Lost in Interpretation
– how Narratives are interpreted into Data in participatory Planning Processes in a Swedish Context

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is the continuation of two case studies of participation in municipal planning processes in a Swedish context, building on the idea that everyone needs to participate to achieve a sustainable future.

A perceived communicative gap has been found; The inhabitant perceives meetings with municipal representatives, both politicians and officials, as part of one on-going dialogue, while municipal representatives act from different roles, aims and time perspectives.

This text shows how material collected by the municipality or given by the public, in participatory processes, are narratives. The intention behind the study was to compare narrative answers to quantitative survey answers, but the discovery was that the inhabitants want to tell their whole story, even when only given the opportunity to answer a limited survey question. The stories are the same, whether they are told to a politician or a municipal planner. This also indicates that the inhabitants perceive that their participation in future development in a certain area starts already in political dialogue, thus much earlier than what is usually referred to as the early stages in planning theory.

Further, different municipal actors, interpret these narratives, to be used in a political or planning decision-making process. This text aims to show what can be lost and/or gained in interpretation.

1. INTRODUCTION
In the field of planning theory different forms of participation and communicative planning can be found addressing the critical early stages of participation (for example Healey 2006, Peterman 2001, Fröst 2004). But depending on which scholar you read, or which process you mean, these early stages are defined differently. When talking about urban planning or a building project, the *early stages* have been defined as being the problem description phase in comparison to inviting to participation in the actual design stages. This paper will show that the early stages can be said to be even earlier, in describing a current state.

The material gathered in two case studies with very different aims, lead to discoveries and hypotheses about communication in general between public and municipal authority.

In the first case in the municipality of Uddevalla, the task was to develop a method for public participation in the early stages of municipal planning. Five area analyses were written, based on narrative interviews with inhabitants. The analyses were constructed by triangulating answers on certain topics, trying to capture the current discussion or state of each topic among the inhabitants. For each area between 9 and 14 deep interviews were made and recorded. Following these were shorter spontaneous interviews with people on site, now with follow-up questions chosen from the recorded interviews. And lastly groups were gathered in workshops around certain themes identified through the interviews. The combined material were interpreted into the analyses documents, using longer narrative quotes as illustrations to the text, trying to show the reader from which discussions on site the analysis drew its conclusions. In the deep interviews, the only question asked to all interviewees was "Tell me about your area" after a short introduction on how their answers were to be used in the analysis document. Some chose to tell the history of the area, some about their commuting habits, yet others about conflicts with the municipality about this or other.
The analyses showed in the end, that letting the inhabitants freely tell stories about an areas current state, gave a document highly relevant to possible development in that area. Comparing the participatory analyses to the municipality comprehensive plan, clearly showed in which areas the municipality would meet understanding and conflict respectively to their development plans. Thus the analyses could constitute a starting point of a participatory process, much earlier than what is generally referred to as the early stages (Åhlström, 2011).

The other case study in Lerum was less directly involved in municipal planning practice. Instead, the work of a commission of polticians from the municipal council has been studied through their meetings and dialogue sessions with the public. The commission has an overall task to map and investigate the public view on a sustainable future in a specific area, Gråbo, in Lerum municipality. The commission and its task are part of the municipality's Vision 2025, a policy document setting the objective to be Sweden's leading municipality in sustainable development by the year 2025. The vision document states that it is the inhabitants of the municipality that will drive this sustainable development, being given the opportunities to make "smarter sustainable life choices in their every day lives" (Vision 2025, own translation). The commission followed by this case study was given the task in 2011, to investigate what "a sustainable Gråbo" might entail, for the municipality and for its inhabitants, and to report their findings by the end of 2013. In the autumn semester of 2011, a group of 33 master students from the Department of Architecture at Chalmers used Gråbo as their project site in a master studio. The local context of Gråbo was analysed and a total of 14 in depth projects were presented in January of 2012, showing sustainable solutions for the future Gråbo. The projects were exhibited in Gråbo and the political commission acted as hosts in this exhibition. The second case study for the research project to which this paper belongs, started in that exhibition. The political commission had prepared questionnaires and a noticeboard in the exhibition to gather opinions and voices from the visitors. The narrative examples from Lerum in this paper are all taken from this noticeboard.

