1-1-1988

**Story Telling as Design Method**

Angela Balmer
Leonard Clark
Diana Dame

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: https://newprairiepress.org/oz

Part of the Architecture Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

**Recommended Citation**

Balmer, Angela; Clark, Leonard; Dame, Diana; Gaffney, Kerry; Rivers, Efrem; Hamlet, Russell; Herlocker, David; Illert, Glenn; and Karam, Antoine (1988) "Story Telling as Design Method," Oz: Vol. 10. https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1166

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oz by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.
Story Telling as Design Method

Authors
Angela Balmer, Leonard Clark, Diana Dame, Kerry Gaffney, Efrem Rivers, Russell Hamlet, David Herlocker, Glenn Illert, and Antoine Karam

This article is available in Oz: https://newprairiepress.org/oz/vol10/iss1/16
Story Telling as Design Method:
The use of scenario modeling to design a Seniors Center

Angela Balmer
Leonard Clark
Diana Dame
Kerry Gaffney
Efrem Rivers
Russell Hamlet
David Herlocker
Glenn Illert
Antoine Karam
Critic: Gary Coates

Why is it that so many student designs
look like squared-up bubble diagrams for
solving functional problems rather than
visions of an architecture capable of sup­porting the rituals of everyday life? Why
is it that so many contemporary buildings
also lack a sense of aliveness and a capac­ity to nurture the life they contain? Could
it be that how we design unconsciously
shapes the nature and possibilities of
what we design? Is it possible that new
ways of designing could produce an ar­chitecture that is whole and alive?

These questions guided our exploration
of the relationships between process and
form in the design of a new Seniors Center
for Manhattan and Riley County, Kansas.
Our proposal for the adaptive re-use of a
historic downtown building is the result
of a process in which written and oral
stories were used to guide design
decisions.

Our work began with library and field
research on the phenomenology of aging.
Then we wrote very concrete stories about
a Seniors Center that would be life en­hancing and beautiful. As one team
member recalls, “When writing the
scenario I had to capture the image in
words and be highly descriptive in my
writing so that others could read my work
and have the same image that I did. To
convey this image I had to concentrate on
the details of construction and the
finishes of materials and write them
down. This intense concentration helped
me organize and visualize the design of
a fairly complicated building in my
mind.”

Each story was written from the perspec­tive of an older person engaging in a
specific sequence of activities to occur at
the Center. The qualities and forms of the
building came into existence as scenarios
were being written. Another team
member commented, “The scenarios
gave life to the building even before I
touched a sheet of drawing paper. The
research we had done prior to the scenario
writing came out in the scenarios. In
writing the scenario about a Seniors
Center’s Bake Shop I sensed the smells of
freshly baked breads and cakes. I could
hear the mixing of ingredients, closing of
oven doors and people talking and
laughing. I saw the smiles, breathed the
comfortable relaxed atmosphere, and felt
the shop come alive. I could not help
smiling as I wrote.”

We met the seniors to share our ex­perience with scenarios and asked them
to join us in writing their own scenarios.
The meeting was inspirational and pro­duced new images and visions as well as
some practical ideas. When we had in­tegrated their scenarios into our own story
we began the final phase of design utiliz­ing working models. Our process of
design involved sketching quick schem­atic plans on trace and immediately
transferring them to the model. We were
aided during this phase of the project by
a thorough activity/space program
developed from our previous research.

The scenarios provided a living vision
while the more conventional program
provided key figures and relationships.

This process of combining modeling and
scenario writing is described by a
member of the team: “The scenarios
became a part of my whole thinking
process. Once we were working with the
model and 3-D spaces were being created,
I found that new scenarios were constant­ly evolving.”

As a group we would talk, build, disman­tle, and build again until the stories and
model grew together and the qualities we
had envisioned in the scenarios were fully
present in the design. Design became
play as we used our hand, heads, and
hearts to bring life into our building. “We
even made people for the model, gave
them names and walked them through
the spaces. This helped us refine the
scenarios we were creating.”
The working models were more effective when large and rough. If a model ever became too detailed and finished, it inhibited us from making further design changes and we would tear out areas to get ourselves unstuck. By keeping the model loose and crude, we were always able to change any part in order to improve the whole. The use of working models enabled us to discover the essence of what a senior center could be.

The combination of scenario writing and designing with models made a participatory group process possible involving both students and seniors which was exciting and productive. This approach to design gave us a sense of freedom and the ability to trust our instincts. We used our intuition and listened to what our hearts were telling us so that a design full of life, excitement, and sensitivity towards people could be produced.