

GOOD STORIES... UN/MAKING TRANSFORMATIONS OF POST-INDUSTRIAL CITIES

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BRITTA ACKSEL

Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities Essen

“Sustainability” is used strategically in urban governance; it is a means as well as an end. Some argue that the focus often lies on the former. The point of this paper is not to show that “sustainability” is used to achieve a diverse set of goals, but rather how this is done. The article starts with three stories about the transformations of three post-industrial cities (Malmö, Essen, Almada) and lays out how the transformations have been enacted (or not), thus demonstrating the dynamic and context-specific way “sustainability” is put to work in urban governance. Further, the argument is that stories, due to their ontological entanglements, may well be more than “good stories”. In and through stories, “sustainability” as an urban governance issue is un/made along with certain kinds of post-industrial cities. The article points out how stories make sustainability marketable while unmaking it as something that requires fundamental change. Moreover, the claim is that these two stories make competitive post-industrial cities and unmake connections between industrial pasts and global environmental challenges. Nevertheless, they also cause critique and dispute and might pave the way for different dis/connections.

Keywords: transformation story, sustainability, post-industrial cities, urban governance

A city that turns itself around from Germany’s coal and steel industry stronghold to Europe’s Green Capital, from “grey to green”, is “put simply: a good story”, as a manager of Essen’s Green Capital year points out (Interview 10 April 2017).¹ During my research in the southern Swedish city of Malmö, I come across what an interlocuter from the city museum describes as “this story we tell all the time” (Interview 2 December 2016). The story is of how the bankrupt industrial city rose from its ashes “like the bird phoenix” through its embrace of sustainable development (Interview 25 September 2017). And in Almada, a city not far from the Portuguese capital of Lisbon, I find traces of a transformation story according to which

¹ I would like to thank my interlocuters, who supported my research very generously with their expertise and time.

a new chapter in the city's history is to be written and in which it would be reinvented and become an example for the whole of Portugal (Camara Municipal de Almada et al. 2006).



Map of Europe. The three needles show Malmö, Essen, and Almada (© OpenStreetMap www.openstreetmap.org/copyright)

This is a taste of the three stories at the centre of this article. I encountered them during fieldwork about sustainability governance in/of cities between autumn 2016 and early 2018. While I was researching six policy instruments aiming for “sustainability”² transformations, I encountered what I came to name “transformation stories” in many of the 72 interviews I conducted, while doing participant observation and in numerous field materials and documents. I was following policy instruments and, even though my focus was on them and not on stories, the latter caught my attention (Marcus 1995). Stories are one way in which “sustainability” is employed strategically in urban governance (and beyond) aiming for economic growth and a way that “sustainability” is put to work to remake cities formerly associated with heavy industry. I will show how this has been done in three European cities and what is un/made in the process.

² In my research, I encountered many different and changing ideas and ideals of sustainability, which is the reason I use it in quotation marks.

Public officials and politicians use “sustainability” strategically, as is well established. It is a settled facet of governance at the urban level and beyond. Different authors developed concepts to refer to strategies in which capital outflow – as happened in Malmö, Essen, and Almada due to industrial decline – is addressed through investments in “sustainability” (Holgersen and Malm 2015: 276; Rosol et al. 2017: 1712–1713; While et al. 2004: 551). Referencing the concept of “spatial fix” according to the human geographer David Harvey, they call such strategies “sustainability fix”, “environmental fix”, and “green fix”. Using the label “eco” or “climate branding”, others point out how urban actors use “sustainability” as a location factor (Busch and Anderberg 2015: 3; Carvalho et al. 2017; Rosol et al. 2017).

What is true for “sustainability” holds up for stories as well. Stories and narratives are used for strategic or political purposes. This fits into the “narrative turn” that can be observed in and beyond academia (Andrews 2007; Schneider 2009: 3). The interest in stories and narratives extends far outside of Literary and Folklore Studies to Political Science, Economics, Geography, City Planning, and Psychology. Values, logics, and premises that become accessible through narratives might be the focal point (Ochs 2017: 41; Shore and Wright 2011: 13–14). Other researchers are working on the performative character of stories (Borie et al. 2019: 205; Eckstein and Throgmorton 2003: 4–7) while others pay special attention to how stories are used strategically (Ameel 2017: 322; Zavattaro 2014: 190). Cities, companies, grant applications, research projects, campaigns – it is commonly understood that all of them need a good and strong narrative to be successful (Griem 2021; Sattler 2016).

