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WITHIN THE LIMITS OF SCARCITY

RETHINKING SPACE, CITY AND PRACTICES

Edited by
Barbara Ascher
Isis Nunez Ferrera
Michael Klein

Special Issue in collaboration with **SCIBE**



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in collaboration with **SCIBE** Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment
Peer Reviewed Articles 

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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

Barbara Ascher, Isis Nunez Ferrera, Michael Kleinp.7
Scarcity - Local responses to “lack”

Camillo Boanop.13
Notes around design politics: design dissensus and the poiesis of scarcity

Bo Tangp.29
Negotiating shared spaces in informal peri-urban settlements in India. The role of amenity buildings and the effect of the post-hoc introduction of infrastructure towards the creation of common places

Federico Venturini, Ersilia Verlinghierip.51
Scarcity, post-scarcity and local community: L’Aquila as a case study

Piero Sassip.71
Degrowth urban policy? The contemporary debate on post-growth alternatives and the challenges posed by soil consumption

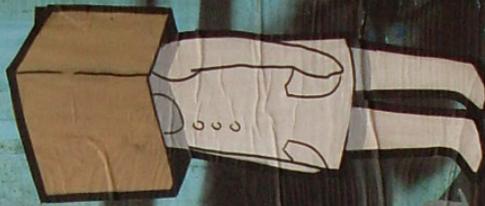
Sheikh Serajul Hakim, Joseph Lim Ee Manp.83
Scarcity, control and negotiations: an interpretation of form in urban informal settlements

Tomaz Pipanp.103
Territorial Compromises: limits of morphological and civic negotiation

Sante Simone, Mejrema Zatricp.117
Voids as modern ruins. The project for the city in the face of the new spatial scarcity

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Scarcity – local responses to “lack”

Scarcity – when demand outstrips supply – is regarded as a most natural condition of human life. And though there is a particular timeliness and actuality about raising scarcity as an issue now. Questions of availability of (financial) resources and their distribution have shifted towards the centre of current debates, especially since the economic, financial and sovereign debt crisis. In order to combat losses, attention was shifted to spending cutbacks, affecting basic welfare services such as education, health, unemployment benefits, and access to affordable housing, amongst others. In the face of crisis and austerity cuts, the existing welfare models built on state supply and social redistribution turned out to be fundamentally dependent on economic growth. Ultimately, these austerity policies created new scarcities for large parts of the population¹.

In the so-called global south, on the other hand, scarcity in cities has been a prevalent constraint, commonly conceived in the form of material deprivation, and the limited financial and institutional capacity of governments to cope with rapid urbanisation and the plethora of political and socio-economic challenges arising from these developments. In both cases, when it comes to the built environment, scarcity is mainly conceived, again, as a material condition – as a lack of, mostly (but not exclusively), financial resources.

Yet the actuality of scarcity is not limited to economic crisis alone. Scarcity has reappeared in the debates about ecology and sustainability, most often embedded in the limits-to-growth² narrative. Peak oil, peak soil and many of the related discussions on depleting resources address scarcities arising from the lifestyles of Western consumer societies. The expansion of these consumption levels to the entire global population would further exacerbate this situation, resulting in a fundamental ethical dilemma. Resources are too scarce for the dominant minority of the world's population to continue living as it does today. The sustainability debate's proposed solutions to social and technological problems are ultimately about scarcity while at the same time new “qualitative” forms of scarcity arise: lack of clean air, clean water and commonly accessible land. Is this the onset of a new age of scarcity?

Scarcity – the experience of “not having enough” – has held a central position in the field of economics, the discipline defined by Robbins as “the forms assumed by hu-

1 For a collection of articles on the issue see: Klein M., Rumpfhuber A. (2014 eds.): *Scarcity: Austerity urbanism*, derive 56.

2 Meadows D.H., Meadows D.L., Randers J., Behrens W. (1974), *The limits to growth: A report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind*, London, Pan Books.

man behaviour in disposing of scarce means”³. Economic activity, i.e. the allocation of resources in order to satisfy needs and desires, follows from scarcity: it renders every activity in means-ends relationships. Assuming that human wants are endless, infinite, but not so the availability of resources and commodities, scarcity is raised into its position as an a-historic and absolute category. It becomes a natural law to which we must submit.

