



Design Narrative

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Abstract. The narrative vocation of design represents a crucial key for the interpretation of some contemporary cultural expressions such as making history, representing through different media, archiving and exhibiting.

This essay explores narratives in three different “dimensions”: narrative as a *scenario* (that envisions new contexts, behaviours, uses, spaces); narrative as a *tool* (that creates new ways of triggering innovation), narrative as a *process* (that codifies methodologies dealing with complex issues).

Narrative – be it implicit or explicit - is at the basis of all design interventions as a story is an authorising device, a tool able to systematise each element and direct it to a specific direction.

Creating the strategies for a story as a design infrastructure means generating attention and stimulating memory, as narratives trigger curiosity and cognitive participation in the audience.

Words and pictures are at the basis of imagination, as they design means for envisioning what is not there yet: conversations, dialogues, verbal and visual texts. Cognitive artefacts are media devices able to articulate a narrative repertoire and foster the process of innovation.

Keywords: Narrative · Design methods · Design Tools

1 Design Narrative as a Scenario

Narration is a crucial attitude in the meta-design approach as it encourages the process of conceiving future innovative contexts of application. Meta-design means outlining the design process: if the goal of design is to solve specific problems, the goal of meta-design is to propose new fields where innovation can be expressed. Meta-design is also all the preliminary research necessary for developing original solutions. Therefore, a *scenario* is a fundamental tool in the meta-design process. It helps designers make decisions and build consensus around a suggested model as a possible representation of the design context. Indeed, the meta-design approach is a strategy to start a dialogue with final users: through a process of negotiation, the narrative of new possible contents engages the consumer by triggering a process of signification [1, 33]. Manzini and Jegou [2]

The original version of this chapter has been revised. Including caption for figure 2. A correction to this chapter can be found at

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separate *Design Orienting Scenarios* (DOI) from *Policy Orienting Scenarios*, which define tools and procedures. In particular, DOI represents a design tool able to share articulated and motivated visions. According to these scholars, scenarios have three main features:

- they present a set of alternative contexts in which the subject of the project (a product, a service or other) could find its collocation,
- they represent a variety of acceptable and feasible options,
- they are communicated through design simulations.

The scenario building activity supports decision making since it works as an intuitive model for the reality on which one simulates to intervene. Scenarios must show “future worlds”, which could be exist (plausible), and the ways with which they are communicated must foster discussions and evaluations (debatable). Furthermore, they have three main goals:

- describing and understanding activities and events,
- representing problems, needs and design constraints,
- depicting new activities, solutions and “stories”.

They are made of three elements: *vision*, *motivations*, and *proposals*.

The element *vision* answers the question: “How would be the world if?” This answer is expressed through a story and a metaphorical picture able to represent the situation in case a sequence of events takes place.

The element *motivations*: “Why is this scenario meaningful?” This answer rationally explains assumptions, conditions and with which criteria the results will be evaluated.

The element *proposals*: “How is the vision developed and structured?” This answer represents the different design opportunities triggered by the scenario.

The scenario is not a “picture” of a distant future, but critical anticipations capable of orienting the future in continuity with the present [3].

To improve meaningfulness and communication, we can build narratives with the subject of the project (product, space, communication artefacts... and so on), as well as accompany and convey meanings by creating a story. A narrative can transform its role from passive to active when it precedes the design idea, when it frames *its mise-en-scène* and prefigures the scenario [4, 50]. Furthermore, it becomes an activator of implicit contents and brings forward new contexts of meaning.

2 Design Narrative as a Tool

Several stages of the design process are based on narrative approaches. Sometimes the design attitude embraces codified ways of using tools in narrative frames, while other times it borrows them from “outside” fields.

Therefore, we will mention some design tools that are able to create new manners of triggering ideas and unexpected points of view.

In the following lines, we will illustrate some extemporary strategies based on very simple tools and other structured approaches focused on more elaborated tools and specifically created for the field of design.

In the *Grammar of Fantasy*, Gianni Rodari [5] introduces an interesting game/exercise called *Imaginary Binomials* that designers can apply as a pretext to create a short story around a topic so as to trigger suggestions and inputs and develop ideas during the brainstorming stage. For the binomial to be imaginary, a certain distance among words must be evident, their combination must be unusual for the imagination to create a relation. The methods to find the two words can be many (i.e., random draws or indications on a book...), hence even the most common words can trigger the imagination because they are out of context and therefore interesting.