The vast array of works about the strategic use of stories³ includes some at the nexus of cities and “sustainability”. Staci M. Zavattaro (2014: 191), from a public administration perspective, analyses, for example, how cities use sustainability narratives for city marketing purposes without long-term or holistic goal setting and she encourages the development of narratives with a less consumerist emphasis. The role of storytelling in policy mobility is at the heart of Sergio Montero’s (2017) article on traffic policies in Bogota. The Latin American urban planner shows that the construction and dissemination of a simplified narrative about urban transformation led the Mexican city of Guadalajara to adopt policies from the Colombian capital. And the German political scientist Teresa Kallenbach (2021) works on the role of stories in Copenhagen’s transformation into a bike-friendly city. The stated goal of her project (based at the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies Potsdam) is to derive transferable communication strategies for the promotion of cycling in other cities.

The focus of this paper is the use of stories and the trajectories of “sustainability” in urban governance. For post-industrial cities,⁴ I found a certain type of story, one that I call a transformation story, a term that originated in my field sites. I use it to describe stories about change in which industrial pasts are used as a canvas for current “sustainability”

³ Among others, see the special issue of *Narrative Culture* (6/1, 2019), especially the introduction by Stefan Groth and Ove Sutter’s contribution.

⁴ The description as post-industrial is, as so many terms with the prefix “post”, criticized for looking backwards. A description of the present is said to be lacking (Mah 2013: 15–16). Nevertheless, I use the term post-industrial exactly to point to the past – to the past of heavy industry in Malmö, Essen, and Almada.

efforts. Put differently, stories about change are put to work to foster further or different conversions. By telling these stories and showing how they are enacted (or not), I point out how vastly different and dynamic various trajectories of “sustainability” as an urban governance issue can be.

Further, I argue that these stories are not pure fiction, but neither do they merely describe something out there in the world, either. Following Laser and Sørensen (2021), I think about them as ontologically entangled. Building on the work of the Dutch philosopher Annemarie Mol (2002) and her argument about relations between knowledge and ontologies, Laser and Sørensen (2021: 26) call attention to the inseparable ontological connection between stories and their content. Stories form the realities of what they describe (Laser and Sørensen 2021: 32; see as well Asdal 2015; Wagenaar and Cook 2009: 159). Analysing enacted transformation stories, therefore, allows for insights into recent developments in/of urban “sustainability” governance as well as perspectives on the un/making of post-industrial cities.

To reach these insights and perspectives, I first tell three transformation stories. Next, I look at how the three stories are enacted, and I address how transformation stories are told, by whom and where, and I describe how I encountered them to demonstrate how “sustainability” is employed strategically in and through stories. Reading them together shows that employing “sustainability” to remake former heavy industry cities is by no means a universal remedy. Despite many similarities, these processes are highly entangled with projects, politics, and time(ing) (among other things) and come in different shapes and shades. Following this and focusing on enacted transformation stories, I show how stories un/make “sustainability” and what kind of post-industrial city they un/make. I argue that the stories make “sustainability” marketable and that the stories I analyse unmake “sustainability” as something that requires fundamental change. By looking at un/made pasts, presents, and desirable futures, I reason that the stories unmake the connections between industrial pasts and their global ecological consequences. Further, I claim that they make competitive post-industrial cities but make the primacy of competition debatable as well.

THREE CITIES: THREE STORIES?

So, let me first tell you three transformation stories. How I tell them, as you will shortly see, is not symmetrical. The telling is based on the stories themselves and my encounters with them, which I will lay out in the next section.

MALMÖ: “LIKE THE BIRD PHOENIX”

“The story of Malmö”, according to the city’s website, is about: “[...] how a post-industrial city reinvented itself as a dynamic knowledge centre built on cultural diversity, youth, and sustainable development” (Malmö Stad 2016).

