

MIND THE GAP: FACTS ABOUT SCARCITY? A CONFRONTATION OF GOVERNMENTAL AND USERS' PERSPECTIVES OF OVERCROWDING IN BRITISH HOUSING

Michael Klein, Barbara Elisabeth Ascher, Isis Nunez Ferrera

Scarcity can be understood as an attempt to state a condition of lack or a limit of availability of something. What and when we consider something to be scarce relates to large extents to the motivation and the respective standpoint from where the claim scarcity is raised. The contextual forces, which range from the material conditions and its use to the cultural practices, norms and values expressed by people living in those specific environments, can be considered a decisive factor for the differences from what one considers as scarce to the other. Ultimately, it is a matter for what purpose we raise the question about scarcity: from a historical distance, from the perspective of the directly affected, as a designer, policy maker or from a critical theoretical perspective. It is, however, as well a question of the limits referred to and a matter of distribution, i.e. who gets what share.

In order to discuss the challenges of scarcity in the discourses in planning and architecture, we look at the specific case of overcrowding in housing. Overcrowding can be considered a specific, 'actual' scarcity, as opposed to the theoretic abstraction of the concept of scarcity. Indeed, we are aware that any form of scarcity is constructed. Our aim is to discuss a dualism which arises from the attempt of separating abstract concepts from praxis within the realm of planning. Because of the relational character of scarcity, the dualism of the abstract category and the everyday experience and practices also affects our understanding of overcrowding. What we consider scarce, does not only relate to the respective context, but, in its relational nature, it shifts and alters with the changing context, which raises the question of how to define or determine scarcity.

27

This is the case in the setting of a standard and an example in the built environment provides the overcrowding standard. Even though overcrowding is not equal to scarcity, it presupposes scarcity: scarcity is underlying overcrowding, for the argument goes 'too many persons' for 'too little' space. Overcrowding – we are referring to the British case here – has been a 'consistent worry'¹ in this country. It could be described as well documented – as a concern of defining the 'problematic living conditions' indeed; the other side of those affected however often goes unheard. The goal of this text is to shed light onto the circumstances and methods in 'defining' the problem of overcrowding through occupancy rates by policy-makers and researchers and, by doing so also helped to 'construct' the problem and to confront it with perceptions of the other

¹ So Former Housing Minister Keith Hill in a parliamentary debate, see HC Deb 20 January 2004 c26

side, of the concerned.

A designative line of scarcity, so it exists, should be identifiable by following various methodical paths. The conduct of research by detour of more than one approach, sometimes termed triangulation in qualitative research methods should help to validate findings by more than one source and a surplus of knowledge. Moreover, multiple viewpoints and methodical approaches further enrich the knowledge by the various epistemological potentials (cf. Flick 2009, p.444). For our purpose here, triangulation is taken up not for validating (a truth of scarcity) by dual evidence, but instead for discussing scarcity as a contingent category in relation to its background, as we can assume that scarcity will differ from one time to another, from one place and perspective to another. Investigation thus the position of the administrative body of the state concerning overcrowding on the one hand and contrasting it with the experience of overcrowding of dwellers on the other should help to elaborate the difficulties and risks of (necessary) standardisation as well as it should create awareness for planners to pay regard to the ambiguity and relativity of the issue of scarcity.

Overcrowding, ‘the too small accommodation for your household’ as British housing organization Shelter explains it² has been a particular a is one thing state interventions into housing have sought to eliminate. To do so, the body of administration draws upon the level of occupancy, a second-order concept based on two - more or less unchallenged- concepts: the one of household and the one of dwelling.³ Both of them, the count of dwellers and the physical configuration, i.e. size and rooms, determine housing according to their standards and together form the basis for measuring occupancy. The exceeding of a rate of occupancy - which often accompanies ‘poverty’ - has been tackled by welfare states. By doing so, the states have re-inscribed their power into housing markets countering over-occupancy by defining a ‘truth’ of overcrowding:

“To ensure that dwellings do not exceed this [level of occupancy], an overcrowding norm is set. The level is in part determined by what housing administrators and politicians believe to be acceptable minimum standards, but naturally there is a potential disagreement about where the line should be drawn’ (Kemeny 1992, p.28).