The idea was to compare the qualitative study in Uddevalla, to a more structured questionnaire and a more quantitative interpretation of participatory dialogue in Lerum. The discovery however, was that the participants wanted to tell stories, even when asked to answer a more structured or narrow question. The medium of written notes and questionnaires however, made the participants shorten their stories to the bare essentials or to fragments as will be shown below. When handing over their questionnaires or pinning their notes to the noticeboard, they tended to do so with explanatory comments to what they had written.

1.1. They tell us stories

In the two cases described above, two realisations were made: First – the inhabitants do not usually differentiate between the different municipal actors. The inhabitant is taking part in one on-going dialogue, with one complex opponent – the municipality. Meanwhile the municipality, being a diverse organisation, conducts several dialogues in different themes, on different timelines and from different actors with the inhabitants. This in itself creates a discord in the contact and interplay between inhabitant and municipality. In planning issues this becomes increasingly apparent.

Second – The inhabitants tell stories. They do not just hand over answers. They are the experts on the local context where the planning decisions ultimately land in physical form. But being an expert on context, also means connecting the whole picture of an area in one story. While they might focus more or less on the topic at hand for each meeting with representatives from the municipality, their respective stories are the same. Simply put, the data and its connections remain the same, but given the context of the meeting with the municipality, the inhabitant tends to hand over fragments of this story relevant to the respective agendas of meetings.

The difference between the stories collected in Uddevalla and the material from the study in Lerum, was in the beginning intended to be a comparison between different kinds of knowledge or data. The narratives were to be compared to answers given in questionnaires, surveys and structured interviews. However, the participants in Lerum insisted on telling stories, or fragments of stories, regardless of how the question was asked.

This text has pulled narrative examples from the body of empirical evidence in my two cases. The first is a collection of quotes collected in notes written by visitors to an exhibition in Lerum, the second a passage from a recorded narrative interview in Uddevalla. The exhibition in Lerum showed projects for sustainable planning solutions made by master students at the department of Architecture at Chalmers. A political commission of the municipality, who used the exhibition as the venue for dialogue with inhabitants during one week, hosted the exhibition. The politicians handed out questionnaires as well as offered a wall where visitors could pin notes. But the visitors handed back the questionnaires and notes, often with more words spoken, explaining or telling their answers to the receiving politicians. They wanted to tell their stories.

Most meetings and workshops documented in this study in the case of Lerum have been themed towards physical planning solutions and the notion of "a sustainable future". The stories told have therefore been set in hypothetical futures ("I would like it if…", "It would be good having a…"). However the discussion around said "collected" answers have often compared the wishes to current state ("Because now, all we have is…", "It would solve the problem of…"). The examples above would constitute more complete stories or narratives, had for example the conversation around the notice board been recorded more extensively.

What was supposed to be a study about different kinds of knowledge became a study about collected stories and how the receiving municipal actors handle them. It seems narratives collected in participatory planning processes are often broken down in themes, to then be broken down into quantifiable categories of stakeholder interests. Participants, understanding this, give fragments of narratives, rather than the full story, to begin with. Can this constitute a risk that important data is being lost in interpretation?

1.2 Communication, translation, mediation

In an article about how research results are to permeate the realm of policy making, Cash et al come to the conclusion that three steps are always needed; communication, translation and mediation (Cash et al, 2003). The case studies described in this paper suggest that the same conclusion can be applied to participation and the decision-making and planning processes of a municipality. It has been shown that there is a discord between the perceived dialogue between inhabitants and the municipality (Bomble 2012 – in progress), showing the need for clear communication.

This paper in turn addresses the issue of translation, or interpretation, of the narratives inhabitants tell and how they can influence the different decision-making processes within the municipality. The discovery presented in this text is that it is not the method of communicating with the inhabitant that creates the communicative discord, but rather how the dialogue results are interpreted and simplified to be used in the municipal organisation that often leads to important coherences being lost in interpretation. Narratives are broken down into fragments and disjointed data to be shown in quantifiable statistics.

1.3 What is a narrative?

No common definition exists for a narrative or a story. This is an attempt at explaining the definition and use of the phenomenon for this text:

The earliest definition of a narrative is said to be that of Aristotle, when he describes poetry as having "a beginning, a middle and an end" (Johansson, 2005, p 124). A narrative is then to be seen as a sequence of events where one thing leads to another. And many definitions refer temporality, but also about the relationships between the different elements of the story and the narrator.

