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Storytelling as Authentic Engagement

By Rowena Alegria

“Narrative imagining—story—is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, or predicting, of planning, and of explaining.”

– *Mark Turner, cognitive scientist, linguist, and author*

Planners make plans. They look back on what used to be, at what previous plans have wrought. They study present circumstances, the state of existing conditions, and predict what would happen if any number of steps were taken.

A storyteller might see in this process the beginning, middle, and end of a story.

A story is a narrative—a succession of incidents, true or fictitious—written in prose or verse to entertain, amuse, or instruct a reader. Stories are humankind’s primary means of teaching and learning. From our very earliest years, stories help us make sense of a confusing world. They bring order to complicated situations and help us see ourselves and others—maybe even see ourselves in others.

Once we can speak, we become storytellers (Figure 1). Consider how often you talk about your day or your beliefs, or pass along data, insights, and memories through story. How many times have you said, *You’re not going to believe what happened!*

You are a storyteller. We are all storytellers.

But what does that have to do with planning? In what is an increasingly difficult and confusing world, plenty. Planners for the most part are not beginning their work these days with a clean slate, an open prairie on which to plat neighborhoods and transportation. Cities exist. They have a past. They have a story of their own, and people to go along with it. Prior planning efforts were probably less than inclusive. Today’s planners in many respects get to address what their predecessors planned, not just in the reimagining, but in the mayor’s office, city council meetings, and community town halls.

Storytelling provides an opportunity to explain and teach but also to listen and learn from residents—to make plans not only for community, but with them.

This *PAS Memo* is intended to help planners consider how storytelling can be used to authentically engage residents by listening to them and their concerns; how those stories can bring new voices into City Hall to inform and improve policies and projects; and finally, how new relationships and lessons learned can help to evolve both the stories and projects coming out of planning offices.



Figure 1. *We are all storytellers: participants share their stories at an #IAmDenver Storytelling Lab hosted by the Smiley Branch Library in 2019 (Photo courtesy Denver Office of Storytelling)*

A City Perspective: Storytelling as Engagement

Cities have tended to take a traditional public relations approach to storytelling, relaying information to constituents via communications teams pitching to news media. While the tactics and platforms have evolved, the most common approach remains to announce a project as it kicks off or celebrate it when a ribbon is cut. Only the most essential information, in the voices of people with differing levels of actual involvement and rarely those whose neighborhoods will be affected, gets packaged into press releases and speeches presented at press conferences and in social media campaigns with infographics, photos, or video, and in community meetings via PowerPoint presentations from community engagement teams.

Much work goes into these explanations, collecting and confirming details, including quotes from voices important to the city or its partners, but depending on what else is going on in the news that day, all that work may get translated into a few seconds on television or radio or a few words in print that might get posted on news outlets' social media channels. Or not. This is called "earned media" for a reason. And earning it has become harder than ever.

While earned media outlets have shrunk over the past several decades, social media and other "owned" media have expanded exponentially. "Owned media" includes blog articles, newsletters, and social media posted on channels "owned" by government organizations, nonprofits, businesses, or individuals. These platforms allow for reaching a desired audience directly and organically, without paying for advertising or relying on earned media, and doing so on one's own terms with regard to mission and values.

This is important to cities because we have a high level of responsibility to our constituents. Our work is taxpayer funded and directly affects residents. It has become harder and harder to relay information, however, which has forced us to rethink how we do so. A recent emphasis on diversity and equity has also compelled us to consider for whom we do so and perhaps come to terms with past injustices that allowed for cities to worry less about those harder-to-reach populations. Planners face similar challenges. The need to engage with constituents is greater than ever, and storytelling can provide a powerful tool.

According to the [Public Relations Society of America](#), public relations has evolved to incorporate the concepts of "engagement" and "relationship building" (PRSA n.d.):

Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.

Creating relationships with constituents is even harder than making headlines, especially when systems for both communications and community engagement are generally designed to push out information, less so to collect a response to it or to gather new information, although those systems are evolving, too.