The history of shifts of the perception of overcrowding does not only hint at the contingency of such standards, but they also reference the problem to generalize the implications on housing on a universal level. Various actors have tried to frame overcrowding differently at different times. What was considered a decent standard of living entailed long-lasting debates in the field in policy-making. It diverges even more when looking at different cultures of living together.

The following sections on the historical discourse related to overcrowding in Britain and the interviews from a case-study on the perceptions of scarcity by the local residents in the London Bromley-by-Bow, the area of study of the EUSS 2012 summer school, illustrates different routes of investigation and their implication on the establishment of the definition of overcrowding.

THE STANDARDISATION OF OVERCROWDING

The standard of overcrowding was first introduced into the British legal system by The Housing

2 As described by Shelter. See: <http://england.shelter.org.uk>

3 Against this schemes much housing research draws upon, Jim Kemeny(1992, p.10) argues for the use of ‘residence’, referring to dwelling as a home in its locational context.

Act from 1935. This standard, set out in part 10 of the act, measures overcrowding by basically two factors. The first, 'sexual overcrowding' is reached if two persons of opposite sexes have to share one room (with the exception of married couples) including living rooms and kitchens. The second is a count of the people - each dweller counting as one, only children below ten years of age are counted as a half - and set in proportion to the number of rooms the accommodation provides. This is measured against a nominal standard scheme (1 room for 2 persons; 2 rooms for 3 persons; etc.). Everything that is not conform to the scheme is overcrowded.⁴

The statutory standard of overcrowding in the 1935 housing act was accompanied by a large-scale survey in the years 1935- 36, measuring the extents of overcrowding and, implicitly, what would be necessary to counter it. In its relation to the survey and beyond, the intended policy for decent living conditions, the standard obtains full meaning. The measurability of overcrowding in housing entered the sphere of law through a policy package and it did so for the purpose of public utility. By means of law, the state sought to establish a standard below which housing was no longer tolerable. Neither should people live in unsanitary nor in overcrowded conditions for reasons of endangerment - of the public health on the one hand and of morality of the people on the other. To be more precise, thus, doing away with overcrowding and the negative epiphenomena, rather than a decent living was the motivation for the housing act.

The setting of the standard of overcrowding gave a measure of scarcity, to determine an almost 'technical truth' of scarcity. This meaning is not present in the object of housing itself or in the living conditions, but it is constructed within the discursive formation as a relation between the institution of the state-government, the practice and means of law and the concern of the occupancy of the built objects⁵. Because of their relational nature, the understanding of scarcity and overcrowding heavily rely to the contextual forces that determine them on a legal basis. In doing so, the management of overcrowding by means of standardization and regulation becomes an instrument of power. As the standard signifies the line that separates what is tolerable from what is not, it also marks and defines scarcity in the occupancy of living space as well as it regulates supply and demand. By the setting of the standard and the policing of an area on base of particular knowledge and practices, the scope of the governmental body and its power extends into new domains. Here, discursive formations re-establish and re-inscribe the power of the state authority in the realm of housing through the new standard, below which the living conditions must not remain.

Once the survey had been conducted and the standard been established as a norm, renting out under conditions of overcrowding meant an offense against the law and resulted in a penalty for the landlord and the eviction of the tenants. The survey was conducted by the Health Department, yet the authority and avengement lied in the scope of the local government, which also allocate social housing to tackle overcrowding.

