

SCIBE

WORKING PAPER NR.

11

SCARCITY + CREATIVITY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

**FROM OBJECTS OF AUSTERITY TO
PROCESSES OF SCARCITY**

Jeremy Till

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11

A Working Paper for SCIBE¹
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Introduction

We live in an age of austerity; or, rather, we are continually told that we live in an age of austerity and therefore must live by its strictures. Both the political left and right promulgate the notion of, and need for, austerity programmes. Such is the unconditional acceptance of the term that it controls all aspects of our lives, from the very personal (i.e. shortened shopping lists) to the very public (i.e. cutbacks all round in major spending projects). Architecture, as a discipline that spans this private-public spectrum, is thus inevitably bound to the conditions of austerity, and so it is worth unpicking some of the ways that austerity is formulated and the reaction of architects to these formulations. In order to do this, the paper will look briefly at two examples from the twentieth century in which programmes of austerity inflected on architectural production in order to see if particular traits emerge. I will then argue that austerity as a term is not sufficiently nuanced to describe the complexity of operating under the current social, economic and ecological conditions. The final section of the paper will therefore move to a formulation for spatial production based

¹ Presentation to Society of Architectural Historians Annual Conference, Detroit, April 2012.

around the notion of scarcity, hence the title: “From Objects of Austerity to Processes of Scarcity”.

Episode 1: Weimar Germany

This process of the abstraction and subsequent reification of austerity can be identified in my first episode of austerity and architecture, that of Weimar Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s, in which enduring post-war scarcities, global economic collapse and rising population combined to induce programmes of austerity, most notably in the Weimar budgets from 1930 to 1932. Against this economic backdrop and faced with a combination of housing shortages and the lack of resources to build that housing, architects responded in a very particular manner.² This was also the period in which the tenets of international modernism were being formulated, and what we see is a merging of modernist ideologies with the expediencies required by austerity.

The discussion is focused most clearly through the second CIAM congress of international architects held in Frankfurt in 1929, entitled *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum* (literally translated as The Subsistence Dwelling), which was subsequently recorded in a book of the same title. Faced with an unprecedented demand for housing, but against the backdrop of post-war scarcities, architects responded in two ways. First through the development of plans for reduced space standards, and second through the employment of new industrialised technologies. Thus Karel Teige’s *The Minimum Dwelling* famously opens with the words: “Essentially, the housing question is a problem of statistics and technology, as is any question

² As Catherine Bauer notes in her seminal book on Modern Housing: “There was an acute shortage at the end of the war, accompanied by a complete breakdown in the old agencies of housing production.” Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), p. xvi.

concerning the provision and satisfaction of human needs.”³ Teige’s directness is tempered in the language of other early modernists, who tied this technocratic regime into a wider project of social emancipation but in all cases we can see parallels with the economic discourse of the time.⁴ As Siegfried Giedion notes in his opening address to the Frankfurt congress: “it was settled (at the first CIAM conference) that the prime task of the architect is to ‘bring himself into line with the times’...Connection of architecture with economy could obviously not help being made the first point of the Programme.”⁵ The new science of architecture takes human need in the context of imposed limits, and frames it in the quasi-scientific language that went hand-in-hand with the progressivist rhetoric of early modernism. Austerity was seen as something that could be overcome through architectural ingenuity, rational thinking and technological advance – and more than that it was something that the older approaches to architecture and construction simply only could not deal with; efficiency of means was required and the old forms of building and aesthetics did not meet this criteria. A new way of thinking and doing was required. It is here that austerity, although framed as a challenge, actually becomes a covert opportunity to pursue the modernist agendas developed through CIAM.

Episode 2: Austerity Britain

This confluence of austerity and modernizing tendencies can also be identified in Austerity Britain – the period immediately after the second world war. As Andrew Saint argues this period represented, “a coming

³ Karel Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling*, 1st edn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 9. Original emphasis.

⁴ Hilde Heynen is particularly good on the intersection of the social, the aesthetic and the technological within the wider context of economic crisis in the period of the *Das Neue Frankfurt*, out of which *Existenzminimum* arose. Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: a Critique* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 43–50.

