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Article

Challenging the Master Narrative on Large-Scale Social Estates: Exploring Counterstories Through Digital Storytelling

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Abstract
The challenging and reframing of dominant narratives have been recognized as crucial to the regeneration of stigmatized areas. This article builds upon a digital storytelling process in the social estate of Peterbos, Brussels, to investigate how the counterstories of inhabitants challenge the "master narrative." The counterstories foreground the spatial agency of tenants, the (dis)enabling role of space, and the difficult relationship with social housing companies. The article concludes that counterstories not only reveal dominant spatial imaginaries about high-rise estates but also have the potential to foster a more situated and experiential understanding of the relationship between people and space. However, it is important to note that digital storytelling is not a substitute for inclusive planning. Critical engagement with ongoing planning processes remains crucial.

Keywords
counterstories; digital storytelling; inclusive planning; social housing

Issue
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1. Introduction

As research moved away from the positivist ideal of technocratic planning, lay knowledge and the experience of residents and non-planners have been gaining importance in planning, both in theory and practice (Fischer & Forester, 1993; Innes, 1998). As part of this evolution, storytelling or narrative processes have been seen as ways to include more diverse groups of residents (Schuman, 1987), particularly those who had often been excluded from the deliberative arena (Albrechts, 2002). Incorporating storytelling as "a method for planning" (Van Hulst, 2012) would facilitate other forms of communication that are different from the technical jargon used in the design charette or the planning process in general (Bulkens et al., 2015).

The focus of this article is the exploration of the use of *counterstories* in planning. Apart from a recent publication developed by Lopez et al. (2018), few planning researchers have actively engaged with the concept of counterstories. In addition, rarely have they focused on the way digital storytelling can be used as a tool to capture such counterstories. Through a discussion of our action research in a social high-rise estate in the Brussels-Capital Region (Belgium), we hope to demonstrate the relevance of this approach, especially in places that are subject to stigmatization. While large-scale social housing estates are relatively rare in Belgium due to the strong liberal-economic character of the Belgian housing order, the promoted preference for private ownership of free-standing houses over compact housing development has resulted in an image problem for such estates. Debates in media and regional parliaments in Belgium have centered around the liveability of these estates (De Decker & Pannecoucke, 2004).

Through our analysis of planning documents and a self-initiated digital storytelling project in the context of the regeneration of the social estate of Peterbos

in Anderlecht, Brussels, we identified two key benefits of counterstories. First, examining planning documents as forms of stories helped us to recognize the subtle ways in which culturally dominant representations of high-rise estates are enacted in texts and images in planning documents such as master plans and action programs. Second, the process of digital storytelling, in which counterstories emerged through conversations, moving images, and voices, helped to develop more contextualized and situated understandings of space and social behaviour.

This article is organized as follows: First, we examine the role of storytelling in planning and introduce the concept of counterstories. We highlight their significance in marginalized areas and, specifically, in planning processes in high-rise social housing estates. Next, we discuss the context and methodologies used to capture the stories of planners and residents. We frame the ongoing planning processes as a form of storytelling and, by doing so, show how planners respond to prevailing narratives of high-rise estates. In the analysis that follows, we illustrate how counterstories of residents, conveying their experiences in space, enable us to challenge these narratives. Before concluding the article, we emphasize that counterstories generate knowledge that can inform a critical planning practice, particularly in places with contested narratives, while also underscoring the critical questions and dilemmas that arise with the tool of digital storytelling.

2. Positioning Counterstories in the Planning of Large-Scale Social Estates

The analytical perspective of this article is inspired by the resurgence of stories and narratives in planning over the past three decades (Sandercock, 2010; Throgmorton, 2003). This "story turn" has been conceptualized as both a model *of* planning and a model *for* planning (Van Hulst, 2012). Framing storytelling as a model *of* planning draws attention to the importance of crafting good narratives within planning processes (Secchi, 1984). Throgmorton (2003), for instance, demonstrated that by writing "texts," using a particular language, such as plans and visual renderings, planners are inevitably involved in persuasive storytelling. In the wake of shifts in ethics and epistemology (Innes, 1998), storytelling has also been promoted as a model *for* planning (Sandercock, 2010; Van Hulst, 2012). By creating spaces for stories to be heard, planning practice could become more therapeutic, democratic, and/or inclusive (Sandercock, 2010). More recently, the notion of counterstories has been coined by scholars in the field. Lopez et al. (2018), for instance, highlighted how counterstories can offer critique but also hope, enabling planning practice to learn from community voices. Fattah and Walters (2020) have similarly shown how counternarratives of people living in informal settlements can produce solidarities to resist evictions. However, these recent publications primarily focus on counterstories developed in response to larger "common sense assumptions" (Lopez et al., 2018, p. 108) that are part of traditional planning in polarized contexts. Although crucial, they do not show how stories of planners and inhabitants deviate within planning processes that are not conceived in a top-down way but rather include levels of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969). As such, knowledge about the more subtle ways that common sense assumptions about marginalized places and people enter contemporary public planning processes is incomplete. Further, situated knowledge of what planners can learn from counterstories in the context of ongoing regeneration processes is lacking. Finally, these recent publications are mostly focused on textual data such as interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic fieldwork notes, and less on visual material or creative tools such as digital storytelling. In order to explore these intersections, it is first necessary to gain a clearer understanding of the concepts of stories, narratives, and spatial imaginaries, as well as their role in planning processes and the regeneration of large-scale social estates, in particular.