As communications director for Denver Mayor Michael B. Hancock from 2012 to 2015, it was my job to understand all

this as well as to strategize around it. We poured blood, sweat, and tears into pushing out daily communications, but no matter how many cameras showed up or how many headlines we earned, when we met directly with constituents it was clear that many of them were not receiving our carefully crafted messages. And the deeper those meetings went into community, particularly with marginalized communities, the more true that was. But then what?

Storytelling as Authentic Community Engagement

In the Mayor's Office, we tried many approaches, including improving our media relationships with mainstream and community outlets; launching a newsletter; and, as Denver is about one-third Latino/Chicano, expanding our efforts to reach more Spanish speakers. All were worthy efforts and showed some success.

We continued to hear, however, that the city never listened. As issues of race and justice came to the fore, those cries grew louder. We amped up our efforts to get out into the community with the express intention to listen. While there were plenty of uncomfortable moments, there were fewer of them after we paid some attention—at least in those meetings. Even people who had been visibly angry with us when we arrived were by and large cordial after we took the time to hear them. Some residents were even ready to listen to at least some of what we had to say. We wound up witnessing many powerful resident stories that informed our work and our understanding in new ways. Often we lamented that we couldn't share those stories with others.

In 2015, I moved out of the Mayor's Office and into the Agency for Human Rights and Community Partnerships. There, I began to work closely with an incredibly diverse group of civil servants dedicated to advocating for and engaging with communities many are a part of. This group collaborated with volunteers appointed to 10 different commissions by the mayor to advise him on policies that affect them and their communities—for example, people living with disabilities, immigrants and refugees, and older adults. A constant? Every constituent group expressed feeling underappreciated and misunderstood by the rest of the city. They all believed they had important stories to tell that, if heard, could help the powers that be make better decisions.

In 2018, I proposed that the City and County of Denver create an office of storytelling, in part to discover what would happen if we provided such a platform to residents. What if, instead of pitching media to translate our information into a short story or asking residents to sit through a presentation about us, we let residents tell their stories and actually, intentionally, listened?

Since our launch in April 2019, the [Denver Office of Storytelling's](#) #IAmDenver initiative has recorded more than 400 stories—from [daring drag queens](#) to [inspiring wheelchair activists](#) and from [unsung COVID community heroes](#) to [determined Chicana warriors](#). We began creating two- to three-minute individual films but evolved to producing documentaries of 20 to 55 minutes once we came to under-

stand that entire communities were missing from historic city narratives on which decisions continued to be made. And we learned from community the power and potential of the films in response and conversation.

Our latest documentary, for example, began when women from two of Denver’s original Chinese families came to us with the story of Denver’s Chinatown. I was born and raised in Denver and never knew until that moment about two years ago that our city ever had a Chinatown—or that a neighborhood in part created by racism and redlining was mostly burned down in an anti-Chinese race riot in 1880 and finished off by urban renewal in the 1950s. A participant told the story of how it felt to see her neighborhood replaced by a parking lot. The women told us they feared the history of their community, which continues in a different and much more dispersed form today, would die with them and looked to us to help ensure it lived on.

Primarily by creating such films in the voices of residents, with no narrators or voice overs, our work preserves and shares stories that help make Denver history more complete, inclusive, and accurate. We bring those missing resident voices into City Hall to inform policy decisions as well as into community for conversation. We use storytelling for engagement that fosters relationships not only with the city but within our community, particularly around issues of social justice.

The Office of Storytelling, a team of just three including myself, has created some three million impressions on social media and hosted free screenings across Colorado’s Front Range at libraries, museums, schools, and other forums. People watch a film and then discuss the issues addressed there, which have included social equity, criminal justice, education, and much more (Figures 2 and 3). The films are also being shown in classrooms.

At a screening of #IAmDenver’s [A Thousand Paper Cranes: How Denver’s Japanese American Community Emerged from Internment](#), a woman whose mother appeared in the film and was imprisoned as a child with her family by the U.S. gov-

ernment during World War II told the crowd, “Our only family heirloom was an Army blanket—until this film.”

Why Engage in Storytelling?

