

INSURGENCE! RECLAIMING THE POSSIBILITY OF MAKING THE CITY

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In September 2012, almost 100 young planning professionals, post-graduate students, established academics and experienced practitioners came together in London to develop new approaches to issues around scarcity in architecture, planning and design. The Third European Urban Summer School (EUSS) – Times of Scarcity: reclaiming the possibility of making – was hosted in London by the University of Westminster, School of Architecture and the Built Environment, in collaboration with the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP), the International Federation for Housing and Planning (IFHP), the European Council of Spatial Planners (ECTP-CEU) and the International Society for City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP). The main partner in facilitating the EUSS was the London team behind the research project Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment (SCIBE). To coincide with the third EUSS, the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment announced the International Award for Young Planning Professionals to encourage ideas with innovation potential on the topic of ‘Adapting Cities to Scarcity: new ideas for action’. The award-winning entries are included in this publication.

Following the first Summer School in collaboration with UN-Habitat in Wroclaw, Poland (2010), and the second in Lisbon, Portugal (2011), we developed the third EUSS as an invitation – a call to arms – for young design and planning professionals to find new ways of thinking about and new tools in response to emerging questions around scarcity. This seemed a particularly timely task in a London marked by the legacy of the Olympic Games and recent austerity measures, just beginning to show their impact on the ground; most explicitly, on the Olympic Fringes. Applications from prospective EUSS participants and tutors were invited in the form of proposed physical or process-based interventions in response to previously identified specific scarcities in the built environment. Selected participants came together in east London to explore a charged territory located in-between central London, the Canary Wharf Estate and the Olympic site and surrounded by highways and railway lines: Bromley-by-Bow.

Six teams were formed and challenged to identify one mode of scarcity in this particular context through on-site explorations and fieldwork exercises; and to propose how to address this creatively through a physical intervention or through a change in the way in which things are done.

To supplement work on their group projects, participants were exposed to a large number of lectures and workshops delivered by devoted speakers and tutors throughout the duration of the EUSS. Every day of the Summer School had its own theme: a thorough introduction to planning in London and the concept and context of scarcity; sensitisation to the subtle nuances and facets of

certain notions; awakening creative imagination; considering aspects of renovation; approaches to adaptation; methods of prognostication; pathways to the popularisation of planning; possibilities for outreach and the articulation of new ideas; and finally: the demonstration of projects developed by participants. In the spirit of the Summer School's theme (Times of Scarcity), participants had to adapt to very different working environments, ranging from the splendid surroundings of central London over University premises undergoing refurbishment to the cold- and wetness of Sugarhouse Studios, an old factory building on site which is currently used as an architecture studio, local cinema and pizzeria.

The questions we set out to explore together focused on approaches to architecture, planning and design under conditions of both operational and contextual scarcity. Operational, in that we, as design and planning professionals, increasingly see ourselves forced to work with less, with limited or depleting resources of all sorts: financial, social, natural. Contextual, in that the conditions within which we are asked to intervene are increasingly marked by resource scarcities that seem to encompass all domains of urban life.

It is difficult to produce a valid definition of a notion as multi-faceted as scarcity. Of course, scarcity is when demand outstrips supply. Natural scarcity could be defined as the scarcity of resources which are rare – rare earth, for instance, or precious metals. However, natural scarcity only becomes real through human interaction with a natural condition. All natural phenomena experienced by human beings are directed or at least influenced by human activity. Thus, scarcity is sociomaterial. It is always relational and reveals how resources within society are handled. Scarcity is artificial when it is the result of misdistribution: when the supply of a resource could be large enough to respond to demand – but when demand and supply are tweaked by decisions based on vested interest. Scarcity is engineered when it serves an interest: increased demand for a resource in limited supply will lead to a higher price and thus more profit; the hoarding of a resource for the in-group will lead to scarcity for the out-group; etc... It is a systemic condition. Scarcity in one place, time or scale can trigger scarcity in another place, time or scale through human – non-human relations and feedback mechanisms. The process of becoming aware of scarcity is the process of social construction. Regardless of the factors that trigger scarcity, it is always perceived and experienced as a real condition. When used on the grounds of political or economic motivation, the idea (and fear) of scarcity may result in real actions with real consequences.

The 'final projects' delivered by the teams were impressive: many went through a lot of effort to discover on the ground what local residents wanted for their neighbourhood; others developed a 'scarcity toolkit', hoping to address the complexity around scarcity in planning; others again proposed new ways of looking at available resources in the area and how to re-use them without adding more infrastructure, money or material. In retrospect, however, what seems worth noting is the very particular process of transformation that participants (and tutors) seemed to undergo during and after the EUSS. Challenged to scrutinise the relevance and value of established design and planning approaches, initially, many participants began to see their possibilities (their 'toolkit') shrink in view of complicated sociopolitical and economic systems that seemed beyond their control; they felt left with just one option: to play along, to become complicit in the further spread and establishment of what they began to view as social, environmental and economic injustice. What are we, as planning and design professionals, to do? After this initial feeling of help- and powerlessness, however, a shared experience of new-found purpose began to emerge, the re-discovery of creativity and the possibility of doing otherwise. So what if scarcities are about more than simple resource depletion? So what if they are embedded in political, social

and ecological systems? What are we going to do about it?

Some initial answers to these questions, I hope, will shine through in the material presented on the following pages. They relate clearly to issues of personal and professional integrity; to our ability to exercise our freedom and choose our role within – or outside – the system. They build on our willingness to redefine our profession and to reclaim the possibility of making within and beyond the limits of the city. Most of all, they all require a brave and decisive move: away from complicity and towards insurgence.

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