Stories, on the one hand, are seen as a sequence of events unfolding in time and space. They describe a change in a situation and help us to make sense of it (Ameel, 2017; Verloo, 2015). Narratives, on the other, are analytical reflections on these stories that reconstruct different storylines and add meaning to them (Verloo, 2015), representing a particular point of view for a particular audience (Ameel, 2017). In planning, such analytical reflections are intertwined with spatial imaginaries (Davoudi, 2018). The latter are collective understandings and representations of a place that supposedly emerge from a range of characteristics and phenomena associated with that place (Davoudi, 2018). While they can generate a sense of belonging and community, they can also create exclusion (Davoudi, 2018). The naturalization or reproduction of spatial imaginaries is therefore not a neutral process, but rather one that is imbued with power relations. Indeed, those in power have a normalizing judgement (Foucault, 1991) that dictates what is considered the "true" narrative of a place by silencing other experiences or "by 'othering' competing interpretations" (Watkins, 2015, p. 512). Lindemann (2020) uses the concept of master narratives to describe such hegemonic paradigms or ideas, similar to the concepts of *grands récits* or metanarratives (Bamberg, 2004). Master narratives often operate below the level of conscious recognition, implicitly shaping smaller stories and daily life. As such they are not only descriptive but also constitutive of reality, guiding our interactions (Sandercock, 2003).

This seems especially relevant in marginalized areas, where inhabitants' social and political identities are subject to different forms of discrimination. In addition to ethnicity, factors such as class, religion, disability and appearance can contribute to their disadvantage. Inhabitants of marginalized areas not only lack agency in shaping their image (Costera Meijer, 2013), but they also often face the consequences of negative

spatial imaginaries. In social housing estates, stigma is frequently cited as a primary issue, exacerbating other problems (Hastings & Dean, 2003; Hicks & Lewis, 2020). Authors such as Arthurson et al. (2014), Wacquant (2008), and Warr (2005) have compellingly described how dominant narratives derived from spatial imaginaries, which depict estates as barren, chaotic, and rough, negatively affect internal social cohesion and personal well-being. This is why several authors have emphasized the importance of image building in neighbourhood renewal (Hastings & Dean, 2003; Wassenberg, 2004). However, while planners responsible for such renewal do not necessarily *perpetuate* problematic reputations as commercial media tend to do, Hastings and Dean (2003) have demonstrated that they do *respond* to the narratives mentioned above, thereby inadvertently reinforcing negative spatial imaginaries.

Several authors have argued that narratives can serve as not only oppressive but also as healing experiences when they accurately recount personal experiences (Sandercock, 2010). In this regard, counterstories appear to be interesting means of image building. Counterstories have their roots in critical race theory, where they have been embraced as a primary way to give a platform to voices from the "outgroup" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2413). Counterstories do so by sharing real, lived experiences that highlight the cracks in the master narrative and "open new windows of reality" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2414). This attention to lived experiences is based on the firm belief that knowledge stems from the social position. In spatial disciplines, a few tools have been developed in order to capture such lived experiences, such as GIS-based spatial narratives (Elwood, 2006) and countermapping (Peluso, 1995). Community organizations have adopted GIS-based maps and images to include their spatial knowledge in decision-making processes. Countermapping, on the other hand, frames mapping as a power-laden representation (Dalton & Mason-Deese, 2012). The choice of what to show on a map (e.g., national boundaries) or what not to show (e.g. ancestral native lands) renders it a tool for hegemonic forces to reinforce their power positions in spatial development. Countermapping seeks to find different ways to envisage spaces in maps, in order to "increase the power of people living in the mapped area to control representations of themselves" (Peluso, 1995, p. 387). In our analysis, we used digital storytelling, which is a tool with which participants create short videos that consist of moving images, pictures, and drawings. In these videos, participants talk about their own lives in their own voices (Truchon, 2016). The tool is often used among marginalized and sensationalized communities to make their unheard voices be heard (Gregori-Signes & Pennock-Speck, 2012). It promotes them as experts in their own lives (Truchon, 2016) and makes them active subjects in the formation of their neighbourhood's imaginary (Costera Meijer, 2013).

