò, 2011, p. 151). In this confrontation with the territory, the urbanists encounter a rupture between prevalent received imaginaries and their experience of the French capital. This experiential break can be cast as the first event in a story sequence, one in which the urbanists are first readers and then interpreters of the terrain, moving forward under the sign of porosity.

Throughout their work, Secchi and Viganò (2011) make references to textual notions: the *reading* or *description* of the territory, the *interpretation* of its signs, and the *scripting* of future situations. In *The Porous City*, the book covering their contribution to reflection on Greater Paris, they read the city across scales, from the architectural to the territorial, they describe its infrastructural and hydrographic networks, they put it in relation to established and emerging global metropolises, and they set it against the backdrop of the Kyoto Protocol on climate and in the context of socio-political stakes for the city, as understood at the end of the first decade of the 21st century (prior, as it may be, to the peak of

the migrant crisis in 2015). This primary act of description establishes a prefigural context for a Greater Paris oriented towards a more socially and ecologically conscious future. These descriptions, accompanied and partially constituted by careful image-based research, set the grounds for work on five prospective scenarios, a projectual position, five strategies to realize that position, and a proposition for a new spatial structure organized in three types of space, notably deploying a strong metropolitan transport structure, connective vegetated space, and hybrid spaces combining biodiversity functions with urban dynamics. The whole concludes with a statement—a confession?—that the book is too impractical to be taken as a project, but that it should be understood instead as a *testimony* to the research undertaken, with testimony itself constituting a particular sort of story (Secchi & Viganò, 2011).

The textual and particularly narrative character of the overall work in *The Porous City* is substantial, but I want to consider the role of extensive but non-exhaustive description. What is description, besides the act of giving a name to what is, a detailing of the existing so that it gains relief against the broader phenomenal field (for a full survey of philosophy of language dealing with description, see Ostertag, 1998)? Viganò (2010/2016, pp. 125–131) makes a claim for the critical role of description in forming a discourse on the territory, despite a range of critiques regarding the inadequacy of any description vis-à-vis the real, with discourse formation underpinning the cognitive possibilities for the spatial project as knowledge producer. Secchi, on the other hand, is not always clear in his conception of the role of description, seeming at points in his career to lambast so-called descriptive urbanisms for their sterility. As Grigorovschi (2016) has shown, however, in the appearance of a false debate between Corboz and Secchi, each respectively defending the role of description and of narration, the latter urbanist was in fact criticizing pretensions of descriptive *objectivity* in contrast to urban narratives which allowed subjective forms of knowledge to find expression. To paraphrase, Secchi was not dismissing the importance of description for transformative urbanism but was dissatisfied with so-called objective approaches that lacked the creative imagination necessary to reveal something new in projectual, prospective visions of the urban (Grigorovschi, 2016, pp. 211–214). In a sense, Secchi was advocating a kind of *creative* description, going beyond a simple mimetic relation to the existing.

Interestingly, Viganò (2010/2016, p. 129) portrays literary description as not narrative but rather rhetorical, which could lead us to think that she saw it more as a style for persuasion, and thus manipulable, rather than as a representation of real situations. It can be argued that a confusion of terms exists around what are often called rhetorical devices when they are employed, for example, in description. I would argue that a device such as a simile is not rhetorical in essential terms but can take

on persuasive functions within the context of a rhetorical mode. To consider a simile rhetorical in the middle of a non-persuasive lyric poem, for example, would be to mistake the importance of the modal frame in which we find any given device. By strict analogy, I would compare this with the case of musical modes, where identical notes perform distinctly different roles in each different mode despite no other discernible difference beyond a framing context. Likewise, description can function in a rhetorical mode but is far from being limited to it.

