

City Crafting in a Contested World: An Elected City Councilman's Perspective

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Abstract

Very few planning scholars have served as elected officials. I have, twice: first in the mid-1990s and most recently from 2012 to the present. Service as an elected official generates a very different perspective from the one typically available to planning scholars and professional practitioners. In brief, it enables one to see that urban planning as typically practiced (at least in the U. S.) addresses only some of the factors that shape the transformation of cities. This broader perspective available to elected officials might point the way toward inventing a new practice, which could be called "City Crafting." This paper explores city crafting in a small city located in the Midwest of the United States, with a special focus on a rapidly redeveloping area just south of the city's downtown. After briefly explaining what I mean by city crafting and how it differs from conventional planning, I narrate a story based on my own personal experiences as a scholar engaged in practical action. The story focuses primarily on the City Council's May 20, 2014, meetings and the Council's consideration of a several interrelated topics, including proposed adoption of a new "Form Based Code" for the new "Riverfront Crossings District" south of downtown. After briefly recounting the aftermath of this new Code's adoption, I conclude by considering the implications for planning and planners.

1. Introduction: From City Planning to City Crafting

I taught urban and regional planning at the University of Iowa for 24 years before retiring in the summer of 2010. For 26 months in the mid-1990s I also served as an elected city councilman in Iowa City, Iowa, which is where the University of Iowa is located (Throgmorton, 2000). And from the start of 2012 through the present (May 2015) I have been serving in that position once again. This gives me unique perspective shared by very few scholars of urban planning.

The practice of urban planning in the United States is driven by a belief, or should I say the hope, that planners' plans can shape the future of cities. They do, at least in part. But, when seen from an elected city councilor's point of view, the planners' plans appear far from comprehensive.

Here is the nub of the issue: *plans mean nothing until people act*. Such actions unfold step by step, with each step affecting other actors who respond in ways that are consistent with their own values, interests, and (I would say) stories. Those actions in turn imply or produce effects that bleed across jurisdictional and functional boundaries, and hence escape the control of the planners and their plans. Unable to control the action of others, actors use a variety of means to influence those actions. One of the means often used is for actors to tell stories about the past (how things came to be as they are), or about the future (what is likely to happen if a particular action is taken). Sometimes these stories are designed to manipulate other actors, but they can also take the form of what I would call *ethically-sound persuasive storytelling*. This, and mobilizing a political constituency around an ethically-sound persuasive story, is precisely what I take to be the role of good elected officials. Whichever form they take, persuasive stories have significant implications for the *identity and demographic composition of places*.

Let me explain just a bit further. The fact that action unfolds step-by-step has significant implications for professional planners, at least in the United States. Regardless of how skillfully professionally-trained practitioners plan for the future, and regardless of how useful and important their efforts, they will be able to convey no more than a partial version of what must be done to craft the future of existing cities. They will—on any complicated topic being contested in the public realm—discover that their analyses and plans are rendered inadequate or insufficient by a combination of disciplinary blinders, avoidable and unavoidable errors, intentional exclusion of unwelcome perspectives, politically-motivated falsifications and obfuscations, unexpected events and unanticipated consequences, technological changes, shifts in budgetary and legislative priorities, the emergence of unforeseen opposition, demographic and cultural transformations, limitations imposed by jurisdictional and functional boundaries, and other factors. They will also discover that disciplined inquiry and practice cannot authoritatively specify how particular issues *should* be framed or how specific problems *should* be defined, for those tasks are normative in character and hence go beyond the reach of the empirical scientist and the technical expert.

On first glance, it might appear as though this simply restates the tiresome lament about the ways in which politics damages, undercuts, and corrupts the plans and evidence-based recommendations that professional planners and other experts provide. Having worked in both the scholarly and political worlds, however, I prefer to reformulate that lament and take it in a different direction: that is, to emphasize the power of stories and persuasive storytelling. When confronted by the circumstances described above, professional planners and other experts consistently find it necessary, even against their own inclinations, to invent and tell stories that explain the need to do as they advise. Their stories, moreover, have to be told to other people, people who inhabit, tell, and enact different stories. The quality of this interaction between this diverse array of tellers and recipients is crucial, for the interaction can help the people of a place live together amicably and possibly construct a shared sense of community and identity.¹ Conversely, it can divide tellers and recipients of stories into hostile camps. In a contested world such as ours, deeds become words and words can become wars.

By saying storytelling has this potential, I am not claiming that storytelling is the only activity that matters, that all stories told in the public realm are true or effective, or that stories commonly repeated within narrowly bounded communities should necessarily be assigned higher priority than professional plans or analyses. Nor am I claiming that that everything I have to say applies equally to all cities throughout the world. My experience, expertise, and focus is limited to cities within the formally democratic regimes of the West, especially in the United States and parts of Europe. Finally, I do not mean to be contributing exclusively to the scholarly literature within my home discipline, urban and regional planning. I hope, instead, to probe how stories and storytelling affect action in the public realm, especially with regard to the inherently political tasks of *city crafting* and *place making*.