"All narration, whether it is oral or written, whether it recounts real or mythical events, whether it tells a story or relates a simple sequence of actions in time, presupposes not only (at least) one narrator but also (at least) one narratee, the narratee being someone whom the narrator addresses." (Prince, in Richter 1996, p 226)

The different explanations of narratives being descriptions of events placed related to each other in time, chronologically or at least in relation to a timeline also hints at causality and context as being the defining factors for a narrative.

Czarniawska describes an example where listed facts can have different meanings depending on the order and context they're placed in, within different narratives.

"'The company suffered unprecedented losses' and 'the top managers were forced to resign' are two mysterious events that call for interpretation. 'With the company suffering unprecedented losses, the top managers were forced to resign' is a narrative" (Czarniawska, 2004, p 7)

When it comes to interpreting narratives collected in participatory planning processes, events, facts and arguments are placed in relation to each other, and to the narrator. These relations can be of temporality, causality or context and can thus reflect and communicate much more than the singular data on their own.

It is about yet another parameter of the narrative – coherence. It needs to be coherent or "make sense". There are several levels at which coherence can tie a narrative together, as is shown by linguists Agar and Hobbs in three levels:

- Local coherence ties each sequence in the narrative to the former or following sequence.
- Global coherence ties all sequences to an overall theme or moral of a narrative.
- Thematic coherence where parts of the narrative ties to general cultural themes, contexts or values. (Johansson 2005 p 126, quoting Mishler 1986)

The narrative or the argumentation for an opinion often stays within a definition concerning temporality, causality and context. They are seldom told as for example mysteries, where causalities are deliberatively hidden but presented at the end. Or even less often as poetic narratives or deliberatively in several narratives at once to see them interlink at the end. Thus many recent discussions about looser definitions of the narrative can be ignored for this study's purposes. Narratives could also be categorised as stories, plots, intrigues, discourse… but that is superfluous to the purposes of this study.

This study must however consider the full narrative behind a collected fragment of narrative. The participants in the case study have not always been given the opportunity to tell "the whole story", but have given one or two sentences in a statement. These fragments however show narrative indicators as will be shown below.

The definition of a narrative chosen for this study is therefore: a set of data linked together by temporality, causality, context or coherence.

2. EXAMPLES [1]

Narratives in its many variations, being told by participants in participatory planning as well as in politicians dialogue with their constituents, is interpreted and processed thematically, thus a lot of the defining factors of the narrative are ignored and lost. This full story is sometimes only conveyed orally on site, but should not be disregarded when interpreting the data. Given the context of the meeting or workshop, participants often only give a fragment of their narrative at each meeting. It gives less material to interpret, but the loss of context can be devastating here too. The examples from the meetings in Lerum are such fragments:

1) "There must be a bank and a post office here."
– A quote from said exhibition, is for example a statement that is clearly related to a narrative that this inhabitant could tell us. It opens for many, and perhaps inaccurate, interpretations.

Other statements written on notes in said exhibition are more complete narratives:

2) "It would be fun if there was a school for cultural activities here, and more shops. And maybe some restaurant, like McDonalds or Chinese food or something like that. I think this place is too boring."

This compared to the next example give different notions about the possible narrator:

3) "It is important to have a holistic view of a society that should be for everyone, poor and rich alike. Raised awareness on how we build is crucial for the sense of community against segregation."

The above statements were all written on notes and hung on the wall in the exhibition. At first glance, most people will instinctively deduce that they come from rather different contributors. There is already something in the choice of words and references that hints at our preconceptions about categories of people.

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[1] (All examples are author's own translations from Swedish.)

The example from Uddevalla is a more complete narrative, told by a 45-year-old man, living with his family in a rural area:

4) "I believe in accessibility. It has to be accessible to get here, and accessible to get out of here to someplace else. It doesn't work if a car is the only option that works! Cars aren't for everybody. You must have a good bicycle path too. It can't be meant for only one type vehicle. You should be able to choose between bike, moped, car, buses… Those are the choices that should be available to you. But they aren't today. Because if you choose the bike, well then you'll go very carefully (laughs) or you'll have to make many detours. So instead of 8 km to town, you will have to go 15, almost 20 km. If you're on a moped you're slightly more secure on the big road, but it is still very dangerous. And then you have the car… and the buses, well they go very seldom. And far away! (…) So this place it is not exactly suited for everyone in our family, but we make do… Me and the wife pick them up in the car!"