Despite the seemingly ubiquitous presence of description in various traditions of realist fiction, and the strong presence of recognizably descriptive language across narrative objects, the narrative mode, with its concern for the sequencing of events, does not itself do much to describe. Description behaves rather as a non-narrative interruption in the temporal flow and scale of the story while being embedded in the logical ordering of the narrative text. As Bal (2017, p. 59) points out, the vast majority of embedded material in a narrative text is in fact non-narrative, including descriptions, yes, but also assertions, discussions, asides, and others. She shows how descriptions end up being necessary for narrative—with their qualification of objects, production of motivations, and expression of relations—but precisely in their relative separation from narrative functions (Bal, 2017, pp. 26–27). Since we are not treating narrative as a static object, but rather as an active mode, we are not obliged to essentialize description either. Instead, we can see how description is matter integrated into a seemingly unified story, which itself is rather more a manifold collection of materials arranged in a form which offers intelligibility. When Secchi and Viganò (2011) describe the asymmetrical territory of Greater Paris they encounter in their research for *The Porous City*, their descriptions of urban functions and materials are practical and necessary non-narrative elements deployed strategically in the narrative they write in search of a more socially and ecologically equitable metropolis. It is not the descriptive passages themselves so much as the narrative mode which makes it possible to employ description to these ends.

Such an understanding allows for Ricoeur's (1983/1984) often-quoted qualification of narrative as a "synthesis of the heterogeneous" to function without completely annihilating the elements, materials, or forces at work in the urban narrative. A careful reading of the philosopher's work on narrative could certainly open up nuanced understandings of how disparate elements participate in the story, but a great many interpretations and appropriations of Ricoeur's work tend towards pulverizing any notion of differentiation. Lussault, for example, declares that within and through the plot, the intrinsic heterogeneity of the world of phenomena with which the author is confronted is overcome, because these phenomena are classified, hierarchized, qualified, and integrated in the globalizing and finalizing order of the narrative (Lussault, 2013, p. 844). Lussault's sense

of narrative, while not strictly falling outside the field of possibility, especially in the age of the contemporary storytelling industrial complex, is more a warning against oppressive practices than it is a tool for spatial invention.

Short of outright oppression, a fraught field of possibility is produced through the methods Secchi and Viganò employ in their work on Greater Paris, principally through the synthetic behavior of narrative. Much as with the "social porosity" storyboard discussed above, narrative strategies do tend towards a synthesis of multiple viewpoints into something resembling a coherent storyline, in this case, a series of interviews coalescing around the story of a city divided by heavy infrastructure and uneven distribution of resources. Perhaps the most totalizing narratives of *The Porous City*, however, arise precisely in the moments that, at first blush, appear to be just rhetorical, or *merely* descriptive, when Secchi and Viganò—in giving an account of the socio-spatial realities of the metropolis—tell a new story of Paris, in terms of what it has been, how it has been understood, where it might be heading, and the futures they propose as being among the most desirable. As can be seen in the presentation of their territorial strategies, Secchi and Viganò offer (re)qualifications of Greater Paris that sculpt a futural narrative for planning. In their strategy for a biodiverse approach to porosity, for example, they describe the parks, forests, and natural spaces of Greater Paris as monuments, reservoirs of biomass, and critical (infra)structural features of the territorial landscape to be reconnected in a continuous network of biodiversity (Secchi & Viganò, 2013, pp. 212–220). With the highest percentage of impermeable ground surfaces and highest built density in the country, the French capital is most often narrated for its architectural character and its mineral aspects, with the native flora and geological landscape overlooked or undervalued. The qualification of the critical importance of landscape features contemporaneous with the study, as well as in the projected strategy, provides a particular re-valuation that changes not only our imaginary of Greater Paris but also the grounds for agency in planning. In many ways, this can appear liberatory, particularly in how *The Porous City* narrative allows Secchi and Viganò (2013) to recast Paris as a site for increased biodiversity, where new social equity can arise from an isotropic redesign of the transport system, where new attitudes toward living with water can mitigate the deleterious consequences of climate change, and where old housing stock can be repurposed for an energy-efficient future.

At the same time, the synthetic function of narrative presents problems that cannot be easily dismissed by the urbanist as narrator. If the city remains a profusion of signs, verbal and otherwise, the city narrated by even the most gifted and sensitive practitioner will remain one that is focalized through an individual perspective. When Secchi and Viganò (2013, p. 245) argue for a Greater Paris of interlocking transport networks of differentiated speeds and local insertion—a city of

different but articulated idiorhythms—they are telling a story that still claims the authoritative position of the specialist, commissioned by an organ of the French state in this case, and which synthesizes a broad array of points of view through the filter of the adopted planning model, along with other affective conditions. In other words, the multiplicity of Greater Paris is always consolidated into Secchi and Viganò's voice (itself a synthesis of their collaboration together, along with their colleagues and students) and takes on a hierarchical aspect. And yet, even resting as it does on learned authority, and frequently hinging on declarative statements, the narratives told by Secchi and Viganò are as easily appropriable as any other (Mongin, 2013). The logic of the narrative mode, by synthetizing phenomena through a nuanced but unified perspective occupied by Secchi and Viganò, lends itself here to reappropriation and reuse.