⁵ Ernst May, *Die Wohnung Für Das Existenzminimum*. (Frankfurt: Englert & Schlosser, 1930), p. 8 (in English summary at end of book).

together of many things: the Modern Movement, a puritan strain in British philosophy and design, the needs, constraints, opportunities and organization of post-war reconstruction, and the triumph of fresh thinking about childhood, teaching and learning.”⁶ Again, industrialization, efficiency and technical prowess are employed as the means to address austerity, this time allied to the technical and industrial advances achieved as part of the war effort. Austerity Britain was remarkable for its political ambition, largely driven by ideals of collective provision of health, education and welfare. For the reformers, austerity, far from a brake to the establishment of the future, was actually the motor. As David Kynaston notes in his book on the period, architects were to the fore in the envisioning of this brave new world: “if for Keynesians, social reformers and educationalists the war provided unimagined opportunities for influencing the shape of the future, this was even more true for architects and town planners and their cheerleaders.”⁷

In his book that documents the architectural history of the post-war era, Nicholas Bullock traces two routes under the conditions of austerity.⁸ One is that of the architectural elite in an internalized story of the establishment of certain forms of modernism, set apart from the backdrop of post-war exigencies and turmoil. More interesting, because less self-referential, is the second route in which the conditions of production and limits of resources led to new forms of architectural invention. Austerity, as in the 1930s, becomes both the driver and excuse for innovation. Although these new forms of construction and planning did not, Bullock points out,⁹ necessarily save money, they certainly provided new opportunities for architects and

⁶ Andrew Saint, *Towards a Social Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. viii. The book is about schools, hence the last part of the quote.

⁷ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-1951* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008), p. 29.

⁸ Nicholas Bullock, *Building the Post-War World*, 1st edn (Routledge, 2002).

⁹ Bullock, p. 192.

builders. As Andrew Saint notes of the Hertfordshire Schools architects, who were prominent at the time: “they wanted to compose not an essay or a book but a language and vocabulary, and to write the first literature in it all at the same time.”¹⁰ Austerity, far from a limit on progress, was its very genesis.

Contemporary Austerity

One may hope to find lessons from these two previous episodes in order to suggest ways of coping with the contemporary conditions of austerity. However, one major difference must be noted. Where the previous two periods were tied into a reformist political agenda, the present situation is determined by a regressive economic ideology in which neo-liberal dogma demands a singular diet of austerity.¹¹ The argument is continually made that in order to re-establish economic equilibrium, packages of austerity are absolutely necessary. But scratch the surface and what one finds is that this argument for the ‘inevitability’ of austerity masks a deeply ideological underbelly, in which social inequality is ramped up and the private sector is given renewed prominence.¹²

For architects two apparently opposing positions arise out of these conditions of contemporary austerity. For the vast majority of the profession, let’s call them the 99%, the wider context of economic leanness

¹⁰ Saint, p. 65.

¹¹ Though even as I write, Standard and Poors (amazingly still having some credibility despite being a major agent in the economic crisis in their wrapping up of junk CDM/CDC’s with decent ratings) have downgraded European economies because ‘austerity alone becomes self-defeating’.

¹² In the UK so called austerity programmes in higher education, schooling, and health are in many cases actually costing the taxpayer more. Thus in higher education, fees will triple in 2012 on the grounds that the public can no longer afford to pay for Universities and so the burden should shift to the students who benefit. However, the reality is very different: far from reducing public costs the increased fees actually increase the burden on the taxpayer because the government will have to fund the higher loans. Under guise of austerity in Universities, the government is effectively privatising them. See Jeremy Till, ‘Scar(c)e Times’, *Occupied Times*,

leads to cut-rate fees, continuous value engineering and the drive towards the technicisation of the processes, with assumed efficiency gains, through BIM and other industry-led programmes. In all these aspects architects, far from operating at the forefront of cultural expression as they were in the previous episodes of austerity, are left on the back foot, denied the resources to operate and marginalised in the wider debate about the means of production. The austerity drive passes down to architectural education as well, with ever more strident demands for market-ready students framed in terms of the decadence of the academy, an anti-intellectualism that threatens the very basis of educational values.

It is maybe not surprising that the other reaction to contemporary austerity is one of escape from its political constructions and into the more rarefied air of aesthetic discourse, treating it simply and uncritically as a condition to be reified, even celebrated. This is the path of the elite discourse in architecture, let's call it of the 1%, which although in the minority still acts as a point of salvation for the 99%, allowing them to feel that there is higher life beyond the dross of efficient gains. Here the aesthetics of austerity emerge; they were there of course in the earlier modernist episodes, but now they become a source of solace, the means of establishing the very essence of architecture in the face of the fallen world outside. Right from the beginning of the current economic crisis in 2008, the 'decadent' architecture of the 2000s has been mentioned in the same breath as the excesses of the period. After establishing guilt by association, the argument goes that in order to demonstrate the propriety of architecture, we need to reassert its core, authentic, values.¹³ Thus a loose grouping of European architects are championed in the pages of publications such as *Building Design*, *2G* and *Detail* as prophets of an era of austerity and good architectural sense: Caruso St John, Tony Fretton, Sergison Bates in the UK,

¹³ One could cite many examples, but a recent one is Peter Buchanan, 'The Big Rethink - Towards a Complete Architecture', *Architectural Review*, 2011.