In order to use counterstories as a mode of inquiry, Delgado (1989) suggests first examining how stories contribute to a master narrative, perpetuating a specific version of social reality. He then proposes analysing counterstories by showing what such stories leave out, potentially preparing the way for a new story. We will follow this order of inquiry to study how stories of planners derogate from stories of residents of large-scale social estates. In doing so, we will reflect on the "generic styles [stories] can take" (Martinez, 2014, p. 38). To explore the stories, we will highlight the specificity of planning documents, in which not only texts but also graphs, plans, and images respond to dominant representations of space. For the counterstories, we will focus on the tool of digital storytelling and how we applied it in the context of Peterbos. We will highlight its strengths but will also show some limitations regarding its potential to capture counterstories.

3. Context and Methodology

3.1. The Regeneration Plans

The context of this analysis is Peterbos, a high-rise social housing estate located in the Brussels-Capital Region, Belgium. The estate, which was built after the Second World War, comprises 18 high-rise towers with 1,400 housing units, as well as a few commercial and social services. It is situated in an open and green landscape on the periphery of the city region and is surrounded by low-rise neighbourhoods. At the time of writing, the site is undergoing various planning processes aimed at the renovation of public spaces and several towers. In our analysis of the "master narratives," we focus on two main regeneration plans.

The first regeneration plan is a master plan that was initiated by a social housing company in 2014 but was ultimately rejected by the housing authorities of the Brussels-Capital Region. The plan exists of two reports: one called *Sketch Design Phase* and another called *Preliminary Draft Phase*. While initially seen as a guideline, it became a detailed plan that included a progressive renovation of the towers and public spaces.

The second regeneration plan includes a "diagnostic," "priorities," and an "action program," developed within the context of a "sustainable neighbourhood contract." These documents were adopted in early 2019 and formed the primary guidelines for developing new facilities and renovating the public space in Peterbos. The neighbourhood contract is a transversal planning policy that has been adopted in various countries in Europe as an instrument steering participatory regeneration processes in areas facing social and economic difficulties (Aernouts et al., 2022). In Brussels, the policy was adopted in 1993 and changed in 2010 in order to give more attention to environmental dimensions, hence the "sustainable" neighbourhood contract. Nowadays, it combines planning interventions with socio-economic actions, bringing together various stakeholders, such as the region and its planning institutions, the municipality, citizens, and, in

this case, social housing companies. In this article, we solely discuss the three documents (diagnostic, priorities, and program), made by an external multidisciplinary urban planning agency during the first year of the neighbourhood contract. We do not focus on the plans and activities developed afterwards, such as a master plan, social-cultural activities, and social economy projects.

3.2. The Digital Storytelling Project

In light of sensationalizing and stigmatizing media coverage following incidents of violence between inhabitants and the police in the spring of 2018 (see for instance Grymonprez, 2018; Debaets, 2018; "Peterbos: Une zone de non-droit à Bruxelles?," 2018), we were drawn to the idea of using digital storytelling as a means to showcase more diverse perspectives of Peterbos. Over a period of seven months, from October 2018 to May 2019, we organized six workshops and two feedback sessions with eight inhabitants of Peterbos, during which we created short videos using a combination of texts, pictures, drawings, and short moving images. To recruit inhabitants, we explained the project to passers-by in the public space of Peterbos and also used the knowledge of social workers to identify those who might be interested in an audio-visual project or benefit from telling their story. As such, our selection was based on the needs and motivations of inhabitants rather than on research interests or representativeness. We presented the stories and findings from the digital storytelling process to both participants and inhabitants of the neighbourhood, in order to understand how some elements were shared among estate inhabitants. Each workshop included assignments to reflect on the message of these videos. The eight inhabitants were divided into two groups: a Monday morning group with two women and two men, and a Wednesday afternoon group with one woman and three teenage boys. To understand the conditions that led to the creation of these stories, the two authors of this article attended the sessions as participant observers. Joint by a third researcher, throughout the process, we formed researcher–inhabitant duos to provide support and act as soundboards for specific assignments. This support ranged from helping people with disabilities to cross the area or to take pictures, to contributing to the writing process in case of language barriers. By actively supporting one or two participants each, we aimed to normalize our presence as part of the process. A fourth researcher, who played a key role in developing the digital storytelling tool, guided the sessions and compiled the videos.

We conducted an analysis of both the plans and the digital storytelling project within the framework of action research on inclusive regeneration strategies for large-scale social housing estates. Indeed, our research delved into not only an in-depth study of how the regeneration was experienced locally but also engagement with planning stakeholders who were involved in the regeneration process, by conducting interviews and attending meetings, presentations, and workshops. Our collaboration with the planning stakeholders, on the one hand, explains how we got access to the regeneration plans. We did a narrative analysis of these regenerating plans by examining the planning documents presented above, including the texts, graphs, plans, and images, and by identifying how they related to broader imaginaries and narratives on high-rise estates present in the context of Peterbos as well as in national and international literature on large-scale social estates. Our engagement with the inhabitants through the digital storytelling project, on the other, was limited to a relatively small group of eight people. We tried to develop a meaningful interpretation by taking into account inhabitants' social and political identities and how these related to their experiences. The first author of this article, Younes Rifaad, also conducted interviews with four of the eight inhabitants to discuss our interpretation of the stories.

