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The city as narrative: Storytelling alternatives to place marketing in the age of VUCA and mediatization

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Abstract

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This article reconceptualizes the contemporary city as a narrative ecosystem — a space that not only organizes social functions but also enables the production and circulation of meanings. Building on critiques of territorial marketing and the homogenization of urban space, it develops the concept of the city as both an interface and a narrative sandbox. Rather than treating the city as a brand or a marketable product, the analysis approaches it as a dynamic figure of meaning whose identity takes shape through interaction, ritual, memory, and everyday practice. Drawing on recent research on mediatization, media convergence, and participatory storytelling, the article identifies four key paradigm shifts in urban thought: from product to process, from promotion to relation, from center to network, and from identity to narrative figure. It argues that urban storytelling holds significant potential as a tool for reconfiguring communities, relationships, and meanings within contemporary processes of spatial communication.

Keywords: urban narrative, storytelling, spatial communication, place promotion, mediatization of space, media convergence, place identity

From branding to storytelling: The city as a narrative future

Cities today are no longer merely clusters of infrastructure or objects of development strategy. In an era of unpredictability and multilayered crises, another dimension of their nature becomes visible: they emerge as spaces of storytelling. Contemporary reflection on urban imagery has shifted its focus from a logic of management to a logic of meaning, and from product to relation. What was once framed as *territorial branding* — a set of promotional activities aimed at marketing a location — is increasingly giving way to narrative thinking, in which both place identity and the ways it is narrated take precedence.

This article aims to demonstrate that the contemporary city should be understood as both a narrative ecosystem and a cultural interface. Such an approach enables us to transcend the reductionism of territorial marketing and grasp the processes by which meaning is produced under the conditions

of mediatization and media convergence. The research problem concerns how the narrative paradigm enables the reconstruction of relations among space, memory, everyday practices, and communicative infrastructures.

The study is situated within the fields of urban sociology and social communication, at the intersection of urban studies, spatial semiotics, and mediatization research, with particular reference to the theory of cultural interfaces.

Methodologically, the article is theoretical and analytical. It employs a critical review of the literature (on territorial marketing, convergence, and mediatization), a comparative analysis of paradigms (product → process; promotion → relation; center → network; identity → narrative figure), and an interpretive framework of _the city as interface/sandbox_ to organize the discussion. The methodological objective is to achieve a conceptual transition from a marketing-oriented to a narrativist perspective.

The central thesis of the paper is that urban storytelling is not a promotional technique but an infrastructural practice — one that designs the conditions for the coexistence of multiple, polyphonic narratives. Such an understanding explains the dynamics of contemporary spatial communication more effectively than current branding models.

The contribution of this work lies in integrating four paradigm shifts into a single operational framework (interface/sandbox) and in demonstrating how this framework can be applied to the design of urban narrative environments.

Caio Esteves notes that traditional place branding relies on retrospective data and cognitive structures ill-suited to the mosaic temporality of the present. "One cannot plan the future of a city by relying exclusively on yesterday's research," writes the author of *Place Strategic Foresight* (Esteves, 2025). In a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, the future unfolds not along a single predictable trajectory but through branching trajectories. The same holds for the past, which ceases to function as linear genealogy and instead becomes an overlapping assemblage of temporalities (Adam, 1998). In this age of complexity, cities that adhere to uniform and predictable models of image management gradually lose the ability to respond flexibly to shifting conditions. They confine themselves within one-dimensional narratives that fail to resonate with local communities or with the dynamic rhythms of social networks.

Simultaneously, urban space increasingly operates as an interface — a semantic environment that continually generates and processes stories. The city

no longer resembles an ordered plan but a field of potentiality, where social practices negotiate meaning with collective memory and visual aesthetics. The city ceases to be a stage for social actors and becomes an actor in its own right, capable of self-organization. Within this context, traditional strategies of territorial marketing — based on the centralized dissemination of coherent messages and image management — lose their effectiveness, often provoking distance, irony, or affective reinterpretation (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 119). What becomes necessary is the cultivation of *narrative ecosystems*: environments that foster co-creation and differentiation of stories, in which form and reach are as significant as content.