Once upon a time, Malmö was a proud industrial city. The prosperity and pride were linked to thousands of industry jobs, which led to enormous growth in population and taxes, among other things (Statistics Sweden 2010). The city's shipyards were especially central to Malmö's identity. The Kockums crane in the western harbour area was not only a central landmark but the city's pride.

Industrial prosperity was followed by a decline starting in the 1970s (Anderson 2014: 11–12). One of my interlocutors from the Environmental Department puts it like this:

The city was really in crisis, we were basically bankrupt as a city at the end of the 90s, we really were. All our industrial jobs just disappeared; I think we lost 40 jobs in just a few years' time; I mean 40%. It was a very harsh awakening; we were hit really hard by the recession. But how do you sort of, find a way out of this industrial era? There were some attempts to bring the industry back [...].⁵ (Interview 24 November 2016)

But remaking the city by focusing on different industries did not work. In this bleak situation, the Social Democrats, so the story goes, developed a survival strategy directed 20 years into the future. First, it was met with ridicule. The thought-up vision was based on huge investments, deemed unattainable from the city's position. Political courage, ascribed to the former social democratic mayor, led Malmö to new greatness, and the formerly proud industrial city rose "like the bird phoenix" (Interview 25 September 2017) to be a "young, global, modern city" (Anderson 2014: 12). So, the happy ending and the slogan of the local social democrats still today.

ESSEN: "FROM GREY TO GREEN"

The counterpart to this story in Essen, whose past is not characterized by shipyards but by coal mines and steel plants, is a story of a grey industrial place transformed into a green liveable city. The first sentence of the application for the title to be European Green Capital 2017 is:

The successful 150-year transformation story, from a city of coal and steel to the greenest city in North Rhine-Westphalia, is a role model of structural change for many cities in Europe. (Stadt Essen 2014)

The grey arrived in Essen in the mid-1800s (Berger 2019; Goch 2002: 63). Mining in the Ruhr Area, tightly connected with the iron and steel industries, as well as diverse sub-industries, fundamentally changed the city that dates to the Middle Ages (Czierpka 2019; Goch 2002: 64–65). The decisive factors were technical and economic developments, political changes, and the proliferation of coal as a commodity (Goch 2002: 62–63). Rapid industrialization came with costs, however. Examples of what "grey" meant were

⁵ The author edited the quotes to enhance readability.

polluted air, black lung, pseudocroup, poisoned soil, and foaming rivers (Interview 10 April 2017). Despite this, the city grew enormously (Berger 2019).

Today, in contrast, Essen is one of the greenest cities in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia. Here, swimming in the Ruhr, formerly one of the dirtiest industrial rivers in Europe, is officially allowed. A bathing area was ceremonially inaugurated in 2017, the green capital year. And for the future and as part of the green capital year, goals have been set, such as a modal split between walking, driving, using public transport, and cycling of four times 25% by 2035, 20,000 “green jobs” by 2025, or a CO2 reduction of 95% by 2050 (Raskob 2016).

ALMADA: “OPENING A NEW CHAPTER”

Almada, like Malmö, had massive shipyards once upon a time. While the Kockums Crane in Malmö was sold, deconstructed, and sent to South Korea, the Lisnave shipyard in Almada closed, but the reddish crane with huge white letters advertising the company name is still one of Almada’s landmarks.⁶ The massive Lisnave crane, which you can see from neighbouring Lisbon, is also on the cover of a coffee table book in which a former mayor is quoted as follows in the foreword:

So, when we proposed – as we still do – the opening a new chapter [sic!], we wanted to match the innovation and quality of magueira’s shipbuilders. We also wanted to show the same courage as was shown by so many of Almada’s people, who had to reinvent their own future when shipbuilding and ship repairing came to an end. In fact, what we are doing now is reinventing the city’s future by involving everybody in the sustainable transformation of the east riverside zone. The process aims to transform problems into development opportunities, and we embark upon it in the full belief that we will also be helping to build solutions to problems that are not only local socioeconomic and urban issues, but issues affecting the whole of Portugal. (Camara Municipal de Almada et al. 2006: [5])