This is partially a problem of embodiment, in that deliberately synthetic narratives tend towards totalizing and universalist positions, which are not a-contextual but far less situated than, for example, a personal account of spatial practice. When Secchi and Viganò (2013, p. 187) declare, for example, that "Paris is a floodable city. Everyone remembers the famous flood of 1910; but one often forgets that there was in the past other important floods in 1924, 1945, 1955 or 1982," the relative accuracy of the statements does not change that the totalizing narrative voice speaks from something like an Archimedean point, encompassing not only all of Paris in a simple sentence but also a century of hydrographic history. This may be a necessary and useful strategy for human cognition and communication, this generalizing function, but it carries with it the problems of any omniscient voice, recounting with authority from an impossible vantage. When Rendell, expanding on Haraway's (2010, pp. 18–20) notion of situated knowledges, engages in "site-writing" as a critical spatial practice where the practitioner assumes a subject position immersed in the spatial context within and through which she writes, the embodied entanglement of the speaker prevents certain aspects of the totalizing narrative from taking control. In other words, I am arguing that writing as a particular subject with a particular body in a particular space prevents a story from easily assuming the authoritative positions that work against the democratic potential of narrative practices in urban planning.

An example of a more embodied and singular narrative practice can be found in Secchi and Viganò's (2012–2013) proposal for the development of the neighborhood along the Canal de l'Ourcq, in the context of the extended work on the Greater Paris consultation. Working the terrain, the urbanists collected stories from inhabitants around the site. From narratives they collect, Secchi and Viganò write a series of micro-stories of the future, one of which is published later as a phased narrative told by one inhabitant, Mohamed. In his story, Mohamed leads readers from his family apartment, recently renovated with a new balcony for added living space, to follow the canal as far as a warehouse reconverted into a small business incubator. Speaking at points in language suspiciously like that of a planner ("Water management is now allowed by meadows which contribute to the landscape design of the park and which offer in this way a large diversity of vegetation to inhabitants"; Secchi & Viganò, 2013, p. 46), the narrator reveals a desirable future for his neighborhood in a narrative told on a human scale, taking place around the Canal de l'Ourcq and situated in spatial experience. This narrative is not totally impervious to appropriation—no language could ever truly be—and there is even room for questioning whether the text is not an appropriation in itself, instrumentalizing the voice of Mohamed to tell of a future which suits the planners. At the same time, it provides a way of understanding the field of possibility for transformation of the neighborhood and its post-industrial heritage towards more socially just and ecologically minded urbanities, while resisting certain aspects of the authoritarian narrative that characterizes much top-down planning.

4. The Palimpsest Again: Towards a Narrative of Poetic Practices

By considering the non-narrative elements of story as both radically other than the narrative function as well as constitutive of it in their difference, we arrive at the possibility of a poetics of narrative practice. This possibility could resist certain of the more pernicious and oppressive aspects of story, while maintaining its remarkable power to create form *from*, *within*, and *through* the phenomenal world. Viganò (2010/2016, p. 131) uses the term "discourse," broader than narrative, whose development for her is marked by "the selection of situations, images, figures, metaphors, descriptions, and stories" assembled into "a sequence of arguments that structures the interpretation and becomes the medium through which, and in which, the interpretation takes form." But while this view continues to target the rhetorical dimension of urban practice, and with good reason, we can still see how the narrative mode can function in such a sense, organizing diverse elements into, if not an argument, a vision, a story.

The full implications of a narrative mode that accommodates radically non-narrative elements would require seeing how planning narratives depend on how this other material is deployed in a story structure for their efficacy. If we remember Secchi's criticism of the supposedly sterile description of urbanisms aiming to give objective accounts of the territory, we can recall his demand for creative imagination and, as Grigorovschi (2016, p. 213) puts it, a different kind of attention which would involve a power of interpretation capable of revealing the new. In other words, against a dry approach to a purely mimetic description of the territory, Secchi sets what I identify as *poiesis*, the productive function in the descriptive act.

