

SCIBE

WORKING PAPER NR.

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SCARCITY + CREATIVITY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

CONSTRUCTED SCARCITY

Jeremy Till

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A Working Paper for SCIBE
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In our original grant application we introduced scarcity as “a condition defined by insufficiency of resources (based on the etymological derivation *escarceté*, denoting an insufficiency of supply).” This immediately begs the questions as to what we mean “insufficiency “and what we mean by “resources”? This short essay will argue that because of the relational nature of these terms, we need to move from an assumption of the inevitability of insufficiency, and at the same see resources not as isolated commodities, with an inevitable slide towards their exhaustion) but as part of a complex network, or political ecology. As soon as scarcity is released from its classical attachment to stuff (and the exchange of stuff), then the target of creativity is shifted from the object alone to the social and political networks within which that object exists.¹

Relative Scarcity

At the start of this research project, one of our team, the anthropologist Ed Robbins, told the story of Australian aborigines, who exist – nay, prosper – on what westerners would consider an insufficiency, but is for them an abundance. Although their access to material, edible and instrumental resources is extraordinarily limited according to western expectations, it still allows them to open up to an astonishingly abundant set of mythical and human horizons. So, we immediately confront the issue that scarcity is not an absolute term. Scarcity only makes sense in relation to the context

¹ This paper was written before the publication of: *The Limits to Scarcity: Contesting the Politics of Allocation*, ed. by Lyla Mehta (Earthscan, 2010) This book raises some of the same issues in rather more depth than I do here.

(physical, material or conceptual) in which it is found: it is a restless term that always resists being held within a fixed frame. This presents any project about scarcity with a problem. If scarcity is a moving target, what is one aiming at? Or to put it more firmly within a well-known philosophical frame, if scarcity is relative, how does one avoid the charge of relativism? The charge, which comes most trenchantly from the camp of reason, is that if everything is relative, how does one make certain judgements? Thus, if scarcity is always relative, how does one make choices against it, or indeed if it worth making choices give that the context is so fluid? This presents a particular problem as a research project, because if scarcity is indeed relative to its temporal, spatial and cultural contexts, does this mean that research into it is necessarily flawed, because any analysis is simply contingent on a particular context and any wider lessons become impossible?

It is necessary to answer these questions if only to avoid the potential of endless deferment that might arise out of the “one man’s scarcity is another person’s abundance” argument. The first answer comes from a challenge to reason’s dismissal of relativism. It is in the nature of reason to set up its own self-fulfilling logic, and anything that stands outside this frame of reference is found wanting. The circle of reason cannot admit to anything else and so expels the relative. “Anything goes, means nothing matters”, says the rationalist, “if you cannot accept reason, you must be irrational.” It is easy enough to undermine the circle of reason by pointing to its self-constituting nature. “I must be right, because I have defined the terms of that rightness,” is not a sentiment that stands up to prolonged scrutiny. However, the critique of reason does not get us to a firmer understanding of the relative, though it might move us on from the charge of relativism. As I try to argue in *Architecture Depends*, just because the world is contingent, this does not imply we must deal with it contingently – as if anything goes.² Quite the

² Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009) In particular chapters 3 and 11.

opposite: the contingent world, in which scarcity is so clearly placed once it is not seen as absolute, needs to be addressed with intent; it demands that intentional choices be made, which is different from the so-called modern world, in which rational choices are presumed to be determined by the prowess of reason or technological progress. As the political theorist William Sewell notes, this recourse to the assumed authority of “rational choice” is a central plank of neo-classical economics, with its underlying claim “that all social relations are determined by choice under conditions of scarcity.”³ It does take more than a glance at the recent economic turmoil to understand that far from economic choices being made by the individual within a supposedly rational framework, they are in fact overseen by the invasive ideologies of the free market. This suggests that under conditions of scarcity, rather than leaving choice to the runes of reason, we have to be intentional about the choice, but to do that we have first to be clearer about the underlying construction of scarcity.