Here a story is put forward that taps into the innovation and ingenuity of the shipbuilders, who once were the city’s backbone as a resource for future development. Not only is the quality of the built ships something to be proud of, but also the way inhabitants dealt with the steep decline after the industry jobs moved elsewhere. What once were problems are to be collectively transformed into solutions. At the site where the shipbuilders once worked a new neighbourhood is supposed to emerge in the urban development project *Almada Nascente*, which will put the city on the map and make it a role model for the whole country (Statistics Portugal 2021; Welz and Blum 2007: 41, 43).

⁶ The Lisnave shipyard in Almada closed, but another yard in Setúbal still operates.

PUTTING THEM TO WORK... ENCOUNTERING TRANSFORMATION STORIES

The three stories I encountered in Malmö, Essen, and Almada each originated in political-administrative contexts and may be described as “official narratives” (Adam 2018: 35). All three of them use industrial pasts as a canvas for “sustainability” efforts. All three of them are strategically put to work to make the city more attractive for inhabitants, investors, projects, etc. Nevertheless, I show that their enactments differ vastly, and it is worthwhile to give them a closer look. They differ in their presence and absence, their timeliness and datedness, and their development and dissemination. By looking at how the stories are enacted I will give insights into trajectories of “sustainability” as an issue in urban governance and show how “sustainability” is put to work to remake cities of former heavy industry.

MALMÖ: “THE STORY WE TELL ALL THE TIME”

Malmö, the dot on the far north of the imaginative line that can be drawn on a map between the three cities included here, is the place where I encounter a transformation story most prominently. Most of the time, my interlocutors frame it as “this story we tell all the time” (Interview 2 December 2016; Interview 24 November 2016; Interview 5 December 2016). They assume that I will have heard “the story of Malmö” rather often. For example, one of my interlocutors from the Environmental Department of Malmö says:

I am sure you heard the story from other people about how Malmö made sort of this transformation phase, which was very difficult, of course [...] we talk about it so much that I sort of imagine you’ve heard a lot about it. (Interview 24 November 2016)

People explicitly frame it as a story or narrative. Some tell it with shining eyes, others tell it while remaining rather distanced to it, as an aspect somebody researching Malmö should be informed about, especially somebody interested in “sustainability”. The distanced relationship between several of my interlocutors and “the story of Malmö” is connected to its wide use and dissemination, which makes it feel “stale”, as some put it. In addition, it is described as “political”. Or, phrased differently, the story is identified as a strategical means of enhancing Malmö’s image, or that of the Social Democrats, which raises suspicions.

I come across Malmö’s story not only in interviews and conversations but also in the city administration’s different publications. In speeches and presentations, I hear and read about how Malmö became a “young, modern, global city” (Anderson 2014: 12). One of these occasions is the mayor’s opening speech at the conference *Sustainable City Development: Local Implementation of UN Sustainable Development Goals* in December 2016. The mayor welcomes the international audience with “the story of Malmö” and, in one of the long rows of the main room of the city’s new event centre, the person sitting next to me whispers that he had told me so: the story is taken out at every opportunity there is.

The dissemination of Malmö's transformation story is a conversation topic as well as the story itself. A regional and local politician from an opposition party connects the strong presence of the story to the fact that the city has been governed by the Social Democratic Party for so long. The social democratic deputy mayor describes the origin of the story as follows:

[...] He was the big man of Malmö for 20 years. He was from the Social Democratic Party, the SPD in Germany, and he started with this story, and we still tell it. (Interview 26 September 2017)

The man whom she is describing so enthusiastically is a former mayor. Not only is this story ascribed to him but so is the re-focusing of local politics to "sustainability". Both are strongly connected to two urban development projects. The first is BOO1 in Western Harbour, a housing exhibition for sustainable buildings. The second is a project in the Augostoborg neighbourhood, where the focus was not on creating a new sustainable living quarter, but rather on refurbishing the existing housing stock. Neither the two projects nor the former mayor is uncontroversial (Anderberg and Clark 2013: 598; Interview 5 December 2016).