4. Revealing the Master Narratives Within the Regeneration Plans

In both the master plan and the documents of the sustainable neighbourhood contract, we identified two key narratives that were responded to: the impact of modernist high-rise architecture and the homogeneity of social renters. In this section, we link the stories of the planners to national and international literature on large-scale estates and study how they are reproduced in the analysis of these plans.

According to the master plan, Peterbos possesses the positive qualities of a good modernist neighbourhood, such as an "abundance of qualitative green spaces" (Office 1, 2014a, p. 22). However, the large amount of public space is also viewed as its weakness, as "most of it currently remains undefined" (Office 1, 2014a, p. 88), making hierarchization and privatization of parts of the public space the priority of the plans. The undefined spaces in their current state "make the neighbourhood confusing and thus, unsafe" (Office 1, 2014b, p. 38). Additionally, the current social composition of the neighbourhood is considered a "social mix…that is unhealthy" (Office 1, 2014b, p. 36), which is illustrated with various diagrams. In one of the diagrams, the revenues of Peterbos, the municipality, and the entire region are compared. Below the diagram, it is stated that there are too many elderly and unemployed inhabitants, particularly when compared to the statistics in other places. In another graph called "Spaces With a Healthy Mix" (Office 1, 2014a, p. 36), the ratios between social rent and rent and ownership for middle-class households for an area in Sheffield and Amsterdam are displayed. The plan proposes to densify the site by introducing housing for middle-class inhabitants. The additional buildings would be constructed right next to the existing towers, forming ensembles and collectivizing parts of public space.

As a result, the remaining public space would become easier to understand, enabling "better

appropriation by inhabitants, and as such a better management" (Office 1, 2014a, p. 88). In addition, the densification would create the critical mass needed to provide more commercial and cultural facilities, located on a central and structuring lane. This would also break the monofunctionality of the site, which "provides no reason for people in adjacent neighbourhoods to visit" (Office 1, 2014a, p. 58), increasing their isolation. The team responsible for the master plan consulted inhabitants of the neighbourhood through "tent discussions" (Office 1, 2014a, p. 38), with questions mostly relating to the public space. Regardless, most of their conclusions involving the functioning of the public space came from a reading of spatial characteristics.

The "diagnostic," "priorities," and "action program" of the neighbourhood contract, the second set of regeneration plans that were subject to our analysis, offer a more sensitive and refined reading of the site, yet propose solutions that are similar to those in the master plan. For instance, the priorities report notes that "urbanism in open order has both spatial and ecological qualities, but it also causes problems in terms of appropriation and social control" (Office 2, 2018b, p. 10). In response to these problems, the planners aim to re-activate public spaces by introducing new functions to the area. One solution is to construct a large central facility that would attract visitors from the surrounding areas, thereby breaking the isolation of the neighbourhood. Another proposed solution is to create a network of services primarily for local inhabitants. Together with new "conviviality spaces" (Office 2, 2018c, p. 84) and renovated walkways, these facilities would create a new hierarchy that encourages the appropriation of public space and fosters social interaction among residents.

The plan's authors also aim to involve tenants in the construction of these conviviality spaces, believing that it would make them feel more connected to the neighbourhood and thus more responsible for it. As highlighted above, the language used in the documents of the neighbourhood contract is less forceful than in the master plan. The designers of the neighbourhood contract aim to value local knowledge, in this case, acquired by a team of architects and sociologists who conducted the fieldwork and organized participatory workshops, albeit operated in a very challenging time frame.

Although the two regeneration plans and the analyses supporting them differ significantly from each other, they both respond to two prevalent ideas in discussions about high-rise social housing estates. Firstly, modernism has been criticized for failing to create functional spaces (Sendi et al., 2009). While modernist estates were initially based on progressive ideals of equality and good living conditions for all (Turkington et al., 2004), they quickly became a quick and cheap solution to house large amounts of households, in the context of slum clearances (Declerck, 2004) or to rebuild destroyed housing after the Second World War (Wassenberg, 2004). As a result, the initial architectural ambitions of the movement quickly decayed and essential elements such as collective facilities (Vervloesem et al., 2008) or the importance of orientation (Declerck, 2004) became less present. This led to a standardised and monotonous construction of high-rise towers (Zimmer, 2009), often in cheaper, peripheral locations with few facilities (Turkington et al., 2004). Modernist architecture subsequently became the subject of criticism (Lees & Baxter, 2011), particularly in the case of Belgium, where freestanding owner-occupied housing is still considered the norm (De Decker & Pannecoucke, 2004). In recent years, however, this criticism has evolved in architects' and urbanists' circles, with a reconsideration and appreciation of high-rise housing (Dejemeppe, 2010). Their demolition is increasingly seen as ecologically irresponsible, while their high density and collectivity are viewed as a qualitative solution to population growth in major cities. Nevertheless, as shown by the plans presented above, open spaces in high-rise estates are still often seen as unreadable and confusing, hindering personal investment and leading to an anonymous environment (Hall, 1997; Lefrançois, 2022). This is believed to result in a lack of social control that allows for the physical degradation of the estate (Lefrançois, 2022), as no one feels responsible for the environment.