So if we add analysing methods from different fields that deal with narratives, is there more knowledge to be found in these narratives and narrative fragments?
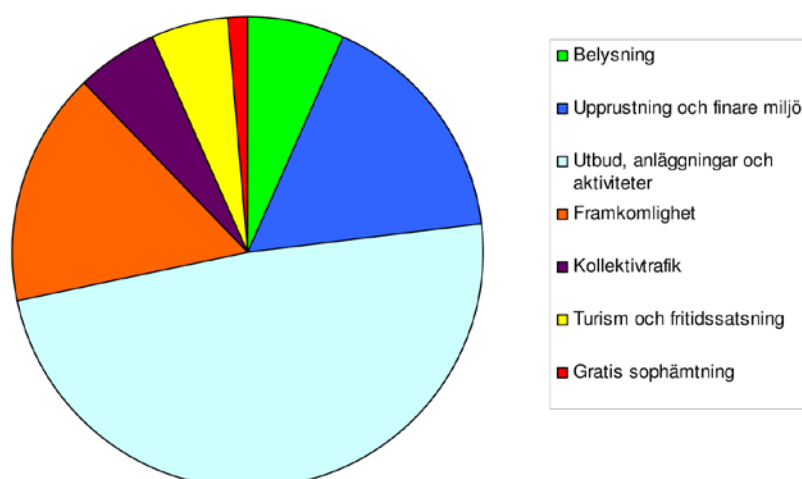
3. INTERPRETING THE EXAMPLES
This text has pulled narrative examples from the body of empirical evidence in the two cases. They show different kinds of narratives and fragments of narratives that all fall under the above definition. When interpreting narratives, one can look to other academic disciplines to learn that it might not be the isolated data that are to be taken from a story, but the context and coherence of said story might be what is most important to the narrator, and maybe also to the interpreter.

The role of the interpreter is of great importance when collecting a participatory material. In the case of Uddevalla, hours of recorded interviews were interpreted into area analyses, using triangulation of issues at hand. Compiling a document that was to be compared to the analyses made in the municipal comprehensive plan, issues like public transport, physical character and sustainable development were specifically sought for in the interviews. Illustrating the analyses' texts with quotes from which the analysis was drawn, the reader could see how the interpretation was drawn from putting one narrative description of context next to another within a certain topic. Thus using a narrative analysis method found in social studies to meet the demands of an architectural or physical planning related study (Åhlström 2011).

In the case of Lerum, the interpretation process wasn't designed to take care of narratives. The political commission collecting questionnaires and opinions on a wall used quantitative methods, taking care of qualitative material, simplifying for the purpose of prioritizing between issues for the municipal politicians. However, so many statements gathered were at an executive level to do with concrete maintenance issues as well as planned developments in the area, the commission made a report to be handed directly to the municipal board, to help the executive part of the organisation with their priorities in the selected area. All the answers to "What do you miss in Gråbo?" in the questionnaire, as well as statements from the noticeboard expressing something an inhabitant missed were all grouped in a pie chart, with a shortened list of what the statements detailed in an appendix (Figure 1). Going back to original statements on notes, one can see that some statements were clearly divided into several answers to fit in the pie chart. (Figure 2)

Kategorisering av vad man saknar

- Belysning
- Upprustning och finare miljö
- Utbud, anläggningar och aktiviteter
- Framkomlighet
- Kollektivtrafik
- Turism och fritidssatsning
- Gratis sophämtning

FIGURE 1: A pie chart over the 127 answers stating something one wants or misses in Gråbo. The biggest field represents "facilities and activities". Examples 1 and 2 are counted here. (Gråboberedningens delrapport 2012)

aktiviteter	Bensinstation	1
Utbud, anläggningar och aktiviteter	Post	2
Utbud, anläggningar och aktiviteter	Bank	2
Utbud, anläggningar och aktiviteter	Klätter- och parkourpark	1
Utbud, anläggningar och aktiviteter	Animebutik	1
Utbud, anläggningar och aktiviteter	Basketplan	2
Utbud, anläggningar och aktiviteter	Fotbollsplan	1
Utbud, anläggningar och aktiviteter	Större utbud för ungdomar	2

FIGURE 2: In the appendix of the report example 1 is found, divided into two posts. The word "must" is gone, but there are two wishes for a bank and two wishes for a post office among the collected statements. (Gråboberedningens delrapport 2012)

The quote from Lerum saying there must be a post and a bank (1), is a statement clearly related to a more complete narrative that this inhabitant could undoubtedly tell us. This opens for many, and perhaps inaccurate, interpretations. It could for example be in coherence to accessibility, or a wish for more people in the centre contributing to a social safety factor, or both. The fact that it is a fragment of a story however, makes it impossible to interpret with certainty.

