

SCIBE

WORKING PAPER NR.

SCARCITY + CREATIVITY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

9

THE IMPOSSIBLE HAPPENING

Andreas Rumpfhuber

THE IMPOSSIBLE HAPPENING

9

A Working Paper/Programmatic Manual for SCIBE
Andreas Rumpfhuber

The individual and the group cannot avoid a certain existential plunge into chaos. This is already what we do every night when we abandon ourselves to the world of dreams. The main question is what we gain from this plunge: a sense of disaster, or the revelation of new outlines of the possible?

Félix Guattari: "Pour une refondation des pratiques sociales", in: Le Monde Diplomatique, 1992, S. 1.

Along the most universal understanding of creativity as simply a "new combination of information" (Holm-Hadulla: 2010) I will argue here that creativity is constitutive linked to action, but is essentially *unforseeable* and *uncontrollable*, thus cannot be measured nor calculated¹. In doing so I propose a concept of creativity that is strongly linked to the concept of "the political" in recent aesthetic and political theory (ie. Ranciere, Marchart). "The political" has been specified as the *associative aspect* of a political action [assoziativer Aspekt politischen Handelns] (Hannah Arendt), whereas "politics" is being deliniated as *dissociative* (Carl Schmitt). The first constitutes a mode of "living together" (Zusammenleben), the other encompasses "power" (Macht), whereas the two concepts and its characters together – "the political" and "politics" – make up the autonomous sphere of politics.²

¹ This also implies an understanding of Information that is not necessary already decoded and known (understandbare).

² Agonism, Antagonism, etc.

My aim is to take up the very initial aspiration of our research endeavour that took its starting point in the financial crisis of early 2009. Back then, I had the feeling, it was the idea to understand the crisis as an opportunity for (radical) change. The approach was to twist the idea of creativity (of the designer) that – in an burgeoise tradition – is linked to abundancy and growth, towards an concept of creativity housed within limits or scarcities. By doing so we imagined to be able to create a powerful tool³ for action – for research and the design-practice – that could add to/foster (radical) change. A change, at least for me, that was understood as being able to create a counter-reality to dominant liberal discourses. The hope was that our research design could enable us to render a newly re-politicized practice of architecture and design. We decided to test our tools specifically in an anyhow ideologically contested domain – that of housing⁴: (In Vienna) at first to test the tool by analysing the model of social-democratic public housing provision and ultimately to *act on it* by proposing scenarios for a future model.

Positioning design-practices within financial capitalism

From the very start of our research we asked for the role of creativity within situations framed by limits. On a broader scale the global crisis of capital starting in 2009 initially framed our research-project, and is still framing it. Generally one has to state that the crisis and its “discursive aftermath” influences in many ways each of our empirical data: since the national elections in Fall 2010, the London project is framed by an ever more rigid

³ Understanding concepts as tools: “...concepts were after all nothing but tools and that theories were equivalent to the boxes that contained them (their power scarcely able to surpass the services that they rendered in circumscribed fields, that is, at the time of historical sequences that were inevitably delimited)” – cf. Felix Guattari: *Microphysics of Power / Micropolitics of Desire*, in: *FG: Soft Subversions, Texts and Interviews 1977-1985*, 278-290, here: 279.

⁴ Liberal housing market, Public Housing Provision, etc. – in short a field defined within architectural discourse.

policy of liberal politics, cutting of funds, and abolishing the welfare state as such by out-sourcing basic social services to its citizens. In Vienna the discursive framing is by far more moderate, when it comes to questions of economic downturn. Still, the Vienna Model of Public Housing is strongly dependent on the international financial markets, as well as international discourses: i.e. sustainability and limits of growth, resulting in a vivid discussion and questioning of how the model as such can be sustained.