The Paradox of Scarcity

This apparently simple conclusion, that scarcity demands intentional choice, may begin to hint about how to deal with scarcity (of which more later) but does not really help us define what it is. The modernist solution is to define scarcity in terms of its other: typically scarcity is paired with abundance and as in any dialectical pairing, each term haunts the other. Abundance is the handmaiden of progress, whereas scarcity sets limits that upset all the hopes of growth that the project of modernity promised. Scarcity, as the spectre of abundance must therefore be vanquished. But at the same time, scarcity is needed, exactly in its role as spectre, especially within the system of capital that modernity invoked. As Marx identifies, scarcities are produced by capitalism as stimulants to consumption. As Jon notes in one of our earlier discussions “*those in the system who own and manage these*

³ William Sewell, ‘Toward a Post-Materialist Rhetoric for Labor History’, in *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis*, ed. by Lenard Berlanstein (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 29.

(material) flows have a vested interest in maintaining scarcities."⁴ Scarcity is necessary to capitalism in terms of establishing the basis of the market, whereas true abundance is a threat to the market in terms of overwhelming the market. This is the paradox of scarcity; one can't do without it, one can't do without it. So when I used the term "restlessness" above this was not in innocence but in homage to Marx's identification of the restlessness of capital as it continually shifts to exploit new opportunities, and with this manipulates scarcities. Again, we are left without an absolute, even a firm platform, against which to ground scarcity. The dialectic with abundance is not so neat, but rather paradoxical in the extreme.

This paradox tends to confuse, purposely, the reality of scarcity with the ideology of scarcity. There are real scarcities, with real and profound human consequences, but the ideology of scarcity in its twinning with abundance holds out the eternal promise that there are endless ways escape those conditions, "*promoting the false consciousness that we can extract as much as we want from the planet.*" Even in conditions that appear to set specific limits against which scarcity can be measured, there are always connections to other systems that provide an escape from the limits. Take, for example, water scarcity. The lack of water in sub-saharan Africa is a real condition: people die because of this scarcity. But there is always a counter position in the form of potential solutions (the provision of wells, of standpipes) that offer the promise of a resolution to this lack and just this promise alone allows others to diminish the consequences of what is a very real scarcity for those directly affected. So our first task must be to disentangle the reality of scarcity from the ideology of scarcity. In its latter guise it "*naturalises (it makes obscure) the social component of the limits of these [resource] flows.*" This means that any discussion of scarcity must be framed

⁴ All quotes in italics are from this entry on our initial blog site in a piece written by Jon Goodbun. <http://scarcity.ning.com/profiles/blogs/scarcity-reality-and-ideology>

in terms of its social construction and the way that scarcity is “produced”, because only thus can one unmask its ideological constitution.⁵

The Scarcity of Stuff

By situating scarcity in the context of its social construction, we avoid the trap of simply associating scarcity with stuff – a trap that I fell into with the mention of wells and standpipes. The scarcity of stuff is problematic for two reasons. First because stuff can be seen as neutral and thus removed from ideological or social attachments. Second lack of stuff can be dealt with the provision of more stuff, but this does not necessarily solve the underlying problem. So, for example, the solution to hunger – the lack of food – is not best provided by food aid. Indeed, as the authors of *The Scarcity Fallacy* note, the presentation of hunger in Malthusian terms of lack of foodstuff perpetuates as myth of scarcity that avoids dealing with the real causes, namely inequitable distribution, poverty and other inequalities.⁶ Hunger is real; scarcity is not. Thirdly, by associating scarcity with stuff, it is always possible to suggest that the solution to the particular scarcity can be achieved by technological advances. A clear manifestation of this is the rhetoric, particularly of the technocratic right, is that the crisis of peak oil – if even accepted – can be addressed by as yet undiscovered technical fixes either in the form of new means of exploration or else alternative energy sources. The issue with all of these three is that they do not uncover the constitution of the very scarcity in the first instance.

In the field of the built environment scarcity is nearly always associated with stuff (including carbon) and the reaction is accordingly limited to material and technical fixes. Not enough oil: answer more insulation.