Secondly, while the importance of maintaining and renovating social housing is increasingly recognized in the context of Belgium, where there is a strong lack of social housing, actors involved in regeneration plans tend to problematize the social composition of social housing estates. In Belgium, social housing is seen as a safety net, catering to the most precarious households (De Decker & Pannecoucke, 2004). As in other countries such as the UK and France (Musterd & Andersson, 2005), this spatial concentration of precariousness has been deemed to amplify individual problems (De Decker & Pannecoucke, 2004). Contemporary planning solutions often aim to break this spatial separation from wealthier households, either in the form of introducing middle-class housing (as in the case of the master plan) or in the form of attracting visitors by introducing public facilities (as in the case of the neighbourhood contract). Even if such approaches have been criticized in other contexts for their weak empirical foundations (Crump, 2002) and a lack of understanding of how groups mix (Lees, 2008), they remain part and parcel in regeneration plans in Belgium.

In the following section, we will compare these stories of planners with those of inhabitants and participants in the storytelling process, focusing on those stories that are excluded from these key ideas.

5. Searching for Counterstories

5.1. Place Attachment

Both regeneration plans present a spatial imaginary of an inside-outside dichotomy, portraying an isolated,

undefined, modernist estate that prevents appropriation by its tenants. The plans are based on the belief that people are confined within the "borders" of "an island" (Office 2, 2018b, p. 68), resulting in a dynamic of "people withdrawing in themselves and…not leaving the neighbourhood often" (Office 2, 2018b, p. 6). The "lack of structure and difficult orientation" is also believed to "contribute to the isolation of the neighbourhood" (Office 1, 2014a, p. 25), leading to design strategies focused on redefining and hierarchizing public space. However, the digital storytelling process challenges these ideas by showing the inhabitants' mental maps, the contemplative character of appropriation, and hidden uses of the landscape.

The inhabitants' mental maps do not correspond with the neighbourhood being isolated or a singular entity. Even though the site is homogeneous in terms of architecture and ownership structure, the digital storytelling trajectory shows that people's daily geography is not restricted to the "borders" of the site (see Figure 1). For instance, one resident created a video about his social life outside the neighbourhood, including information about his friends and acquaintances in Brussels and his participation in a community agriculture project. Referring to his own neighbourhood, he describes that he "only passes through" (video Participant 1 [P1]). For the teenagers, their neighbourhood and daily lives do not limit them to the site of Peterbos. When asked to discuss their neighbourhood in the workshops and their videos, they chose to discuss a snack bar close to their school, clothing shops in the center, and a municipal park, among others.

Inhabitants also make sense of the public space, enjoying the green environment and nature the site offers. They recognize it as a valuable asset in a strongly urbanized environment and make use of the open-air sports facilities, take walks, or smoke cigarettes in designated places. As much as they enjoy some places, they avoid others, such as those occupied by drug dealers, creating a mental hierarchy that assigns certain uses and behavior to certain places. In other words, residents learned how to (re)act in specific spaces, creating differentiation in "publicness." This mental reading and hierarchy do not prevent inhabitants from appreciating the site as a whole, although they do so in a more contemplative manner, as opposed to the active appropriation pursued in the plans. For example, one resident mentions in his video that he enjoys watching children play and people walking their dogs. The teenagers dedicated their videos to the animals they encounter at Peterbos and are "proud to know the whole neighbourhood, every nook and cranny" (video P6; Figure 2). They even included images and short clips of a fox and a bird's nest in their video, which they had originally shared on social media. This exemplifies the positive emotions associated with certain qualities of the site that allow individuals to express themselves and contribute to their identity (Fleury-Bahi et al., 2008).

Some uses remain overlooked by the planners, such as those of the shared spaces in the apartment blocks. For inhabitants, these are social spaces where neighbourly relationships play out in elevators or hallways, where people know each other by sight, greet each other, and/or chat. These spaces function as parochial

Figure 1. Stills of video fragment of resident showing her daily walks with her dogs (video P4).

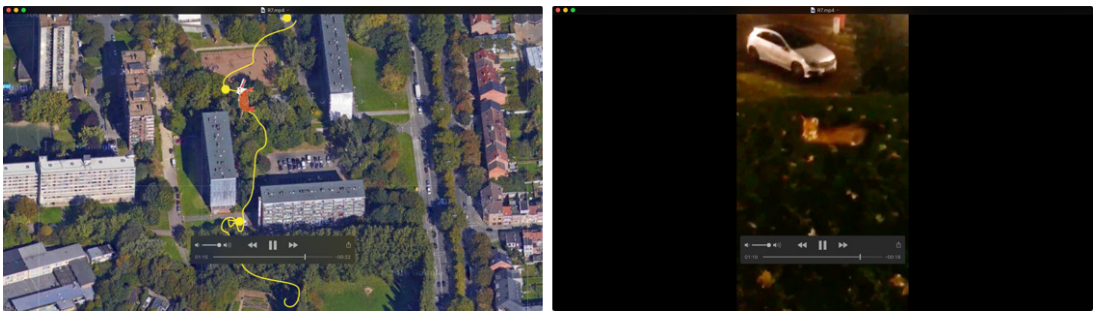

Figure 2. Stills of a video fragment of a youngster showing his appreciation for the wildlife in Peterbos (video P6).

