JENS MARTIN GURR

CHARTING LITERARY URBAN STUDIES

Texts as Models of and for the City
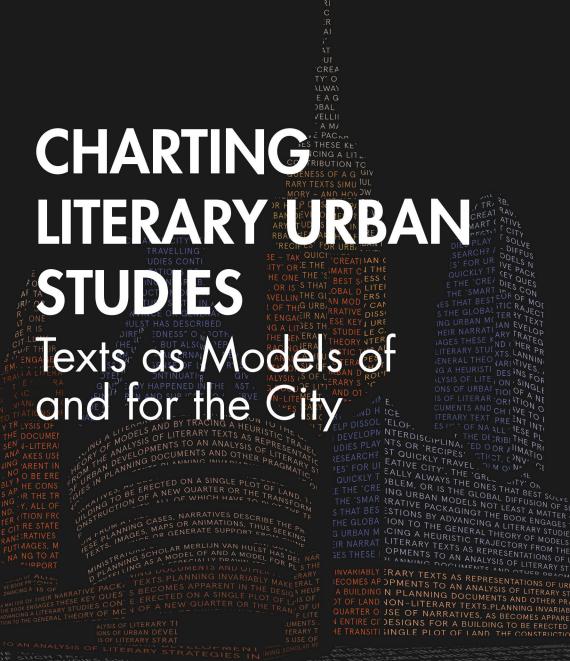
Charting Literary Urban Studies

Guided by the multifaceted relations between city and text, *Charting Literary Urban Studies: Texts as Models of and for the City* attempts to chart the burgeoning field of literary urban studies by outlining how texts in varying degrees function as both representations of the city and as blueprints for its future development. The study addresses questions such as these: How do literary texts represent urban complexities – and how can they capture the uniqueness of a given city? How do literary texts simulate layers of urban memory – and how can they reinforce or help dissolve path dependencies in urban development? What role can literary studies play in interdisciplinary urban research? Are the blueprints or 'recipes' for urban development that most quickly travel around the globe – such as the 'creative city', the 'green city' or the 'smart city' – really always the ones that best solve a given problem? Or is the global spread of such travelling urban models not least a matter of their narrative packaging? In answering these key questions, this book also advances a literary studies contribution to the general theory of models, tracing a heuristic trajectory from the analysis of literary texts as representations of urban developments to an analysis of literary strategies in planning documents and other pragmatic, non-literary texts.

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Texts as Models of and for the City

Jens Martin Gurr

For Lucia, Johanna and Antonia

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This book builds on some long-standing research in historical as well as contemporary literary and cultural urban studies and in related fields. In addition to individual formulations and passages in several chapters, which have been used in earlier essays, I gratefully acknowledge permission from the respective publishers to re-use more extensively material from earlier essays.

Parts or earlier versions of material from the **Introduction** first appeared in:

- Jens Martin Gurr. "'Urban Complexity' from a Literary and Cultural Studies Perspective: Key Cultural Dimensions and the Challenges of 'Modeling'." *Understanding Complex Urban Systems: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Modeling*. Ed. Christian Walloth, Jens Martin Gurr, J. Alexander Schmidt. Heidelberg, New York: Springer, 2014. 133–150.
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- Jens Martin Gurr, Martin Butler. "Against the 'Erasure of Memory' in Los Angeles City Planning: Strategies of Re-Ethnicizing L.A. in Digital Fiction." *Selling EthniCity: Urban Cultural Politics in the Americas*. Ed. Olaf Kaltmeier. London: Ashgate, 2011. 145–163.
- Jens Martin Gurr. "The Modernist Poetics of Urban Memory and the Structural Analogies between 'City' and 'Text': *The Waste Land* and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*." *Recovery and Transgression: Memory in American Poetry*. Ed. Kornelia Freitag. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. 21–37.

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- Jens Martin Gurr. " 'Urban Complexity' from a Literary and Cultural Studies Perspective: Key Cultural Dimensions and the Challenges of 'Modeling'." *Understanding Complex Urban Systems: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Modeling*. Ed. Christian Walloth, Jens Martin Gurr, J. Alexander Schmidt. Heidelberg, New York: Springer, 2014. 133–150.

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Introduction

Talking about his magnum opus *Ulysses*, James Joyce famously told his biographer Frank Budgen: "I want [...] to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book" (Budgen 69f.). Joyce here facetiously suggests a double function of texts that is central to this book's interest in the relation between 'the city' and 'the text': Texts can be *representations of* the city – *Ulysses* as "a picture of Dublin" – and they can be *blueprints for* the city – "[Dublin] could be reconstructed out of my book".