One way of characterizing what lacks in the supposedly objective account of the territory is the figurative dimension, which would allow for a movement from one notion to another, from the existing territory to possible futures. Secchi himself was deeply interested in figures, writing that they are not always used in a descriptive sense, i.e., simply to evoke what is poorly known, but very often they have a role of construction and organization of our thought. This notion of construction is important since for Secchi (2000/2011, p. 18) a figurative description of the territory has the aim to alter our perception so as to give us access to new situations. The figure, here, constructs a conduit between two states that are objectively non-identical—between the real and the possible territory. This is another way of naming the metaphorical function of language, of thought, which brings together, in conceptual space, the similar in the dissimilar.

For Pérez-Gómez (2016, p. 181), the principal medium of invention for design attuned to both human needs and the environment is "poetic or literary language, the language whose elemental unit is metaphoric sentence." Citing Aristotle, he argues that metaphor, by "implying an intuitive *active* perception of similarity in the dissimilar," gives us "the very structure of knowing" (Pérez-Gómez, 2016, p. 182). Emerging from embodied consciousness, metaphor orients us in the conceptual field while also liberating language from its logical structures to become material again, the stuff available for crafting new understandings. We can see this in operation in the figurative language used by Secchi and Viganò.

In an essay on the use of metaphor in urbanism, Secchi (2013, p. 125) explains that the role of metaphor is "to give a meaning to what we are provisionally unable to understand." Later in the text, he relates a story of how a concept that he and Viganò had been developing for mobility network circulation, drawing inspiration from the movements of liquids in sponges, was eventually studied by collaborating mathematicians. Trying to model sponge dynamics, the mathematicians made links to a parallel research project they were conducting on capillary irrigation in the brain, so that eventually the terms "brain," "sponge," and "mobility network" came to mutually influence the researchers' conceptual understanding of the other terms (Secchi, 2013, p. 132). This is pertinent to our understanding of how Secchi and Viganò, when collaborating, make use of the metaphoric function of figures to shape their projects. According to Secchi (2000/2011, p. 19), figures cross, at the cost of some resistance, the space that separates discursive practices from the concrete results of interventions on the city, the territory, and society. In this way, relations are constructed between what we indicate, in simplifying, as the real and the words used to say it. For example, when the pair makes use of the figure of the "sponge" to describe local, low-speed, deeply connective, and highly permeable networks, the physical possibilities of footpaths and bike lanes that make up a local active mobility

plan take on new meaning in both conceptual and real space (Secchi & Viganò, 2013, p. 244).

In studying Greater Paris through the metaphor of porosity itself, Secchi and Viganò (2011) draw the existing territory of the Paris agglomeration closer at once to several dissimilar situations—the porous Naples described by Benjamin and Lacis in 1925, the isotropic future of Paris described in *The Porous City*, and the myriad echoes of their plans as embodied in later projects for urban porosity, including in student designs and academic research. In the latter category, a 2018 collective volume, *Porous City: From Metaphor to Urban Agenda*, gathers essays studying exactly Secchi's claim, how figures provide a crossing between the discursive realm and the material plane of the city (Wolfrum, 2017).

This epitomizes what Havik (2021) identifies as the horizon of possibility for poetic design approaches, the capacity to "dissolve boundaries, break down dichotomies, and find more productive ways to deal with and even embrace ambiguity." Part of what the example of the porous city reveals, however, is that the real conceptual power of the metaphoric function of language, as a logic of rapprochement, involves much more than the initial two terms often assumed to be at play in the figurative apparatus. While classical models of the metaphor are often broken down into *vehicle* and *tenor*, we see instead that what lends the metaphor of porosity its capacity to evoke or even provoke complex new relationships is how it draws into proximity a multiplicity of dissimilar states. Havik (2021) likens it to the moment of innovation in both science and art, "when seemingly unconnected or even contradictory ideas, images or strains of knowledge momentarily resolve." At the same time, metaphor explodes any notion of linear coherence, crossing scales, temporalities, and even media and modes, to rearrange the conceptual field in an instant. Pérez-Gómez (2016, p. 197) considers that "emerging poetic language is inherently innovative and open" due to the fact that "its very nature is polysemic and metaphoric," and it is this polysemy which we find in the layers of porosity in Secchi and Viganò's vision for Greater Paris and its analogues.