By “city crafting” I mean action that produces real outcomes in physical design and social relationships at the street level within cities and the city-regions within which those cities are embedded. Of all the categories of action related to such outcomes, I think most about “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber, 1973) involving major “matters of concern” (Latour, 2004), especially: global climate change and species extinction, extreme inequality in income and

¹ In making this claim, I fully recognize that persuasive storytelling is often used as mere manipulation. This manipulative use of storytelling (and the “noble lies” associated with it) should be resisted. But I believe that an ethically sound version of persuasive storytelling also has the potential to link the technical and political spheres, the sciences and the humanities, the secular and the religious, into a pragmatic and democratic way of building better cities and crafting a shared life in a contestable world.

wealth, ethno-nationalist impulses associated with transnational movements of people; the role of religious beliefs in public affairs, seemingly intractable debates over race and social justice, and techno-biological transformations associated with computerization, biotechnology, robotics, and nanotechnology.

I believe good city crafting requires actors to draw upon the best available research generated by a diverse array of professions and scholarly disciplines. Likewise, I believe good stories can be made stronger by using scientific evidence as tropes that can turn a story in a preferred direction (Tilly, 2002; Throgmorton, 2008). But skillful research, professional expertise, and dispassionate reflection are not sufficient. Crafting a better world also requires a willingness and ability to learn from stories that come from diverse sources, especially those rooted in the practicalities of ordinary life and including those that articulate the birth, development, ambitions, and boundaries of the disciplines and professions.

In brief, I want to make space for elected officials *within* planning (that is, city crafting), not treat them as intruders who can only wreck good planning, and I think ethically-sound persuasive storytelling is a crucial part of the emergent practice.

I now want to explore this relationship between story telling and city crafting to life by narrating a story based on my own personal experiences as a scholar engaged in practical action. The story focuses primarily on the City Council's May 20, 2014, meetings and the Council's consideration of a several interrelated topics, including proposed adoption of a new Form Based Code (FBC) for the new Riverfront Crossings District south of downtown. Narrated in first-person present tense from one city councilman's situated point of view, the tale is unavoidably subjective and limited in a variety of ways.²

As suggested above, the tale suggests that city crafting requires acting on a complexly interwoven mix of topics that cut across institutional, professional, and disciplinary boundaries. It also suggests that a city unfolds step by step, and that each step changes the context for subsequent actions.³ And it suggests that storytelling—especially the interaction between community storytellers and professional experts who are enacting the deep stories of their professions and disciplines—plays a key role in this process of unfolding. Last, while at least hinting at how complex public action can be even in one small city, this story also introduces questions of community identity that we U. S. Americans and you in Europe face early in the 21st Century: Who are *we*? Where did *we* come from? And where are *we* headed?

2. Two Days in the Life of an Elected City Councilman

To help you make sense out of the tale I am about to tell, I must first give you a sense of the city in which I serve and the political structure of the city's government.

² This poses a serious very practical challenge for an elected official like me, namely: how can one find time to craft a rigorous theoretical argument about engaging in practical action while simultaneously engaging in that action? It may not be possible, for the challenge returns with every passing day. But if one doesn't try, the truths of practical action will remain deeply mysterious and easily manipulated.

³ This unfolding is related to "path dependency" wherein a sequence of decisions and actions radically constrain subsequent actions. In the worst case, such a sequence can produce a "rigidity trap" that inexorably leads to the "predictable surprise" of catastrophe. The practical challenge is to figure out how to turn away from such destructive paths, step-by-step. This is an enormously difficult political task, primarily because interest groups and political constituencies have over time been assembled around the ways things are and hence resist substantive change except on their own terms.

Iowa City is a city of roughly 68,000 residents (2010) located in east-central Iowa near the middle of the United States. Most residents of the city like the fact that it combines the virtues of a small town with—because it is the home of The University of Iowa—the cultural attractions of a much larger city. According to the City’s recently modified Comprehensive Plan (City of Iowa City, 2013a), several key events since the late 1990s have presented the city with an array of new challenges and opportunities. It further indicates that application of the concept “sustainability” will enable “the community” to “strike a balance between preservation [of the city’s small town character] and change [growth and investment that brings big-city vitality].” The Update does not, however, indicate how this balance should or will be achieved. The City Council is formally responsible for resolving these tensions and ambiguities and for striking the balance, and it does so by exercising discretion within constraints imposed by existing laws and codes. But, for reasons described below, City Councilors are strongly inclined to defer to the professional staff’s recommendations. The Update implicitly treats this staff-led process as a “black box.”

One cannot understand why the City Council is so strongly inclined to defer to the professional staff’s recommendations, or indeed even understand how politics work in Iowa City, without knowing that the city has a Council/Manager form of government. Voters elect the Council, the Council elects the Mayor, the Council hires and, if necessary, fires the City Manager, the City Attorney, and the City Clerk, and (supposedly) the Council sets policy while the Manager executes it. I say “supposedly” because most Council members almost always do as the City Manager and staff recommend. As a practical matter, therefore, the City Manager has most of the power in Iowa City government; I often feel as though we Council members are but puppets on a stage, with a skilled City Manager manipulating our actions. Plato might be pleased.