Mediatization — understood as the deep transformation of social logic through media — has profoundly altered the ways cities are experienced and narrated (Hepp, 2013). Media convergence has decentralized urban stories, dispersing them into polymorphic forms: a mural becomes a social media post; the post becomes a video; the video becomes a strategy; the strategy becomes a protest; the protest becomes a meme. Meanings no longer develop linearly but evolve iteratively through networks, often in unpredictable ways. This shift calls for not merely new stories but a new epistemology of storytelling. In response, the city must be conceived in nonlinear terms — as an open structure, designed less like a coherent narrative and more like an open-world video game. Such a model encourages broad participation and invites us to understand the city as a space of lived experience rather than merely a place of habitation. Hierarchical narratives give way to relational maps of meaning, and uniform messages transform into layered stories. This, in turn, demands a rethinking of the role of urban institutions: not as authors of a singular narrative but as curators of diversity and moderators of narrative complexity.

Cities today require less promotion and more listening. This article, therefore, does not offer another theory of branding; instead, it proposes a shift in place marketing — from the city as brand to the city as story; from center to network; and from past to entangled future.

Structure of the article. Part 1 reconstructs the mechanisms of homogenization and the erosion of *genius loci*. Part 2 examines the limitations of territorial marketing and suggests a shift toward bottom-up place storytelling. Part 3 conceptualizes the city as a narrative interface, articulating a semiotic paradigm of urban meaning. Part 4 introduces the sandbox as a participatory structure, grounded in the paradigm of interaction and co-creation.

Part 5 analyzes the crisis of authorship in the algorithmic age, within the paradigm of convergence and affect. The conclusion integrates these transitions into a single *gestalt* — the figure of the narrative city.

Mechanisms of urban unification: From locality to placelessness (*Paradigm of homogenization and the loss of genius loci*)

Contemporary cities are increasingly losing their distinctive character, as globalization processes homogenize not only physical space but also the ways it is experienced. Research in environmental psychology shows that these transformations lead to a unification of lifestyles and, consequently, to the erosion of the unique qualities of local environments (Lewicka, 2012, pp. 32–35). Urban space — once a carrier of identity, communal rituals, and cultural narrative — now often appears as a standardized landscape of repetition: identical shopping malls, chain restaurants, and uniform architectural layouts. What once constituted the recognizability of place has been reduced to a utilitarian minimum.

A key concept describing this process is *deterritorialization*. In cultural theory, it denotes the breaking of ties between physical space and the social and cultural practices that once defined it (cf. Deleuze & Guattari, 2015). Manuel Castells's notion of the "space of flows" likewise highlights how local rootedness weakens within the network society (Castells, 2008, pp. 487–493). In both perspectives, space loses its capacity to serve as an embedded environment of life and is reduced to neutral infrastructure. As early as the 1970s, Edward Relph identified this tendency as *placelessness* — the disappearance of distinctive characteristics and emotional resonance in space. A place stripped of depth and authentic rootedness becomes a surface without narrative continuity (Relph, 1976, pp. 79–82).

George Ritzer's concept of *McDonaldization* further illuminates this trend, describing the dominance of standardization, predictability, and calculative rationality as organizing principles of social reality (Ritzer, 1997, pp. 21–28). Urban space begins to resemble replicated stage sets — identical functions, brands, and formats, transferable from one location to another without altering their essence. Shopping centers in New York, Warsaw, and Bangkok thus offer the same architecture of experience: neutral, safe, yet devoid of local context.

An especially significant dimension of this process is *aesthetic homogenization*. Distinctive urban idioms — street patterns, spatial rhythms, and architectural details — are disappearing, replaced by universal formats designed for flow optimization, functional efficiency, and visual uniformity. As a result, space loses semantic density: it ceases to serve as a reservoir of meaning and narrative, becoming instead a surface to be filled. Alan Bryman's concept of *Disneyization* captures this dynamic as the stylization of the city into a theme park — an excessively aestheticized environment stripped of depth, contradiction, and affective dissonance (Bryman, 2004, pp. 15–23). Revitalization, subordinated to the logic of consumption, reduces the city's past to a touristic attraction. The historic center becomes a stage set whose purpose is not to sustain a communal story but to deliver an easily consumable experience.