Storytelling provides an opportunity to explain and teach, but also to listen and learn from constituents, to make plans not only for community, but with them.

Engaging Marginalized Communities

According to the [American Planning Association](#),

The goal of planning is to maximize the health, safety, and economic well-being of all people living in our communities. . . Planning is successful when it is inclusive and reflects the comprehensive values of the entire community.

Clearly, reaching marginalized communities should be a priority. To “get involved,” APA suggests the following opportunities: becoming a planner, providing input at a community meeting, and volunteering on a planning commission.

If planners truly strive to expand the tent, as it were, what additional opportunities can be provided?

Storytelling might play a role, but let’s begin by defining “marginalized community,” with a little help from Pooja Bachani Di Giovanna, assistant director at the Davenport Institute, which offers training on engaging marginalized communities: “Marginalized communities include those who have been historically excluded from involvement in our cities, as well as those continuing to face other barriers to civic participation. This includes those marginalized by factors like race, wealth, immigration status, and sexual orientation.” She goes on to add “those who lack technological access, civic literacy, and mobility” (Di Giovanna 2021).

How likely is it that such people would become planners, show up to a planning meeting, or volunteer? What is being done to make that more likely?



Figures 2 and 3. Following a screening of #IAmDenver’s [Chicanas: Nurturers and Warriors](#) at the Auraria Higher Education Center in September 2022, audience members participate in a talk-back (left) and fill out surveys about their reactions in exchange for an #IAmDenver sticker (right) (Photos courtesy Denver Office of Storytelling)

Every community is different, and planners will have to define their own for themselves. But coming to a broad and inclusive understanding, and challenging presumptions, is key to determining relevant strategies for meeting residents where they are in the hopes of expanding their inclusion in planning work.

Storytelling can help a planner go beyond Census data and community meetings. It provides an opportunity for planners to truly come to know residents both as individuals and as members of their communities—to listen and learn about their history and stories that were left out or misinterpreted by others in historic archives, news stories, and curriculum. That understanding, and the building of new relationships that might foster better participation, have the potential to make planning better reflect the values of the entire community.

Providing a Platform for Residents to Tell Their Own Stories in Their Own Voices

Like many cities, Denver has been experiencing unprecedented growth. This is not news to planners, who have been racing to stay a step ahead of all that new development. Many residents are being pushed out of the neighborhoods they grew up in. Others are watching those neighborhoods change in front of their very eyes in countless ways: people, food, traffic, buildings, jobs, and so on. If given the opportunity, many would happily make it clear how unhappy this makes them. Many would also relish the opportunity to remember, which has the potential to inform planners about previous planning efforts.

We have found a high level of appreciation that the city is willing to have these conversations, and in the case of the Office of Storytelling, brings resources to recognize and memorialize resident contributions—often for the first time. All of this helps build goodwill and authentic relationships with community and partners.

It may seem counterintuitive to approach storytelling from a resident perspective. But if the goal is to bring residents into



Figure 5. Participants at an #IAmDenver Storytelling Lab work on a storytelling exercise at The Center on Colfax in 2019 (Photo courtesy of the Denver Office of Storytelling)

our work, especially if that work is centered around what can and should happen to a community, it helps tremendously to understand who residents are and how they see themselves and their communities, including their buildings, roads, and parks. What better way is there to do that than to allow them to tell us? *What is the city but the people?*

There are many ways to make this happen, some relatively easier than others. For example, community meetings hosted around a new neighborhood plan or a neighborhood up for historic or cultural designation might be turned into an opportunity for residents to come together and tell their stories about that neighborhood.

Early on, the Denver Office of Storytelling hosted [Storytelling Labs](#), with partners including the Denver Public Library, Lighthouse Writers Workshop, and the Denver Center for the Performing Arts (Figure 4). We conducted short workshops to inspire stories about Denver and led exercises around what makes a good story, then invited participants in front of a camera, if they were so inclined. The vast majority of them were.