Now entering the 42nd month of a 4-year term as an elected city council member in Iowa City, I’ve grown used to hearing questions such as: “What’s it like being a council member?” “How much time do you spend on the job?” And “how has the job changed since you were on the Council 20 years ago?” I usually respond by saying it’s much harder being a city councilor now than it was back then. The population of the city and surrounding area has diversified considerably; the percentage of residents who are black, Latino, or Asian has increased significantly over the past ten or more years. The city faces much stiffer competition from communities near and far, especially from the neighboring cities of Coralville and North Liberty. Social media have radically transformed how people communicate their interests and concerns, and the politics of the state are far more polarized than they used to be. As a result, the issues we have to deal with are far more complicated they were when I first served as a city councilor in the 1990s. This is especially true for anything having to do with the juncture of schools, housing, race, and poverty, largely because the Iowa City Community School District includes Iowa City and its two largest neighboring cities.

But describing the context is not quite like experiencing the action. Picture a brightly lit City Council’s chambers, and imagine yourself accompanying me as I prepare for and participate in one of the City Council of Iowa City’s regular bi-monthly meetings. These meetings begin with a work session, which starts at 5 p.m. and typically ends at 6:30. It is followed by a formal meeting, which begins at 7 p.m. and ends anywhere from 8:30 to 11 p.m. or later depending on the number and complexity of topics on the agenda. The formal meetings are televised live and rebroadcast on the City’s Cable TV channel. Normally, the work sessions are not.

It is Monday, May 19, 2014. I spent most of the weekend at home reading the ~100-page information packet for the work session and the much longer ~550 page packet for the formal meeting, and now I’m sitting in one of the coffee shops downtown trying to finish. One can’t (and

I don't read all the material the city staff gives us. Inevitably I must sort through it, focusing on what I consider important. Tomorrow night's agenda includes three such items. I'm feverishly trying finish reading the packet and drafting notes to use during the meetings. I feel as though I've run out of time and don't feel adequately prepared.

"You talk too much," a now-retired member of the council told me a couple years ago. To an extent, she might be right. I do prepare quite thoroughly. This leads me to ask far more questions and to challenge the staff's recommendations far more frequently than the others do. No surprise there. I'm a 69-year old retired professor who has a clear set of priorities that often reflect those of a large proportion of the local electorate. I am here, first, to do the best job I can for the people of the city and, second, to empower people who feel their concerns are being marginalized or ignored.

So, yes, maybe I do talk too much. But maybe the other Council members talk too little and are far too deferent to the City staff. It is very easy to see why this might be the case: they have varying types of full-time jobs and often have parental responsibilities at home. Mayor Matt H., for example, is a handsome, personable, and smart but (in my view) very cautious young lawyer who is married, has three children, and comes from an Iowa City family that has deep roots in the city. I have a great deal of respect for him and my five other colleagues, partly because I recognize that they bring diverse kinds of expertise to issues confronting the city. Susan M., for example, is a financial analyst and Rick D. is medical doctor who works for the University of Iowa's Hospital. But I am also aware that none of them have the same knowledge and experience I have concerning urban planning and public policy making.

During tomorrow night's work session we're going to discuss a proposal sent to us by the Chair of the City's Planning & Zoning Commission. (We call it the P&Z Commission.) That Chairperson recommends that we ask the School District's Board to incorporate a "walkability clause" into a "Diversity Policy" the Board adopted a year ago. During the formal meeting we will also vote on the second reading of a proposed ordinance to adopt a new Form Based Code for the recently created 76-acre Riverfront Crossings District south of downtown (Figure 1). This new Code was explicitly intended to implement a "Downtown and Riverfront Crossings Plan," which the City Council had adopted in January, 2013. And we will vote first consideration on an ordinance creating a new Conservation District for an older core residential neighborhood, which is located just northeast of the downtown and the main part of the University of Iowa's campus.

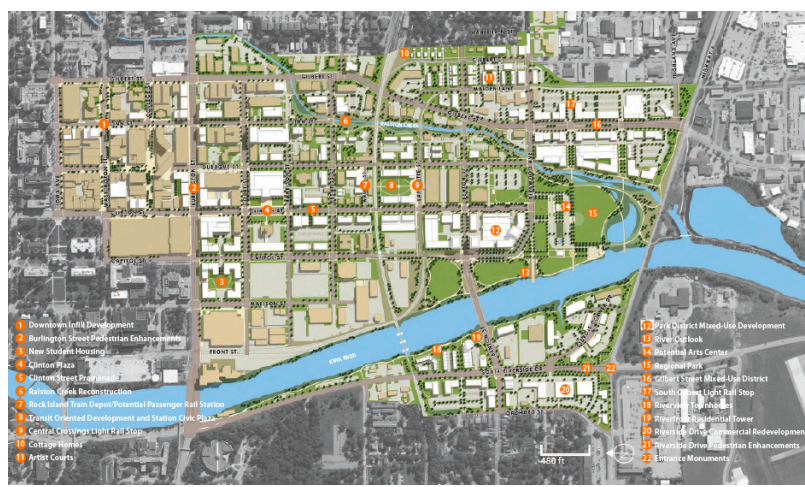


Figure 1. The Downtown and Riverfront Crossings Plan (North is on the left).