Guided by such a dual understanding of the relations between city and text, this book attempts to chart the burgeoning field of literary urban studies by addressing questions such as these: How do literary texts represent urban complexities – and how can they capture the uniqueness of a given city? How do literary texts simulate layers of urban memory – and how can they reinforce or help dissolve path dependencies in urban development? What role can literary studies play in interdisciplinary urban research? Are the blueprints or 'recipes' for urban development that most quickly travel around the globe – take the 'creative city', the 'green city' or the 'smart city' – really always the ones that best solve a given problem, or is the global diffusion of such travelling urban models not least a matter of their narrative packaging? The book engages these key questions by advancing a literary studies contribution to the general theory of models and by tracing a heuristic trajectory from the analysis of literary texts as representations of urban developments to an analysis of literary strategies in planning documents and other pragmatic, non-literary texts. These suggestions, it is hoped, will be of interest to scholars both in literary studies and in various fields of urban research as well as to students in these areas. Given this interdisciplinary orientation, I have cut short a number of more in-depth discussions that would have been in order had the book been addressed to a literary studies readership alone.

After decades of scholarship on literary representations of the city, the emerging field of literary urban studies[1] has more recently also begun to read literary and non-literary texts side by side and to consider both the pragmatic functions of literary texts and the 'literariness' of planning documents (cf. Ameel 2016, 2017, 2019; Buchenau/Gurr 2016, 2018; Keunen/Verraest), important work that this book builds upon and seeks to continue. Here, a key influence has

been the sustained interest in the role of narratives in urban planning, design and development; urban planner Leonie Sandercock has even spoken of the "story turn in planning" (2010).[2]

Planning invariably makes use of narratives, as becomes apparent in the designs for a building to be erected on a single plot of land, the construction of a new quarter or the transformation of an entire city, all of which have to plot the transition from a present into a desired future state. In all these planning cases, narratives describe the process in texts, images, maps or animations, thus seeking to attract, convince or generate support from owners, city administrators, investors and other stakeholders. In this vein, governance and planning scholar Merlijn van Hulst has described "storytelling as a model *of* and a model *for* planning". In doing so, he has especially drawn attention to the "future-directedness" of both narrative and planning: "Through telling and listening to stories, actors in the present not only make sense of the past, but also prepare for the future" (van Hulst 300). It is this "future-directedness" (van Hulst 300) and the (at least potential) openness of planning – alternative developments are always at least imaginable – which make it possible to read planning texts as "future narratives" in the sense of literary scholar Christoph Bode (cf. Bode/Dietrich): A "future narrative" is a narrative that describes more than one potential continuation in a given situation and thus does not – as the more common "past narratives" do – present a development as having already happened in the past and thus as no longer allowing for different outcomes. Rather, "future narratives" portray the future as being open and subject to intervention. In "future narratives", this is made explicit in the form of decision points – or "nodes", as Bode calls them – in the narrative, which can either simply be bifurcations or may offer three or more alternatives. Each of these potential paths into the future can then, in turn, contain further nodes. Nodal structures, I will argue, are common also in literary texts seeking to represent an urban experience of constantly having a choice between different potential courses of action (cf. Chapter 3). In the practice of planning, most plans – whether they are master plans for an entire district or smaller-scale plans for an individual building – do not explicitly present alternatives. In other words, they do not flesh out alternatives in narrative descriptions or visualisations, let alone with considerations of anticipated costs, benefits and impacts. However, any planning document, sometimes implicitly, refers to different possible futures and thus contains at least one node; in the simplest form – and this may even be the most common one – the alternatives may only be that a plan may or may not be realised. Thus, any plan for the future is essentially a "future narrative", because even where it is presented as a 'must' without alternatives, it contains – at least implicitly – the decision point of realisation or non-realisation.

While, as part of the "story turn in planning", numerous studies from the field of planning research and planning theory have engaged with the role of narratives in planning (if frequently with an inflationary and fuzzy use of the term 'narrative'), this is hardly true to the same extent for literary and cultural studies despite their specific competence in the analysis of narratives. Thus, there is as yet no substantial narratology of urban planning, although recent

work by Lieven Ameel, Bart Keunen and Sofie Verraest points in the direction pursued here (cf. especially Ameel 2016, 2017, 2019, 2021; Keunen/Verraest). These studies have shown the potential of narratological and rhetorical analyses of planning documents: Specific underlying plot patterns and their generic implications – as well as central tropes and references to established patterns of narrative sense-making – have thus been shown to suggest or predetermine outcomes, path dependencies, inclusions and exclusions. Thus, a literary studies approach to planning texts can frequently show them to be profoundly 'literary' (cf. the discussion of the 'Garden City' concept in Chapter 8), but it can also help explain their – often unintended, occasionally highly problematic – political implications.

