

DISCOVERING SCARCITY: URBAN STORYTELLING. TEN DAYS OF INVENTIONS, DOUBTS, ENCOUNTERS, FALLACIES AND WORKING TOOLS

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[1] SCARCITY THE SNAKE (PREMISES)

TOOL ONE: ASK YOURSELF WHY

The first day I heard about scarcity, I was primarily curious about its meaning. In ten days, I discovered that no univocal explanation is possible. We can start debunking a myth: scarcity is not just a condition that exists in the poorest countries in the world. The urban experience of scarcity is ambiguous as a snake which sneaks around us changing its shape. Scarcity, suddenly, appears as the other face of richness, the dark edge of crystal skyscrapers: in the age of endless desire related to possession, whenever we discover inequalities, we see the fail of redistribution represented by a widespread condition of scarcity.

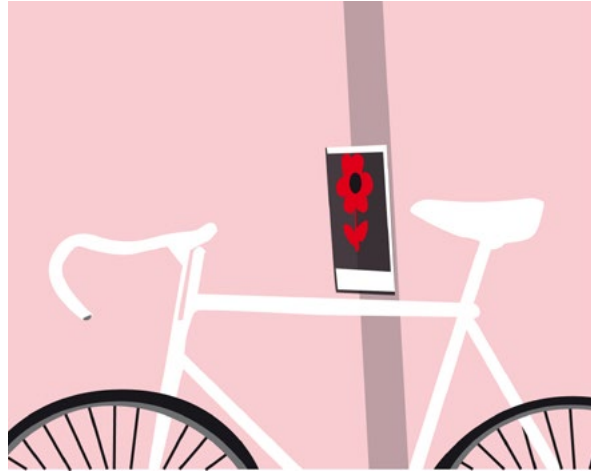
I begin to look for a different angle, partially dark and partially shining, which allows me not to determine if I am seeing scarcity, but to understand the reason why the urban environment can be seen as scarce (just) by certain people. Now I am ready to discover when the snake changes its skin, and why.

[2] SCARCITY AND EXPECTATIONS (IN SITU)

TOOL TWO: MENTAL MAPPING

Bromley-by-Bow is a question mark between Canary Wharf and the Olympic Games site: how many Londoners would be able to draw the proper limits of this wide portion of land inhabited by a 60% of Bangladeshis and few bored British? 237

Sugarhouse Studio is far from the metro station, especially because I have taken the wrong exit. Walking down the High Street I feel I am getting lost, drunk of the smell of motor oil melted with fast food. Not far I see the Bow Roundabout. On the opposite side of the High street, crossing the monumental traffic island where a skinny church is standing, there is a white bicycle left as a memorial, teaching me that traffic is the boss in here. Rain and cold weather cover my first impression of Bromley-by-Bow, but would it be different if it was sunny? Walking through Bow means to go up and down, crossing infrastructures and rivers, orienting through new and old landmarks. I expected an urban decay I don't see, the evidence of abandonment that I cannot proof basing on the vital industrial area, dirty and disconnected, but fascinating and populated.



Before visiting Bromley-by-Bow I read the statistics and masterplan of the area and I was, let's say, well-learned on the topic. But the topics in the field were different.

One day, Peter said that it's all about expectations: the prejudice influences our impressions, our feelings, our critiques. Sometimes, it's better not to be prepared, to be a virgin, for a spontaneous first impression.

[3] SCARCITY TALKS (PEOPLE)

TOOL THREE: CONSTANTS

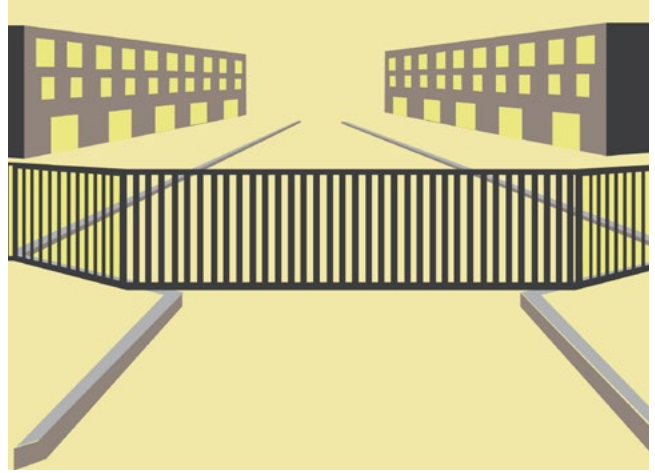
Trying to get the information you want from the people you interview, never works; during ten days of talking in Bromley-by-Bow I learned three important things:

- * Forget to be an architect: don't use terms like urban environment, accessibility and cityscape.
- * Be transparent but not rude: never ask directly what you want to know.
- * Try to find what people love and talk about it, using this argument to better understand how they live and if they are happy. Start to belong to their world.

