Scarcity and Agency

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Published online: 14 Mar 2014.

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At first sight the title of this essay might appear to be a contradiction in terms. Scarcity, defined at core as a lack, would suggest the closing down of options in an effort to reduce production and consumption.[1] Agency, on the other hand, is increasingly associated with an opening up, a widening of activities so as to intervene in, and adjust, overarching structures. A recent research project that I have been involved in suggests, however, that scarcity not only forms a context for an activist sense of agency but actually demands it.[2] But to get to this alliance of scarcity and agency, and with it the potential for new constitutions of architectural practice, it is first necessary to unpack some founding assumptions of scarcity.

Scarcity Constructs

Scarcity has figured as a specter through the course of modernity, haunting the supposedly natural impulses of growth and progress. Nicholas Xenos notes in *Scarcity and Modernity*, "Scarcity could … be cast as the antagonist in the human story, a story with a happy ending; the vanquishing of the antagonist and a life of happiness every after amid abundance for all. … Progress would provide the mechanism for a deliverance from scarcity, and hence a deliverance from history itself."[3] In all its various deployments in modernity, scarcity is seen as *the* condition that frames the life of *homo economicus.* Thus for the first paid economist, the Reverend Thomas Malthus, scarcity is something that presents a threat to human progress, and so its causes (in his case, those of the population growth) must be controlled (in his

case, through extremely unpalatable actions against the poor).[4] For the economist Lionel Robbins, it is the defining feature of man's behavior in relation to their needs and as such the central plank of modern economics. Robbins states, "Economics … is concerned with that aspect of behavior which arises from the scarcity of means to achieve given ends. It follows that Economics is entirely neutral between ends."[5] For recent neoliberal economists and their politician followers, scarcity has become the legitimation for the imposition of very damaging austerity measures.[6] Scarcity is presented everywhere as a universal presumption, an inevitable feature of modern life, on the back of which various strategies are argued for and then played out, whatever the consequences.

At the heart of such versions of scarcity lies the scarcity postulate—that human needs are unlimited but the means to achieve them are scarce. The word "postulate" defines something that is given, and so it suggests a received truth that human needs are indeed unlimited and the scarcity of means is established as universal. Our research challenges these core assumptions:[7] first, in questioning whether human needs are in fact unlimited, because if they are, we are in more trouble than even the most serious models of biosphere stress predict; and second, in rejecting head-on the essentializing nature and inevitability of scarcity. Our approach to scarcity establishes it always as a constructed, sociomaterial condition. Yes, the effects of scarcity are very real, and yes, things really are running out, but the way those effects are distributed and the

ways that the causes are manipulated are far from natural. Causes and effects are socially and politically constructed. The underlying causes for the depletion, and the unequal distribution, of resources are constructed by social and economic forces. They are not inevitable. There is enough food in the world; it is just in the wrong places, and so hunger and famine result. These constructions are transcalar, relational, and contextual. First, they operate at all scales from the geopolitical to the very local, with too often the causes played out at a geopolitical scale, and the effects being felt at a very local and human scale. Second, scarcities arise out of, and are immanent within, complex relations between social organizations, economic processes, psychological desires, existential needs, and the geophysical flows of material, food, water, and energy. Scarcities can arise by chance combinations of these various systems of organization in the world, but more often by the deliberate design of actors wielding power over resources. Finally, scarcity is highly contextual, dependent on the perception and cultural position of individuals and groups. One person's abundance is another's scarcity.[8]

Scarcity and Design

This version of scarcity—as constructed—has important implications for design. In the neoclassical conception of scarcity as pure, measurable lack, buildings and cities are reduced to material objects that have the same qualities of any commodity. In times of abundance, these building objects are polished up to become the beacons of progress and growth,

which suppress signs of any underlying scarcity. This is more or less what happened in the boom years of the 2000s, when the superficial gloss of global architectural production disguised some of the more distasteful aspects that it left in its wake, such as the labor camps of Dubai or the mass migration of construction workers in China.[9] But when hypercapitalism hits the buffers, when the flow of commodities is staunched, buildings are subject to exactly the same measures as the other aspects of the economic world: reduction and control. The designer's gaze is turned ever more toward the object, because that is where things can be measured (and so reduced) and frozen (and so controlled). In design terms, one does the same but with much less. Architecture becomes just another residue of a curtailed life world, subjected to all the stringencies of austerity.