In contrast to 'traditional' literary studies approaches interested in literary representations of cities, the field of literary urban studies as it has evolved and as I understand it, is also centrally concerned with the real-world city and its challenges. This is, therefore, a more thoroughly interdisciplinary field requiring literary scholars to leave their comfort zone and to engage with, say, the theory and practice of planning or with approaches to modelling urban complexities in economics, mobility science, or the social sciences. Literary scholar Eric Prieto has described the concerns of what he calls "geocentered" criticism as follows:

> [The] geocentered study of authors or works should lead away from the individual author and work and toward a more general kind of knowledge, one that breaks through the aesthetic frame that sets works of literature off from the world and seeks to use the study of literature as a way to better think about the world around us.[3]

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While I sympathise with the real-world commitment, I see no reason to "brea[k] through the aesthetic frame" and I do believe it is *one* task of literary studies also to provide detailed readings of individual texts. Moreover, it may precisely be an understanding of the aesthetic functions and appeal of texts – literary as well as pragmatic – that can help explain their very real impact. Literary urban studies thus understood, more so than established approaches to studying 'literature and the city', must be concerned with conceptualising the relation between the textual and the material city, between 'the city' and 'the text'.[4]

Here, an understanding that regards texts as models can be particularly fruitful. According to a general theory of models (cf. Stachowiak 131–133), all models share the characteristics of being (1) representational, (2) reductive and (3) pragmatic. A model may therefore be defined as a simplified physical, digital or mental representation of a more complex outside entity to which it must be functionally or structurally similar in order to function as a model. Models are devised or chosen for a specific purpose and – depending on that purpose – will selectively focus on different characteristics, elements or connections of the system perceived as central to this purpose while disregarding others. Thus,

a map of a city with colour-coding in green, yellow or red to represent high, medium or low average incomes per district is a model of that city in that it (1) represents the city, (2) does so in a highly selective, simplified, abstracted and aggregate form, and (3) does so for specific purposes – possibly to support decisions about where to launch social cohesion programmes – while it would be largely useless for other objectives.

Moreover, mathematician and information theorist Bernd Mahr has argued that models should additionally be understood in their dual nature of always being both "models *of*" something and "models *for*" something:

> A model is always based on something *of* which it is a model, i.e. departing from which or referring to which it has been produced or chosen, its matrix. The purpose of building or choosing a model is its use […] One of the typical uses of models is their use as a *means of designing* [*or creating*] something. [Here] models are samples, pre-formations or specifications […] The notion of the model can therefore only be explained convincingly if it is acknowledged that a model is always both a *model of something* and a *model for something.*[5]
>
> (2015, 331f.; italics original; my translation)

Adapting this notion, a model can be understood as being to varying degrees both the *descriptive* rendering of an entity *of* which it is a model and – at least implicitly – the *prescriptive* blueprint for the design or transformation of a future entity *for* which it is a model. With reference to the relation between the city and the text, a text can thus be understood as an urban model in that it is – again to varying degrees – *descriptive* in its representation of the city and – again at least implicitly – *prescriptive* in that it formulates directions or options for a different future city. This dual nature is also evident in the fact that texts not only represent an external urban reality but contribute to shaping perceptions of the urban and thus to highlighting that a different city is at least conceptually possible. Moreover, as the increasingly frequent collaboration between planning experts and science fiction writers shows, literary texts as models *of* and models *for* urban realities also have a crucial role to play in developing scenarios. Thus, the German Federal Institute for Building, Urban and Spatial Research (BBSR) in 2015 issued a study entitled *Learning from Science Fiction Cities*: *Scenarios for Urban Planning* (my translation; cf. BBSR).

The notion of texts as models lends itself to being applied to both literary and pragmatic, non-literary texts such as planning documents. However, more clearly than in Mahr's original conceptualisation, where "model of" and "model for" are two sides of the same coin or may only be gradually more or less prominent in different models,[6] "model of" and "model for" are here introduced as a heuristic distinction based on which the field of literary urban studies can be charted or mapped.[7]

There has recently been an increased interest in adapting a general theory of models (with frequent references to Stachowiak and especially to Mahr) to

literary studies and in disciplinary literary and cultural studies approaches to the theory of models (cf. several contributions in Bahlke/Siegert/Vogl as well as in Dirks/Knobloch; Wendler). Pioneering work has been done, for instance, in two research training groups in Münster and Jena.[8] Expanding and refocusing such work, this book specifically conceptualises literary texts as models complementary to the currently dominant quantitative models in urban research, a notion I develop in more detail in Chapter 1.