As homogenization intensifies, Marc Augé's category of *non-lieux* (*non-places*) gains renewed relevance. Non-places are spaces devoid of memory, identity, and social relations (Augé, 2010, pp. 74–84). Airports, gas stations, parking garages, and shopping malls — despite their functional significance — fail to provide communal or cultural meaning. Individuals remain anonymous within them, and the time spent there is excluded from biographical continuity.

This trend is reinforced by increasing mobility, both physical and mediated. Studies in environmental psychology and urban sociology by David Stokols, Saul Shumaker, and Jorge Martinez reveal that frequent relocation, high residential turnover, and shortened settlement cycles weaken attachments to place (Stokols, Shumaker, & Martinez, 1983; see also Lewicka, 2012, pp. 245–246, 258). Space thus ceases to operate as a relational structure and becomes a backdrop for transient biographical episodes. Consequently, cities begin to resemble one another not only visually but also narratively: none of their stories sustains long-term engagement.

This process also erodes what has been termed *genius loci*, the "spirit of place." In Christian Norberg-Schulz's phenomenology, this concept designates the affective and symbolic depth of a given space (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, pp. 18–21). Under conditions of homogenization, the *genius loci* fades, displaced by atmospheres engineered for consumption and predictability. Space becomes aesthetically standardized and semantically impoverished.

As the *spirit of place* vanishes, so too does its *narrative density* — its capacity to express relations and sustain meaning. Experience loses its narrative dimension. Culturally, stories do not merely convey content; their primary function is to sustain significance, maintaining bonds between experience

and its symbolic dimension. In a world where space becomes uniform and up-rooted, narrative may act as a form of resistance against semantic depletion. By *telling the city* — through everyday practices, local histories, and collective memory — individuals and communities restore their capacity to generate meaning. Urban depth is not recovered through promotional campaigns but through stories that are lived, told, and shared.

From place marketing to place storytelling: Limits of branding and the narrative turn (**N**arrativist paradigm in urban studies)

The history of place marketing reveals a gradual recognition of the symbolic resources embedded in urban narratives. In the latter half of the twentieth century, as *territorial marketing* developed, cities came to be seen — like products — as entities that could be packaged, promoted, and sold. The earliest conceptualizations of place marketing emerged in the 1970s, when authors such as O'Leary and Iredale highlighted its potential for managing urban space (Glińska, 2016, p. 84). At this stage, the approach was primarily instrumental: the city was treated as an object open to commercialization rather than as a cultural subject.

A turning point arrived in the 1980s and 1990s, when deindustrialization and economic crises radically reshaped cities in Europe and the United States. The loss of industry and employment led to a redefinition of the city's role — from a site of production to an arena of competition for investors, tourists, students, and professionals. Marketing, previously marginal to urban governance, assumed a central position. The logic of promotion was elevated to the level of policy, and the language of advertising entered the lexicon of strategic planning. This inaugurated an era of "aestheticized governance," in which cities were increasingly designed as brands. Within this paradigm, *place branding* emerged as a system of representation — a composite of associations, images, ideas, and emotions ascribed to a city. As Bill Baker notes, a place brand does not exist in isolation; it is the sum of circulating social imaginaries, shaped in both public and private spheres (Baker, 2019, p. 140). Urban space alone was no longer sufficient as a carrier of meaning — it had to be narrated, given communicative form, and transformed into an image capable of being shared. Branding thus rested not on physical territory but on the production of a perceptual map: a set of emotional and symbolic landmarks that determine how a city is received.

This shift created the need to generate narratives. Holloway and Hubbard observe that people interact with place on three interrelated levels: through design, through experience, and through representation — via images, films, texts, and stories (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001, pp. 51–53). In this last dimension, storytelling gained particular importance as a communicative form that not only reflects but also structures experience. A city that is narrated acquires meaning; a city that remains un-narrated risks disappearance from collective perception.

Place marketing thus gained an epistemological dimension: it not only promotes the city but also *constructs* it. In this sense, urban branding becomes a practice of knowledge — organizing perception, selecting salient narratives, excluding others, and establishing interpretive hierarchies. The story ceases to be an accessory; it becomes the framework through which the city is experienced. However, at this point, the limitations of classical urban marketing become apparent.