The proposed walkability clause raises difficult issues. Many parents who live in the city’s core neighborhoods currently walk their children to nearby elementary schools. They want to ensure that the District’s new diversity policy – which is intended to achieve greater socio-economic balance among the District’s 19 elementary schools – won’t compel their children to attend a more distant school. In emails and public statements they have typically emphasized the virtues of neighborhood schools and have often highlighted the value of walkability for the sustainability of neighborhoods and the city as a whole.⁴ But many of these parents are actually upset because their children would have to attend a school that has one of District’s three largest percentages of low-income students, as measured by Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) rates.⁵ It also has one of the largest percentages of African-American students. Other residents have stressed the importance of sticking to the School Board’s Diversity Policy, even if that means requiring some students to attend a more distant school. I have advocated *both* walkability *and* diversity, not either/or, and I want our Council to take actions that will reduce socio-economic imbalances among our city’s neighborhoods. The staff and other Council members typically respond that we can do that only if the other cities in the School District agree to reduce socioeconomic imbalances within the region’s neighborhoods, which has thus far produced a seemingly endless cycle of unproductive intergovernmental debate about the merits of mandating “inclusionary zoning” and dispersing federally-subsidized housing for low-to-moderate income households.

The second issue, adopting the new and quite complicated Form Based Code for the Riverfront Crossings District, raises related complexities. Our Council approved the first reading on the Code 7-0 two weeks ago after hearing comments that night and two weeks previously from only a few residents. (I wasn’t really surprised that so few people showed up. The FBC is a very complicated topic, which would entail a large shift away from conventional zoning. More important, there had been virtually no coverage of the proposed code in the local news media.)

At that earlier meeting on May 6, one of the City’s planners (Karen H.) had displayed lots of appealing photos and images to help Council members and others envision what the Form Based Code would hopefully produce. The Code, in turn, was proposed as a key means of implementing the “Downtown and Riverfront Crossings Master Plan,” the text of which also contained a large number of very compelling images (Figure 2). In a sense the images and the planners’ vision might have been too appealing, for it was not at all clear (at least to me) how the transition from the present day place to the planners’ vision for its future would be achieved. So I asked the staff how they thought the transition from existing zoning to the FBC in that area would occur.⁶

⁴ Although Iowa City is hardly the kind of city Jane Jacobs had in mind when she wrote *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961, many residents seemed to be inspired by, or at least aware of, her work. For Jacobs, cities are “problems in organized complexity” (p. 438). To really understand them, she wrote, “You’ve got to get out and walk” (Jacobs, cited in Allen, 2011, p. 41).

⁵ The School District uses participation in the FRL program as a surrogate measure for poverty. In 2013, 33.8 percent of all students in the School District were enrolled in the program. FRL rates for elementary schools ranged from 5.9 percent at Lincoln in Iowa City and Wickham in Coralville to 72 percent at Kirkwood in Coralville, and 77.1 and 78.6 percent at Grant Wood and Mark Twain respectively on the southeast side of Iowa City (CITE SOURCE).

⁶ In *Planning Matter*, Bob Beauregard (forthcoming) states, “Plans erase what exists in order to propose what has been imagined” (p. 4). The Riverfront Crossings District contains several notable older buildings and quirky structures, some of which might have to be erased to make space for that which our city planners have imagined. It also includes the University’s new Music Building, the County’s small Jail and beautiful old Courthouse, and the site of a proposed and now twice-rejected County “Justice Center.”

NOTE: Fig 2 goes here.

Figure 2. Birds-eye view of southern half of the Riverfront Crossings District

I couldn't know for sure, but it seemed to me that the question caught the planning staff by surprise. When asking this question, I was fully aware that the process by which plans are developed is like a "black box": the planning staff solicits public participation and obtains many ideas and recommendations, but then translates those ideas and recommendations into a final plan without fully explaining to the public the technical and political judgments involved in making that translation. Also aware of this "black box" phenomenon, attentive local residents know that "politics" influences what the staff submits. Hence they often do not trust that the planners are truly offering expert advice and recommendations.⁷

Who knows what really will emerge in the District? I think of Riverfront Crossings' future not as something that anyone can fully foresee, as if one were designing a new bridge, but as a place that is, and will always be, in the process of becoming.⁸ Architect Christopher Alexander (2002-04) calls that process *unfolding* (or "wholeness-extending transformation"); transformations occur step-by-step. I like that concept, for it expresses the core idea that it is action and interaction that truly matter, not merely formal plans and decisions. For me, the whole process is a matter of city crafting in which the city planners and I are actors in what Bruno Latour and others have described as an "actor-network" or "assemblage."⁹