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In the industrial area close to the river Lea, Jane helps me to analyse Bromley-by-Bow in depth: she tells me she likes the neighbourhood but she doesn't remember any place which she feels attached to, except Victoria Park and Canary Wharf's restaurants, all located outside the limits of Bromley-by-Bow. She reminds me of my grand-aunt and thus I feel like I can have a more relaxed conversation with her. I come back to her workplace twice. During these talks I learn of some problems in Bow; first of all, community disconnection. Everyone I talk to seems really busy in their own everyday lives, suspended in a private microcosm. Trying to learn more about their attitudes and desires gets tougher.

Talking is never just talking; it's more like searching for a contact point. Jane becomes my constant, my personal way to go deeper.



[4] SCARCITY CREATES A NEW LANDSCAPE (AT NIGHT)

TOOL FOUR: SELF-ANALYSIS

The common feeling that there is not enough space for all, that in order to improve the quality of life in our cities it is compulsory to provide them with new facilities, is a consequence of the global trend to consume rather than use. At the base of this phenomenon we find one prejudice exceptionally damaging: the idea that New is best. New is more beautiful; faster; easier to use. The truth is that cities don't need new functions and objects all the time.

The problem then moves from a lack of resources to their wrong placement. Cities are already full of stuff, but people are prevented from accessing these resources. In order to survive in times of crisis, to use differently (instead of to use less) seems important. How many territories can be used more, better, than today? Will the hyper-planning that London has in mind for Bromley-by-Bow consider the potential of spaces in-between, or will it super-impose flat-pack facilities and places?

The new landscapes created by scarcity could be an opportunity for institutional planners to involve communities in something that is different from the abused cliché of participation.

[5] GO BACK TO SCARCITY (A PROJECT)

TOOL FIVE: PURPOSE-GLASSES

Which level of intervention is still possible? The scarcity landscape forces us to reconsider the role of planning. Indeed, bottom-up planning does not just mean to ask people what they want to do with existing and future spaces; the aim of planners is not just to define rules for the production of new spaces and functions. The goal is to discover the possibility of making in the public realm with nothing but imagination.

Luckily, space is always a new discovery. Thus, when I come back to the streets and squares of Bromley-by-Bow, thinking of stimulating people's reactions I discover how surprisingly dynamic the common space becomes when you look at it with a specific purpose.



Usually we experience the urban space with a short range of uses and most of them are predetermined by an official function, because centuries of zoning prevent us to think about the multi-functionality of each space. On the contrary, we should say to ourselves 'Find a place, give new rules'. The Ginger Bread Path (below) invented by my team goes in this direction: it is a tool which helps people in recognizing the flexibility of urban space and aims to improve the observation skills of citizens and their ability to create new coloured tones in their grey neighbourhood.

[6] SCARCITY IS HAPPINESS (THE END)

TOOL SIX: POLLYANNA WAY THINKING

Walking through Bromley-by-Bow I ask myself if the missing link might be just a sparkle of happiness in the interaction between people and spaces: neither the production of new spaces nor their re-arrangement can really improve the city scene if we miss urban life.

As a rational architect, it is hard for me to define happiness as a possible tool for planning. Still this emotion, associated with memories and future perspectives, is the (most subjective and partial) marker we have to understand community satisfaction; the identity, the pride to belong to a piece of land instead of another one. We cannot quantify it, but in times of crisis it could probably be an advantage.

Under condition of scarcity, planners have to recognize the potentialities of existing built space, its capacity of generating joy, fun and intense experiences. The guys from Assemble were able to transform a petrol station into a theatre and the underpass of a highway into a playful meeting point! If scarcity is the mother of invention, happiness can be the one condition we need to deal with in order to transform contemporary urban spaces into generators of individual and social experiences.