Still one has to be careful in the analysis of the very situation. Many of the criticisms of the crisis that have been discussed in the last months are shortcomings of an utter misunderstanding of the modes and ways in which contemporary capitalism is at work in our society, by applying old and somehow dated models of political economy onto a contemporary situation. That is: one needs to take into account a radical change in how capitalism is framing today's society.⁵ Most convincing and most useful for the SCIBE project are descriptions of capitalism as "cognitive capitalism" (i.e.: Pahl, Mayer: 2007, etc.) or "financial capitalism" (i.e.: Christian Marazzi: 2010, Stephan Schulmeister: 2002, etc.), assigning "a new spirit" to capitalism (cf. Chiapello, Boltansky: 2005). In short these theories stress the fact of a rupture within the logic of capitalism that roughly coincides – on a societal level – with the protests and uproar in the late 1960s and early 1970s and can be associated with the dissolution of the Bretton-Woods system in 1973 (as done, for example by the Austrian economist Stephan Schulmeister).⁶

Thus rupture in capitalism has been accompanied by a shift in the understanding of the practice of architecture and design. In the bourgeoisie tradition there was (and still is) the idea of the "colonial" architect. He is the

⁵ This is especially important for a different framing of historic material. The Vienna housing model in 1970 was organized in a different way than it is today. This might become crucial for our project when the Oslo-team looks into Stavanger in 1970s ...

⁶ Still there is a question for the Norway project (something that also could apply at least for the Vienna project, if we start to imply historic, 1970s projects as well) – that is: the constitution of capitalism exactly at the point of rupture as described above – since the finding of oil coincides with that very periode ...

one who stands above a situation. He is the one that can delineate a problem (whether he sees a morally abject situation or not, whether he engages in moral or ethical questions does not matter within this model), and ultimately he is the one to propose the best solution for the very situation. This bourgeois concept of the architect places the designer at the outside. The designer is external to a given situation in which he acts upon. (Examples: MVRDV in Vienna, Humanistic Designers such as Victor Papanek...) Contrary to this, there is a contemporary idea of the architect that I'd call the "post-colonial" designer. She places herself in the midst of a situation. She is part of the reality that she designs for. Always being aware of her very situatedness within a construct. Thus, such an understanding of the architecture/design practice is deeply grounded in, dependent on, and relational to a societal reality (formed by discourses, including not only speech acts but also things).

It is exactly within such a fluid, shifting and ever more scarce situation of financial capitalism⁷ *in which* the "post-colonial" designer/architect is placed and today aims to re-evaluate a practice of design and architecture. It is exactly in this respect that we need to question the role of creativity, by asking if the application of creativity in a design-process is guaranteeing a constant and seamless mobilization of all the forces that are in play? Or, if the moment of creativity today might be an event of rupture, of interruption of the continuous flow of financial capitalism. In other words: Does design or architecture ensure the streamlining and optimization of a given scarce and constraint situation? Thus, is design making an inescapable situation a bit more cosy, a bit more aesthetic? Or, on the other hand, can architecture and design re-organize a situation for the very moment, does it introduce or re-assemble a given situation in yet unforeseen and unpredicted ways; does

⁷ This situation is of course only a construct. But as such it is very productive, it becomes, so to speak, reality. Within this frame it is of course interesting to compare – for example – a scarce situation in the inter-war years in Vienna and today's mode of scarcity. But it is not interesting to come up with the idea that back then, the situations were much more scarce.

it exhaust the (potential) performativity of a given situation? Following the concept of the post-colonial architect/designer one has to admit that the practice of design and architecture is always both. With the means of the very practice, architecture and design is able to organize and reorganize, to correct, to reform, and to alter a given situation, but it also makes a situation also more cosy and more aesthetic. It is able to hold together and to keep in shape an in-escapable situation, by always believing in the possibility of improvement.

