

## **SCARCITY IN PRACTICE: ASSEMBLE AND SUGARHOUSE STUDIOS**

If scarcity is the disjunction between wants/ambitions and the resources at hand, our work has been a process of prioritizing things, or the process of finding alternative means to fulfil ambitions. It is worth saying that what brought us together to work independently and in an undefined/continuously evolving way [as Assemble, a design and architecture collective], was our previous experience working in offices. The scarcity could be described as the lack of integrated design, or an understanding of how a task relates to the overall project ambition; how a CAD drawing relates to the act of casting concrete.

As our practice grows, more ‘scarcities’ creep up, such as financial resources in relation to growing ambition, our experience in relation to a desire to maintain a democratic management, etc... Sometimes the realization of the ‘scarcity’ in a project, or in a situation, is what frames subsequent problem solving. Ignoring the ‘scarcity’, i.e. not taking a step back, has always had a detrimental effect on the work – for example not working out the budget/sustainability of a thing; relying too much on the power of on-site instinct; or vice versa. Similarly allowing the scarcity to lead the design has produced unexpected results. For Cineroleum for example, the desire to recreate the luxury of the picture palace combined with the need to find the cheapest, most durable materials. Similarly much consideration was invested into the details of the foyer, as well as the programming of the films – from popcorn holders to staff uniforms, car noise friendly films, everything was important. Not to mention the importance of making profit on the bar, as a way of covering our overheads.

### **SUGARHOUSE STUDIOS**

38 Sugarhouse Studios is a project which gradually developed in collaboration with the LLDC. It all began with our scarcity of storage space for all the Cineroleum materials which we have inherited after completion of the project (mainly chairs and curtains). Calling up our local councils to find an abandoned room for all our stuff led us to Unit A2 on 107 High Street in Stratford – a light industrial building, owned in 2011 by the LDA property, then the LLDC and now LandProp Holding. We initially agreed to retrofit the property, to accommodate and programme a fortnightly community film club in return for rent and a place to work. Prior to this Assemble existed in each other’s living rooms and pubs or via lengthy email threads. This building was in a state of disrepair, full of previous tenants’ things; it has been squatted for a few years since the Griffin Signs business went bankrupt.

Now the whole Sugarhouse Lane area is earmarked for development - the 13 acre residential mixed use development Strand East. The certainty of our building’s demolition and the initial

short term lease (our first agreement was only for one year) had a direct impact on construction of the space. Gradually the project grew, a pizza oven was installed, local organisations got involved in our public programme, our office gradually set up in the back of the building, forming more of a residency. With the public events programme, we tried to focus on issues related to development of east London, got people involved in making things as well as just having fun in this big light industrial building. Casting concrete with school children via Groundwork; celebrating the new Young Mayor with Newham Youth Council; running across the A11 with Run Dem Crew; or watching Utopia London followed by Q&A with the director.

Although Sugarhouse Studios has worked as a destination, or venue for conferences and special events such as the Summer School, general footfall has proven difficult on daily basis. However, it was the recognition of our place in the Sugarhouse Yard and the wider Stratford High Street business community, which became a significant part of our residency. Making the connections to our neighbours, such as the two music schools and building equipment suppliers, or the residents across the road, is gradually shaping our ambitions for the space. Gaining popularity with students as a place to buy food and play ping pong, we secured a contract with Access to Music to become their official canteen. Similarly, the popularity of events and the benefit of 'creative' enterprise in what could otherwise be a semi-demolition site have helped us gain a lease extension with LandProp as the new landlord of the site. With at least another two years ahead, potentially longer (depending on the speed of Strand East), we hope to take part in the rapid and particular development of this part of Stratford High Street.



**Figure 1-4 The Cineroleum - one of Assemble's projects - transformed a disused gas station into a cinema.**  
**Source: Assemble.**