

Participatory Place-based Storytelling: A Tool to Beat Stereotypes and Unlock the Power of Communities

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transformative potential of place-based visual storytelling as a tool for territorial regeneration. Drawing upon diverse case studies executed by Melting Pro across various regions, this research underscores the methodological adaptability of storytelling in reflecting and reshaping the identity of a place. The case studies, selected for their variety of contexts and targets, uniformly employ participatory storytelling to enhance territorial identity, with visual elements serving as a consistent thematic thread. Our findings indicate that participatory visual storytelling significantly influences perceptions and identities of places through two principal mechanisms: re-semantisation of values and empowerment of the local community. The paper details how this practice enhances people's awareness of their roles within their environments, strengthens community bonds, provides inspiration to overcome communal challenges, and activates a process of re-signification that deconstructs prejudices and stereotypes, renewing personal insights and emotional experiences. The two methodologies explored —DS Lambertian method and SPACE format— demonstrate storytelling's dual impact in redefining place meanings and driving community engagement. Furthermore, storytelling provokes critical reflections on the social and psychological dimensions of place, fostering new narratives and community participation. This study not only highlights the practical applications of storytelling in urban and rural regeneration but also frames it as a powerful catalyst for on-going dialogue and change, perpetuating a cycle of narrative evolution and public engagement. Ultimately, we argue that storytelling is a timeless practice intrinsic to human beings, essential for their wellbeing and the places they inhabit. By fostering inclusive, grassroots innovation and involving people from the very beginning of the regeneration processes, this practice activates a virtuous process of valorisation for both the territory and the people who pass through it, with multiplying effects over time and space.

Keywords: Storytelling, Community, Re-Signification,

1 Introduction

Anecdotes, myths, tales, and narratives represent central nodes in all cultures. On the one hand, they reveal the value system from which they derive, conferring a sense of Community, continuity of generations, and history on the people who inhabit that particular territory. On the other hand, they play an essential role in the collective imagination on the perception and understanding of the territory, how others see us, and how we see ourselves. Working with storytelling practices in a territory allows us to combine perspectives, data and actions to tell new stories and revive older ones. It provides multiple perspectives that allow us to read the territory differently and to rethink our visions, often distorted by stereotypes.

In this paper, we explore place-based Storytelling following these two paths. The two aspects outlined are indeed the two sides of the same coin, the one of the regeneration of a place, which sees merged the need to create and strengthen local communities by empowering people together with the importance of a re-semantization and re-signification of the territory, through narrative practices. Since Storytelling is a polysemic term, we emphasise that this paper refers to any form of visual narrative realised through



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participatory practice. In the following paragraphs, a series of best practices using place-based Storytelling will be selected and analysed on the basis of two main aspects related to territorial regeneration – namely, the re-signification of territory and the empowerment of people.

In socially and creatively based grass-root regeneration processes, place identity is one of the main issues to address. Much more than a space conceived as abstract geometries, places are imbued with meaning, putting individuals, groups or societies and their relations at first places [1]. Therefore, the concept of place is physical and psychological [2], meaning either the individual's internal psychological or social processes, attributes, and activities done at the place [3]. In other words, places are interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined [4]. When regenerating a place, one of the most peculiar aspects of innovation is rooted in actions that strengthen the capacity of people to act from the early stages of a process. Ideas enable innovative and structural impact on society because they are based on the active role of inhabitants who are not just carriers but makers of their rights [5]. Innovation is therefore a process that can be managed, promoted and enhanced by each contribution, and a potent tool to let people contribute to society is storytelling, which allows individuals, regardless of their social and economic background, to give an insight into their everyday lives, engaging participants and the entire Community by having a cognitive and emotional impact. Storytelling provides an infrastructure that multiplies the opportunities for exchange, accessibility and participation. Its power lies in the universality (of stories) [6].

2 Stories boosting stories - methodology and results

The narrative actions recalled in this paper are based on two principal methodologies. One draws its scientific foundation on the Digital Storytelling (DS) method [6] developed by the Story Centre of Berkley (USA), a reference point on the international scene for participatory storytelling processes. DS has been considered a prominent method of creating and expressing personal stories [7]. Here, people create individual digital stories through a collective and self-reflective process fundamental to unlocking creativity and strengthening relations between participants.