The minimal difference of creativity

Still, of course, there is a minimal difference between streamlining a situation and re-organizing a situation in a yet unknown way. The first design-solution of streamlining is based on consensus of all that are involved in a design process. This does not necessarily include a harmonious and consensual participatory design process, but can also denote that the resulting designerly object is consensual, looks good, functions well in all the thinkable ways it should function, etc., etc. Such a design-process works by *dissociation* (a given group dissociates itself from other groups, within the group there is consensus of the “distribution of the sensible, etc.). The second design-solution of re-organization – of little revolutions, if you will – works by *association*. Only by associating and linking together ideas, and elements that not have been linked together before, or in this specific context, *the impossible happens*.

Accepting that creativity works by *association* I want to discuss in the following three concepts of creativity in relation to an ever more hegemonic liberal discourse of political economy, namely financial capitalism. By doing so I will be able to separate ideas that are essential and important for *the impossible happening* from ideas that I render not useful or productive for the SCIBE project, since these only aim at standardizing creative processes in order to make them predictable and applicable for capitalism. The first position that I will be discussing is that of attributing creativity to the genius

architect/designer/artist. A concept that I understand as a rather nostalgic and reactive concept, but that is still highly productive in today's discourse. The second concept of creativity that I will touch upon will be various modes of assessment of creativity for the industry and location factors. This concept is ultimately linked to a neoliberal understanding of a calculable, and manageable world, hoping by assessing calculable factors of innovation to trace creativity and ultimately to be able to calculate creativity. The third position that I discuss, understands itself as critical or at least alternative to capitalism and promises a better world by organizing people in groups which subsequently create new things by "consens-creativity", or creativity that is only social. Especially this last understanding of creativity bears interesting concepts/ideas, but still is only a simple affirmation of the imperatives of financial capitalism.

Genius, Calculus & the Social Practice of Creativity

One thread in contemporary discourse about creativity is that of an old and – seen from a post-colonial perspective – overcome concepts, such like that of the genius artist, or the genius architect. This array of thought neglects contemporary modes of production and its division of labour. Such an understanding of creativity, as Christian Hermansen points out (CH: 2011) is strongly linked to an ancient understanding of creativity, which used to be the exclusive domain of the Gods. In a modern discourse⁸ – and a bourgeoisie organized civil society – creativity is *lodged in a few inspired individuals*.

Such an idea of the creative practitioner has come under scrutiny especially since the 1970s and the dawn of post-modernism. -- Referring to my other research project "Architecture of Cybernetics of Organization", this happens actually already after WW2: In a situation in which one wanted to overcome an old and despotic organization of society. In these post-war

⁸ since the French revolution, cf. Foucault – of course this is only the dominant concept in modern times besides of other concepts ...

years an old hierarchic organization of societal processes had been questioned by a cybernetic hypotheses ... One of many other examples is the questioning of the position of the architect/designer as the bearer of creativity. --

Even though, one could argue that this discourse of the few inspired individuals is becoming more and more marginal (within a post-colonial discussion), one still has to admit that the use of the mythical figure is still highly productive in today's forms of reality production. An example of such a highly effective reality production is the star economy of architects and designers. The aspect of this traditional figure that is still so highly productive is certainly not the uncontrollable "black box" of the genius and its creative products. It is actually not the unpredictability of the architect/designer that is essential productive in today's discourse. On the contrary it is actually the predictability of the star-architect that makes her or him so hot and sought-after by capital. Its productiveness in today's financial capitalism however is actually the *dissociative* modus of operation, that is the "state of exception" he or she creates, and in which decisions can be made without relying on a democratic dispute.⁹

Parallel to such an exploitation of the idea of the creative master, we find another operational mode of creativity in today's shaping of reality. Legions of assessment methods (see: Christian Hermansen: 01/2011) are applying the logic of political economy and its calculus/statistical reasoning onto creativity. These assessment methods actually represent a neoliberal idea of creativity as something that can be assessed and thus ultimately can be foreseen and planned (still in the line of population-thinking as discussed by Michel Foucault). They establish an economic understanding of an otherwise artistic concept. However such an approximation ultimately

⁹ Missing discussion (and literature) about Koolhaas stressing the importance of the start-architect in a situation of crisis ...