The conceptual layers of the metaphoric figure bring us back to Corboz's (2001) image of the territory as a palimpsest, which helped structure Secchi's (2000/2011) understanding of the strata of signs left to be discovered by the attentive urbanist. This territorial metaphor "of the stratified space in which relationships are crafted and reciprocal adaptation between the territory and population occur," Viganò (2020, p. 169) writes, "gives rise to places where its intensity and depth become monumental." The contact between the different strata, each representative of a different territorial state, each with their heterogeneous contexts of cultural and entropic forces, stands as a materialization of the metaphorical function of language and its power to bring the disparate into contact without a necessary loss of complexity. Under the auspices of the palimpsest, the art at work

in a poetic approach to planning is not that of the lone urbanist imposing form on the profusion of the city, but rather the shared work of tending to the layers, in the continuous and conscientious modification of the landscape to which Secchi (2000/2011, p. 15) referred. This is what draws the narrative of urbanism for Secchi and Viganò into poetic practice, the iteration and reiteration of transformative description that produces knowledge and opens up new situations for the urban landscape.

5. Conclusions

Narrative methods, understood as a set of planning strategies that take the narrative mode as an organizing principle for intervening in the territory, carry no essential value of their own, depending so firmly on non-narrative and particularly on figurative or poetic devices to engender change in conceptual and physical space. This is a critique in the sense that, despite a fashion for both the reification of the story object and the subsequent polemic against its failings (citing constrictive *telos*, the overreliance on coherence and continuity, and vulnerability to appropriation), I want to argue for better understandings of how narratives take effect. In my view, this bypasses a series of objections which find examples of narrative which differ from the supposed norm, so that instead of insisting that urban narratives are or are not coherent, we are able to see how working in a narrative mode tends towards drawing coherent forms in the urban landscape, while remaining attentive to the risk of the totalizing function of such syntheses. At the same time, the instances and spaces of narrative interruption, the transformative descriptions, and the metaphoric images, among others, gain purpose in the figurative scheme, rather than as problems to be resolved. This leaves an opening for urban practice that can be both narrative in its mode of operation and poetic in its production of new urban knowledge. Secchi and Viganò demonstrate in their practice how this can reverberate widely across related disciplines, as we have seen in multiform iterations of urban porosity.

Returning to Mohamed's micro-story of the future, we might catch a modest sense of what is possible in the narrator's journey. Along the way, Mohamed offers small but evocative figures, rhythming the narrative into a vibrant image: a new living space glazed and lit like a greenhouse, the ground outdoors liberated from sealants to play the role of a shared garden, an urbanized space offering easy access to transport and mixed functions, and a canal bank lined with pontoons where Mohamed thinks to bring his children fishing (Secchi & Viganò, 2013, pp. 46–47). As the gaze toward a future situation, the metaphoric content of this micro-narrative may avoid grand gestures and fully utopian visions. On the other hand, it brings us closer to a possible future, where the palimpsest remains in place, but we are able to glimpse its porosity and the ways in which we might move through it.

Afterwards, the abiding question of the practical application of these narrative methods remains unresolved. To the extent that the human being can be considered a storytelling animal, planners such as Secchi and Viganò have always narrated their practice and practitioners like them will continue to do so without any special need for explicit methods of narration. In this sense, the transparency of Secchi and Viganò's narrative impulse when projecting future scenarios for Greater Paris, for example, is to be expected as a base mode of human cognition and communication. On the other hand, when we turn towards the possibility to draw narrative away from its totalizing tendencies, away from synthetic coherence, and begin to consider the profusion of signs in the phenomenal field as it might be represented in a plurivocal and shared narrative, at that point such methods are neither implicit nor transparent. Secchi and Viganò's (2011) "social porosity" storyboard, in this sense, might be the best example in their work on Greater Paris of how the narrative mode can produce knowledge and a form of shared narrative through multiple voices. While it may leave questions as to how exactly to *act* in the wake of its appearance, and how to create urban spaces which respond to such a plurivocal text, the story emerges and offers stakes for planning. In this case, the call is for a break in the hard divisions that separate people and create unequal conditions for living, and so Secchi and Viganò's reply with the figure of porosity establishes its meaning.

Conflict of Interests

The author joined the COST Action CA18126 Writing Urban Places at the beginning of 2022 but had not yet participated in any network activities at the time of the submission of this article.

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