Used in a specific context, that context is part of the narrative, creating coherence in interplay between two communicating opponents, as described by Linde (1993); Coherence being dependent on both temporal and sociocultural context. These collected fragments do have both temporal and sociocultural context, but were ripped from it as no record was made of who put up the notes, or for that matter what they were discussing while in the exhibition. The statement is separated from its coherences, even if the word must suggests that they exist.

The next narrative (2) gives an instinctive image of a young narrator addressing people of higher authority. There is a wish and an assessment of current state. It has a local coherence between the current "boring" situation, and the wish for a livelier one, which "would be fun". It has a global coherence in its references to the overall wish for a better more fun life, the reason for telling the story is the wish for a change. While the notion that the narrator is a young person, might be said to be based on preconceptions about the clientele of McDonalds,

one might use quantitative linguistic analysis methods, measuring which words are used most often by different respondent groups. The results thereof could then be used to suppose the target groups reached in an anonymous survey such as this wall of pinned notes. (Ref.)

The next statement (3) would probably (author's assumption) show another narrator group according to said linguistic analysis. This statement can instead be used as an example of how far, or short, the interpretation reaches when is sorted into the municipality's records. While the whole statement is kept in the documentation of the exhibition, it is sorted under Attitudes and Social issues in a list of collected statements. This is a political statement to be included in the commission's next report, at the end of 2013 – . Two years after the comment was pinned to the wall in January 2012. Referring to Czarniawskas concept of the interview as a narrative production site (Czarniawska 2004, p 49), this case was very limited (anonymous on a piece of paper), but the interviewee/ narrator still chose to tell about a "holistic view" and much larger contexts than just his or her own. If the aim was to gather a deeper understanding of the inhabitant's contexts and opinions, this example could be said to be the wrong kind of information for the chosen communication medium – or vice versa. Even if the statement hints at valuable holistic understanding of the social context in this area (Gråbo), the lack of context for the actual narrative leads to poor possibilities for feedback and usage of this narrator's capabilities.

A very basic literature review can be a structuralist view on a narrative. Saussure is considered to be the first structuralist in linguistic studies and is referred to also in literature review and narrative theory. He claimed words and their meanings only exist in relation to one another, and that the meaning of a word is completely dependant on its relationship to other words. As an example we wouldn't understand the word hut unless it is compared with for example other buildings of different sizes (hovel, shed, hut, house, mansion, palace) (Barry 2009, p 41). Thus a language or a story takes its meaning from the relationships between its elements. Thus the defining factors of the narrative described above – How the meaning appears only when temporality, causality or coherence can be observed between the different elements. A critic of Saussure – Ricks –describes the same thing, but from another perspective. He says that in language as in narratives, the relationships between the elements cannot be without the inherent quality of the element itself. Basically contradicting Saussure's logic by turning it inside out. (Barry 2009, p 44, referring to Ricks, 1981)

Furthermore Saussure claims that language doesn't describe the world, it constitutes the world for us, as we choose meanings to the elements around us. Barry chooses to illustrate this with the word pair terrorist/freedom fighter as a clear example of how choice of description also illustrates a point of view. In narrative examples from Uddevalla one group of inhabitants describes their rural dwellings as secluded while another more urban group of inhabitants calls the same place remote. The choice of adjective becomes indicative of the inhabitant's preference and worldview.

Either way you choose to use Saussure's logic when looking at the narratives collected in Lerum and Uddevalla, one has to look at the context between the different elements in each story. One also can look at the choice of words by pairing them with similar words, but with different values.