The discursive formation of power and the standard of overcrowding further imply that, for power is created within, the standard cannot be considered as absolute and set in stone, but it is a possible subject to hegemonic struggles. For the overcrowding standard, this was the case from the onset and the implementation of the Housing Act through the national government. Already at the time of implementation, the Labour party heavily criticised the standard for it implicitly

4 See Housing Act 1935

5 See e.g. Hall (Hall 1997, p.44): 'Meaning is constructed within discourse (...) and nothing which is meaningful exists outside discourse.' The discursive formation exists as a relationship between the involved institutions, practices and more; they are 'are not present in the object'. (Foucault 2002, p.49)

involved the acceptance of everything above standard. With 3.8% of the total households, the number of overcrowded appeared rather low; the standard, so the assumption was to become the legitimization of everything slightly above overcrowding.

Even though the standard was not considered as an ideal and the intention of the government was that its low level should become obsolete and be updated according to respective requirements⁶, it was neither touched nor changed. The housing acts of 1957 and of 1985, in spite of several requests and claims⁷ saw the overcrowding standard from 1935 continued in consolidated forms. Only in course of the Housing Act 2004 the (Labour) Government put effort to amend the overcrowding standard by a new form of measuring, for the one used up until that date was 'no longer defensible in a modern society'. One major reason for that discussion is that overcrowding, as mentioned, is the base drawn on for allocating social housing in determining priorities⁸. Yet because overcrowding is higher amongst social renters, allocation and also necessary re-allocation has to relate to the standard.

The New Labour Government subsequently published several papers on the behalf of the effects of overcrowding and the issue of a change in defining the standard. ⁹ The housing health and safety rating system was considered to tackle overcrowding for a while ¹⁰, yet ultimately, a statutory standard of overcrowding was to remain as a 'fall-back'. The proposition therefore was to follow the Bedroom Standard developed in the 1960s and used in the Survey on English Housing since 1993/94. The Bedroom Standard regards composition of the household, age and sex when contrasting a target standard model of allocation of bedrooms¹¹ to the factual number of bedrooms that the apartment provides (convertible spaces such as kitchens are no longer counted). It is complemented by the Space Standard(including a referencing breakdown of floor area) with the Overcrowding Bill as amendments of the statutory 1985 (1936) definition. This bill was presented as a secondary legislation in 2004 to be tested by pathfinder authorities, which favoured to adopt the new standard and from then on formed also the basis for strategy documents. The amendment was projected for 2009, underlining a phased and manageable move. In 2011, the new Coalition Government again posed the question whether the 1985 overcrowding definition was eligible to describe acceptable living conditions anew. A majority of respondents said that it was no longer fit for purpose. The respondents' suggestion was to use the bedroom standard.

The change and its relating debates are interesting for the issues that have been risen along. The Labour Government has repeatedly underlined not to defend the existing standard, yet refused 'symbolic gestures'. In the debate, the governments promoted the bedroom standard, but they shifted to focus on strategies to tackle overcrowding, to differentiate social housing supply and adapt it to urgent needs, to delivering more affordable homes and on strategies how to re-allocate 'under-occupied' housing. The 'hesitant' implementation of a new statutory standard lies in its enormous impact. Raising the standard would ultimately increase the demand for housing. Instead, one rather favoured improving the housing supply. Furthermore, a new standard could fall back on the local authorities and the respective allocation schemes for social housing, because

6 See HC Deb 30 January 1935 c364

7 For example:: later example: HC Deb 29 January 1996 vol 270 cc647-750

8 Housing Act 1996

9 See: (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2004)(Dep. for Communities and Local Government 2006)

10 The proposal of a New Housing Fitness Standard to tackle overcrowding

11 The Bill schedules a bedroom for each person over 21 years of age, for cohabitating couples, for two of the same sex between 10 and 20, for two persons under ten, two of same sex if one is between 10 and 20 and the other under 10, for any person not fitting to this standard. Cf. Overcrowding Bill 2004 , p.2

housing issues still is a public concern. Ultimately, the debate on the overcrowding standard raises the question of standards in general - not only in the efforts needed for amendment, but also who is benefitting from it.

