

PLANNING INSTITUTE OF AUSTRALIA 2013 QUEENSLAND CONFERENCE

The Little Square and the Little Triangle: a Tale of Two Plans

Sean Cullen¹

¹Logan City Council, Australia

ABSTRACT

The little square and the little triangle were plans that were made by the same hand. They were made in the same way. They sought to achieve similar things. They were sent to their communities at the same time. However, their communities responded very differently to them.

The little square was received with relatively little fuss. Questions were asked. Answers were given. Some changes were made. The plan was complete. Meanwhile, the little triangle divided its community.

Some people loved the little triangle. Some people hated it. Some people did not understand the little triangle so they began creating their own stories about what it meant. Some created stories of joy. Some created stories of horror. The lines were drawn, and the battle began.

This is the story of two plans that appeared to be very similar, but were received by their communities in very different ways. The story will explore some reasons for why this might have happened, and what we can learn from it.

INTRODUCTION

This is the fairy tale of the little square and the little triangle. It is a story of two plans that: were made by the same hand; were made in the same way; sought to achieve similar things; and were sent to their communities at the same time. But their communities responded very differently to them. It is a story that tells us that:

- every place is different and has its own story;
- to really understand a place you need to understand the stories of the place and its people;
- to change a place you need to create a new story that builds on the past;
- you need to tell the new story well; and
- you should let the people tell you how they think the story should go.

THE STORY

A Dilemma

The King was concerned that there were not enough houses in his Kingdom. People kept coming to his land. But where would they all live? New houses and villages were being built on the farmland and countryside outside his existing towns and villages. But if all the new people built their houses on the farmland and countryside, where would his people grow their food and ride their horses?

So the King decided that more houses were to be built within the boundaries of his existing towns and villages. He asked his kings-people to search the Kingdom and find out where they should go. The kings-people searched the land and found what they thought were the two best locations in the Kingdom. The King liked the areas and ordered his kings-people to make plans for more people to live there. And so the kings-people made the little square and the little triangle.

The Little Square

The place of the little square was like many others in the Kingdom. There were lots of different houses there. Some were new, but many were old. Most people there did not own the house they lived in. There was a large rail station in the area, and there were large workshops nearby where people worked. Nearby there were schools, parks and a meandering river.

The little square would allow most of the houses in the area to be knocked down to make way for bigger buildings for people to live in. The biggest buildings would be near the rail station. There would be lots of small houses, and there would be some more shops.

The Little Triangle

The place of the little triangle was also like many others. It was quiet and peaceful. There were large houses on large blocks of land. The people who owned them lived there happily. They loved their place. They loved how close it was to town. They loved how green and leafy it was. They loved having backyards so big they could park their trucks in them, and make their own waterslides in them in the summer. Some people had lived there for most of their life. They had raised their children there and were now ready to leave for other adventures. Some people had only just come to the place of the little triangle to raise their family, and planned to live there for a long time.

The little triangle would also allow most of the houses to be knocked down to make way for bigger buildings and smaller houses, so more people could live there.

The King's Message

The King was proud of his plans so he sent them to his people. Most of the people of the little square were pleased by the little square and thought it was a good idea. It made sense to have more houses near the railway and near the workshops. There were some people who were upset by it. So the King asked his kings-people to talk to them about their concerns. Some changes were made to the little square, which made some of the people happier. Not everyone liked it, but most seemed to. The plan was soon settled and life moved on.

Meanwhile, the little triangle was dividing its community. Some people loved the little triangle. Some people hated it. Some people did not understand the little triangle so they began creating their own stories about what it meant. Some created stories of joy. And some created stories of horror.

The People's Stories

The people who loved the little triangle thought it was a dream come true. Now strangers carrying suitcases of money would knock on their door and ask to buy their house. With all that money they could travel, see the world, and do what they had always dreamed of. They might even come back one day and live in one of the new houses that would be built there.

But the people who hated the little triangle thought it was a nightmare. To them the bulldozers were on their way. They would rip down the trees. Big buildings would tower over them. They would never have privacy again. They were now condemned to live in a building site. And worse, strange people would be coming to live there. People not like them. That was not why they bought their house there. That was not where they wanted their kids to grow up. And where would all these new people go to work, go to school, go to the doctor? Where would all the cars go? The roads were already full. The parks, the schools, the hospital and the shops – all full. There was no room left. No room for anyone else.

The War

Inside the place of the little triangle, neighbour turned against neighbour. The people formed into groups – Protect the Triangle, who hated the plan, and Liberate the Triangle, who loved the plan. The groups feuded with each other and took their concerns to the King.

At first the King did not know what to do. Why had his people reacted like this? The people of the little square did not react like this. Why were they so upset? Were his messengers rude when they delivered the little triangle to them? Why did they not understand it? Surely this would all blow over? But he soon discovered that it would only get worse. Protect the Triangle and Liberate the Triangle went to war. And no one in the Kingdom was safe.