There were many other topics I wanted to probe during that May 6 work session. They concerned the very large increase in development density that would accompany the FBC; the likelihood that Tax Increment Financing (TIF) would be used to provide an additional development incentive; the use of density bonuses to encourage construction of Class A office space, workforce and affordable housing, LEED certified buildings, and preservation of historic structures; and other topics. But our mayor likes to run a tight ship and keep our work session discussions within the allocated 90 minutes, so I had to leave some questions unasked. I agreed to submit a written version of my questions to the planning staff so that they would have time to

⁷ I was also thinking about urban theorist David Harvey's (2001) comment about utopia: "Utopias of spatial form are typically meant to stabilize and control the processes that must be mobilized to build them. In the very act of realization, therefore, the historical process takes control of the spatial form that is supposed to control it" (p. 173).

⁸ If adopted and fulfilled, the Plan could produce a built form akin to what Jacobs advocated in *Death and Life*: short blocks, mixed uses, old buildings mingled with new, and sufficient residential density, and it could facilitate the kind of economic development that, in her view, produces great cities. But the Plan and FBC would also use financial incentives to encourage construction of buildings considerably taller than ones she advocated and considerably out of scale with current buildings in the city. The proposed use of these incentives recalls a question posed in one of Jacobs' later books: how can local governments play a significant role in city development without becoming or creating a "monstrous moral hybrid"? (Jacobs, 1994).

⁹ According to Latour's (2004) Actor-Network Theory, facts become matters of concern when they gather around themselves a variety of human and non-human actors. Such an "assemblage" exists when humans, non-human things (whether living or not), and technologies (or tools) are brought together into a functioning whole. These grouping might be fleeting, are always heterogeneous, and constantly evolve as they enroll other actors and lose allies when conditions change and successes or failures accumulate. In later work, Latour (2010) later argues that scholarship and social practices are "compositional" activities; they put things together to enable intellectual positions and desirable conditions to become stable and endure.

prepare a written response for the whole Council. In other words, we Council members did not discuss and probably did not understand the complexities of what we were on the verge of adopting. In the end I too voted for the FBC that night primarily because I thought it had the potential to greatly improve the quality of urban design in the area, at least in relation to the existing zoning code.¹⁰ This Riverfront Crossings Plan is not so massive a project as, say, New York Mayor Bloomberg's Willets Point Redevelopment, nor is it as important as the redevelopment of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. But for the people and businesses in Iowa City, adoption of the Code for Riverfront Crossings could be a very big deal.

Now, on May 19 and having just read the staff's response to my questions, I intend to focus on just a few key topics during tomorrow night's work session and meeting. I intend to move that we amend the proposed Form Based Code in three specific ways: to increase the minimum amount of time that affordability must be maintained for projects that receive an affordable or workforce housing density bonus; to reduce the maximum post-bonus building height in two sub-districts from 15 and 12 to 10 stories; and to reduce the density bonus for Class A space. I also intend to move that we amend an amendment that has been proposed for the Downtown and Riverfront Crossings Plan. The proposed amendment contains some very weak language about considering affordable housing in the area. I want to strengthen it. To ensure that my amendment even gets considered, I've asked another Council member to second my motion.

The emphasis on affordable housing is connected to the discussion about walkability and the School District's diversity policy. Knowing that other Council members think I talk too much and ask too many questions, and having already posted my ideas on this topic in an email to the Mayor and City Manager, which appeared in our Council packet for the meeting, I plan to remain quiet, let other Councilors express their thoughts, and then ask questions to clarify the consequences of their own proposals. At that point, I expect to offer my own ideas.

The third topic, creating a new conservation district, emerged out of long-standing concerns of homeowners that landlords and developers who profit from the lucrative student housing market are undermining the long-term health of the Northside neighborhood. Located within easy walking distance of the downtown and the University, the neighborhood contains many ~100 year old homes, streets lined with mature trees, an elementary school, and three successful neighborhood parks. But it also contains homes that have either been converted into rental units or else replaced by banal apartment structures. The proposal sailed through the Historic Preservation Commission and then the P&Z Commission, and now looks like it will pass the Council's scrutiny very easily.

It's now 5 p.m. on the 20th. Our work session begins and I immediately find myself caught off guard. The Mayor surprises me by proposing that we defer action on the very modest amendment to the Downtown and Riverfront Crossings Plan. The amendment is untimely, he says, because we had, in our May 6 meeting, instructed staff and the P&Z Commission to investigate the possibility of including affordable housing into the Form Based Code. Oh good grief! I've completely forgotten about that. What is it we instructed the staff to do? No one seems to remember exactly, and we don't have the exact text in front of us.¹¹ Surprised, unclear about what

¹⁰ Inspired by Jacobs' words, "you've got to get out and walk," and thinking of her ideas not as ideology but as a source of inspiration, I led a "Jane Jacobs Walk" through the northern part of Riverfront Crossings back in May 2012. I wanted my fellow walkers to see the area's present and planned future through Jacobs' eyes, and to imagine ways to make the area into an even more attractive, diverse, and lively place.