Peter Märkli and Valerio Olgiati in Switzerland, and a whole range of Flemish architects including Robbrecht & Daem and Stéphane Beel. In all of these, and more, tectonic rectitude and aesthetic decorum come to fore. Austerity is appropriated for its worthiness, and in this is completely detached from its regressive economic and political genesis. The architecture of austerity does not just employ the aesthetic virtues of simplicity, precision and honesty, but celebrates them as a form of moral action (“Beauty is the most radical thing I know”, says Peter Märkli.¹⁴)

I have written elsewhere about how this attachment of aesthetics to morals ends up in a dangerous cul-de-sac, where architecture assumes righteousness, but is actually completely detached from the dynamics of real ethics, played out as they are in social space, so the morality that it posits is a false one.¹⁵ Part of the problem, which the contemporary condition shares with the two previous episodes, is that the designer’s response is so tied to objects, now in the sense of them representing austerity, then through the hope of new futures being founded in the efficiency of stuff. At least in the two twentieth examples in the 1930s and post-war, the objects were attempting to deal with the condition of austerity, whereas now they just freeze it, either through the diminished architecture of the 99% or the austere aesthetic of the 1%. However, in all cases they do not (and cannot in their static conception) address the forces that have produced the austerity. We may look to the previous episodes for inspiration as to how to cope with austerity more inventively, but in the end this is in vain because the

¹⁴ Florian Beigel, ‘Peter Markli in Conversation’, *Architects’ Journal*, 2007. In an article in *Building Design* at the same time, Ellis Woodman writes: “Neither of these projects (by Märkli) is easy to digest, being as they are concerned with issues that preoccupied architects for centuries — grammar, proportion, propriety, measure — but are discussed only in the most limited terms today.. If we are once again to have an architecture that speaks of values other than the spectacular, it is surely through a return to those concerns that that we will find it. Märkli’s work offers a crucial signpost along that path.” Ellis Woodman, ‘Beyond Babel: The Work of Swiss Architect Peter Märkli’, *Building Design*, 2007.

¹⁵ See Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009). esp. Chapter 10.

externalities that produced it are so different. The innovation and optimism that were associated with the progressivist idealism of the previous periods has been replaced with a dour realism consistent with the regressive and sometimes punitive political mood. In the place of the current understanding of austerity, we need a more nuanced term that deals with both cause and effect, with the externalities and their implications. That term is scarcity.

Scarcity contra austerity

Scarcity is not the same as austerity. Although austerity and scarcity are intertwined – the programmes of austerity do indeed induce real scarcities of resource – the genesis of the two terms is different, and in this lie the clues as to how to deal with the contemporary condition. As argued above, it is important to understand austerity as an imposed condition; it is not a natural or inevitable constraint, but one that is established as a result of other economic and political forces. In the current programmes of austerity that are being played in the majority of the Global North, the pervasive argument is that the economic crisis demands austerity. In these terms, austerity is the outcome of the ideologies of neo-liberalism, whereas scarcity is higher-level condition that both drives those ideologies and also threatens them. Scarcity is the motor of capitalism through the way that scarcity of supply regulates the market; too much stuff diminishes desire and competition. But it is a threat in so much as the mere whiff of limits undermines notions of growth and freedom on which capitalism is founded. Scarcity as an economic fact is thus far more complex than austerity, the latter of which is usually presented as a blunt instrument, a fait accompli that is left as a given for architects and others to work with, and not a concept that can be unravelled strategically and tactically.

Where austerity is created in response to a presumed condition, and in this much is more artificial than natural, scarcity is both real (things really are running out) and constructed. From Malthus onwards, neoclassical

economists have attempted to naturalise scarcity, describing it as an inevitable condition that drives the economic machine, most obviously in Lionel Robbins' famous statement: "Economics ... is concerned with that aspect of behaviour which arises from the scarcity of means to achieve given ends. It follows that Economics is entirely neutral between ends."¹⁶ However, recent discussions of scarcity have focused on its constructed nature.¹⁷ The most direct example is food scarcity. There is enough food in the world, it is just in the wrong places.¹⁸ Food distribution systems, the politics of food subsidies, the machinations of global food corporations – all these and more combine to construct a scarcity of food. The result is very real – hunger – but the underlying condition is constructed.

An understanding of scarcity might allow us to understand better how to operate in the contemporary conditions under which the built environment is produced. If one feels impotent in dealing with the causes of austerity because of their macro-economic genesis, the same is not necessarily true of the two sides of scarcity, the real and the constructed. One might expose the ideological basis of programmes of austerity, but it is difficult to intervene in its bluntness as a financial instrument; the only way we can tolerate this impotence is through believing the promise that austerity is a short-term necessity out of which growth will once again be found. On the other hand, scarcity, both real and constructed, widens the field beyond the straightforwardly economic and forces one to engage with its underlying social, ecological **and** economic constitution, and the dynamic relationship between these parts. Scarcity is also not going to go away; it can but get

¹⁶ Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (London: Macmillan, 1932), p. 40.