⁵ In his work on water scarcity Erik Swyngedouw makes it clear that scarcity is not an absolute, but is “discursively produced...the discursive representation of water as being an integral part of nature permits casting ‘nature’ into pole position to explain scarcity. In other words, nature is the principal ‘cause’ of water scarcity rather than the particular political economic configuration through which water becomes urbanised in highly selective and uneven ways, resulting in a serious ‘scarcity’ for the poor and powerless and abundant waters for the socio-economic and political elites” Erik Swyngedouw, *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47.

⁶ S. J. Scanlan, J. C. Jenkins and L. Peterson, ‘The Scarcity Fallacy’, *Contexts*, 9 (2010), 34-39.

Running out of copper piping: answer use plastic piping. Creativity in dealing with scarcity is thus invested solely in the design of innovative form, techniques and materials. Even the more developed environmental theories, such as Cradle to Cradle, concentrate on material flows, and in their generally technocentric approach avoid a confrontation with the social (while being full of social worthiness) – hence their easy appropriation by the corporate sector where those material flows become things to be commodified.

The discussion of scarcity in the built environment is thus generally limited to issues of actual scarcity, which may be defined as the condition when demands exceeds supply on an ongoing basis, leading to ever-diminishing stocks. The actual moment when this condition is defined as ‘scarcity’ is not fixed, but as long as there is the prospect of an actual limit, the state of scarcity exists and must be dealt with. The most obvious example is peak oil and the diminishment of other forms of natural resources. Simple lack – say of rain in a desert – does not constitute an actual scarcity, because it is not set within the context of an eventual limit. It is clear that we have to address actual scarcity, but need to do so in a manner which avoids seeing each condition in isolation, because that turns limits into spectres – as David Harvey notes: “The invocation of ‘limits’ and ‘ecoscarcity’ should, therefore, make us as politically nervous as it makes us theoretically suspicious.”⁷ The typical response to actual scarcity is to reduce usage of materials and energy (this is the basis of much ‘green’ architecture), but this does little but to delay the fateful moment whilst still draining resources. It is an attitude embedded in that terrible, and terribly accepted, Bruntland definition of sustainability, which effectively says let’s try to keep going as we are.⁸ So instead of seeing actual scarcities as ever-diminishing buckets of stuff, they have to be seen in relation to other networks and resource flows, and one’s creative intervention is not in

⁷ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 217.

⁸ “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

rearranging the contents of the bucket, but in designing new processes that divert and optimise the resource flows and changes values and modes of behaviour, thereby understanding stuff in its social context.

A good example of this was an intemperate exchange at my first presentation on scarcity, when a member of the audience basically dismissed our whole project at a sweep, along the lines: “you architects do not know what you are talking about, there are no scarcities in construction materials, it is the land of plenty out there.” To which I replied:

“Not in steel, where a massive diversion of resources to feed China’s urban boom has left a relative lack in the West with greatly increased prices, and the sudden draw on Brazil’s natural resources which has inflated prices there. And not in cement, where the need to create an abundance of it has led to its manufacture contributing 5% of all global greenhouse gases in any one year. And not in Indonesia, where the combination of the destruction of the rainforests and the continuing demand for hardwoods – legal and illegal – has meant the collapse of vernacular building methods which were based on timber.”

“But those are just side effects; it doesn’t mean that there is a scarcity”...which in a way proved my point if he were to look outside the loop of scarcity simply defined in terms of resources, because it is the side effects that are exactly the signal of the relational nature of scarcity. Despite all the claims of the Neo-Malthusians, scarcity is not a natural or inevitable condition, but one can only reach this conclusion once the social and political production of scarcity has been unpicked.

Associating scarcity purely with stuff is thus going to be restrictive, and hence our original use of the word “resources” is not inclusive enough, suggestive as it is of a pot of something to be drawn upon. Instead, stuff – the non-human – must always be situated in the context of the human in order to understand the scales of scarcity. If this sounds very Bruno

Latourian, it is. The modernists say: “Let us not mix up heaven and earth, the global stage and the local scene, the human and the non-human.” Latour says “We have never been modern!”, and with this delves into the heady mix human and non-human. The task is to see stuff embedded in social networks, so that scarcity is never seen as part of an isolated condition of “insufficiency of resources.” To do this we have to return to its social construction.