As Anderberg and Clark (2013: 602–603) show, Malmö had been a pioneer in urban environmental questions once before, prior to the invention of "the story of Malmö", and before a new neighbourhood was built in Western Harbour and Augostoborg was refurbished. But it was mainly a place for the implementation of projects originating at the national level. This started to change in the mid-1990s. Malmö began to develop a "green profile" (Anderberg and Clark 2013: 602–603). The analysis of planning documents by the human geographers Holgersen and Malm (2015: 279–280) establishes that the focus on "sustainability" was a reaction to outside incentives, such as national governmental programmes or programmes from the European Union, which were utilized to overcome structural changes due to industrial decline. The sustainability terminology gradually became part of the city's planning documents.

To sum up, the transformation story of Malmö is always about the proud industrial city and its downfall and how it rose again to be a young, liveable city through its engagement with sustainable development. But the way this story is enacted differs. Some use it and even showcase it as a marketing instrument in the context of eco branding, others are mainly bored with it, and some criticize the neo-liberalization of "sustainability". Regardless of which way the story is told, it is seen and enacted as an important way of understanding the city's sustainability efforts and is told again and again.

ESSEN: INVENTING A STORY

Going a step south on the imaginative line that connects Malmö, Essen, and Almada on a map, the enactment of the transformation story looks rather different. Although I encounter the story of Essen's transformation from a grey industrial Moloch to one of

Germany's greenest cities regularly during my research and later – Essen is the city where I have lived since 2013 – the story is not as well established as the one in Malmö.

Essen's mayor, just like Malmö's, includes the transformation story in speeches. The Christian Democrat tells the story "from grey to green", for example, to welcome national and international guests to the *Twins Conference Ruhr: Cities in Climate Change*.⁷ This is very similar to how "the story of Malmö" is enacted. What differs is that Essen's transformation story is only told in direct connection to the title of European Green Capital that the city won in 2017, or at least that was the case during my fieldwork.

The story can be found in publications in the local, national, and international media or in presentations and speeches that are part of the official Green Capital programme (see, among others, Nair 2017; Schreiber 2017). The story is a component of the application to become the Green Capital and can be found in the diverse materials produced during the year (Stadt Essen 2014). I encounter the story in numerous conversations and interviews, but only in those with people who have a direct connection to the project. Outside the scope of Green Capital projects, the story is not (yet) an important reference point. My interlocutors do not tell me the story intertwined with their biographies, for example, like in Malmö.

The story of the city's transformation from smoking chimneys to Green Capital, as it is put in an advertisement in the nationwide German newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* on 1 June 2017, is explicitly framed as a marketing instrument. After "culture", "sustainability" was chosen as a succession topic for the region. An interlocutor from the Ruhr Regional Association describes this as follows:

[...] and they said, we need a new leitmotif for the region for the next ten years, but it cannot again be culture, but [...] what are the main challenges? And that, of course, is the topic: city and climate change. (Interview 14 June 2016)

Part of this decision has to do with the region's image, a point that is frequently discussed in conversations and interviews about the city's transformation story. Despite the long tradition of image campaigns for the Ruhr Area (Müller and Carr 2013), the region is still associated with white laundry turned grey due to air pollution rather than with blue skies over the Ruhr. The image of the city and the region is seen as central for further development (Interview 14 June 2016; Interview 9 February 2017). Against this backdrop, the transformation story is widely enacted by officials, which is a reason it, and the Green Capital year in general, are critiqued. As in Malmö, the accusation is that it is marketing instead of far-reaching "sustainability" transformations. While I encounter these kinds of critiques against the EU-European format regularly (as is common in other title cities), Essen's transformation story does not have the kind of dissemination as Malmö's does.

⁷ The conference took place between 6 and 8 November 2017, organized by the European Green Capital, the Ruhr Regional Association, and Climate Expo NRW. City representatives and experts from over 20 countries discussed the challenges of climate change to urban areas.