Participation is encouraged within the story circle at the beginning of the process of creating the stories and during the sharing at the very end. The story circle promotes an exceptional balance between self-reflection and community sharing of stories; the storyteller shares his/her own story, and the facilitator, with the group, calls with questions for a more excellent definition of the story to be told. Starting from this conventional approach to story circle, we introduced a facilitation role that is a responsibility that rotates among the participants, namely the visual facilitator. The visual facilitator is the one who prompts reflection on the images that arise from the story being told orally in the story circle. The images described are not necessarily those that will later be used in the production of the digital story but rather a prompt to process the first steps of the Lambertian process (Owning your insight, Owning Your Emotions, Finding The Moment) [6]. This is precisely the reverse of the photo-elicitation process involving narrative Storytelling from photos. In the story circles, we ask participants to tell the story and then think about the resulting visual suggestions, thus starting from the story and arriving at an image.

Particular emphasis is also placed on the digital stories shown to produce other stories. Although this step is integrated into the standard process both in the briefing and the accompanying script-writing part, only a little is reported in the scientific reference articles. The choice of stories shown is crucial in giving direction, providing an inspirational model, and being excellent teaching material. The choice can fall on several factors, such as thematic content, narrative type (digital curricular story, advocacy story, and more), the techniques used (snapshot: editing with one photo, editing with several photos) and the quality of the photos used (processed or unprocessed). Stories are shown at the beginning of the DS process during the

briefing and during the writing and storyboarding. Once the storyteller has written the story as a text, the text needs to be transformed into a multimedia work. The text is fragmented into small paragraphs, and each portion is combined with a photo, an image or a video using the storyboard tool. The initial text can be modified based on the images/videos identified to create a genuine dialogue between images and text through a co-evolutionary process, creating multimedia language. Even though in DS processes, the journey itself, in terms of social exchange and skills acquisition (writing, digital, editing), is perceived as more significant than the destination [8] [9], the digital stories realised are a new starting point of story elicitation. It is the intrinsic capacity of a story to generate other stories by assonance, identification or inspiration. Furthermore, this capacity generates potentially infinite possibilities.

The second methodology we refer to is related to the format SPACE, a site-specific intervention defined over the years by Melting Pro to activate territorial regeneration processes through creativity. SPACE stems from the desire to generate positive impacts to reactivate spaces and territories and consolidate the involvement of local communities [10]. Creatives and artists are called to intervene after being closely in contact with the local Community. They collect data on the territory, exploring and observing it directly, capturing the values and the traditions and grasping the true identity of the place.

A second phase of territorial immersion is aimed at artistic conception, stimulated by the exploratory experience just lived and by the relationship with the people living in the area. In this phase, the relationship of proximity and exchange between artist and citizen is stimulated and induced by specific technical and methodological tools deriving from punctual engagement strategies (interviews, co-design and artistic co-design, playful or consultative and participatory moments, expedients facilitating the emergence of trusting relationships, etc.). Finally, a third phase of site-specific artistic production is aimed at the realisation of the artistic project that can reinterpret the territorial space in a new way, enhance it, re-characterise it, and reactivate it by saving it from degradation, disuse, neglect and by enhancing its symbolic/cultural/aesthetic function. Framed into a place-based storytelling approach, the Space format is declined so that local stories are captured through an action of active listening and then transformed into an artistic artwork, most of the time a visual narration.

Translating a story into an image multiplies the effects of territorial Storytelling and its meaning ad infinitum. It gives new value to the territory as a means of redemption. The visual aspect increases the sense of belonging to the territory and the emotional bond, enhancing the discovery, learning and openness of people, either inhabitants or tourists, as well as reaching multiple audiences, becoming a sort of experiential map of the territory by overcoming cultural, linguistic, cognitive differences, conveying complex messages in a simple way. If a few words are used, the resulting artwork becomes fertile ground for exchanging new stories and reference points for the area, inspiring new process implementations in the surrounding areas.

The two approaches differ profoundly in their methodological approach. In the first case, value is given to the authentic, first-person narrative. The opportunity for people to reclaim their own stories is a core component of the method [11]. In the SPACE method, the artistic intervention becomes an authorial mediation, which transforms the individual stories of the people of the Community into a visual narrative that unleashes a collective power. Instead, they have in common the participatory processes of active listening, the possibility of giving a voice to those who would not otherwise be heard, and the creative power of stories to create other stories.

3 Discussion – best practices

When a specific type of narrative prevails over the others, the identity of the place is strengthened in the direction of the predominant vision, distorting the collective imagination and, most often, creating solid

stereotypes. The following cases show how place-based Storytelling helps trigger and spread new or different narratives, helping the process of re-signification of territory.