The Office of Storytelling works to make its gatherings as fun and friendly as possible. Community-centered food and drink, provided by a local community vendor if possible, help people feel welcome and encourage them to stay awhile. The tools they need, perhaps notebooks and pens, can come with your logo and information about the project (Figure 5). In my experience, people who are intrigued enough to show up will want an explanation about your work as well as an explanation for why they have been invited to participate. The session should inspire residents who wouldn't otherwise engage with the planning department to join in—and provide you the opportunity to invite them back for more.

Planners might show historic neighborhood photos and ask about how residents once got around, or shopped, or played, and listen to the responses. Perhaps a new understanding awaits. Throughout the state, History Colorado has been working on a [memory initiative](#) in which they invite residents to a memory sharing workshop guided by staff. They sometimes ask residents to bring a photo they'd like to talk about or



Figure 4. The Denver Office of Storytelling partnered with the Denver Center for the Performing Arts and the Boys & Girls Club to host an #IAmDenver Storytelling Lab in Denver's Park Hill neighborhood in 2019 (Photo courtesy Denver Office of Storytelling)

offer prompts to inspire memories. In later phases, they partner with community historians to collect oral histories, photos, and documents that get shared in various forms including exhibits and conference presentations. A similar process might inform any number of steps in a planning process. Residents may have input on that process, as well, if asked.

If planners want a little storytelling expertise to pull off such a gathering, there are likely partners in your community that might be able to help, including librarians, local writers' groups, universities, and historic organizations. The sidebar below describes several potential local resources planners can look to.

Storytelling can help you to foster authentic relationships that make residents feel welcome, respected, and valued, to build community in both the built environment sense and in the sense of a public society (Figure 6). These community relationships can be a valuable means of bringing residents into the planning process early enough to inform it, to help them understand what it is and how and why they might participate. Established early enough, you may not wind up asking them to choose among a predetermined set of options but instead inviting them to help develop those options, and in the end, developing options you can all be excited about.

If and how you share any resident stories gathered depends on your goals and your budget. The important element is that residents have a chance to tell their own stories, and you get the chance to listen and learn by asking the kinds of questions that advise your work. Listening for the issues residents care about can help inform and improve the directions you take.



Figure 6. Participants at an #IAmDenver Storytelling Lab hosted by Rocky Mountain PBS in 2020 share their stories with each other (Photo courtesy of the Denver Office of Storytelling)

And once you have a better sense of your audience, how to talk to them, and what things they are looking for, telling your own story more clearly and effectively becomes easier.

Storytelling for Historic Preservation

Starting in 2020, the city's Community Planning and Development department initiated a "[Denver in Context](#)" series to welcome marginalized communities into the historic preservation process by collecting and honoring their histories as "historic

Resources for Building Stories

Planners hoping to collect and share resident stories, diversify their own, or even bring more diverse stories into their presentations can look to a number of different sources for help.

Archives. All of the documentary films the Office of Storytelling creates owe a great debt to local archives, which help us to illustrate and bring to life the histories residents tell us through historic photos, newspapers, and documents stored in local archives. Many museums, preservation organizations, universities, and libraries have searchable digital databases and make amazing partners.

Libraries. Modern libraries offer a wealth of information, including books, maps, and a spectrum of searchable databases. They also have librarians who are phenomenal at helping you figure out how to find things or finding them for you. Plus, many have great meeting spaces in buildings and communities where people already like to go for hosting community meetings, including storytelling sessions.

Nonprofit organizations. In Colorado, nonprofits have an economic impact of more than \$40 billion per year and employ some 330,000 people (Denver Office of Strategic Partnerships et al. 2018). Their work touches pretty much every sector and many, if not all, of the communities one might want to reach. The Denver Office of Storytelling partners with more than 40

organizations—including the archivists—and we wouldn't be able to do the level of work we do without them, from helping us to make connections with the communities they serve to opening their spaces for Storytelling events.

Communications teams. As social media demand has grown, so have many municipal communications teams. The earlier you bring them in the better when it comes to not only telling stories, but getting them promoted on social and with news media, as well as on internal channels.