ALMADA: IN SEARCH OF A STORY

In Almada, the most southern point of the imaginative line connecting the three cities, the situation during my research is vastly different. I do not encounter a transformation story, not in speeches, presentations, flyers or brochures, or current newspaper articles, at least not for quite a while, and this absence puzzles me. This is especially surprising since Almada, of the three cities studied here, is where the industrial past is most visible due to the giant crane that you can see from Lisbon or in the murals in the city showing workers waving red flags with muscled arms. But why don't I encounter a story like the ones in Malmö or Essen? I start to look for a transformation story and directly ask about it in conversations and interviews. Nobody tells it to me and in Almada, no transformation story is enacted during my field stays. But what about the story I told above? I found it by chance.

In late 2017, I am observing the work of the local Energy Agency and regularly spend lunch breaks with employees of the agency and the environmental department. Concerning one of these lunch breaks I write the following note:

[...] It is a little cold, but after lunch, at the canteen, we are heading to a museum with a pretty big garden and an amazing view over the Tejo to have our daily espresso. Five of us sit down in the little museum café [...] where different books are on display. Daniel,⁸ who usually sits in the office at the end of the hall, skims through a volume about emblematic design objects of the 20th century. I am browsing through the books as well till I find a coffee table book, showing Almada under a bright blue summer sky on its cover.

The book I am referring to in this note is a bilingual book edited by the city of Almada. In this richly illustrated publication about a planning process, I do find something that can be called a transformation story, a story that uses the industrial past of the city as a canvas for current “sustainability” efforts. It is intertwined with a project to develop 110 hectares at the east river into a new, sustainable living quarter, including the area of the former Lisnave Shipyard (Blum 2007: 39; Camara Municipal de Almada et al. 2006).

At a certain point in time and in the context of this development project, traces of a transformation story can be found in Almada. “Sustainability” once was used strategically and in connection to the city's industrial past, just as I pointed out for Malmö and Essen. The Portuguese sociologist Rosalena Gomes Bezerra (2014) describes how this narrative is not limited to the coffee table book I find during the lunch break. Based on analyses of newspaper articles and billboards she demonstrates that the industrial past was strategically used by local politics to campaign for *Almada Nascente*. And the cultural anthropologists Welz and Blum argue that in the early 2000s “sustainability” was part of Almada's modernization promise (2007: 49; see also Blum 2008: 7–9). The city developed an Agenda 21 strategy and signed the Aalborg Charta, a commitment to future-oriented

⁸ The name has been changed.

politics. Environmental issues and sustainable city development were established as new elements and focuses for local politics (Welz and Blum 2007). Almada is one of the first Portuguese cities that initiated an energy agency, began participating in the European Mobility Week, and was even awarded by this EU campaign.

In my view, the absence of an enacted story that links “sustainability” to the industrial past as I found it in the bilingual coffee table book during the lunch break can be explained by looking through the fence at the former area of the Lisnave shipyard. In 2017, this view still showed an industrial wasteland and no new neighbourhood that could be the topic of a new chapter for the city (for reasons on this, see Welz and Blum 2007). The cultural anthropologist Eva Maria Blum (2016, 2008, 2007) analyses the diverse reasons why the project *Almada Nascente* was not developed. Among others are the global financial and economic crisis and historic tensions between the communist-led city hall and the national government in Lisbon.

TRAJECTORIES OF “SUSTAINABILITY” AS AN URBAN GOVERNANCE ISSUE

So far, I have told three transformation stories and laid out how I encountered them. All three stories can be described as official narratives since they originated with local administrations and/or politicians (Adam 2018). They have in common that they use the industrial past as a canvas for further development and all of them are about cities with a track record of “sustainability” projects and awards, but only two of them are enacted.⁹

The question might occur: why tell a story that has not been enacted and that I only found by chance? Why not stay with the stories of Malmö and Essen? I chose to include all three stories to point out how dynamic and diverse the use of stories and “sustainability” in urban governance can be.