confuses two important concepts: that of innovation with that of creativity and eventually leads (1) to a standardization of the design process and (2) to a homogenization of its results. No matter how far-reaching and precise the statistical calculation mode has been developed (and will be developed), creativity is always added to the strict mathematic equation as the *transcendent carrier of innovation*. Creativity becomes somehow the magic thing creating the surplus. Here the traditional concept of the genius already discussed above becomes effective. The appropriation of such a powerful concept like that of creativity promises the super-natural, the unforeseen, the divine adding innovation to the mundanely and economically calculated. It creates innovation on a rhetoric plane of reality. And finally, if you think all the consequences of these assessment methods thoroughly through, you will end up dismissing the architect or the designer for the rational economist (as organizer, today: analyst). Hence assessment methods of creativity can only be understood as an attempt to expand the *logic of political economy onto other and essentially different fields of knowledge*. Ultimately this creates an ideal, self-referential and circular world of political economy. A world which is totally closed off and with no change at all.¹⁰

Taking the above said into account I disagree with Christian's approach to define creativity (1) as something new (with social relevance), (2) as something useful (for the individual, or the society), and (3) as something valid (that is a new idea must be socially validated). Again: such a definition comes close to the definition of innovation. That is: *repeatable ideas that are successfully applied in practice* (Schumpeter) vs. Creativity is denotes the *very moment, the event* of a new connection, a new assemblage, etc.

Finally I take a turn on the tendentious concept of "social creativity". Social creativity is widely understood to be in itself critical to capitalism and

¹⁰ OMA polemic on "unchangeability" in cities ... Venice Biennial 2010, ...

to outline an alternative practice. Essential to the concept of social creativity is the arrangement of individuals in organized groups (undecidable whether the formation of the group is initiated from a transcendental power or voluntarily from within). Creativity lies not with one gifted, but is actually a quality that arises in the interaction between team-members. I argue that such a framing of creativity only simply equals labour formations with creativity: (1) It uncritically affirms contemporary division of labour, i.e. *the project*; (2) It always affords an institutional framing, some kind of organizational, bureaucratic structure that, in the terms of managerial discourses, aims to solve a problem (see also the critique of CH, 2011: 3); (3) It simply affirms contemporary forms of subjectivation – that is individualization (ie. enterprising self, cf. Ulrich Bröckling: 2006)

In this sense the concept of “social creativity” succumbs to a contemporary mode of capitalism. I even would argue it becomes a technology of cognitive/financial capitalism itself, merely understood as a vital tool for the economy. Thus, it is a tendency of diluting the potential strength of a (single) creative practice, and levelling out the moment of creativity, the moment of rupture, by assigning creativity to everybody’s consensus (which actually again, is the definition of innovation: applicable). In doing so, it becomes clear that “social creativity” can only be a critical concept to level out hierarchies even in the creative domains¹¹. Hence “social creativity”, as it is being practiced, does not question the liberal-democratic framework in which it is operating, but remains part of the state-apparatus of the bourgeoisie, with one single purpose: to guarantee the undisturbed functioning of capitalist reproduction.

¹¹ To level out hierarchies is actually a managerial imperative that is about 60 years old. Cf. Andreas Rumpfhuber: *Architecture of Immaterial Labour*, 2009.

Impossible Happening

Nonetheless, such an social contextualization of creativity bears two interesting aspects that are useful to discuss and emphasize in relation to our project and the proposed understanding of creativity – as (little) revolutions and ruptures in the constant flow and logic of today’s capitalism.