The bedrooms standard addresses a rather low level of overcrowding as the British Housing Condition Survey after the implementation shows: approximately 3 % of the total households are overcrowded in the 2008-09 survey. It varies by tenure, highest among social renters (6.7%) and above average among private renters (5.4%) ¹² and by ethnicity and it is higher in urban areas headed by London. Already in 2010, however, the NHF prognosticated a drastic rise of overcrowding as an effect of the crisis and recent notes seem to confirm this expectancy and recent austerity cuts have also hit the housing sector particularly on the side of low income.

THE PERCEPTION OF OVERCROWDING

‘We have two singles and two doubles here, and seven people altogether. My husband and my son have the singles. Myself and the baby boy, we have a double. The other double, my mother-in-law shares with the two girls. She is here permanently [...]’ ¹³

This account of a 36 year old married woman with four kids on their bed-room situation in a council flat in London, depicts the gap between the legal definition of overcrowding and the perception of the described condition as a state of being filled with more people or things than is desirable. ¹⁴ Using the survey on housing conditions in Bromley-by-Bow that was conducted by the London-team of the SCIBE research group between autumn 2010 and spring 2012 as a source, the following findings reveal a different notion of overcrowding than the official statistics are able to uncover. ¹⁵

The selected interviews as summarized in the brief for the ‘Scarce times: alternatives futures’ competition in May 2012 and in the brief for the EUSS in September 2012, are based on 105 semi-structured interviews with local residents in Bromley-by-Bow, supported by diaries and photographic essays by some of the inhabitants of the area. The following examples are not meant to deliver a complete picture of all possible impacts of overcrowding, but they take advantage of the social situatedness of the research data: ‘Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles- and to the problems of the individual life.’ (Mills 2000, p.226) The qualitative material hence emphasizes the local dimension of overcrowding and the impact it has on everyday-life of the affected residents. ¹⁶ The empirical material of the case-study on Bromley-by-Bow shows that only 10% of the interviewed residents lived under conditions

31

12 See (Communities and Local Government 2010)

13 Here and in the following: SCIBE and The Architecture Foundation (SCIBE & The Architectural Foundation 2012)

14 Collins English Dictionary

15 The increasing use of ethnographic material within interdisciplinary spatial practice is noteworthy. See Jane Rendell (2010, p.175) ‘...the ways in which disciplines foreground and value certain patterns of enquiry and knowledge production, and ignore, marginalize and even repress others. Perhaps the very interest that architecture currently has in ethnographic practice is present precisely because these methodologies contain qualities and activities that have been and are currently cast aside and devalued in architecture...’

16 The open-ended approach towards an investigation based on personal encounters has obvious weaknesses looking at the possibility to validate and universalize findings, especially if the standpoint and intentions of the interviewer does not become obvious. A certain doubt about biases of the research has to remain, especially when the theoretical backgrounds, power-relations between actors and the context of the interview situation are not made sufficiently transparent.

considering the legal definition (SCIBE & The Architectural Foundation 2012, p.27), based on the Bedroom Standard¹⁷.

Fifteen per cent of the interviewed residents shared accommodation with persons they were not related to, not necessarily under conditions of overcrowding. According to the documentation of selected interviews, we can assume, that there might be a larger number of men than women, who share accommodation with non-relatives. Most of them are either renting a place together as a group or are subletting from a private owner, who lives in the flat. All female interviewees sharing accommodation had some kind of family relation to the other members within the same household. Although it might seem as if only a minority experiences overcrowding themselves, a larger community reports being affected, especially by the misuse of public and semi-private space for private purposes such as laundry and storage.