Since the early 1990s and the foundation of the local agenda 21 processes, topics like water, energy, mobility, health, and food management – original challenges of urbanization processes – have received new traction under the heading of “sustainability” (Bauriedel 2016: 170; Brunn et al. 2012: 589). Cities become places not only massively at risk due to the consequences of climate change, but the places and actors to solve it, and hence attention and interest in “sustainability” as an urban policy issue rises. The three transformation stories I introduced are part of this development. But they also go hand in hand with concepts such as “green”, “environmental”, and “sustainability fix” or place and urban branding. They refer to the use of these and similar advances in “sustainability” to further a city’s image, competitiveness, and growth.

⁹ That no transformation story is enacted in Almada does not indicate that there are no efforts towards “sustainability”.

Reading and juxtaposing the three transformation stories and their enactments shows how well-established “sustainability” as a location factor in intercity competition is; it might be described as a successor or complement of “culture” (Carvalho et al. 2017: 6; Lederman 2015). Nonetheless, trajectories of “sustainability” as an urban governance issue are diverse. Its strategic use is common, to say the least, but that does not make it permanent or stable. It may have developed as an explorative movement or be a well-considered choice and strategic decision (also indicating the changes in meaning and relevance of “sustainability” as an urban governance issue). It may come and go. Its development is entangled with un/successful projects such as a housing exhibition, a city award, or the development of a new neighbourhood, and depends on funding schemes beyond such big-scale projects. It is connected to political developments such as local elections and long-standing rivalries as well as international crises that may torpedo a project’s finances.

Despite the dissemination of “sustainability” as an issue in urban governance and the fact that the strategic use of “sustainability” aimed at economic growth is well established, it is not self-evident, and it is highly dynamic and entangled with situations, which calls for close and repeated investigations. Understanding enacted stories as ontologically entangled and hence productive, emphasis this, which is why in the following section I turn to the two enacted transformation stories of Malmö and Essen. I argue that enacted stories do not merely reflect the establishment of “sustainability” as a location factor in intercity competitions but are part of making it. They are more than good stories.

MORE THAN GOOD STORIES...

Stories are not only a way “sustainability” is employed strategically in urban governance to remake former industrial cities, but I also argue that, due to the ontological entanglements between stories and their content, they are productive. Laser and Sørensen (2021) debate these connections in their article about the river Emscher based on the work of Annemarie Mol (2002). Stories form the realities of what they describe. The claim is not that telling stories magically lets something happen or appear, but that there are ontological entanglements between stories and their content, just as there are between knowledge and ontologies (Laser and Sørensen 2021: 32; see as well Asdal 2015; Wagenaar and Cook 2009: 159).

Stories like the ones I have presented may be more than good stories. When enacted, they are involved in the un/making of “sustainability” as an urban governance issue as well as the un/making of post-industrial cities. Based on Mol (2002: 41–44), I describe something as enacted to point towards the continuous production of something in practice. While stories make “sustainability” and post-industrial cities in a certain way, they prevent or unmake other possible versions (see also Beck et al. 2021: 143). To indicate this, I chose the term “un/making”. How do the two enacted stories un/make “sustainability” respectively and what kinds of post-industrial cities do they un/make?

Stories, like the ones about Malmö and Essen, are not only a manifestation of “sustainability” as a location factor but they enact it. They contribute to the phenomenon that “sustainability” is marketable. “The story of Malmö”, for example, shows how well it works to use “sustainability” to fight industrial decline. This not only brands Malmö as a frontrunner in sustainable urban development but also “sustainability” as an attractive solution. While stories produce this kind of “sustainability”, “sustainability” as a marketing strategy likewise produces transformation stories. In this process I claim that, so far, they unmake “sustainability” as something that requires fundamental change by, among other things, un/making spatial and temporal connections.

The two enacted stories make cities that, until the present, have changed drastically and are still changing, that are committed to “sustainability”, and are role models for others. One story makes Malmö a young, modern, and global city, the other makes Essen surprisingly green and liveable. They have the same basic tone with some variations.