Other agencies and departments. Your colleagues, including engagement teams, may be doing work that at least points in the same general direction. Rather than work in parallel, you might be able to compound your resources by joining forces on projects.

News media. There are a lot of reasons we have relied on news organizations to tell our stories. Their reach may not extend as far as it once did, but they tell stories for a living. It helps to target your pitches to those who produce the kinds of stories you're looking to tell. Relationship building helps here, too.

Universities. A wealth of resources exist on college campuses, from libraries and meeting and screening spaces to planning and other departments where both students and professors might share your work, inform it, or help complete it.



Figure 7. The Denver Office of Storytelling created a documentary film, *¡Qué Viva la Raza! Honoring a Denver Legacy*, to accompany the city's first culturally based historic context report from Denver Community Planning and Development, both released in February 2022 (Photo courtesy of the Denver Office of Storytelling)

contexts,” or reports, and sharing tools for protecting heritage and culture. The first context, [Nuestras Historias: Mexican American/Chicano/Latino Histories in Denver](#), and a companion #IAmDenver film from the Denver Office of Storytelling, [¡Qué Viva la Raza! Honoring a Denver Legacy](#), were completed in early 2022 (Figure 7).

In Denver, only about 13 percent of the city’s designated landmarks are designated for underrepresented or marginalized communities, although the current population is more than 40 percent nonwhite, 14 percent foreign born, and seven percent living with a disability (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). The city’s collection of landmarks does not accurately represent the culture and history of a place that has been racially, ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse from the very beginning. Meanwhile, the spaces and places historically connected with these underrepresented groups are being lost at an alarming rate to rapid development.

Latinos are among the ethnic groups with a long history in the area. In 1541, Spanish expeditions ventured into what was then the homelands of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Ute and is now the state of Colorado. In 1819, the Adams-Onís Treaty designated the Arkansas River in southern Colorado as the border with Mexico. Spanish settlers from Taos established the state’s oldest town of San Luis in Colorado’s southwestern corner in 1851. And Mexicans were prospecting for gold at one of the first documented areas in what became Denver in 1858. Just over a century later, the city became one of the ground centers for the Chicano civil rights movement. At present, Denver is about one-third Latino. Clearly, there was plenty to explore that wasn’t sufficiently reflected in the city’s landmarks.

Led by Denver’s Landmark Preservation team, the Office of Storytelling partnered on this first of its kind initiative to:

- Create an overview of the city’s Latino/Chicano/Mexicano history
- Map sites, landscapes, and buildings known to be associated with the community

- Provide opportunities for the community to identify key historic themes and resources
- Preserve and protect Latino and Chicano culture
- Build a more inclusive list of designated Denver landmarks and historic districts
- Inform the citywide building survey *Discover Denver*
- Guide future research and preservation efforts

More than 100 people showed up for the virtual kickoff on a Saturday morning, and most of them stayed on for nearly two hours—beyond remarks and presentation of the project, beyond the scheduled time. They asked questions and made suggestions, but mostly they told their own stories or those of the people and places they encouraged us to include. Some were terrific, others less so, but all of us listened. We provided a survey for residents to continue to submit their stories and suggestions, then went on the road, virtually because of the ongoing pandemic, with State Historian Nicki Gonzales to capture more.

Once the community helped narrow down the themes that would represent their history, the Office of Storytelling set out to find the people who could bring that history to life in a documentary film. We interviewed Gonzales about the project and the lengthy Latino history that has been her specialty as a historian and professor, and others, including Rosa Linda Aguirre, who tells the story of her restaurant, a space many remember for an annual feast that fed thousands for free at Thanksgiving. Tepeyac Community Health Center founder and CEO Jim Garcia recounts how members of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church transformed a small, shabby home into what has become over the decades a state-of-the-art clinic that provides healthcare to members of the community, no matter their status or ability to pay. Artist and activist Santiago Jaramillo (Figure 8) speaks of the transformative power of art and his work to build and promote the creativity and talent of his neighbors—and the threat of gentrification. And Federico Peña, Denver’s first Latino mayor, describes what the city was like when he arrived here from Texas in the 1970s and his role in creating the international airport that now drives the regional economy. The Storytelling