Corleone is a small village near Palermo in Sicily (Italy). The widespread news about the city was mainly related to mafia news events. Moreover, the film industry had also put its stamp on it by fictitiously placing the godfather's house in Corleone, creating a fake conception of what the land offers. Indeed, many tourists who visit the village ask where the godfather's house is and realise, to their astonishment, that this house never existed. Here, the work that Melting Pro carried out back in 2011 was to work on terms used in a particular way in the mafia context – such as 'family' or 'friendship' - and to initiate a process of “value inversion” so that those words would have taken on a different meaning. In order to do that, we collected place-based stories through an interview-based storytelling approach, asking inhabitants to highlight the beauty of the heritage through an authentic counter-narrative action, revealing untold first-person stories. Inhabitants were engaged through a participatory process. Memories, suggestions, and stories returned a different image of Corleone, giving back a different perception from cliché. The stories were available on-site along outlined tourist routes with the possibility of accessing extracts from the digitised documentary archive of the Falcone and Borsellino maxi-trial. By unveiling memorable stories and promoting a different relationship with the territory, place-based Storytelling aims to produce and promote content, meanings and data to offer a new shape and vision of the territory, breaking down a collective imagination based on stereotypes.

The same approach was taken within the project “Stories behind the cities”, aimed at sharing and promoting the intangible cultural heritage of three European countries - *Croatia, Serbia, and Romania* - through place-based Storytelling. The three countries have experienced a common history of conflicts, changing borders, and totalitarian regimes. Post-conflict identity narratives are complicated to change. Through the engagement of the local Community, the project mapped resources - urban stories, and therefore myths and legends about events, places, and citizens - to open new scenarios, highlighting European values related to human rights with a particular focus on ethnicity, race, migrants, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity. The activities, run in 2020 by Melting Pro in cooperation with the StoryCenter of Berkley, led participants to investigate the connections between urban narratives and city-making, creating a good opportunity for Novi Sad, Rijeka and Timisoara to reshape their old narratives and create new ones about their history, Community, and heritage. The project impacted people, empowering them to perceive their city differently and rethink their blinkered and biased views, creating digital stories to share on big screens and the Internet with the possibility of using the stories as catalysts for new visions.

If we shift the focus on practices that favour interactions and capacity-building processes, i.e., the modalities that provoke the sharing of perceptions, needs, and visions and, more generally, that promote transforming information into explicit knowledge through a network of iterations, we understand that people want to be represented and need to be represented [12]. They want to recognise themselves in the narrative they meet. They want to recognise the experience they lived. They want to find answers to their questions. Through storytelling, individual identities, different and united in a system, can contribute to defining that growth strategy that Hirschman indicates as the main lever to develop the latent identities of territories within a global context [13], an instrument of legitimation, fundamental for accrediting social, cultural and economic values

In *Melilla*, a Spanish enclave in Morocco, the regenerative work was implemented in 2019 in the Rastro district under the European project 'Youhood. Young artists in the hood'. Young creatives from Rome and Rotterdam worked closely with Spanish artists, the local Community and the municipality. The Rastro neighbourhood has an emblematic history from a cultural, social and political point of view. The

multiculturalism of the district, characterised by a mix of Amazigh and Jewish culture, permeates art, gastronomy, commerce, and handcrafts, giving this place its identity and inspiring artists in their creations. The changed conditions of economic and social fragility have put a strain on peaceful coexistence in recent decades. The abandonment and neglect of spaces have fostered a dynamic of ghettoisation of its inhabitants from the rest of the city. In this context, narrative processes had a strategic role. It is a powerful tool used to express the desire to promote and activate a new narrative and empower the inhabitants, satisfying the need to be represented and share stories. A process of re-signification expressed through public art and street art affects precisely those public places that are abandoned and unseen. To realise the intervention in the Rastro district, the artists took part in actual participatory Storytelling, meaning the elaboration of a new neighbourhood narrative defined through the involvement of several people.