The first limitation is *reductionism*. Treating the city as a product — even a "unique" one — imposes market logic upon the realm of meaning, which cannot be easily translated into categories of utility or efficiency. The city is not merely a collection of functions and services; it is also memory, contradiction, and polyphony. Classical marketing, however, privileges coherence, clarity, and communicative minimalism — features that serve effective brand positioning but flatten complexity. The result is simplified narratives that exclude elements inconsistent with the desired image.

The second limitation is *centralization*. Urban branding typically revolves around institutional actors — city halls, promotion offices, creative agencies — who design strategies in a top-down manner. The city's story is thus produced *for* residents rather than *with* them. Compelling urban storytelling, however, must be participatory, emerging from social relations rather than imposed from above. This calls for a shift from a sender model to a networked model, in which local actors, civic initiatives, artists, and everyday users of space co-create the city's narrative map.

The third limitation is *stasis*. Branding, even when adaptive, presupposes a relatively stable identity — a set of enduring attributes ascribed to the city. Nevertheless, urban reality is in constant flux, both materially and symbolically. Place is not a sum of characteristics; it is a process. The city's identity is never fixed but continually negotiated in the tension between past and future. Compelling urban storytelling, therefore, cannot be declarative; it must be dialogical and situational.

Storytelling is not merely a tool of modern marketing but an *alternative logic* of urban communication. It simultaneously represents the city and participates in its making. It engages emotion, fosters identification, and opens space for marginalized voices and histories excluded from official accounts. Unlike promotional language, storytelling relies on context and meaning rather than slogans designed to elicit immediate reactions. In an era of communicative saturation, where conventional forms of promotion lose traction, storytelling provides a deeper relational framework. It does not state what the city offers; it reveals what the city *is*. It allows the city to be experienced through narrative, language, and emotional resonance. A city that can tell itself ceases to be a mere functional structure and becomes an environment of meaning.

In contrast to marketing—which treats place as an object of communication—storytelling recognizes its subjectivity. The city is no longer a backdrop but an actor, no longer an object to be promoted but a narrator of its own story. The move from marketing to storytelling thus marks a paradigm shift: from strategies of *visibility* to strategies of *presence*, from stories designed to persuade to stories grounded in meaning.

The city as a narrative interface: A semiotic paradigm of space (*Semiotic, interface paradigm*)

Methodological note. The interface analysis draws upon classical theories of spatial language (Goffman; Lynch) and contemporary studies on the cultural interface (Manovich), treating cognitive maps as narrative matrices that organize urban experience. In this perspective, the interface is understood not as a visual surface but as a structural condition that shapes the creation and circulation of meaning.

The contemporary city is no longer merely a space of habitation, production, or exchange; it increasingly functions as a *medium*. Urban structure now operates as an *interface*—a system of elements mediating between the user and a field of meanings. The individual's experience of the city unfolds simultaneously through physical presence and cognitive schemes—cultural frames that endow space with sense and direction. Urban infrastructure not only organizes movement and functions but also serves as a carrier of symbolic order, structuring participation in social life. This perspective becomes

particularly vivid when the city is examined through the lens of the semiotics of space and the concept of the *cultural interface*.

Erving Goffman demonstrated that individuals navigate the world by relying on interpretive frames that organize action and define situations as meaningful (Goffman, 2010, pp. 30–40). By analogy, urban space may be understood as a *social interface* — a configuration of frames that both assign meaning to actions and guide their course. The city does not merely enable action; it *configures* its very form.

From this perspective, urban space resembles a narrative structure: it contains dominant motifs, climactic points, directions of movement, and turning moments. It is no coincidence that Michel de Certeau described walking in the city as a form of speech and movement through its streets as the composition of sentences from units of meaning (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 97–98). The movement of inhabitants becomes a form of narration — a practice through which meaning is produced in space.

One of the most influential conceptualizations of the city's narrative structure remains Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City*, which shows that urban experience is shaped as a cognitive structure composed of recurring components: paths, nodes, edges, districts, and landmarks (Lynch, 2011, pp. 89–102). For Lynch, the central notion is *legibility* — the extent to which individuals can construct an internal map of space. Crucially, this map does not mirror physical reality but constitutes a symbolic construction: a narrative matrix within which individuals situate experience and identity. The legibility of the city thus depends less on spatial organization itself than on its capacity to generate meaning — its ability to be narrated and recognized. The mental map is not merely an orientational scheme but a narrative structure: an arrangement of actants, turning points, and trajectories that confer meaning upon experience. The city emerges, therefore, as a medium of memory, storytelling, and orientation — a form of *cultural navigation*.