As I have argued elsewhere, however, austerity is not the same as scarcity.[10] Scarcity, when understood as a dynamic, relational, and sociomaterial condition, moves sharply away from the fixed ideologies of austerity. Most radically, scarcity upsets presumptions of the primary role of a designer. Architects normally define themselves as people who design buildings; they essentially add new stuff—big new stuff—to the world, manifesting a sense of endless growth on which capitalism relies. Scarcity challenges the very ineluctability of growth, and with it the premise of adding more stuff to the world as the sole purpose of design. Scarcity therefore strikes at the heart of normally received versions of design, in which innovation and creativity are announced through the production of the new.

This does not mean, however, that limits will lead to the end of design or an emasculated version of design. Quite the opposite: scarcity opens up new fields in which design may operate, but only if one relinquishes the attachment to the object

as the sole site of creativity. Scarcity demands that we ask the question, "What if, instead of adding, one redistributes what is there already?" and then provokes answers around new modes of design that encompass adaptation, redistribution, restarting, and optimization.[11]

The clue to a new form of design agency lies in the sociomaterial character of scarcity. In stark contrast to Lionel Robbins's economics framed by scarcity as "entirely neutral," the constructed nature of scarcity reveals it to be fully embedded in the contested politics of the sociomaterial world. A sociomaterial understanding of scarcity lifts it above being seen purely in terms of neutral quantity and the limit of resources and instead sees resources as part of a network of social and temporal relationships, into which the designer intervenes. Using the terms of the French sociologist Bruno Latour, this moves scarcity from being a matter of fact (where it can be dispassionately measured) to being a matter of concern (where it enters into the dynamics and ethics of society). The sociomaterial nature of scarcity thus loosens the apparent fixity of objects and the absolute quantity of resources and so opens up new territories within which the designer may engage. Design becomes concerned with the temporal life of objects, with what comes before and after the instant of completion. Attention is thus turned to the ways in which the production (before the object) and effects (after it) of scarcity might be mitigated through canny design. And instead of being simply concerned with limiting the use of resources, as happens in much sustainable architecture, design becomes concerned with the way in which the scarcity of those resources is constructed. Finally, design under conditions of scarcity takes on an ethical dimension, because the construction of scarcity often leads to an inequitable distribution of resources.[12] Design thus has an imperative to

address these imbalances. It is here that agency becomes central.

Scarcity and Agency

Agency is classically understood to be dialectically paired with structure or, in Anthony Gidden's more nuanced version, agency and structure need to be understood as a duality "logically implicated with one another."[13] As my coauthors and I argue in the book *Spatial Agency*, the act of design agency is one that critically intervenes in wider societal structures in the name of, and for the benefit of, others.[14] With scarcity one is presented with a structure that is very real and one that is a pressing societal concern. Indeed it may be argued that scarcity will become the defining feature of contemporary life in the coming years; it thus presents an ideal context within which agency works. In the neoclassical version of scarcity, the overarching structure is presented as a fixed inevitability of lack and the efficacy of any agency is severely limited. But if scarcity is understood to be constructed, agency has the opportunity to intervene in multiple ways and across the full temporal life of any project.

The large-scale geopolitical constructions of scarcity, for instance, in the land grabs in sub-Saharan Africa leading to the displacement of indigenous farming and with it local food scarcities, leave individual agents with a sense of hopelessness. Design agency in the face of scarcity thus often works most effectively at a smaller scale, and an accumulation of actions might then lead to wider change. A good example is the brilliant Waterbanks initiative developed by the architects David Turnbull and Jane Harrison of Atopia Research to address aspects of water scarcity in Africa.[15] By designing a school specifically around the collection and storage of water, the scheme not only addresses seasonal fluctuations of water availability for local farming but also forms a community focus and educational catalyst, both of

which were previously lacking. In this way, the design is much more than a technical solution to the "problem" of water scarcity. It is a multifaceted approach that addresses the multiple constructions of scarcity.

Waterbanks is a good example of how scarcity asks us to move away from the problem-solving paradigm of design. In dealing with the world as a set of isolated problems that the ingenuity of the design is called upon to "solve," one often finds that the underlying constitution of the problem is left unscathed. Typical of this are the technical fixes of some sustainable designs that are devised to solve the problem of excessive carbon consumption but do not usually address the behaviors that lead to that consumption in the first place. Oil is limited but not necessarily scarce; it is only society's wants and behaviors that render it increasingly scarce.