First it is the affirmation of a contemporary mode of capitalism that is essential to embrace and work with and against. Following Slavoj Žižek (Žižek; NLR 64) we have to accept that we are dealing with political economy as the dominant construction of our (Western, European) reality. In Žižek’s words, it would be “naïve to hope that the ongoing crisis will be limited and that European capitalism will continue to guarantee a relatively high standard of living for a growing number of people” (Žižek, NLR 64: 84). Still we need to keep in mind that there is nothing natural about the existing global economic system, which (1) actually relies on a series of political decisions and (2) that each violation of its rules, each rupture within its constant flow, could effectively cause its breakdown. (3) Most important we need to understand that it is actually a heteronomic world we live in, with different modes of logic and ways to understand the world, and although political economy is a dominant mode of thinking, it is certainly not the only one. As we have seen above with the assessment methods of creativity, the capitalist apparatus aspires the homogenization of its own hegemonic autonomy by applying its very uniformly logic to fields heterogeneous to itself, ultimately de-politicizing the social sphere.

Second, one could read the concept of “social creativity” to emphasize the network of social relations outside of the *dissociative* field of politics, with its power-institutions, its institutional discourse on freedom of press, human rights, etc., and its more and more economic logic. Thus we could make use of the concept of “social creativity” not to extend institutionalized rules and its logic of a liberal society into all thinkable spheres of the social, but on the contrary, to actually emphasize the *associative* aspect of a “social creativity” – that is processes outside the sphere of politics creating

“autonomous islands” by constant experimentation. These autonomous islands create their own logic, their own discourses and their own diversity. Most important though they build up a world in itself, their own little microcosmos, that is separate from the reasoning of economy.¹² Hence, what the concept of the island does, is actually re-actualizing a conflictual, heteronomic mode of democracy against the dominant/hegemonic liberal idea of a consensual peaceful way of living together – in which actually all need to subordinate to the logic of political economy.

The potential of the island as a concept of resistance to the ever more expanding sphere of economy has recently come up in various artists’ projects or architects practices in diverse forms, such as in the practice of Territorial Agency, Eyal Weizman, or in the writing of in the French anarchist group TIQQUN. But the motif also plays an important role in Alain Badiou’s theoretical thoughts. The ideal role model for an autonomous island can be traced in a small text by Gilles Deleuze. The text is actually an appendix to his early book “Logic of Sense” (French Original: 1969, German: 1989, English: 1990) and is called: “Michelle Tournier – The world without others.” In this small text the French philosopher discusses the book “Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique” (French: 1968, German: “Freitag oder Im Schoss des Pazifik”, 1969) by Michel Tournier, that takes up the Robinson Crusoe literary theme by Daniel Defoe. Whereas in the original by Daniel Defoe, the hero starts to reproduce the known (bourgeois) world at the island, by building a home, introducing time-management, etc., Michel

¹² To be in dialog with Žižek: Žižek problematizes the use of violence, arguing – with Robespierre – that yet alone the existence of the king is a violent act, or, on the other hand, that the idea of a consensual, conflict-free society is only an idea of a ruling class (in that the ruling class is expanding to all ...).

Žižek: “From the radical-emanipatory perspective, one should turn it around: for the oppressed, violence is always legitimate – since their very status is the result of violence – but never necessary: it is always a matter of strategic consideration whether to use force against the enemy or not.”

Tournier's Robinson does nothing of the same. He actually creates a world that does not resemble at all the world that he used to live in.

This leads to two consecutive accounts that are important for our project. (1) a re-actualization of the discipline of design and architecture, that creates its own logic and action different to that of other spheres of society. Not everybody is an architect nor a designer. We have to take into account that design and architecture it is a very specific mode of working and being creative. In this sense, the role of the designer or architect is not to think in the logic of political economy (rendering a housing scheme most economically efficient) but to apply a different, a designerly, an architects' logic to the same problem. In this sense, the architect, designer essentially needs to get in contact, start a dialogue with the people involved in a design-problem. (2) By doing so, the discipline of design and architecture become re-politicized. By this very separation of architecture and design (and many other) different spheres and understanding the communication between these spheres as necessary conflictual and antagonist including constant misunderstandings and translations, we start to be able to place the concept of creativity exactly in the relation between these spheres. Such singular events/moments of creativity then produce what Guattari calls an existential plunge into chaos. It is the moment that cannot be foreseen and that, in the very moment, re-arranges our world of the sensible (Ranci re) outlining what was unthinkable before.