spaces (Lofland, 1998), providing opportunities for acts of reciprocity, such as exchanging food and clothes (see Figure 3). In a workshop, one resident recounted living in a building with large hallways where neighbours left their doors open and even placed chairs outside to converse. In his new building, the smaller hallways create a barrier to getting to know his neighbours in the same way. The generous circulation space in older apartment blocks is thus a notable spatial quality that enables socialization.

The examples show that Peterbos is not a place devoid of social interactions. Although the connections between neighbours may be shallow, the fact that they recognize each other and sometimes socialize spontaneously is valuable (Blokland, 2009). However, this does not prevent some residents from experiencing profound loneliness. During the workshops, several participants expressed sentiments of isolation.

These perceptions and lived experiences of residents highlight the risk that some of the planners' responses to commonplace ideas on modernist architecture overlook the actual nature of place attachment and fine-grained uses of the urban form. While the residents interact with the built environment (Blokland, 2009), their relationships with the site and with others are not determined by it. On the contrary, inhabitants actively engage with the space and introduce their own meanings and uses.

5.2. Disabling Spaces

By focusing on a lack of appropriation and lively spaces, the two plans not only overlook certain uses and practices of space but also fail to understand why people interact with physical space in a certain way. For instance, while the neighbourhood contract does recognise the problematic state of the pathways, it mostly attributes "the lack of animation in the public space" (Office 2, 2018a, p. 72) to the lack of services on the ground floor, whereas the digital storytelling process highlighted the significant impact of physical (dis)ability on inhabitants' spatial agency. Moreover, the process showed that the built environment itself plays a large role in "disabling" tenants (Lid & Solvang, 2016).

During the workshops and meetings with residents, it became evident that many inhabitants face challenges when moving around in the area. One notable example is a community worker who gave a lift to two workshop participants, despite their house being less than 200 m away. Additionally, while taking pictures on the site, a resident with reduced mobility took various shortcuts to reach a specific location, disregarding the existing walkways and the large central staircases, instead traversing the hilly terrain diagonally. Furthermore, a resident struggling with an illness only walked to the nearby shopping centre on days she felt well.

This reduced mobility of Peterbos inhabitants also makes the malfunctioning elevators in the towers particularly problematic. The buildings range from six to 19 stories high, making elevators a basic necessity for many people. In one workshop, a resident stated that when the elevators of her building broke down, elderly inhabitants barely left their homes. Another inhabitant with reduced mobility commented that the housing company puts his life in danger as he sometimes needed to take the dark and dirty stairs.

The strong focus on the lack of public space appropriation (Office 1, 2014a; Office 2, 2018a) and on "disenclaving" (Office 2, 2018b, p. 20) the neighbourhood in the two regeneration plans, not only downplays residents' agency but also the theme of accessibility. Given the concentration of various kinds of precarity in the area, reduced mobility is part and parcel of Peterbos. Moreover, poverty and health issues (Hughes & Avoke, 2010) can be both the cause and consequence of reduced mobility. Around half of the participants in the storytelling project ended up in social housing due to health problems. For them, poverty not only represents a lack of money but also creates cumulative barriers to well-being (Hughes & Avoke, 2010), leading to poor health and decreased participation (Clarke et al., 2011). As physical space strongly influences these individuals' capacities (Lid & Solvang, 2016; Wanka, 2017), accessibility is their primary concern in the design of public space.

5.3. Paradoxical Empowerment

The regeneration plans explicitly aim to foster a sense of responsibility among residents through "mental and social appropriation processes" (in the case of the master plan; Office 1, 2014a, p. 82) and by involving them "in the use, management and maintenance of collective

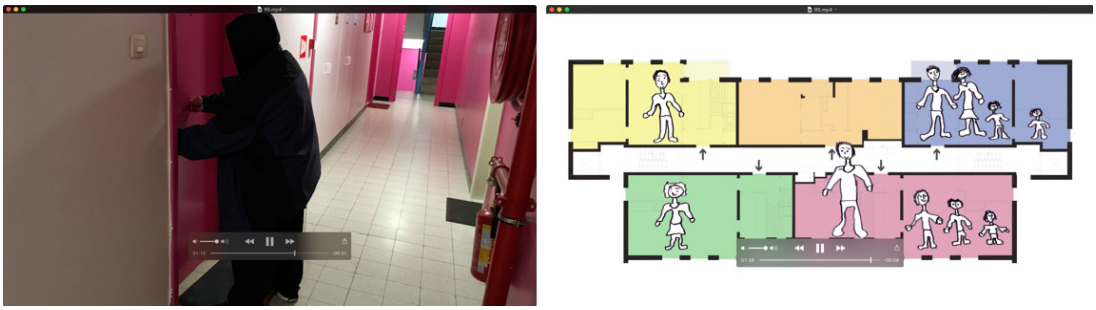

Figure 3. Stills of video fragment of an inhabitant discussing neighbourly relationships (video P4).

materials" in specific public spaces (in case of the neighbourhood contract; Office 2, 2018c, p. 87). Additionally, they seek to "work on the emancipation and widening of horizons of residents" (Office 2, 2018b, p. 10).