Overcrowding and the quality of the accommodation are treated as two separate issues in the survey, with a separate account on the building standard and comfort level of the apartments. This important link between those issues is inflicted by the fact, that not all rooms of an apartment could be used for permanent habitation in the most extreme cases due to their health-hazardous conditions or certain day-activities due to poor thermal insulation or lacking daylight, as the following example of Claire, a woman in her late 40ties, who lives in a 1-bedroom apartment in Bromley-by-Bow delineates:

‘At the night she and her sister sleep together on a mattress on the floor of the sitting room. They both have problems breathing in the bedroom-the walls and ceiling have become overgrown with mould’¹⁸

Raising standards of living had and have impact both on the definition of overcrowding, but as well on the expectations connected to the availability of certain standards for everyone. As 31year-old mother of four Bahiya’s following statement of illustrates

‘You know what makes us have take-out food? That kitchen! I don’t want to cook here. A big kitchen to cook; not like my box! A bigger kitchen, more storage, an additional toilet- that would be good! A nice dining room- that’s what makes you happy and lead a healthy life!’¹⁹

Notions of desirable apartment standards often influenced by an ideal of residence that represents spatial equality relative to others:

‘Where I come from, sharing is good. But here, I am waiting for me to have my own room!’²⁰

It may be noted at this point, that there is some indication that the perception of overcrowding either as a ‘choice of living’ or a ‘denied better’ situation seems to influence the way people talk about these issues, although their living situation might be clearly defined as overcrowded according to the given standard. In Phillipa’s case, a 48year old married woman with one child

17 The following definition based on the Bedroom Standard has been given: 1 room = 2 people, 2 rooms = 3 people, 3 rooms = 5 people, 4 rooms = 7.5 people, 5 rooms or more = 2 people per room, and did not take into account room sizes

18 (SCIBE & The Architectural Foundation 2012, p.41)

19 i.b.d., p.81

20 i.b.d., p.81

that lives in a one bedroom Council flat, she chooses to take in family members on a temporary basis:

‘Two nieces stay with her often, and so a lot of space in her sitting room is occupied by the bunk bed they sleep in. Phillipa cannot find anything to complain about with regards to her flat and thinks of it being in a very good condition.’²¹

This positive attitude towards overcrowding may be especially true for homeowners that are subletting parts of their apartments in order to finance the down payment of their mortgages. This becomes evident in the case of separated 47 year old home-owner Ahmed:

‘Inspired by the Chinese couple next door-who let out their bedroom and added a partition wall between the originally open-plan kitchen and the sitting-room Ahmed found a Bangladeshi flatmate. He charges him 750 Pound a month and is happy to have found a way to ease his financial burdens- and someone to keep him company when he comes home from work in the evenings. Even, if that means sacrificing his only bedroom. ‘The sitting room looks quite cramped now, as I am using it as my bedroom. There is not enough space to hang clothes my flatmate is using the back of the door.’²²

In which regard the provided dwellings are capable of providing multiple activities simultaneously or asynchronous in a night-day rhythm seems crucial on how residents could adapt spaces, when facing a housing crisis due to financial distress, or relocation, or other conditions that trigger overcrowding for example hosting a long-term visitors from abroad. Statements as the following from Jhuma and Ziaul, a married couple with two children that live temporarily in a two bedroom flat assigned by Poplar HARCA, the local Housing and Regeneration Community Association, are thus not uncommon in a multi-cultural community as Bromley-by-Bow:

‘My mother-in-law is here to visit right now. She can only bear to stay with us a few weeks at a time, because she misses the company, the community back home. It’s like jail here she says.’²³

The significance of the home as a gathering space becomes increasingly relevant when the financial means of a family do not allow them to participate in social, cultural or commercial life in the same extend as others. This maybe especially true for children, whose needs vary widely according to their age: ‘Our flat is overcrowded. I mean, it’s alright now, but when the kids grow older it will be difficult.’²⁴ Bahiya, a 31year old single mother of four kids living in a 2 bedroom flat worries. As she continues:

‘There are just buildings, nothing more. It will be too many people in one place soon. No freedom for the kids! If you put them in the house, they will be frustrated. They won’t get self-confidence. You can’t let them play on the balcony-there are people who need to take a

21 i.b.d., p.96

22 i.b.d., p.46-59

23 i.b.d., p.75

24 i.b.d., p.72

rest, who need to go to work. They will complain about the kids.’²⁵

Widening the scope of the understanding of overcrowding to a local and regional context, it becomes obvious that measuring persons accommodated per apartment only measures one scale of the problem, while neglecting for instance the scale of dwelling densities – number of residents per km² - as a crucial factor for the living conditions of larger areas.