Scarcity and Creativity and the Built Environment

Coming full circle I end where the text started. I have been showing how an essentially *unforeseeable* and *uncontrollable* concept of creativity (of the architecture and design disciplines) is linked to the *associative* concept of "the political" and thus how we can re-actualize and thus re-politicize the design-disciplines. I showed how such a design and architecture practice can creatively operate within the limits of our society, fostering change through re-organization and little revolution from within, rather than

promising an outside. Applying this concept of creativity onto our empirical material poses new challenges. We have to take into account that scarcity is a concept (if not a foundational concept) of political economy; on the other hand we are dealing with creativity, a concept that political economy aims to colonize by its own logic and appropriate in its own terms. Still creativity, understood as *unforeseeable* and *uncontrollable* is rooted in a different domain (this is not to say, that creativity might not occur in the economic sphere, but it certainly does not apply to the calculus-logic of it). Only if we are able to establish this minimal difference, we will be able to actually apply it to our material in an *associative* way. Finally we have empirical data that is framed and shaped by the reality of scarcity.

Analysing our material we will be able to trace all four modes of creativity that I have been discussing: the genius, the calculus, the mode of social creativity and finally a mode of creativity that is linked to the political. This will help us to understand how much the discourses of creativity are already colonized by a liberal economic logic, and it will help us to pinpoint modes of creativity that actually act upon each of the given, limited (and scarce) situations. In a second round of our research (at least the Vienna project, but also the London project have two parts – an analytic and an projective) we actively will be able to propose scenarios (or tool-kits for that matter) that aim at creating creative moments for the very moment, applying a different logic to economically framed situations. These second stages of our project then also become crucial and important in another way: such a research questions known research-methodologies and formats of scientific work. So in this sense, even the research project (and not only its research-object) as such aims at trying to act out the impossible.

Bibliography

Félix Guattari: "Pour une refondation des pratiques sociales", in: *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 1992, S. 1.

Felix Guattari: *Microphysics of Power / Micropolitics of Desire*, in: Felix Guattari: *Soft Subversions, Texts and Interviews. 1977-1985*, 278-290, here: 279.

Rainer M. Holm-Hadulla: *Kreativität. Konzept und Lebensstil*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 3. Aufl., Göttingen 2010, ISBN 3-525-49073-9.

Oliver Marchart, *Die politische Differenz: Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben*, Originalausgabe. (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010). A slightly different version of the German is: Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh Univ Pr, 2007).

Ulrich Bröckling, *Das unternehmerische Selbst: Soziologie einer Subjektivierungsform*, Originalausgabe. (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007).

Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism* (Semiotexte, 2010).

Stephan Schulmeister,
<http://stephan.schulmeister.wifo.ac.at/index.php?id=6>

Luc Boltanski und Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Verso, 2005).
Slavoj Žižek, *A Permanent Economic Emergency*, in: *New Left Review* 64, August 2010, <http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2853>

WWW.SCIBE.EU

Author: Andreas Rumpfhuber, University of Technology, Vienna

Contact: ar@scibe.eu

Published: March 2011

Design: Ben Kirk and Rosie McLaren



Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment (SCIBE) is a trans European research project that explores how conditions of scarcity might affect the creativity of the different actors involved in the production of the built environment, based on the analysis of processes in four European cities: London, Oslo, Reykjavik, and Vienna. SCIBE is funded by HERA – Humanities in the European Research Area, a partnership between 21 Humanities Research Councils across Europe and the European Science Foundation (ESF).

The SCIBE Working Papers are published as work in progress in order to disseminate the progress of the project: they are thus discursive and provisional and should not be seen as the author's or research team's definitive take on the subject.

This document is published under a Creative Commons License. This means that you are free to distribute it and quote from it, but that in each case the original must be attributed, acknowledging the author, paper title, date, and SCIBE website (www.scibe.eu) as the source.