Figure 8. Artist Santiago Jaramillo was featured in the #IAmDenver documentary [¡Qué Viva la Raza! Honoring a Denver Legacy](#) (Photo courtesy of Denver Office of Storytelling)



Figures 9 and 10. The Denver Office of Storytelling partners regularly with DenverFilm, which hosted the launch party and screening (right) and Q&A with city and state staff (left) for ¡Qué Viva la Raza! Honoring a Denver Legacy at the Sie FilmCenter in February 2022 (Photos courtesy Denver Office of Storytelling)

team also spent several days out filming some of the businesses, churches, schools, and parks that chronicle Denver’s Latino, Chicano, and Mexicano neighborhoods.

The film and context took more than a year to complete. In the end, more than 300 people shared compelling stories, so many that what was envisioned to be a 100-page report turned into twice that. As themed Storymaps [in English](#) and [in Spanish](#) indicate, residents helped us identify sites across the city that are important to Denver’s Latino/Chicano community. Never before have community voices played such an active and prominent role in Denver’s preservation planning.

A typical announcement of the results would likely have included a press conference with the mayor and city council members. It might have been held at one of the locations identified in the report and shared on social media and the internet. Community members in attendance would probably have been limited to a handful of key advisers, for perhaps a dozen people total. Because of the film, we instead were able to invite community—media included—to the movies for a celebration in early 2022.

In partnership with Denver Film, the only nonprofit theater in Colorado, we hosted a reception, screening, and release at the Sie FilmCenter (Figures 9 and 10). We served tamales and green chile from one of the historic restaurants included in the context. We set up tables where partners could share information about their role in the context and beyond. In the theater, Community Planning and Development presented a summary of the context. City council members talked about the importance of the work and their reasons for participating. I shared about the Office of Storytelling and introduced the film, which appeared on a big screen for audience members to enjoy from the comfort of theater seating, with popcorn—or chips and salsa—in hand, and maybe a glass of wine purchased from the theater’s concessions.

Again, more than 100 people attended, but not the same people as before. Some were residents who had participated in the creation of the context, either in interviews with historian

Gonzales or with the Storytelling team. They brought friends and family members. Community members who follow what the city does and doesn’t do for the community—former electeds and activists alike—also attended, as did members of local media. During the film, they laughed, they cheered, they cried. When the lights came up, a councilwoman was sobbing. Among the historic images we included from the library’s Special Collections she recognized members of her family. She wasn’t the only one who got emotional. Many in the audience came up to us in tears, grateful to see themselves finally honored and officially recognized by the city.

Community Outcomes

Founded as a community engagement project, the Office of Storytelling is an example of how a city can learn from its residents. We thought we would be engaging residents and filling in where historians and earlier storytellers left off. And we have. Because this project was the first of its kind, we had no model to build off of. We had to do the work to understand that scope was too limited.

Working with hundreds of residents over the past three years has taught us how much more needs to be done. It isn’t enough to share stories that often reveal the hurdles and barriers that people have been forced to overcome, often because of policy decisions made in the city or influenced by city policies. What we are learning, what residents have taught us, is that these stories have the potential to bring resident voices into City Hall in a manner that can inform and improve policymaking.

The [Chicano/Latino Historic Context](#), released just months ago, was our first effort in that direction, so the long-term impact remains to be seen. But the emotional council member and others who have attended screenings and experienced for themselves the power of this kind of storytelling and the community’s response to it have since moved to landmark a property, a park with cultural significance to the Chicano community, in part as a result of that work. Council members

have asked us to create a similar film to help build support for a proposed historic/cultural district for one of the city's Jewish communities. They are also working with us to find additional funding for storytelling projects. In addition, the early success of that context has resulted in efforts to make the next one, the [Native American Historic Context](#), an even bigger project, with more funding and a longer timeline for completion.