The intervention [fig.1] focused on a 30-metre-long wall between the neighbourhood school and the square. The horizontal development of the wall was exploited to create a succession of doors and windows with arabesque profiles that look at the surrounding architecture of the neighbourhood against a blue background, echoing the city's ancestral link with the Mediterranean Sea. The door windows play on the meanings of border, passage, and crossing, which refer to the ancient and current history of the neighbourhood and the city, dissolve cultural differences positively, and counter the dynamics of closure and ghettoisation. Melilla has been a city crossed by numerous populations over the millennia. However, today, it is also a border area and the first landing place of hope for many migrants fleeing to Europe from their countries of origin. The barbed wire at the borders is the emblematic sign of a black chronicle. Melilla and the Rastro, in particular, have also meant exclusion and discrimination for the population living there. The narrative unfolds in a bas-relief that can be read from both directions and is the spokesperson for a social message that values diversity and overcomes barriers. Each window door has its narrative inside; they become micro-worlds that open up new stories that interweave the local culture with that of the artists and passers-by who read the work. The conception of the image was thus the fruit of a process of co-participation through remote research, on-site exploration led by locals, free walks through the streets of the neighbourhood to get to know its inhabitants, painting workshops held by the creative in the city's schools and women's prison, and visits to the city and Morocco. All of which helped to broaden the view of the city. The intervention on the wall opened its door to dialogue with the inhabitants who, from their perspective, identified with that message and spontaneously took part in the ongoing regeneration process. Many shopkeepers asked the artists to intervene in their shutters; many children spontaneously took part in the interventions on the wall by helping the artists to paint; the artists, for their part, started to paint unplanned corners and walls of the neighbourhood with the consent of the locals. The presence of a message conveyed through a direct visual narrative that overcomes linguistic and cultural differences in a public space triggers a critical process in the collective imagination. It influences the everyday lives of those who live in a particular space, opening the way to multiple positive developments.



Fig 1. *Murales: Murales realized in Melilla in 2019 within the 'Youhood. Young artists in the hood project'*

Storytelling based on a participatory practice can potentiate activism and public engagement through collective empowerment. It was used in 2023 to let representatives of European NGOs involved in the Buy Better Food Campaign enhance a sense of belonging, promoting the value of authentic experiences and points of view all over *Europe*. Buy Better Food is the European advocacy campaign promoted by ICLEI with a coalition of more than 200 European CSOs and local government, focusing on public food procurement as a critical driver of food system transformation towards a sustainable, healthy, and fair food system in the European Union, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the EU Farm to Fork Strategy. The process of collecting stories, facilitated by Melting Pro together with our esteemed colleague Antonia Liguori, provided the theoretical and practical foundations for the use of digital Storytelling, starting from the personal sphere with a reflection on one's own identity and, through processes of participation and sharing, opening up to a collective level, contributing to the development of a shared sense of belonging and call to action. Also, here, the values component was a critical strategic lever to facilitate the growth of future change agents, working on self-awareness, values and ambitions in relation to self, others and context. The tangible output of the participatory process was short individual videos narrated in an authentic, first-person manner to be shared online or offline. It has been evident since the beginning that participatory practices unlocked creativity in a way in which people were inspired by other best practices, questions, and comments, with the possibility of defining their own story more and more. Underlining the unique relation with the topic within every story, the result was a variety of authentic narratives that overcame technicalities to get straight to the heart of the listener's mind.

All these processes here outlined imply evolved listening and restitution capacities that allow an initial alignment of visions and an authentic participatory design of intervention strategies [14]. Storytelling draws people into a 'circle of belonging' created by sharing a story and its values of reference. Stories encourage our empathy and lead us to engage in emotional relationships with others so they can be a force for transformation [15]. As a key competence, Storytelling supports people in becoming agents of change. The value of a place is no longer determined solely by the value of the buildings it hosts but also by the value of the relationships it can establish within society, with other institutions and with all kinds of stakeholders.

4 Conclusion

This paper advocates place-based Storytelling as a regeneration tool, referencing some practices carried out by Melting Pro in different territories. The cases have been deliberately chosen for their intrinsic differences in context, target and end products while maintaining participatory Storytelling and visual components as a common denominator. Analysing the various cases, it emerged that the power of participatory visual Storytelling as a regeneration tool relies on the possibility of working with fluidity and determination on the identity of a place; either we are referring to the DS method or pointing at the SPACE format. Both methodologies highlight how Storytelling acts on a territory by bringing two value drivers: the re-semantisation of a place and the empowerment of the local communities. Stories are powerful for activating change processes, starting from new meanings and new sharing, challenging social and psychological values of the place within people's perceptions. Place-based Storytelling addresses the need to approach places contextually and understand the complexities of what gives places their identity. It gives people a voice, creating a feeling of involvement and the energy of being impactful, making one more aware of the relational ecosystem in which one is immersed. At last, this paper aimed at highlighting the extraordinary power of stories as an elicitation tool both *within* the process of creating stories and *at the end* of a participatory process. The stories created are themselves a way of unlocking people's imaginations and generating new stories that, once made public, trigger thoughts and discussions in other people for an endless time.

5 Declarations

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5.2 Competing Interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. All co-authors have seen and agree with the contents of the manuscript. The authors certify that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

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