FROM OVERCROWDING TO SCARCITY?

The residents’ perspective on issues of overcrowding contrasts and/or complements the understanding of overcrowding as described and defined in official standards. In such a way, taking into account the substantial information the material provides has capacities to fulfil a substantial role: First, it would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of overcrowding. With the collected information, overcrowding can no longer be broken down to a simple persons-per-rooms ratio. The material of interviews assembles multiple experiences of residents that accounts for an ordinary knowledge about overcrowding and the perceived scarcity and the everyday tactics to cope with these conditions of scarcity. In doing so, this added perspective could also serve as an empowerment strategy directed towards overcoming the hegemony of interpretation and the definition of what is scarce by official institutions within an established political system as the basis for housing policies. Research thus can be understood as a tool, which underlines the relativity of the hegemonic practices in defining as well as it creates opportunities for alternative interpretations and possible future interventions. Doing so, the ‘critical theoretical perspective aims at producing knowledge and understanding that has the potential to change the world for the better’ (Soja 2010, p.192).

Regarding the research on scarcity and the built environment, the complementary investigation of the official perspective and one considering the knowledge of residents and users could contribute to a deeper understanding of the issue. None of them is actually able to map the whole field of processes or impacts that contribute to a ‘multi-perspective’ picture of the problem that takes into account various positions.

Scarcity is shaped by complex local and global social and political processes, historical determinations, respective time frames of investigation and ambitions for future scope of action. The framework of how to go about when researching on scarcity is therefore crucial, as it will establish certain relationships of factors and emphasize certain aspects over others. Due to the complex, interdisciplinary and abstract nature of scarcity, no one single method would guarantee a research result of a complete overview over scarcity. It is therefore necessary to ask ourselves which kind of information we need in order to make more informed decisions within housing policies, urban-planning and architecture and how this could be translated into non-reductionist research strategies, supporting the idea, that a complex problem is more than an account of its different constituents. A complementary approach does, however, not need to remain limited to the field of research. Particularly the field housing, architecture and the built environment that shows gradual transitions from research activity to implementation and policy would provide manifold aspects of applying different methodical approaches.

While such perspectives will not easily come up with consensual solutions for the possible disagreement of the respective interests, they provide the necessary stable foundation of

definitions that would prepare the common ground for fruitful dialogues. The implied potential for disagreement destabilized especially second-order concepts, such as overcrowding or scarcity. For the governmental perspective of planning authority this implies partially abandoning holding a single truth of scarcity and overcrowding. Moreover, this would entail the potential for a truly different conception of what policy can be: Shifting from the order of a top-down perspective in the very sense of policing towards a 'weak' and open understanding of non-pre-determined policy as a social process of negotiation.

References

- Communities and Local Government, 2010. English Housing Survey Headline Report 2008-09, London.
- Dep. for Communities and Local Government, 2006. Tackling Overcrowding in England.
- Flick, U., 2009. An Introduction to Qualitative Research, London: SAGE.
- Foucault, M., 2002. The Archaeology of Knowledge, Abingdon England ; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hall, S., 1997. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, London: SAGE.
- Kemeny, J., 1992. Housing and Social Theory, London - New York: Routledge.
- Mills, C.W., 2000. The Sociological Imagination, Oxford University Press.
- Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004. The Impact of Overcrowding on Health and Education: A Review of the evidence and Literature, London.
- Rendell, J., 2010. Afterword: working through the field. In S. Ewing et al., eds. Architecture and Field/Work. Abington: Taylor & Francis.
- SCIBE & The Architectural Foundation, 2012. Scarce Times: Alternative Futures. London, University of Westminster, London: University of Westminster.
- Shelter, Available at: <http://england.shelter.org.uk>.
- Soja, E.W., 2010. Seeking Spatial Justice, UnivOf Minnesota Press.