A last analysis example from the field of literature or narrative theory is the focalisation of the story. (Barry 2009, Johansson 2005, Holmberg 1999) In short – Who is talking about whom, and on whose behalf? Using the last narrative example above, from Uddevalla (4), observing pronouns and actors within the narrative, conclusions can be made about the narrators'

perspective and perceived adherences. The narrator in this case exemplifies his argumentation with an anonymous "you" – "You must have…", "You should be able…" – addressing the issue as something applicable to everyone in the area, not just himself or his family. However in the end he exemplifies this general advice with his personal situation referring to his own family and how they address the issue of transport "…Me and the wife pick them up". Grouping narratives according to their focalisation could show if opinions or notions depend on whether you look to the collective's or to personal aims, if you argue for yourself or for a perceived greater good.

This interviewee had been asked to answer a survey a couple of years earlier about public transport in the rural parts of his municipality. He said he just answered "no" to the question "Do you use the public transport service?". This longer narrative answer clearly shows he has knowledge about transport issues in general (public transport included), not just about his own travel habits, of value. The inhabitants of an area generally showed understanding for each other's local situations within the same area, within families and among different groups of inhabitants.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The intention was to compare qualitative and quantitative answers to questions on planning issues. The discovery was that people wanted to give qualitative answers in narrative form, even when asked to fill out a questionnaire. Also, since the every day life context described by participants is the same, whether they talk to politicians or planners, the crucial early stages of a participatory process occurs even earlier than the beginning of a specific urban planning process, in the political dialogue about an area and its inhabitants.

Above are only examples of what more than data on a decided topic could be found in a narrative. The studies in Lerum have however not only shown how narratives are underused in their interpretation. It has also been observed how participants in different kinds of meetings between inhabitants and municipality representatives want to give their answers in the form of narratives. To them the context of the data is important. Based on that alone the interpretation methods and feedback systems should be looked at from a wider perspective than today. Instead we tend to analyse the narrative not based on its content, but based on which part of the municipal organisation it is meant to be used in. Thus, the organisational silos are fortified using disconnected data from the narratives, rather than using the contextual coherences to find collaborations between adjacent organisational sectors in overlapping issues.

The inhabitant is an expert on the local context where the planning decisions ultimately land in physical form. But being an expert on context, also means connecting the whole picture of an area in one and the same story. While participants might focus more or less on the topic at hand for each meeting with representatives from the municipality, they tend to tell the same story over and over again. Simply put, the data and its connections remain the same, but the story focuses more on certain components depending on which municipal representative is conducting the meeting.

What happens in the municipalities after different types of dialogues or meetings is necessary simplification and interpretation of the data collected. In order for the data to be used in different decision-making processes, it needs this summarization or translation phase according to Cash et al (2003). However the purpose and addressee of the translation sometimes sifts away information that could be of value to other parts of the municipal organisation. Thus cementing the organisational silos, even when there is an outspoken

ambition towards a more inter-sectorial way of working with overlapping issues, like in Lerum. One could possibly claim that some of what is lost in interpretation could contribute to the more holistic and sustainable view on local contexts.

For a physical planner the main input to take away from the participatory meetings should be the holistic view of the local context communicated through the stories told by participants – how issues and solutions overlap. The planner has many other interests to weigh in to the process, and must already choose and prioritize in the analysis materials. The overlaps and coherences of the narratives could be of help in this prioritization.

The role of the interpreter of participatory material can also be discussed in relation to power. The third step according to Cash et al (2003), mediation, could be considered as the correlation between participation and power and will be the focus of further studies based on the same case studies.

The categories of these interpretations on a political level are for example social safety, public transport, attitudes towards sustainable development and other main topics. A reflection based on the collected notes and surveys in Lerum is that the narrative fragments tend to contain suggestions and solutions, navigating towards physical planning. The politicians have difficulties taking care of "too detailed" issues and they are at risk of being caught in the political realm. Inviting civil servants from especially the municipal planning office to these political dialogue meetings, purely in an observatory capacity, could take care of these low scale suggestions in a more direct manner. The civil servant could easily weigh the public opinion and ideas against on-going planning processes. They could ask themselves whether the public opinion the politicians' meet can respond to the solutions being developed in the planning office. Timelines and processes that today often run parallel to each other could be merged or at least related in a more efficient way. Several municipal actors could use the same narratives if the stories told by participants are told in their entirety and answered considering the narrative's inherent qualities. Thus opening the dialogue and also finding contexts and connections that might suggest cooperation hitherto not considered by the different municipal actors.

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