¹¹ A few days later I read the actual text. It instructed the staff and the P&Z Commission "to discuss or consider inclusionary zoning and other affordable housing incentives in the form-based Code and report

we had actually instructed the staff to do, and possibly not fully prepared, we become confused. Suddenly I realize that at least four other councilors are willing to defer action on the amendment indefinitely, and to wait instead for the staff to talk to the Home Builders Association about the proposal to include affordable housing into the FBC. Having expected the amendment to pass easily, and having prepared to introduce a modification to the basic amendment, I become quite flustered. From whom else, I ask impatiently, would the staff solicit advice? Who counts as a meaningful stakeholder? I see some proponents of the amendment in the audience and know they expect to speak during the public hearing, but indefinite deferral will mean they won't be able to. Hearing four votes in favor of deferring, the mayor indicates no public hearing will take place tonight and the topic will be deferred indefinitely.

The more I thought about this over the next 24 hours, the more steamed I became. Those residents had paid a fee of approximately \$150 to introduce the amendment, had labored hard to marshal an effective case on its behalf, had persuaded the P&Z Commission to pass a watered down version of their proposal, and had come to the Council Chambers to speak at the public hearing, which the Council cancelled. I could not imagine the Council responding in the same way to the Home Builders Association or the Chamber of Commerce if they had proposed a similarly minor amendment to the Plan. We could have opened the public hearing, listened to what people had to say, and then deferred action on the proposed amendment to some future meeting. In my view, the Council's action was not fair, not just, and an insult to those people! And yet, I had contributed to the confusion by not remembering what we had said to the staff two weeks earlier.

As for the walkability clause, the mayor says he is very leery of telling another government body what to do. The rest of us agree. But I emphasize as strongly and as clearly as I can how important it is that we take responsibility for our own actions and not shift the burden onto the School District. If we want to support the District in its efforts to achieve greater economic balance among the *elementary schools*, we need to achieve greater economic balance among *the schools' neighborhoods*.¹² But nobody else responds, other than the mayor, who briefly recounts all the things he claims the city currently is doing to promote greater balance. I can't tell whether he really believes what he says, knows something I don't know, is wearing rose-tinted glasses, or is talking the talk while being completely unwilling to walk the walk.

Soon, thankfully, the work session ends. I feel agitated, partly because I am annoyed at myself for becoming confused early in the work session, and partly because I don't believe the other Council members really want to increase the economic balance among our neighborhoods. I need to cool off by walking to the nearby New Pioneer Co-Op and eating a cookie. As I walk, I'm thinking: the public seems to be presenting us with an either/or choice between walkability and diversity and, more generally, between sustainability and justice. This reminds me of Susan Fainstein's (2010) recent book *The Just City* and Michael Sandel's (2010) *Justice*. But, what is justice? Oh, wait a minute. I'm suddenly in Plato land. Back toward City Hall I go. One of the other council

back to the City Council with a recommendation." No one, myself included, seemed to notice that the modest amendment concerned the Riverfront Crossings *Plan*, not the Form-Based *Code*.

¹² I argued that we needed to explicitly state or improve policies that promote economic diversity within Iowa City neighborhoods, especially by adopting policies that distribute new affordable housing units throughout the city by using inclusionary zoning and economic incentives. I further argued we should ensure that all new neighborhoods built in Iowa City are designed to be walkable in a strong sense, especially in the areas surrounding the two new elementary schools. And, lastly, I argued we should enhance the (strong sense) walkability of existing post-1970s neighborhoods, especially ones that currently have a disproportionately high concentration of very low-income households.

members, owner of a downtown jewelry store, is sitting outside smoking a cigar. I cross the street and sit next to him. We start chatting about the local Catholic high school, which quickly leads me to tell him about my recent visit to my *alma mater*, Notre Dame. Departing, I walk to City Hall's entrance. There I chat briefly with two members of the Human Rights Commission and the director of our new Department of Development and Neighborhood Services, and then go into the Council's chamber. I greet dozens of Northside neighbors, most of whom are friends, five members of the Telecommunications Commission, a man whose young son would be receiving an award, the director of the Senior Center, and several others.

A few minutes into our formal meeting, members of the general public begin speaking (as is the usual practice) about topics not on the formal meeting's agenda. Mary G., an older African-American woman who often appears at our meetings, speaks first. She seems unusually upset and angry tonight. Once again she draws our attention to the lack of a bench at the new bus shelter near a new grocery store, to a cut we made in funding for SEATS (the local paratransit service) many months ago, and to the many ways in which we let our socio-economic class position affect our decisions. Sally S. from the Affordable Housing Coalition speaks next about our inaction on the affordable housing amendment. Affordable housing is, she said, a building block of sustainable communities. Having lived in Baltimore for years, she remembers how deeply divided that city had become in terms of race and class, and she urges us not to let our city become like that. We should instead strive to ensure that our economic success is inclusive. She agrees that affordable housing should be a *regional* priority, but she doesn't think we have to wait for other communities in the region to agree; we can take the lead and show how it can be done well in Iowa City. Lauren B. of the Telecommunications Commission then shows us a video about a cable TV education campaign the commission has produced. Mark P. of Habitat for Humanity gives us a handout about the relationship between local wages and affordable housing. The last person to speak is Roger K., a youngish heavy-set man in a wheelchair who, like Mary G., often appears during these periods. "You guys couldn't care less for this community," he says. "You tend to care only for the rich." He disparages a local developer and two 14-story structures he has built downtown. Downtown "is absolutely horrible," he says; "You guys are catering to the students."