In the exhibition field of design, we can mention an interesting tool: the *exhibition score* [6] (Fig. 1). The concept of the exhibition score breaks down the structure of the exhibition into different parts thanks to a graphic representation organised in parallel layers. This tool has been thought for those designers who must manage the whole simultaneity of the parts that contribute to the *mise-en-scène* of an exhibition. Graphically the exhibition score has a horizontal structure made of different variables (each line corresponds to a specific variable):

- *Content organisation* that is the logics and order of the collection management (the sections and the “file rouge” designed by curators).
- *Spatial organisation*, which determines the paths and the design paradigm of the whole exhibit system.
- *The exhibit of artefacts and displays*, which establish a specific relation between visitors and the content shown.
- *The actions and structure of the interaction between visitors and the collection*, as well as among the visitors themselves, which determine the dynamics of the whole visit as far as the quality of the cultural experience is concerned.
- *The communication register and the narrative style* expressed by the applied graphic communication system, materials, colours, and technologies as well as the interface of the displays.
- *The length of the visit* (total and partial) according to the articulation in rooms or “episodes”.

This aspect is related to the rhythm, the pauses and accelerations that punctuate the visit.

All parts of these horizontal lines correspond to the section placed above and below in order to have a matrix reading.

No other creative discipline possesses such a multi-faceted range of instruments for the design of space as scenography and exhibition design. They use the means of architecture, theatre, film and visual arts to design distinctive and effective spatial dramatizations.

Space is the central medium in which, with which and for which designers think and create. Space – whether in the form of a set designed exhibition or a piece of architecture – is itself used as an instrument and can orchestrate all other instruments in the integrated sense of a total work of art. Four spatial parameters, on which all staged spaces are based, constitute the potential of a space: physical space, atmosphere, narration and dramaturgy [7].

Each of these spatial parameters refer to a specific quality of the space and, in consonance with the other parameters, makes it possible to access content, get to the bottom of things, ferret out the soul of a theme or get closer to a topic. The interplay of the

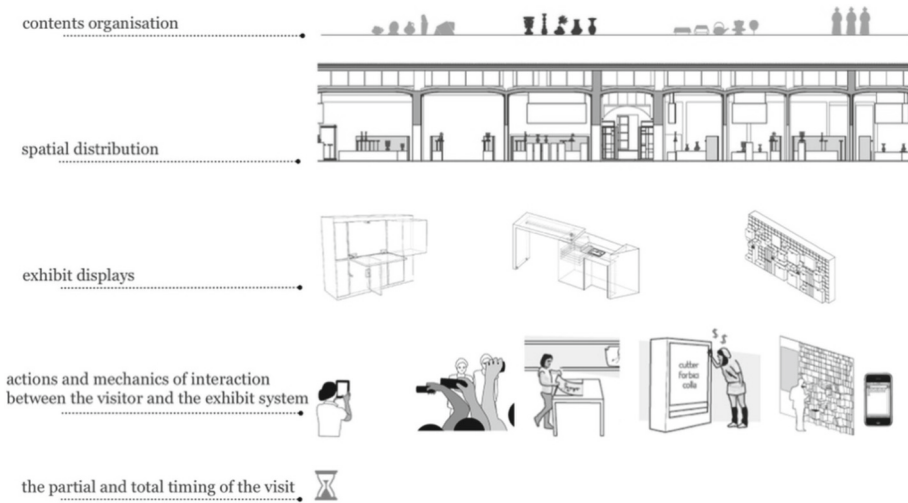


Fig. 1. Exhibition score (by Raffaella Trocchianesi)

spatial parameters in a dramaturgically ingenious and stimulating setting in exhibitions and architecture seduces the recipients into accepting the story and its message.

Another tool related to exhibit design narrative is called *Exhibition sound score*¹. The latter can identify and analyse how the sonic strategies are adopted in museums and temporary exhibitions. It can also be used to design and verify new methods to empower the cultural experience through sounds. Insights from field research are also transcribed into this tool by text descriptions and sound sketches for analogy and analysis. Also in this case (like in the previous one), the narrative infrastructure is developed in horizontal lines; each of them representing a different layer of the visitor's experience and the linear sequence of the exhibition path.