However, the responsibility discourse presented in the plans contrasts with the daily experiences of residents who care for the neighbourhood. As one woman stated in her video: "We can work on the neighbourhood, but I also wish that 'they' would not neglect the neighbourhood so much" (video P5). During the workshops, participants frequently expressed their frustration with pending elevator repairs, which once lasted several months. In this particular case, the social housing company only took action when residents started a protest that garnered media attention. Housing companies often attribute malfunctioning elevators to the residents' incorrect use of them, invoking the responsibility of residents. Instruction posters in the elevators that show appropriate and inappropriate behavior seem to reinforce this narrative. During one of the discussions, a researcher asked why residents did not immediately call the operator to speed up repairs. One man responded that the social housing company reprimanded him when he did so. Another resident agreed, expressing doubts as to whether his complaints "even made it past the secretary," and even if they did, "he was gone for months" (P2; final group discussion on May 21, 2019). The fact that he could not promptly take care of his living environment made him feel insignificant and ignored, as if he was not allowed to speak up because he lived in a social housing estate. This frustration, which is linked to the status of social tenants, extended to other domains of his life, leading to feelings of depression. Another resident shared the same feeling and preferred to connect with people outside the estate, distancing himself from the other residents (Wacquant, 2008). Others simply suggested that the social housing companies should "maintain the buildings better, inside and outside" (video P5; Figure 4).

By cultivating a sense of responsibility among social tenants, the regeneration plans do not challenge but rather sustain the prevailing moral discourse on their "re-education" (Flint, 2004). In contrast, the digital storytelling process shows that true emancipation requires a critical examination of the power dynamics between institutions and tenants (Arnstein, 1969). This may be beyond the planners' control but is essential for meaningful change.

6. A Plea for Digital Storytelling?

The analysis above highlights several strengths of the digital storytelling process in capturing counterstories and feeding alternative spatial imaginaries, thereby countering dominant narratives of space. Firstly, the empirical findings widened generic discussions on the relationship between residents and the built environment, by providing situated and experiential spatial knowledge. Such knowledge shows how people structure their everyday lives (Davoudi, 2018) and assign meanings to certain spaces, which can lead to more inclusive designs for these spaces (Lefrançois, 2022).

Secondly, the comparison between the planning document analysis and the digital storytelling process interrogated the visual representations at the centre of planning. In the regeneration plans, visual tools such as diagrams and plans were used to represent "neutral data." Some of these data, like the graphs that represent places with a "healthy mix," hold spatial imaginaries on housing estates and their inhabitants, in which both the tenure form (social rent) and social composition of social housing neighbourhoods are deemed unhealthy. More generally, they fail to show how individuals shape space. In contrast, the intonations in the voice recordings, the moving drawings, pictures and videos, highlight some characteristics of the hidden transcript (Scott, 1990) of the planning process, revealing how people make sense of the built environment of their neighbourhood and appropriated it in their way. Hence, using new forms of media to represent space, such as countermapping (Peluso, 1995) and digital storytelling, has transformative potential in itself.

Thirdly, the digital storytelling process offered us an interesting tool *for* planning by actively seeking to impact real-world situations (Ameel, 2017). It provides a valuable tool for critical planners, engaging with feminist, anti-racist, anti-classist, or other marginalized perspectives and experiences of "the other" (Piccolo, 2008; Rahder & Altilia, 2004). These approaches value lived experiences and explicitly produce knowledge in relation

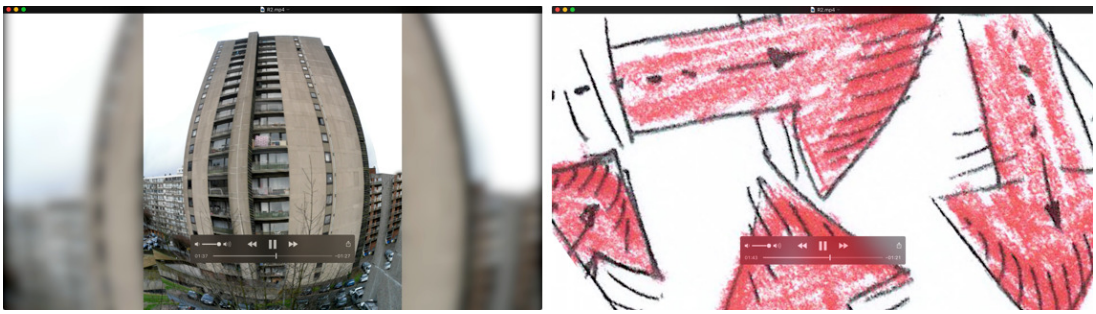

Figure 4. Stills of a video fragment of a resident describing the rigid structure of the social housing companies (video P2).

to a political struggle. As such, they acknowledge epistemological traditions in which "stories do not just recall or make sense of something, they create everything, and are implicated in all aspects of ongoing, lived experience" (Potter, 2020, p. 1544).