An attempt at charting the field of literary urban studies requires a fundamental decision about structure: Does one proceed chronologically by epoch, which would suggest an interest in the succession of literary representations of cities in different periods? Or regionally, by city, in which case one would be likely to catalogue representations of different cities?[9] Or does one proceed by different genres, which would hardly do justice to the overlaps and transfers between literary and planning texts (for these, cf. for instance Ameel 2016, 2019). All of these, I believe, would in different ways strengthen a focus on questions of 'representation', would therefore lead away from what I have called the 'real-world concerns' of literary urban studies and would not necessarily be helpful to a more conceptual discussion of the relation between text and city. However, since I do believe that some concepts are best introduced in sustained readings of individual texts, this study deliberately works both with chapters that take their cue from a representational challenge and that use texts largely to provide examples, and with chapters interested in an individual text. Moreover, I do analyse in some detail texts from a range of different genres and text types – poetry and docu-fiction in multimedia hypertext (Chapter 3), novels (Chapter 4), urban activist writings (Chapter 5), planning documents (Chapter 8), as well as a range of shorter examples discussed throughout.

In conceptualising different subfields of research, approaches and guiding questions in literary urban studies, this study follows three interrelated trajectories, each involving a reversal of the research focus and direction of inquiry:

1. from texts as *descriptive* models *of* key urban structures, developments and characteristics to texts as *prescriptive* blueprints *for* the planning, design and development of cities;
2. from the question of how the city shapes writing to that of how texts shape the city;
3. from the study of literary texts on the city to the analysis of planning documents and other pragmatic, non-literary texts central to urban planning and development.

Tracing these three trajectories, the study proceeds as follows: **Chapter 1,** "Interdisciplinary Urban Complexity Research and Texts as Qualitative Models", outlines a contribution of literary urban studies to inter- and transdisciplinary urban complexity research by discussing textual models of the urban as complementary to the currently dominant quantitative models. Without denying their usefulness for a vast number of purposes, it will be argued that quantitative models are characterised by abstraction and aggregation and

thus are generally not concerned with local or individual specificity. On the other hand, qualitative models are frequently designed to capture just that. More narrowly, literary texts serve as a particular type of qualitative model: By focusing precisely on the representation of specific places, of individual responses and of patterns of sense-making, they are diametrically opposed to quantitative models in their selection of which elements of complex urban reality to include or to leave out. As an alternative form of 'modelling' urban complexity, literary texts are thus shown to function as a complementary type of 'urban model'.

Chapter 2, "Literary Models of Urban Complexity and the Problem of Simultaneity: A Sketchy Inventory of Strategies", develops a typology of literary strategies in the representation of urban complexity. It takes its cue from the insight – formulated by Georg Simmel, Kevin Lynch and others – that an overwhelming simultaneity is quintessential to the urban experience. Arguing that, given the linearity of print, the representation of this simultaneity poses the main challenge to literary models of the city, *and* that the representation of urban simultaneity invariably involves or at least implies most other key facets of complexity, I here use a wide range of texts from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century to develop a typology of literary strategies of nonetheless representing, simulating or suggesting this simultaneity. It is precisely the use of such strategies, this chapter argues, which enables literary texts to function as models *of* urban complexity.

Continuing the inquiry into texts as models *of* the city, **Chapter 3**, "Palimpsests, Rhizomes, Nodes: Texts as Structural and Functional Urban Models", builds on the typology developed in Chapter 2 to provide theoretical concepts and extended case studies for the analysis of texts as structural and functional models of urban complexities. More specifically, using T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" as a quintessential topographical poem *and* as a central text in discussions of urban memory, and Norman Klein's 2003 multimedia database narrative *Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920–1986* as arguably one of the most ambitious attempts at using hypertext database structures to represent urban complexities, I here discuss textual strategies of simulating rhizomatic and palimpsestic urban structures as well as textual simulations of cities as spatialised and layered urban memory. Here, Walter Benjamin's notion of "superposition", the simultaneous perception of different layers of the past, will play a central role.

Chapter 4, "Reversing Perspectives: Urban Memory in Built and Literary Post-Industrial Cities", is the first of three chapters suggesting and performing a shift of attention: It attempts to apply the concepts outlined in the previous chapters – palimpsest, superposition, rhizome – first to physical sites in the polycentric post-industrial conurbation of the Ruhr region in Germany and only then to literary texts representing these sites in particular and the region generally. In doing so, it addresses the question of how concepts from literary urban studies can help understand the real-world city. Second, it argues that concepts of historical layering – usually applied to 'old' European cities such as Rome, Berlin, London, Paris or St. Petersburg – also fit post-industrial