The Construction of Scarcity

William Sewell places scarcity as part of a triad made up of power, meaning and scarcity: “we must imagine a world in which every social relationship is simultaneously constituted by meaning, by scarcity, and by power.”⁹ As Sewell notes: “the discursive features of social relations are themselves always constitutively shaped by power relations and conditions of choice under scarcity...this constitutive shaping is reciprocal – just as meanings are always shaped by scarcity and power, so scarcity is always shaped by power and meaning and power is always shaped by meaning and scarcity.”¹⁰

This chimes with the sense of scarcities being constructed, a term that refers to scarcities that are very real to the people affected by them, but not real in terms of the underlying conditions; the previous mention of food scarcity is a good example. Scarcities here are constructed, either intentionally or through an imbalance of systems. Intentional construction of scarcity occurs most obviously through the free market where resource flows (of money, water, commodities, etc.) are manipulated to create scarcity contra abundance. Scarcity is also constructed through regulatory frameworks which attempt to limit - activities, expenditure, time, etc - often with good particular reason, but without sight of the interconnectivity of limits which, when accumulated, tend to shut down opportunity.

⁹ Sewell, 33.

¹⁰ Sewell, 33.

Imbalances in systems also construct scarcity, though not necessarily intentionally, typically through uneven distribution of human and non-human resources. Thus, for example, in any given city there is probably a surplus of available space, but the distribution of, and access to that space is locked up in systems of ownership. Constructed scarcities appear most clearly in supply chains and life cycles, where the prioritization of one set of flows leads to unnecessary scarcities elsewhere. So, in the construction industry there is a scarcity of new materials but an abundance of recyclable materials – the latter largely diverted to landfill – but because of aesthetic niceties, supply chain mechanisms and constructional norms, the two flows are kept apart.

Dealing with Scarcity

It seems to me that creative energy can be expended most productively within the context of constructed scarcities. This is for two reasons. First because these scarcities are not relative (in the sense of being open to multiple interpretations) but rather can be understood in terms of their construction. This gives one something to kick against, by intervening in these forces of scarcity construction. As Dougald Hind notes: “this is not to deny the force of material conditions, but it is to say that - most of the time - there is social and cultural room for manoeuvre.”¹¹ Second, because that construction is both social and physical, and this places the designer in the broader field where I have argued elsewhere they should be located– not just fixated with the manipulation of stuff for stuff’s sake, but engaging with the processes, flows and politics of how stuff is produced.¹² Quite how this may be achieved within present limits of creative design tactics will be the subject of another working paper, but for the time being I want to end with a slight warning.

¹¹ Dougald Hind, ‘Scarcity and Abundance’ <<http://dougald.co.uk/scarcebooks.htm>> [accessed 18 January 2011]. This page also has a useful reading list around the issues of scarcity.

¹² Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy. Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011).

In writings from both left and right, then is sometimes a sense that scarcity is inevitable and inescapable, and so leaves no room for manoeuvre. On the left, the brilliant analyses of the political ecologists often leaves one with a sense of helplessness, as if the knot of the construction of scarcity is so tightly tied that it leaves no space for intervention.¹³ On the right, as Iain Boal so clearly argues, scarcity has been used too long as a fear mechanism to impose power and unequal distribution, and done so in manner in which the imposition of power is so forceful that individuals are left with no choice or means to escape the condition of scarcity.¹⁴ My way out of these apparent cul-de-sacs lies in the notion of critical agency. As both an optimist with a belief in the efficacy of transformative action, and a realist with a critical awareness of the social triad of scarcity's production (scarcity, power and meaning) I will brazenly steal and alter Lefebvre's maxim, and so if (social) scarcity is (social) product, then there is space for all us to consider ourselves as part of that production and do something about it.

¹³ I am thinking in particular of the work of Eric Swyngedouw and of Mike Davies.

¹⁴ 'Iain Boal: Specters of Malthus' <<http://www.counterpunch.org/boal09112007.html>> [accessed 18 January 2011].

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