THE CONTEXT OF SCARCITY: A VERY BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO BROMLEY-BY-BOW

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Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment (SCIBE) is a 3-year collaborative research project with teams in London, Vienna, Reykjavik and Oslo. In London, the project looks at the potential of creativity to intervene in the processes that trigger, maintain and reproduce scarcity with a special focus on Bromley-by-Bow, east London, one of the UK's most 'deprived' communities. Instead of inventing or appropriating pre-defined issues around scarcity, we designed our research to bring out what kinds of scarcities are experienced by people in 'deprived' areas, where, we assumed, scarcities of all sorts should certainly be present. Our aim was to develop a non-instrumental 'design brief' which should serve as the basis for work with selected designers (architects) and other creative design and planning professionals. In the hope to understand what scarcity means in the context of a 'deprived' east London ward, we photographed and observed, asked 105 residents to take part in a survey and more than 30 to contribute their own photographs and to tell the stories behind them.

UNCERTAIN FUTURES

When we first began our investigation, Bromley-by-Bow offered reason for hope and for concern. For concern, in that the ward's population was expected to double within the current decade, further impoverished by the Government's recent funding cuts and newly introduced policy reforms. For hope, in that an astonishing amount of cosmetic work was underway or had recently been completed; however, the on-going aggressive commodification of former Council housing in the area was blatantly apparent. When speaking to residents and business owners in the area, we encountered a ubiquitous fear of the future, especially in view of changing planning regulations and public policies: 'What happens when our lease runs out, now that the housing association has taken over? Can we afford the new lease? What will happen to our livelihoods?' These were the questions raised by local shop keepers and business operators; seeing the 'middle class' march in, not one of them seemed confident.

About one third of our participants were college or university graduates, whilst more than ten per cent had only attended primary school. Many were unemployed, but two fifths of our respondents were employed, whilst another fifth consisted of students and pensioners. We found that 46% of our respondents lived on less than £10,000 a year. Three quarters of the people we interviewed lived in flats, followed by those who lived in terraced houses (21.2%). More than eighty-five per cent rented their homes – mostly from the Council or a Housing Association. Less

than 15% owned or leased their homes. Seventy-three per cent of homeowners felt that they had to restrict their energy use because they were afraid they would not be able to afford it. In total, however, 'only' less than half of all of our respondents were worried about their energy bills. About 40% of all respondents received housing benefits.

'Only' 10.6% stated that they lived under overcrowded conditions. Our interviews revealed how housing standards and occupation rates mean little in a context of constant and continuous 'overcrowding' and when public policy, Council and Housing Associations alike fail to deliver to actual need and instead cater to the wants of another, parallel middle-class. Council attempts to tackle overcrowding and the scarcity of large family homes by offering incentives to move to those under-occupying are met with disdain and resentment: many of these under-occupiers are senior citizens, they have lived their lives in these flats and have watched their children grow, they are attached to these flats and wish to hold on to their memories.

There were the mixed feelings and perceptions of having to wait for the council to provide services, on the one hand; and of being entitled to these services, on the other. Living in council flats, it seemed, discourages agency: alterations are not allowed; thus prohibiting the appropriation of space; thus prohibiting the identification with space; thus prohibiting attachment to space; thus prohibiting agency. Once strong, the sense of community – built on the experience of shared facilities in walking distance: corner shops, dental office, and related facilities were once available in walking distance and neighbours made use of them, thus meeting and bonding with others – has been transformed into a sense of loss as developers moved in to replace the familiar with centralised facilities further away.

There was a shared sense of being invaded as former neighbours were displaced and unknown individuals or developers began to invest in refurbished and new-built flats that then sit empty for years in the face of acute shortage of homes for real people. The show flats, we heard, are routinely bigger than the ones that people end up buying; many were on interest only mortgages, getting nowhere close to their dream of ownership, the promise of profit.

THE NOTION OF COMMUNITY

Only about one quarter of our interviewees were born in the UK; almost two thirds were born in Bangladesh, the majority of them in Sylhet, to be precise. The majority were married and had children. Our in-depth interviews began to reveal complex histories of engineered and inherited scarcities: tracing the triggers of migration leads on to scarcities within entirely different time periods and geographical contexts, histories of occupation and intentional impoverishment as practiced by the British Empire; of exclusion and marginalisation based on place of origin in the own country; of hope and sacrifice upon arrival in Britain; of struggles to survive and struggles to adapt; of dreams and hopes for better futures back 'home'; of the impact of foreign remittances on the conditions of food and water scarcity in the home country, where building and construction activities contribute to the fast decline of the environment; of value systems transformed by the impact of the 'dominant group' in the UK and lost to the logics of the prevailing market systems; of family relations becoming difficult as individuals try to make space for themselves; of journeys back and forth, between Britain and Bangladesh; of feeling torn between the feeling of responsibility for the members of their family and the desire to do better for themselves; of negotiated existences and of real need – not only of the material means to survive, but also of instructions: how does one navigate the system?

'I was better off in Bangladesh' – a frequently encountered statement, revealing the constant

awareness, and sometimes regret, that there is an alternative, another place waiting to become home, again; the continuous knowledge that being in the UK was and is a choice: 'You know how it is... You don't know what happens next in Bangladesh'.

On average, people in our sample had lived 8.5 years in their current accommodation. They had moved to Bromley-by-Bow because the Council had given them a flat in the area; whoever had come 'voluntarily' had done so because of the good transportation links or the established Bengali community and the advantages this brings in terms of proximity to relatives, friends and mosques. Despite these motivations, more than half of our informants stated that they never took part in community events. An astonishing 25% of the people we spoke with did not know of a community centre nearby, despite the proximity of the famous Bromley-by-Bow Centre. The fact that a large proportion of residents in the area are of Bangladeshi origin seemed to contribute to the invisibility of any potentially existing communal self-help network (i.e., 'community', as we understand it, is both gendered and hidden; it does not happen in 'public' space).

In fact, we encountered not one, but many communities in Bromley-by-Bow, all intertwined. Each of the existing faith-, ethnicity- or class-based communities worked in their respective own interest, claiming their own space and protecting the assets available to them. The competition for available community spaces between the remaining 'white' population in the area and the Bangladeshi newcomers is large, contributing to moments of hostility between groups as well as individual members.

REGARDING PLANNING AND DESIGN

The architects we spoke with complained about the difficulty of achieving the promises that Councils and Housing Associations have made: decanting decrepit housing blocks is complex, making sure families are moved directly into their new long-term homes, avoiding temporary accommodation, designing for maximum flat number, maximum profit, minimum space... Repeated accounts on the struggle to meet the developer's needs, on the expense of the needs of future residents. Can we assume that commodification of a 'natural' talent or skill, such as creativity, places it on the market – in this case, in the form of 'design'? Does the commodification of creativity have potentially dangerous consequences? If creativity is triggered in response to external challenges to the system – such as, of course, the emergence of scarcities – is design, as commodified creativity, the appropriate skill to assure a resilient response? Creativity may respond to needs. Design responds to wants. Would creativity elsewhere, outside of a capitalist context, serve the evolutionary goals of adaptation and survival – within the capitalist context, as design, it serves first and foremost the accumulation of capital. What, then, are we, as designers, to do under conditions of scarcity?