We turn to items on the formal agenda, the first of which is the proposed conservation district. A city planner describes the neighborhood, indicates who proposed creating the district, and reports that it has been reviewed and approved by two commissions. During the public hearing on the proposal, 10 people support creation of the new district and no one opposes it. The Council votes unanimously in favor of creating the new district, and the Council chambers erupt with neighbors clapping and cheering. They exit toward the antechamber and excitedly celebrate their victory while we council members proceed to work our way through the other items on the agenda.

Immediately after voting on the Conservation District, we turn to our second reading of the Form Based Code. I speak only briefly, basically summarizing the ways I think the proposal should be amended and indicating that I would defer introducing the amendments to our next meeting in order to give the staff time to provide feedback. I don't want to do this, and worry that we would end up adopting the Code with very little discussion or understanding, but I recognize that the mayor and other Council members don't want to discuss the amendments tonight. I am only one of seven, and cannot control what the Council as a whole chooses to do. So, despite many misgivings, I vote for the new Code along with the other Council members.

The meeting ends after a few other items are considered, and I depart rather quickly to walk the mile to my home in the Northside neighborhood. As usual, I feel agitated and worn down by the complexity and emotional intensity of the experience. My "monkey mind" is chattering away. I

need to be much more nimble when encountering the unexpected during meetings. But I also want to learn how to get out of my own way. As a long-time professor, I have a very strong tendency to let myself become tied down to carefully crafted written words, to lecture, to claim the moral high ground. This simply does not work well in these meetings with other elected officials. I want to ground my words more in what *I* think and feel rather than tell other Council members what *they* should think, feel, or do. I also want to be much more deft in helping publics form around major matters of concern such as affordable housing. Are all these heated debates merely about the *shadows* of justice? The calm of engaging in stimulating intellectual discussions with philosophical friends beckons yet again. More important in the short run, my wife and daughter await. I continue walking through the dark, toward home.

3. Urban Renewal: The Sequel

Embedded in the story just narrated are brief summaries of the City Council’s short discussions about the proposed Form Based Code for the Riverfront Crossings District. In June 2014, the Council adopted the Code as originally proposed; i.e., none of my concerns or proposed changes were included. Eleven months have now passed. The subsequent unfolding of action in the District might be called “Urban Renewal: The Sequel,” for those actions have begun changing the District rapidly, not through old-style, large-scale slum clearance by the government but through a series of incremental but still profound steps. One might initially think that the “Downtown and Riverfront Crossings Master Plan” would have guided this unfolding. It has in part, but the actual unfolding has differed in important ways from that Plan. An interwoven series of actions involving a multitude of actors both near and took place in the months after the “Two Days” meeting, many of which were either not anticipated or not explicitly considered by the formulators of the Plan. These actions, in turn, strongly influenced what actually took place on the ground. I cannot detail them here, but the most important ones include the following:

- In Spring 2013 the State Legislature adopted property tax reforms that, according to City staff estimates, would reduce Iowa City’s commercial and industrial property tax revenues by \$37-52 million over the next 10 years. These tax “reforms” have compelled City government to find ways to decrease its costs and/or increase its revenues.
- Also in June 2014 the State Board of Regents adopted a new funding model for the Regents’ universities. This new model has caused the University to begin recruiting new in-state students quite energetically and to begin foreseeing 2,000 additional students over the next four years while adding a net increase of only ___ dorm beds over the next 4+ years. The University’s planned increase in enrollment in turn led local developers and public officials to begin anticipating a large increase in demand for student housing near the University.
- In the summer of 2014 the City Council proposed a 1% Local Option Sales Tax to replace the revenues lost due to the State’s action, but voters rejected the proposed tax in November 2014. Many opposed the tax because they believed it would transfer income from ordinary people to wealthier property owners, including owners who were already receiving property tax cuts as a result of the State’s reforms.

- The City has become much more active in using Tax Increment Financing (TIF) as a means of stimulating new development, primarily in response to the very aggressive use of TIF by a neighboring city, Coralville.¹³
- An unanticipated and very contentious debate emerged over the future of three historic working class cottages on S. Dubuque Street in the Riverfront Crossings District.

Of these many actions, the last may well be the most revealing. The full tale about those three cottages is quite complicated and must be deferred to a future paper. However, a quick synopsis can convey the essence of its relationship to the core claims of the present paper.