A New Beginning

Something had to be done. So the King took the little triangle back and decided to start again. The King sent his kings-people to listen to the people of the little triangle. The kings-people sat down with them, one by one, to listen. And the people told them their stories. They talked of what they loved of the area. They talked of what they wanted. They talked of what they did not want for the area. And they talked of what they hated. The kings-people just listened and sought to understand.

The King and his kings-people then made a new little triangle, based on the stories of the people there. The King then sent his kings-people back into the area to tell the story of the new little triangle. And to tell it with as much colour and passion as they could muster. Protect the Triangle still hated it, although now they could understand where the story came from. Liberate the Triangle still loved it, although perhaps a little less than the old one because it did not seem quite as exciting. They all told the King how they thought the story should end. He then considered what they told him, made some small changes to the new little triangle, and it was settled.

The Ending

So what happened to the areas? Well, all the new people have not come yet. So the same people still live there. They still live in their houses with their big backyards. The people with the suitcases of money have not turned up yet. And neither have the bulldozers. But life seems to be moving on. And slowly, just slowly, they are all beginning to talk to each other again...

THE MORAL

Some key lessons of the tale of the little square and the little triangle are that:

- every place is different and has a different story;
- to plan for an area you need to understand the stories of the place and its people;
- a plan should create a new story that builds on the past;
- you need to tell the new story well; and,
- you should let the people tell you how they think the story should go.

Every place has a different story

The places of the little square and the little triangle shared common characteristics in that they both had the potential for growth. However, they were really very different. There was an obvious logic to the development of the little square because it had major transport and employment on its doorstep. People could easily recognise that the little square was a logical step in the development of the area. In contrast, the case for the little triangle was not so obvious. It was close to shops and facilities, but other places were closer. There were already stories that the area should be preserved for its environmental values. Further, to some people the existence of large blocks

so close to amenities was a precious resource to be protected, not exploited through development.

Perhaps most relevantly, the people in the little square were less connected to their area. Many people in the little square did not have a strong connection to the house or land they occupied, and could accept that the area was going to change. In contrast, the people who hated the little triangle did so because it so fundamentally conflicted with their story for the area. It challenged their hopes and dreams for their future. These were not things that could be picked up and moved; they were inextricably linked to the place. Further, the people who loved the little triangle did so because it could enable the next chapter in their lives, to downsize their house and start a new lifestyle.

Understand the current story

To plan for an area you need to know the story of the place and its people. You need to do your homework to find out how the area has developed and what its history is. What are the current stories about the area? Who are the people? At what stage in its lifecycle is the place and its people? That is not to say this should be a determinative influence on the plan. But it is critical to developing a plan and story that can be introduced successfully and accepted, even though not everyone will agree with it.

In developing the little square and the first little triangle there was no consideration of the story of the place or its people. While this did not have much consequence for the little square, it was fundamental to the failure of the first little triangle.

Develop a new story

A plan needs to tell a story. It is more than lines on a map and words on a page. It is a vision, a future and a new beginning. It deeply affects people's lives. So it needs to connect with the people who live there. It needs to have a clear message and rationale that is stitched into the story of the area, to form the next chapter in the evolution of the place.

The little square and the first little triangle were more statements than stories. They were short and sharp without much context. And because of this the statements were taken out of context. People created their own stories to fill in the gaps based on the own hopes, desires, fears and prejudices.

Again, in the case of the little square this did not cause such a problem because there was a clear logic to the evolution of the place, and the people were less resistant to change. However, for the little triangle it caused great confusion and resentment. This new plan, this statement, seemed to come from nowhere. It had no context. Many thought the statement was just plain wrong or sinister. So the people filled in the gaps with their own stories of horror, or joy, depending their perspective.

Tell it well

A story has to be told to its audience well. So you need to know your audience. You need to know what their level of understanding is so you can tailor the story to them. The story should come to life, through words and pictures, in a way that your audience will understand.

It is not enough simply to send out a plan like the King did for the little square and the first little triangle. You have to get out there and tell it, over and over again, starting with the pictures, and then the words, until the narrative comes together and makes sense. And like any good storyteller you should encourage your audience to engage with the story and ask questions.

Choose your own adventure

To be most engaging and satisfying there should be opportunities for the people to choose their own adventure, albeit within particular parameters. You should make it clear what type of story you are telling – is it a story that has already been written, is it a choose-your-own-adventure story with options people can take, or are you making the story up together as you go along? People should be engaged, at least to some extent, in the development of the story so that a plan is not merely a statement or royal decree from on high about what the future will be.

CONCLUSION

The fairy tale of the little square and the little triangle can teach us many things, but particularly that:

- every place is different and has a different story;
- to plan for an area you need to understand the stories of the place and its people;
- a plan should form a new story that builds on the past;
- you need to tell the new story well; and
- you should let the people tell you how they think the story should go.

But perhaps most importantly, the tale of the little square and the little triangle reminds us what can happen if we forget these lessons.