Contemporary cultural, technological, and communicative transformations intensify this narrative function. In the era of mediatization and digital platforms, experiencing space increasingly resembles navigating a user interface. Space is no longer an object of reading but a field of interaction that demands navigation, decision-making, and participation. People do not *read*

the city as a text; they *move through it* as through an application. The urban interface thus requires not only perception but engagement.

Lev Manovich observes that cultural interfaces organize access to data through visual and functional forms that both constrain and enable action (Manovich, 2006, p. 147). Transposed into urban terms, this suggests that the city itself functions as an interface: it organizes access to resources of culture, memory, and economy, while filtering the modalities of social participation. Unlike digital interfaces, however, the urban interface operates at the corporeal and sensory levels — engaging the senses, the body, and time.

This leads to another crucial function of the city: as a *medium of identity negotiation*. Space organizes not only activity but also itself as a figure of meaning. Urban landmarks, according to Lynch, serve both as tools of localization and as carriers of symbolic weight. They construct the city's story by giving it a structure — beginning, development, boundary, and center. The city can thus be analyzed as a narrative configuration, with its own dominants, gaps, conflicts, turning points, and protagonists. It is no coincidence that many contemporary urban projects adopt the language of storytelling: we speak of a "story of place," "district narratives," and "paths of experience." While this vocabulary partly reflects the adoption of marketing discourse, it also signals a more profound epistemological shift — from perceiving the city as territory to understanding it as a *structure of meanings*.

To conceive of the city as a *narrative interface* does not simply mean recognizing that it contains stories. It means understanding it as a structure that organizes the *possibility* of storytelling itself. The interface does not narrate; it delineates who and what *can* be narrated. Space may support communal narratives or suppress them under the dominance of functional logic. It may foster relationships or dissolve into a landscape of non-places. The narrative interface is therefore never neutral — it embodies cultural and political choices.

In the face of contemporary urban challenges — community disintegration, rising mobility, and the commercialization of space — it becomes essential to design cities as *spaces of storytelling*, not merely decoratively but structurally. This entails conceiving of the city as an interactive system that creates conditions for meaning, identification, and presence. Designing urban interfaces thus becomes not merely an aesthetic or architectural task but an *epistemological* one: a way of reclaiming the capacity to narrate the world.

Urban sandbox: Open narratives
and structures of participation
(*Participatory paradigm and the gamification of space*)

The contemporary city increasingly escapes linear models of spatial and experiential organization. It no longer unfolds as a simple sequence of functions or zones but assumes the form of an *open structure* — an environment of exploration rather than a trajectory defined by communication routes. In this sense, the city begins to resemble a *sandbox*: a simulated world whose meanings are not predetermined but emerge through interaction.

In game design, the term *sandbox* refers to games in which the player does not follow a rigidly scripted narrative but instead constructs personal goals and pathways of meaning. This model closely parallels how urban dwellers generate narratives through movement, participation, and spatial co-creation. The city thus becomes a site of open narrativity, in which meaning is produced through lived practice rather than imposed form.

Unlike closed narratives, *nonlinear narratives* lack a single timeline, fixed causal order, or final resolution. Their structure is dispersed — often modular or constellational — offering multiple points of entry and exit. Research in interactive narrative theory demonstrates that the defining feature of nonlinear narratives is their *emergent character*: the story is not preordained but arises from the interaction between the user and the world-system (Ryan, 2001, pp. 103–105). The user is therefore not a passive interpreter but an active co-author of unfolding events. Transposed into the urban context, this means that the meaning of place is not given but produced through action, trajectory, choice, and ritual.

This perspective becomes especially evident when the city is understood as a *narrative board*: a structure designed not only for functionality but for exploration. In this sense, urbanism acquires a new dimension — closer to *experience design* than to functional engineering. The *urban sandbox* does not impose meaning from above; it creates the conditions for meaning to arise.