Every line corresponds to a design variable:

- *organization sections* of the exhibition,
- *typology of the cultural asset* on display,
- *contents* of the sound narratives,
- exhibits and their *sound equipment*,
- *typology of the human interaction*,
- *strategy* of the applied sound systems,
- partial and total *length of the visit*.

This tool endeavours to redefine the perspectives of field research and data analysis related to sound experiences conducted in museums. Instead of focusing on experience with an exclusive emphasis on sound elements, the study examines sound-related strategies at each touchpoint and communication channel throughout the exhibition experience and explores how these strategies can better contribute to narratives and increase accessibility.

¹ This tool was created by Yi Zhang and Raffaella Trocchianesi and is included in the PhD thesis *Sound design and narrative for museums and temporary exhibitions* author: Yi Zhang; supervisor: Prof. Raffaella Trocchianesi, PhD program in Design, Politecnico di Milano 2023.

The same logic is at the basis of the *Exhibition Colour Script* tool (created by the author): in this case the aim is to verify the chromatic landscape of the whole exhibition in terms of contrast or harmony, heterogeneity or homogeneity. Also in this case, information is arranged horizontally: one line represents the sequence of the exhibition system, room by room, through coloured sketches or pictures, the line below their correspondent colour excerpt (Fig. 2). This tool is inspired by cartoons, where the chromatic relation between figures and background and among scenes is crucial for the whole iconographic composition.



Fig. 2. Exhibition color script (by Raffaella Trocchianesi) applied to *Paganini Rockstar* exhibition by NEO [Narrative Environments Operas]

Furthermore, we can mention some tools applicable to all the stages of the design experience, one of them is the *Metaphor*.

Metaphors are recognisable in narratives about field analysis and brainstorming (spatial metaphors); in narratives about problem definition and creation of new hypotheses (experiential metaphors); in narratives that argue design choices (popular metaphors able to easily explain the project); in narratives on staging artefacts (persuasive metaphors that build stories around the project); and finally in narratives developed through the interaction with the final users (inter-linguistic metaphors which characterise user interfaces) [8, 36].

In 2021, an interesting project, by Jeffrey Schnapp, called *Museo Futuro* tried to envision nine metaphors representing new models of museum in the near future.

The project was developed with Daniele Ledda (xycomm Milan) and Elisabetta Terragni (CUNY, Studio Terragni Architetti, Como), together with the team from Museo Madre // Fondazione Donnaregina in Naples.

MuseoFuturo (“Future Museum”) is an experiment in museum-based education that reaches out not to museum professionals, but rather to young professionals in a range of creative and technical fields, inviting them to participate in the development of nine alternative visions – expressed by metaphors – of future museums, while bringing the Madre’s own permanent collection –which, as is the case with most art museums, is mostly in storage– into public conversation.

The metaphors in MuseoFuturo are *Museum as a Microscope*, *Museum as a Telescope*, *Museum as a Stage*, *Museum as a Warehouse*; *Museum as a Place of travel*, *Museum as a Toy*; *Museum as a Public Square*, *Museum as a Laboratory*, and *Museum as a Computer*.

An exhibition, made up of nine nodes distributed within the Madre’s architecturally complex exhibition spaces, translated the strongest of the collectively elaborated curatorial interventions into an innovative experience for museum visitors. The aim was to create a laboratory in which nine concepts of how future museums will be. The concepts

were not only explored but also instanced by means of curatorial interventions developed in small groups working with 18 objects from the Madre collections. The ninth experiment involved working with the collections of a partner institution: the National Archeological Museum of Naples².

3 Design Narrative as a Process

The narrative approach helps to develop methods confronting complex issues. In particular, we can underline different attitudes: using specific narratives to represent the design process; using design approach to increase the creative process and trigger special narratives.

For instance, the first attitude is well represented by Bruno Munari [9] when he uses recipes to describe the design methodology. Indeed, each passage in “The Green Rice” is a step of the design process from problem to solution. *Problem definition*: green rice with spinach for four people; *problem components*: rice, onion, spinach, oil, ham, salt, broth; *data collection*: has anyone ever made it? *Data analysis*: how did they make it? Can I learn anything else? *Creativity*: What is the best way to blend all the ingredients together? *Materials*: what kind of rice, pot, fire? *Materials experimentation*: tests, tastes; *models*: final product; *check*: For four people it’s fine; *executive details*: green rice served on warm plate.