Design agency does not presume to solve problems in relation to scarcity; it only aspires to make the best possible sense of the prevailing and often competing conditions. Is it necessary to build that building in the first instance? Are the parameters by which the project is defined the most appropriate ones? Can one measure things in other ways? What and who constructed the scarcity? All of these questions require one to challenge the brief as an a priori truth, intervening as a collaborative designer at the very earliest stages before other factors have overdetermined the project. Agency starts by questioning the original premise, and so what might first be seen as a problem to be fixed becomes a new way of looking at things. Huge urban parks that need tending? The obvious, technical, solution is a huge fleet of lawnmowers, with attendant noise and energy use. The Curitiba fix, instigated by the great spatial agent Jamie Lerner, is sheep that quietly shear the grass, as well as provide wool and meat. An

extractive, scarcity-producing system is replaced by a productive one.

The production and consequences of scarcity are only ever likely to increase over the coming years, and we need to find approaches to engage with this condition. My optimism lies precisely in the alliance of scarcity and agency, because design agency in the broadest sense is well placed to address the relational, contextual, and contingent senses of scarcity, and with this, in turn, new roles and opportunities for architectural thinking and action emerge.

Author Biography

Jeremy Till is an architect, educator, and writer. He is Head of Central Saint Martins and Pro Vice-Chancellor, University of the Arts London. His extensive written work includes *Flexible Housing* (with Tatjana Schneider, 2007), *Architecture Depends* (2009), and *Spatial Agency* (with Nishat Awan and Tatjana Schneider, 2011). All three of these won the RIBA President's Award for Outstanding Research. As an architect, he worked with Sarah Wigglesworth Architects on their pioneering building, 9 Stock Orchard Street, which won the RIBA Sustainability Prize.

Notes

1   Based on the etymological derivation from the medieval French term *escarceté*, denoting an insufficiency of supply.
2   "Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment," a trans-European project funded by HERA and led by Jeremy Till, 2010–13. With teams from University of Westminster, London (Jon Goodbun, Deljana Iossifova, Isis Nunez-Ferrara, Jeremy Till), TU Vienna (Michael Klein, Georg Kolmayr, Andreas Rumpfhuber), and AHO, Oslo (Barbara Ascher, Christian Hermansen, Arna Mathiesen, Edward Robbins). See www.scibe.eu.
3   Nicholas Xenos, *Scarcity and Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 35.
4   T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 280. In this, he argues that if one attempts to alleviate poverty, as was being proposed in the contemporaneous Poor Laws, then population growth will follow, which in turn will lead to scarcities. Malthus's solution is to leave the poor alone: "the poor are the arbiters of their own destiny," he

writes, "and what others can do for them is like dust in the balance compared to what they can do for themselves." Let scarcity regulate poverty; it is both the origin of poverty and the effective instrument against any population growth that might arise out of the alleviation of poverty.
5   Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (London: Macmillan, 1932), 40.
6   For a good critique of the myths around the austerity regimes, see Carys Afoko and Daniel Vockins, *Framing the Economy: The Austerity Story* (London: New Economics Foundation, 2013).
7   Most clearly and concisely in Jon Goodbun and others, *The Design of Scarcity* (Moscow: Strelka, 2013). The research project is SCIBE.
8   These terms (relational, sociomaterial, transcalar, and contextual) are further explained and then illustrated on the project website, www.scarcity.is.
9   Mike Davis, "Fear and Money in Dubai," *New Left Review* 41 (2006): 47.
10 Jeremy Till, "Scarcity Contra Austerity: Places: Design Observer," *Places*, 2012, http://places. designobserver.com/feature/scarcity-contra-austerity/35638/, accessed September 13, 2013.
11 This is the headline of *The Scarcity Project*, an installation by the designer Paulo Goldstein at Central Saint Martins, September 2013. See http:// paulogoldstein.com/The-Scarcity-Project. These terms are expanded on and illustrated on the website www.scarcity.is.
12 See, for example, Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity* (London: Marion Boyars, 1974).
13 Anthony Giddens, *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), 220.
14 Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, and Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011).
15 For details of the Kenyan school, see www.water-banks.org.