Richard Bartle's classic classification of participant types — originally developed in his analysis of Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) games — offers a useful parallel. Bartle distinguishes four player types: achievers, explorers,

socializers, and killers (Bartle, 1996). Although devised for digital environments, this typology can be applied to urban contexts. Cities likewise host individuals who treat the environment as a field of achievement, others who explore hidden layers of meaning and space, some who seek connection and community, and still others who engage in conflict, spatial appropriation, or transgression. Applying Bartle's typology to urban participation reveals that the city's narrative is never uniform; it is subject to diverse interpretive frames and modes of use, echoing Goffman's theory of framing.

From a design perspective, this implies that urban space should accommodate a variety of participatory forms. Different parts of the city correspond to different narrative modalities: some districts serve as stages for social ritual, others as terrains of exploration, and still others as sites of intensive interaction or confrontation. Instead of a homogeneous division into zones, the city begins to resemble a *constellation of experiential modes* — a structure more akin to a game world than a master plan.

A city conceived as a *narrative sandbox* allows for multiple forms of presence without constraining them to a single script. This approach resonates with twentieth-century artistic and urban movements that challenged the linear, controlled city. Michel de Certeau described everyday urban tactics as ways in which inhabitants not only move through the city but *write it with their bodies* (de Certeau, 1984). Walking, pausing, and changing direction are gestures that both transform space and convert it into narrative. The city, therefore, does not exist as a text to be read but as a practice of narration.

Parallel to this, the rise of new technologies and participatory urban culture has generated *environmental narratives* — stories emerging from the relationships between space, user, and local context. These are often bottom-up productions created by residents, civic organizations, and artists, or through digital data that records the city's flows and variability.

Ultimately, the city as a *narrative sandbox* is neither wholly arbitrary nor entirely open. It constitutes a *conditional structure*: one that does not dictate content but provides an *architecture of possibility*. Urban stories are not reducible to mere communication; they become *modes of orientation* — ways of situating oneself in the world. Designing space as a narrative medium thus entails not the production of content but the creation of conditions for participation.

Algorithmic age and the loss of the sender: Affective convergence of urban stories
(*Paradigm of convergence and the affective public sphere*)

In late modernity, cities cease to be merely social spaces and increasingly function as *media infrastructures* — communicative environments through which meanings and stories circulate. The identity of place is no longer shaped solely through physical experience but through the constant flow of narratives across digital networks. Instead of a single coherent story that "tells" the city, we now encounter an interface through which multiple, often contradictory narratives intersect — produced simultaneously by inhabitants, algorithms, media, and platforms.

In this sense, contemporary urban space undergoes *mediatization*: a process in which media not only transmit content but also shape the frameworks of everyday social and cultural practice (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 17; Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 8). Urban identity, spatial planning, and local communication are increasingly subordinated to media logics. The city thus becomes not merely a physical or social structure but a *figure of media transformation* — its meanings co-produced by residents, planners, recommendation systems, and algorithmic architectures of visibility (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, pp. 15–17).

In the algorithmic age, the *hierarchy of senders* collapses. Cities can no longer control their own narratives. A mural may inspire a TikTok video, which becomes a Facebook post, which triggers a local controversy, which is then amplified into a news story. A single event generates multiple iterations — filtered through camera lenses, trending algorithms, and affective reactions. Zizi Papacharissi describes this phenomenon as the *affective public sphere*: a communicative space where emotion, irony, and fragmentation replace rational public debate (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 110). Under such conditions, the city's narrative is not so much *told* as it *happens*.

The classical model of communication — *sender → message → receiver* — no longer applies. Instead, a *network logic* prevails: meanings emerge at the intersections of media formats, remixes, cultural codes, and algorithmic priorities. Mark Deuze observes that convergence culture transforms not only media but the very structure of social reality (Deuze, 2012, p. 138). The urban story

no longer originates *within* the city but *about* it, circulating in a continuous flow without a clear beginning or center. This deepens the transformation described by Henry Jenkins as *media convergence*: the blending of channels, narratives, and social practices of meaning-making (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, pp. 2–3). Urban narrative thus functions as an *ecosystem*—distributed, fluid, and constantly reshaped by shifting media carriers and affective receptions. It is not confined to a single campaign but migrates across formats. Meaning is not fixed at the outset—it unfolds in time.