Scarcity in this understanding of demand outstripping supply is therefore often perceived as a temporary condition that could be overcome with the help of technical fixes and a range of substitutes. It is compensated for through the use of more efficient methods involving technology and innovation, thus relating it to human progress as such.

On the other hand, Malthus, in his famous *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, shaped an approach to scarcity that was rather straightforward yet highly reductive. He viewed scarcity as a consequence of the imbalance between nature’s resources, in his case food, and population growth. The measures to counterbalance this development have included preventive checks, such as moral education, and positive checks, such as war, severe poverty and famine⁴.

Neo-Malthusians expanded this reductive notion into the consideration of a wider range of underlying conditions, such as industrialisation, exponential growth and consumption, suggesting social and technological adaptation as the way to tackle the immanent scarcity of resources⁵.

On the other side of the neoclassical economics scarcity principle lies its role as a source of social progress. The condition of “not having” triggers the experience of lack, or what people think they ought to have but do not. For societies like ours, where the property of commodities determines social status, we find ourselves in a constant state of comparison with our social environment. In order to climb the social ladder, aspiration is focused on overcoming that lack, using all available means. Scarcity, therefore, not only challenges an ideal distribution of resources but is also considered to be the foundation of social progress⁶.

It does not matter whether it is time, land, oil or money – every kind of energy can become scarce if it takes on a social role. It is not the finiteness of a resource that makes it scarce, as oil or time exemplify, but our use of it and the meaning it gets from its mode of production. Scarcity, therefore, is fundamentally a social category⁷.

It is no surprise, then, that the certitude about the natural laws of scarcity has repeatedly been questioned and challenged from various sides, particularly that of social criticism. As history shows, even if there were recurring phases of scarcities, resources are not always scarce per se. More recently, the work of political ecologists

3 Robbins L. (1932), *The nature and significance of economic science*, London, Macmillan, p. 15.

4 Malthus T.R. (1798), *An essay on the principle of population, as it affects the future improvement of society*, London, pr. for J. Johnson. For a discussion of the essay see: Perelman M. (1979), “Marx, Malthus, and the concept of natural resource scarcity”, in *Antipode*, no. 11, vol. 2, pp. 80-91 and Harvey D. (2001), *Spaces of capital: Towards a critical geography*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 40ff.

5 For a highly controversial example of neo-Malthusian thought, see: Ehrlich P.R. (1968), *The population bomb*, New York, Ballantine Books.

6 Balla B. (2005), *Knappheit als Ursprung sozialen Handelns*, Hamburg, Krämer.

7 Luhmann N. (1988), *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.



has expanded the debate on scarcity by illustrating the relationship between macro systems of allocation and context-specific conditions of insufficiency. Furthermore, political ecology has shed light on the interplay between environmental conditions and political struggles⁸. It has introduced the discursive nature of resources⁹, and it has shed light on the particularities embedded in difference, social movements and the construction of knowledge¹⁰.

Scarcity, therefore, is not a neutral given fact, a natural law to which we have to submit. Far from it – scarcity is a political concept, made and produced as an argument for unequal distribution¹¹: Because there is never enough, access has to be distributed unequally, so the argument goes. In spite of social progress, efficiency thinking and technical advances, scarcity is constantly reproduced to serve as an instrument that reproduces social order.

What does this complex manifold that structures scarcity mean for those dealing with aspects of the spatiality of living together? In the fields of architecture and urbanism, design, planning and geography, scarcity has often played a leading role: Looking for the optimum solution, we have unwittingly become economists in our own discipline. Operating within the general conditions of capitalism, these disciplines make no exceptions: Be it in the architecture of housing schemes, in the research on land use or in planning in postcolonial contexts, we act most often under premises of scarcity. This should be reason enough to reflect on and investigate the causes and effects under which scarcity operates, how it affects the built environment and our forms of cohabitation, and what strategies could be applied to deal with conditions of scarcity.