Inevitably, the digital storytelling process also had some weaknesses. Similar to countermapping, it created "new types of power relations around control and knowledge" (Peluso, 1995, p. 387) through storytelling technologies. For instance, we only developed seven videos with eight inhabitants, a fraction of the 3,000 inhabitants of the site. The workshops were moderated by one researcher, who also compiled the material into videos. The workshops were each time attended by four residents, two to three researchers, and one social assistant. The researchers and the social assistant participated in the different exercises, but only the stories of the inhabitants were captured in a video. Although we organized two sessions dedicated to feedback on the drafts of their videos and enquired inhabitants to discuss our interpretations of them, these different constraints show that digital storytelling is not devoid of "expert" dynamics that can exclude inhabitants from participating fully. The co-construction generated throughout the process can be empowering for some but disempowering for others, such as those who do not wish to be associated with the neighbourhood, as was the case for one inhabitant who decided not to publish his video.

As such, digital storytelling should not be viewed as a quick fix for planning issues (Hodgson & Schroeder, 2002). In our case, the stories helped us to define themes and gain situated knowledge that we integrated into meetings with planning stakeholders. We shared the videos with participants and other residents, discussed them, and confirmed our findings during a neighbourhood festival and community-building activities. We also presented the storytelling project to various stakeholders responsible for the regeneration of Peterbos, showing them the videos and sharing our observations and findings. The urbanists responsible for the follow-up assignment of the neighbourhood contract attended the presentation, and although they emphasized the inside-outside dichotomy in their plan, which was challenged by the storytelling project, they carefully considered the accessibility of public spaces. This highlights the modest, yet significant potential contribution of our work. The storytelling project also sparked new projects and stories, which further explored how residents experience and perceive their living environment. Social workers utilized the project to facilitate more direct discussions on issues between residents and housing officials. As a result of the discussions that emerged during the project, the inhabitants and the social worker set up an upcycling project. The development of counterstories should thus be viewed as an ongoing process that is deeply embedded in ongoing regeneration practices and their imaginaries, where "spaces for micro-interaction" (Aernouts et al., 2022, p. 6) between both could be crucial for success. It is important to note that, in our case, these forms of interaction were not created out of the blue. As action researchers, we translated the counterstories into narratives, by analytically reflecting on them and positioning them against the stories of planners. In this endeavour, we mostly took an antagonistic stance, by highlighting areas where the planners' analysis and envisaged future did not correspond with our findings on the ground, trying to illuminate "how the world looks from behind someone else's spectacles" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2240). In doing so, we occupied an interstitial space (Aernouts et al., 2022) within the planning process, where diverse forms of interaction—collaboration, communication, but also friction and conflict—between different actors were mobilized to nurture the planning process.

7. Conclusion

We started this article by presenting opportunities for storytelling. We understand all planning as storytelling that disseminates narratives and shapes spatial imaginaries. We then put forward the lens of counterstories (Delgado, 1989; Lindemann, 2020). While we see the master narratives as dominant and hegemonic viewpoints that put certain representations and spatial imaginaries into reality, counterstories are efforts to challenge them by including the experiences of marginalized groups. By doing, we do not necessarily want to state that all planners adopt master narratives, nor minimize the potentially challenging time frames within which planners often have to operate. We rather want to show how planners sometimes *respond* to dominant representations, unintentionally reproducing them (Hastings, 2004). We then studied counterstories, building on empirical data of action research, including the study of plans and a digital storytelling trajectory, both developed in the context of a regeneration process of a social housing estate in the Brussels-Capital Region, Belgium.

Empirically, the study of the planning documents drew attention to how specific discourses on the modernist patrimony and inhabitants of social estates find their way in the planning process, in line with national and international thinking about modernist social housing estates. The counterstories showed less visible forms of appropriation, the role of (dis)ability in residents' interaction with space, and the constraints of notions such as "emancipation."

Methodologically, the tool of digital storytelling seems especially interesting from an epistemological point of view, showing new windows into reality through other forms of data, such as voices, intonation, and moving images. They can feed new spatial imaginaries that contribute to seeing and characterizing certain spaces, especially those that are marginalized, different. Nevertheless, digital storytelling should not by any means be seen as a panacea for developing more inclusive planning processes. Above all, such a narrative

approach to planning acknowledges the messy reality of engaging in real-life contexts, in which planners continuously need to remain critical and reflect on the stories on which they base themselves.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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