The *narrative crisis* of the city does not stem from the absence of stories but from their *excess*—a proliferation of circulating meanings without a center of gravity. This reflects the impossibility of establishing a widely recognized master narrative. Instead of a coherent communication strategy, an *affective topology* arises, in which meanings remain transient and contextual. Traditional approaches to urban storytelling as "image management" thus lose efficacy. Attempts to impose a single version of the city's story are frequently resisted, ridiculed, or reinterpreted through participatory media cultures.

I propose understanding "narrative design" as a curatorial practice: rather than composing a single, overarching story about the city, institutions should design story environments—frameworks for the coexistence and iteration of multiple narratives.

In this context, what becomes essential is not the search for a unified narrative but the design of *narrative environments*: infrastructures that enable the emergence and coexistence of multiple stories. Such environments cannot be produced exclusively by experts; they must include the lived narratives of residents—their everyday practices and affective relations to place. Research on urban identity shows that stories about cities emerge not only from historical or geographical knowledge but also from emotional attachment and local belonging (Lewicka, 2012, p. 42). Designing narrative structures in cities, therefore, becomes a *curatorial process*—a matter of creating conditions for storytelling rather than prescribing its content.

From the perspective of the city as interface, the *transmission model* must be abandoned. Narrative is no longer a resource but a *process*. Urban storytelling must thus transform from a promotional technique into an *infrastructural practice*—a framework that sustains diversity, relationality, and polyphony.

Conclusion: The city as narrative gestalt and the epistemological horizon of the future

The contemporary city increasingly resembles a *narrative structure*—a complex *gestalt* of meanings. Urban narrative no longer functions as a homogeneous message but as a dense ecosystem: polyphonic, dynamic, and often contradictory. Understanding the city as a *narrative figure*—in the classical gestalt sense, in which the whole exceeds the sum of its parts—makes it possible to grasp the tensions and transformations that define the present. The city's structure is not a collection of buildings or infrastructures but a configuration of possible stories. Only such an approach enables urban space to respond effectively to the challenges of dispersed meaning and algorithmic fragmentation.

The conception of the city as a *narrative sandbox* redirects attention from traditional, top-down planning models toward open, emergent structures grounded in participation and multilayered interaction. Like an open-world video game, the city no longer offers a single path but a framework for exploration, discovery, and co-creation. This perspective requires a redefinition of identity and community: instead of static data, we face dynamic, co-constructed narrative forms.

New methods for researching and designing urban narratives thus become crucial—from *psychogeography* and *affective analysis* to the use of *digital data* as material for mapping emotional geographies (Mattern, 2015). Approaches such as *urban data storytelling* (Ciuccarelli, Lupi, & Simeone, 2014) connect narrative with systemic visions of the city and open spaces for *curatorial experimentation*, in which designers, researchers, and residents act as co-creators of meaning.

Most importantly, under conditions of representational crisis and shifting relational dynamics, storytelling can assume a *regenerative* function. Urban storytelling not only enables understanding of the city but also its *reconfiguration*. It can operate as a tool for recomposing communities. Rather than searching for a single, overarching narrative of the city, it becomes necessary to create frameworks that allow for the coexistence of multiple stories—divergent yet resonant with one another.

At this juncture, the article's key themes converge: the critique of spatial homogenization, the shift from marketing to narrative, the reconceptualization of the city as an interface, the exploration of the sandbox model, and the

analysis of convergence and affective fragmentation. Together, they outline a paradigm shift summarized in four transitions:

1. **From product to process:** the city ceases to be a commodified object and becomes a dynamic space of meaning-making.
2. **From promotion to relation:** centralized, top-down communication gives way to polyphonic narratives rooted in local practices.
3. **From center to network:** urban storytelling loses its stable sender and evolves through distributed, interactive flows.
4. **From identity to narrative figure:** the city is no longer a fixed set of attributes but a structure of meanings through which identity is continuously created, negotiated, and lived.

These shifts define the trajectory for rethinking the city as a *narrative environment*. The city is not merely a space to be narrated but a *cultural framework* — a medium through which the world itself can be told.

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