“Within the limits of scarcity: Rethinking space, city and practices”

The groundwork for the selected articles published in this special issue of PLANUM, has been presented and discussed at a conference entitled Within the Limits of Scarcity: Rethinking Space, City and Practices that we organised in the course of the research project “Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment” (SCIBE)¹².

From 26 to 28 February 2013, the conference brought together scholars from different fields of human geography, sociology, environmental psychology, architecture and urban planning for a three-day event held at the University of Westminster in London.

Centred on the investigation of, and explanation of, innovation in the city through the lens of scarcity, the conference looked at both historic and current strategies deployed by different actors involved in producing the built environment. The potential of those examinations to inform new ways of thinking and acting around

8 Swyngedouw E. (2004), *Social power and the urbanization of water: Flows of power*, Oxford, University Press.

9 Mehta L. (2010 ed.), *The limits to scarcity: Contesting the politics of allocation*, London, Earthscan.

10 Escobar A. (2006), “Difference and conflict in the struggle over natural resources: A political ecology framework”, in *Development*, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 6-13.

11 Harvey D. (2009), *Social justice and the city*, London, University of Georgia Press, pp. 113ff.

12 The SCIBE project explores the relationship between scarcity and creativity in the context of the built environment by investigating how conditions of scarcity might affect the creativity of the different actors involved in the production of architecture and urban design and how design-led actions might improve the built environment in the future. The research is based on the analysis of processes in four European cities: London, Oslo, Reykjavik and Vienna. For more information, see: www.scibe.eu

cities and space were therefore at the core of the discussions. The panels and discussions were complemented by an opening session with a lecture by Jeremy Till from Central Saint Martins in London (UK) and further keynote lectures delivered by Ole Bouman, curator of the “Architecture of Consequence” Exhibition at the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NL), Camillo Boano from the Bartlett Development Planning Unit of University College London (UK), Pier Vittorio Aureli from the Architectural Association (UK), Erik Swyngedouw from the University of Manchester (UK) and Ana Paula Balthazar from the University of Minas Gerais (BR). Together, these contributions highlighted different approaches to scarcity from design, planning and political economy perspectives¹³.

Whereas the overall conference dealt with a broad spectrum of approaches to scarcity, including more theoretical and historical case studies, this special issue takes up alternative ways of investigating, conceptualising and theorising about scarcity in a broad range of geographical locations at a more local scale. The collection of papers consists of the following contributions:

Drawing from his keynote contribution, Camillo Boano elaborates on readings of Jacques Rancière and Giorgio Agamben in relation to issues of scarcity, proposing a new theoretical framework for approaching the discussion of scarcities and their underlying value structure.

Bo Tang’s research and design project investigates, how shared spaces enable the use of cooperative place-making, which in turn becomes a tool to overcome the effects of a lack of resources in peri-urban settlements in India. Drawing on insights of philosopher Murray Bookchin and social ecology, Federico Venturi and Ersilia Verlinghieri have been looking at responses to the economic shock produced by an earthquake on the Italian town of L’Aquila. Pierro Sassi addresses issues of soil scarcity from a post-growth perspective.

In another example from Asia, Sheikh Serajul’s and Joseph Lim Ee Man’s investigation into migrant settlements in Khulna provides us with a more nuanced understanding of the context-specific socio-spatial negotiations that influence the understanding of scarcity.

Tomaz Pipan has been researching the emerging urban topography in the deregulated special economic zones of the Chinese Pearl River Delta and the necessary spatial negotiation between existing and emerging typologies.

Finally, Sante Simone and Mejrema Zatric look at the voids in New Belgrade’s urban spaces using the interpretative frames of Henri Lefebvre’s work to explain the emerging scarcities.

This current issue of *Planum* presents some alternative approaches to the questions around scarcity, highlighting different aspects of the spatial nature of scarcity within respective local contexts that will provide new insights for researchers and practitioners alike.

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¹³ Audio recordings of the keynote lectures can be found at: www.backdoorbroadcasting.net/2013/02/within-the-limits-of-scarcity-rethinking-space-city-and-practices/



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