To explain the potential of narratives in the creative process, we have chosen a case study directly verified by a semi-structured interview with Laura Curino, who conceived this project [10].

The show “Mani grandi senza fine” (Big Warm Hands) was chosen by Cosmit as one of the Fuorisalone events. Staged in Milan at the Piccolo Teatro (artistic director Escobar), the idea was to celebrate Italian design not through a conference, but a show. The show was created by Laura Curino (actress) and Manolo De Giorgi (set designer) and Lucio Diana (light designer and video curator).

In the “ritual space of theatre, exceptional voices, heads and hands” return to life, as Laura Curino tells us in an interview. They make the dreams and ideas of extraordinary figures, whose “signs” are still present in our homes and in the objects which accompany us each day, shine. Design gives shape and meaning to the art of making: it innovates the way of writing a story. In this experience, theatre becomes the way to defend the primacy of the men who, half a century ago, in Milan, sensed the importance of innovation.

As Curino says, “In designing a theatre experience it is important to put the spectators inside the story, as they can’t read it. The impact should be burning, the message should come immediately or never”. To produce this result, the show was constructed with an affective-emotional approach. In the show there is a particular focus on the physicality of the designers: they are “personas”. The Latin root of the word “persona” combines per (for) and sona (sound) and means “playing through”. The “persona” was the mask used by actors and the voice that passed through the mask. To narrate the distinctive character of many design masters, Laura Curino identifies some specific behaviours. For instance, Vico Magistretti had a snob attitude, the Castiglioni brothers were continuously

² <https://jeffreyschnapp.com/2021/01/20/experimental-museology/>

joking on their multiple identities, Zanuso was irreverent and masculine but had a good relationship with children, and Sottsass was famous for his connections with the literary and the avant-garde culture.

The show was built around significant objects used as narrative devices: for the Castiglioni brothers, a mirror amplified their image as well as their relationship; for Zanuso, an aristocratic armchair upholstered with chequered fabric seems to tell a lot about his character; for Magistretti, the richness of his relationships is suggested by the fact that the window in his study was always open; for Sottsass, who had a deep nature but a simple attitude, the representative object was a Tuscan terracotta.

It is important to stress that in the structuring process of the show there were continuous responses between objects, their symbolic meaning and the word chosen for the narration. As Laura Curino tells us,

“The notational tools that I have been using are extemporaneous: I have chosen the objects and placed them on the floor, then I’ve listened to my body and started to move among them searching for a possible gesture. It is a form of sound mask and, depending on the findings, I just write, or better I speak first and then write. Instead of speaking I am spoken”.

4 Conclusions

In these scenarios, the *homo narrans* is the interpreter of a widespread narrative, which, according to Calabrese [11] is the significant attitude of the contemporary context. In his opinion, this narrative provides conceptual comprehension models of situations.

If we define a narrative as an orienting process of transformation, design and the change which involves one or more actors and focuses on dynamic directions, we can apply this concept to several areas of design and, in particular, to the relationship between design and narrative [10].

To better understand the relationship between design and narrative we quote the *Frame Theory* formulated in the Gestalt field of psychology. It is based on the idea that every experience is understood by comparing it to a stereotypical model. Recalling this theory is a cognitive prerequisite for its readability. Emphasis is also put on the capability of codifying the element inside this framework: neuroscientists enumerate these script elements. If the framework is the semantic paradigm of a fact, the script is the syntactic articulation. The scripts are catalogued as situational, personal and instrumental. Everything is articulated according to a syntax of gestures and actions fixed in the cultural tradition of a social context.

Cognitivists and neuroscientists classify the essential core of every narrative in seven components:

- the *setting*: the “spacialised” and contextualised environment,
- the *casual factor*: that introduces an initial transformation in the setting,
- the *interior answer*: the actor’s motivation related to the setting,
- the *target*: the redesign the setting through something,
- the *intention*: from which the narrative is generated,
- the *action*,
- the *reaction*.

We find another interesting confirmation about this hybridization between design and narrative in the study of Genette, who speaks of an *architetto*. This word clearly recalls the comparison between the design practice and the narrative framework. In fact, he defines it as, “All the general categories (kinds of subjects, ways of utterance, literary genres...) that include every text.” [3, 12].

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