#IAmDenver's latest documentary film, *Reclaiming Denver's Chinatown*, premiered to a sold-out audience at the Denver Film Festival in November 2022. The women who inspired the film connected us with [Colorado Asian Pacific United](#), a coalition of Asian American and Pacific Islander leaders, creatives, and allies who strive to enhance AAPI experiences in Colorado, allowing us to document in the film their efforts to have an offensive plaque removed from the area that was Chinatown. The #IAmDenver film is now part of the group's efforts to find city and nonprofit support for an Asian Pacific Historic District and the founding of an Asian Pacific American community museum, which would be the first in the Rocky Mountain region (Covington 2022). Together, we will be out in community in 2023, sharing the film and furthering such efforts.

How to Tell a Good Story (Yours or Someone Else's)

As should now be clear, good storytelling can serve as a tool planners can use to build community. And it can also help planners more clearly explain themselves and their plans. Here are some steps to consider.

- **Set a goal.** What are you trying to accomplish by telling stories? Who are you trying to reach? What does success look like?
- **Build a team.** With newsrooms shrinking, experienced writers, editors, reporters, photographers, and videographers are on the job market. Hire people who look like those you're trying to reach.
- **Choose your medium.** Words, photography, artwork, film—be creative!
- **Partner up.** If you're doing this alone, you're doing it the hard way. Learn more about what colleagues have in the works, and partner with those headed in a similar direction. The same goes for area nonprofits, universities, and other community organizations.
- **Consider the approach.** Explore frames of reference outside the "expert" and find new angles and story ideas by listening. Who has been missing from the conversation? Get to know them and the spaces important to them. Ask them to tell stories about those places to help you evaluate past planning actions and inform future ones.
- **Determine the platform(s).** Social media provides abundant opportunities for passing on information and engaging responses. Identify audiences and approaches, use compelling visuals, and avoid jargon and acronyms. Remember: planners have many good stories to tell about their visions for a community! Include stories from residents, their children, their neighborhoods, and communities.

- **Bonus advice.** Find the stories that haven't been told and tell them. Better yet, let people who are seldom heard in City Hall tell them.

The benefits of integrating storytelling into planning processes are myriad. New ideas and approaches invite new possibilities. Allowing residents to inform the process early may help you develop options you can both be excited about. The people most affected by the work might, for once, not be the last to hear about it. And you may receive corroboration from members of the community that your planning work is making a difference in their lives that they have been wanting and hoping to see.

Conclusion

Stories are humankind's primary means of teaching and learning. They help us make sense of a confusing world and bring order to complicated situations. For community, planning is one of those complicated situations, and yet, planning is all about building community.

Storytelling is a tool planners can use to build community in both the built environment sense and in the sense of a public society. Getting to know residents through the process of storytelling—listening to them and engaging them authentically—can build relationships and invite them in as partners who bring new ideas and approaches, and envision new possibilities, that maybe haven't been considered before. Storytelling can be a valuable means of allowing residents to inform the planning process earlier, not asking them to choose among a predetermined set of options but inviting them to help develop those options. The gathering and producing of resident stories can help planners better evaluate past actions and inform future ones.

While that seems like a lot to ask of storytelling, the process of gathering those stories and the sharing of them can inspire a bevy of new ways to engage, inform, and include a surprisingly extensive audience. This isn't storytelling just for the sake of storytelling. In this case, storytelling can be a means of engagement and social justice, cultural preservation, and improved policy making—even a form of reparations. It can also be entertaining. As with any tool, the possibilities depend upon the dedication and skill, and the daring and creativity, of the one wielding it.

About the Author

Rowena Alegria is Chief Storyteller for the City & County of Denver and the founder and director of the Denver Office of Storytelling and the citywide storytelling and cultural preservation project #IAmDenver. A career journalist and Denver Mayor Michael B. Hancock's chief communications officer during the first term, she was the 2021 Ricardo Salinas Scholar in Fiction at Aspen Words and has been awarded numerous writing fellowships and residencies. A filmmaker, communications executive, and speech writer, she is writing a novel that plays with form and the history of the Southwest. She was adopted and raised in Denver. <https://rowenaalegria.com/>

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