The pasts that these stories make are both bleak, but the reasons for this differ. While in Malmö industrial decline is the designated problem, in Essen it is environmental degradation and its consequences, as the effects of industrialization, for the quality of life in the region. Whereas in Malmö “sustainability” is made to be an asset for overcoming industrial decline, in Essen “sustainability” becomes an asset to reframe the city’s industrial past by pointing to the devastating ecological conditions once upon a time and the enormous achievements and “long way that we’ve come” (Interview 16 February 2018). The asset is transformation competency. Essen and the whole region have remade themselves as having the experiences and abilities for creating fundamental change that others may profit and learn from and be inspired by.

What both stories unmake are any connections between sustainability problems across city borders resulting from the city’s heavy industry past. The role of coal mining, steel production, and container ships in the climate crisis and its global effects do not have any place.

The future cities the two stories make are rather similar. The desirable future is one in which each city is prosperous, competitive, and growing. There might be major differences in the kind of past and, especially, the kind of past problems the stories make (industrial decline vs. environmental degradation) but a similar shift has not (yet) found its way into the created visions. The paradigm of economic growth and competition remains strong and seems unchanged. Based on the attested contradictions between economic growth and “sustainability” (see, for example, Brightman and Lewis 2017; Rosol et al. 2017; Bubandt and Tsing 2018) I claim that the desirable futures produced in and through the two stories (as of now) unmake fundamentally transformed sustainable¹⁰ post-industrial cities.

¹⁰ Agreeing with anthropologists Brightman and Lewis (2017: 2) sustainability here “might best be understood as the process of facilitating conditions for change by building and supporting diversity – ontological, biological, economic and political diversity”.

CHANGING STORIES: TRANSFORMING CITIES?

To conclude, “sustainability” and stories are used strategically in urban governance to further a city’s image, competitiveness, and growth. By telling three transformation stories and pointing out how they are enacted or not I demonstrate how different and dynamic the trajectories of “sustainability” as an issue in/of urban governance may be and how entangled with specific situations. All three are good stories – industrial pasts make nice contrasts to bright green futures – but while they are being enacted, they are potentially more than good stories.

Acknowledging that stories are neither mere fiction nor just descriptions I offered perspectives on how (if enacted) they un/make “sustainability” as well as post-industrial cities. I argue that they make competitive post-industrial cities and unmake fundamental transformations, but I would like to add: they are also disputed. As I mentioned in the section about their enactment, the stories make themselves debatable, both in terms of their content and employment. In this critique, debate, and struggle, I see the potential for dispute and further-reaching transformations. In a situation where, as anthropologist Anna Tsing (2017: 61) formulates, “business as usual is killing us”, I call for more struggles about how we want to live (Beck et al. 2021). One way to engage in this might be stories that make “sustainability” and post-industrial cities with difficult pasts, including coal and container ships, and versions of desirable futures beyond growth.

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DOBRE PRIČE... (RA)STVARANJE TRANSFORMACIJA POSTINDUSTRIJSKIH GRADOVA

"Održivost" se u urbanom upravljanju koristi strateški; ona je sredstvo i cilj. Neki autori tvrde da fokus često leži na prvom. Svrha ovog rada nije pokazati da se "održivost" koristi za postizanje drugih ciljeva, već utvrditi kako se to radi. Članak počinje s tri priče o transformacijama triju postindustrijskih gradova (Malmö, Essena, Almade) i pokazuje kako se "održivost" aktivira (u) pričama. Održivost se koristi za preuređenje bivših industrijskih gradova kako bi se prevladali učinci industrijskog pada i preoblikovale industrijske prošlosti. Nadalje, autorica argumentira da priče mogu biti više od "dobrih priča". Razlog je to što su ontološki isprepletene. U pričama i kroz priče "održivost" kao pitanje urbanog upravljanja (ni)je oblikovana, kao ni određene vrste postindustrijskih gradova. Članak ukazuje na to kako priče čine održivost tržišnom i kako je razotkrivaju kao nešto što zahtijeva temeljnu promjenu. Štoviše, zaključak je da dvije priče poništavaju veze između industrijske prošlosti i globalnih ekoloških izazova te da čine konkurentne postindustrijske gradove.

Ključne riječi: priča o transformaciji, održivost, postindustrijski grad, urbano upravljanje