¹⁷ See for example *The Limits to Scarcity: Contesting the Politics of Allocation*, ed. by Lyla Mehta (London: Earthscan, 2010); Nicholas Xenos, *Scarcity and Modernity* (London; New York: Routledge, 1989). See also Jeremy Till, 'Constructed Scarcity', *Scibe*, 2011 <<http://www.scibe.eu/publications/>> [accessed 16 January 2012].

¹⁸ S. J. Scanlan, J. C. Jenkins and L. Peterson, 'The Scarcity Fallacy', *Contexts*, 9 (2010), 34–39.

more exaggerated in both real and constructed modes, the former as resources become increasingly stretched, the latter as the market finds ever more need to manipulate systems of production and distribution in order to keep itself going.

Contemporary scarcity

The first step in dealing with scarcity is to think beyond the object. Real scarcities challenge the received notion that architecture should be defined through the act of building alone. Architectural progress is generally signposted through the additions of new stuff to the world, but under conditions of scarcity, the need to continually add is not viable, because adding built stuff by default subtracts from the natural resource base. Scarcity undermines the assumption of endless growth on which neo-classical economics is based. Where austerity leads to a solution of continuing to build, but doing it with less or less often, scarcity thinking leads not to adding, but redistributing what it already there. In this the creativity of the designer is focused not on objects but on systems of distribution (see examples from 00:/ and MOM). Scarcity discourse here leads away from the standardized tenets of sustainability, which tend to work within notions of limit, of using less, of saving carbon, of measuring output, and in this essentialize scarcity rather than deal with it, particularly in the increasingly technocratic mode that sustainability is turning to.

In terms of constructed scarcity, the designer shifts to an understanding of the way that scarcity has been produced. Take another example of constructed scarcity, that of space. There is more than enough raw enclosed space to meet demand in many of our cities; it is just in the wrong hands or legislative framework, and so often lies empty. The challenge here becomes to unlock those frameworks; this inherently a spatial problem, and therefore one that architects as spatial agents should be adept at

addressing.¹⁹ The attention again shifts from the object to the underlying political and social processes. This has been shown brilliantly in the space hacking movement, most notably the *Renew Newcastle* project in Australia, which has released thousands of square meters of empty space in the centre of Newcastle, New South Wales, through dealing with what Marcus Westbury calls the software rather than the hardware of the city.²⁰ We can begin to see some of the same responses right outside here in Detroit with the work of urban pioneers such as Dan Pitera and Dan Carmody.

The strictures of austerity tend to lead us towards a diminished form of architectural practice overseen by the values of the market and the assumptions of state-led programmes of cuts, whereas the more complex nature of scarcities catalyses different ways of thinking and working. Once again austerity and scarcity are intertwined, with conditions of austerity forcing people to look for other ways of working, often motivated by political or activist positions that are in opposition to mainstream orthodoxies. However, there is only so much capacity around the edges. What is now needed is for the lessons in dealing with scarcity to be brought back to the centre, allowing architects to operate in an expanded field, which sees scarcity as much more than as essentialized lack. The combination of lack and object-centered practice is inevitably reductive, whereas the territory of processes and networks that scarcity presents is much more open to creative intervention. Take on example, that of procurement of buildings. Presently this is framed solely in economic terms, with project managers and value engineers controlling the entire process, which under conditions of austerity is defined through endless cost cutting. If, however, procurement is seen as part of a chain of constructed scarcities,

¹⁹ Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011).

²⁰ Marcus Westbury, 'Cities as Software' <<http://www.marcuswestbury.net/2011/05/23/cities-as-software/>> [accessed 16 January 2012]; 'Renew Newcastle' <<http://renewnewcastle.org/about>> [accessed 16 January 2012].

then creativity is needed to unlock those constructions, taking the terms of reference away from those of pure marketplace. This is a designerly and spatial act, beyond the limited remit of project managers, in which resource flows can be diverted (i.e. 2012 Architecten), material use can be redeployed (i.e. Raumlabor) or briefs rewritten to get away from purely quantifiable descriptions (i.e. DEGW).

My argument therefore is that we need to move beyond the limits presented by austerity, which end up either in a retreat in which the architect dons an aesthetic hair shirt of false morality, or else in helplessness in the face of wider forces. If austerity is indeed a point of immediate crisis, scarcity (for all its scariness) presents longer-term possibilities for architectural practice.

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Author: Jeremy Till, University of Westminster

Contact: J.Till@westminster.ac.uk

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