The Riverfront Crossings Plan explicitly stated, “preservation of these structures should be a goal” (Figure 3). Moreover, the new Form Based Code authorized a density bonus and a transfer of development rights in return for preserving historic structures such as the cottages. Shortly after adoption of the Form Based Code, however, a private developer applied to have the site of three cottages rezoned from its current CC-2 to a new Riverfront Crossings zone, RCD-CX. If approved, that rezoning would be likely to increase the assessed value of the property from about \$3.6 M to about \$14.2 M. Friends of Historic Preservation hurriedly applied to have the cottages



CC-8: Cottage Preservation

Figure 3. The Three Cottages in the Riverfront Crossings District Master Plan

designated as historic landmarks, and, after contentious public hearings, the Historic Preservation Commission and the P&Z Commission both recommended approval of the designation. The issue went to the City Council. The property owner objected to the designation, claiming he was being victimized. Many dozens of people weighed in, with builders, realtors and developers on one side, and preservationists on the other. Passions ran high, hyperbole abounded, and positions became polarized. Needing a 6-1 vote to pass, only a 3-4 minority of the City Council voted for designating the cottages as historic landmarks. The majority condemned “11th hour” efforts to preserve the structures, emphasized the rights of the property owner, and cited other language in the Riverfront Crossings Plan, which stated, “The plan is simply a vision, highlighting certain areas. The decision to redevelop is ultimately up to the property owner.” The first cottage was

¹³ In December 2014, the Council approved a 7-story density bonus for a professionally managed mixed-use building near the corner of Burlington and Madison Sts. It would contain 248 units of student housing. The bonus resulted in a 15-story building instead of doing what the Downtown and Riverfront Crossings Master Plan called for; that is, four 4- to 7-story buildings organized around a quadrangle. In February 2015 the Council subsidized that project with a \$4.7 M TIF. Also in December 2014 the Council approved a \$1.8 M TIF for a 96-unit housing project on S. Riverside Dr. In January 2015 it approved a \$976 K TIF for 28 townhouses on S. Dubuque Street at the site of the soon-to-be-demolished Sabin School building. And in March it approved an \$8.8 M TIF for a 12-story hotel on S. Clinton St.

demolished during the night of December 25-26, 2014 (Figure 4). As one locally prominent real estate appraiser said during a public hearing, “In short, it is about the money.”



Figure 4. Cottage demolished on December 25-26, 2014. [Photo by Tom Gilseman]

3. Conclusions

As I hope the tale just recounted reveals, the role of City Councilor is not an easy one to enact. The work can feel rewarding, as it did when Northside neighbors responded so happily to our vote on the Conservation District. But it is hard work, both intellectually and emotionally, and it can often feel quite fruitless and frustrating. Engaging in this particular kind of practical action poses a unique challenge that I have not yet mastered and maybe never will. More important for present purposes, meetings such as the ones just described are only part of the never ending and complicated process of co-crafting how the future of a city will unfold. Plato would have us believe that everyone involved in such a process inhabits a world of shadow and illusion. Unlike Plato, I don't see people in chains mistaking shadows for reality. Instead, I see people who possess many different kinds of knowledge, expertise, and ways of valuing, all of which need to be brought to bear in the here and now, over and over.

Recognizing that the tale just recounted is open to many interpretations, I would hope readers find within it at least four key elements pertaining to my claim about the importance of storytelling in the crafting of cities: first, multiple actors-storytellers have legitimate claims to be actively involved in co-crafting the future of their cities (and the regions within which their cities are located); second, these community-based storytellers interact with professional experts who are enacting the deep stories of their professions or disciplines, and are thereby living out the Platonic fantasy that professional planners (and other experts in narrowly defined domains) know more than others and hence can actually plan a city's future; and third, powerful actors use their skills and resources to shape how that fantasy is actually executed.

At a deeper level the tale also reveals, fourth, that the decision about the three cottages ultimately involved two key questions of city crafting and community identity: who are *we*, and where are *we* headed? Our answers to these questions in the Council's Chambers and throughout the full range of place-making and city-crafting activities were being influenced in no small part by stories and the narrative imaginations of the storytellers. In the case of Riverfront Crossings, one story dominated: the need to make space for the so called “creative class,” a concept that in a place like Iowa City would not instantly be mocked. Other relevant stories, such as those directly pertaining to the city's African-American and Latino residents, the area's small businesses,

lower-income people in general, Libertarians, and Fundamentalist Christians were scarcely visible and had no meaningful effect on either the city planners' or the City Council's vision of Iowa City's future. And yet, commonly shared stories about the dangers associated with having lower-income black people live in mostly white neighborhoods or attend mostly white schools, or about black kids being the ones who always get bused, lurked prominently just below the surface of the debates over "walkability" and affordable housing. And the Libertarians' and Fundamentalist Christians' stories were exerting considerable influence over State and National elections, policies and budgets, which in turn were altering the incentives and constraints within which our City government acted.

But mine is only one telling of this tale. Other versions can be told and, in fact, are currently circulating around town. Those circulating stories are, in turn, likely to play a major role in this coming November's City Council elections. This fact indicates how storytelling influences the co-crafting of cities.

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