

DOUGALD HINE

## Dériving Scarcity

Bromley-by-Bow, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2011

Under each railway arch along Arnold Road, you can get a different part of a car repaired or replaced. Tyres, exhausts, side panels - you could work your way from arch to arch, cobble together a whole vehicle by the time you reach the corner with Bow Road, where the valeting service under the final arch promises the “best hand-job in London!”<sup>1</sup>

I carry on in the other direction, into Bromley-by-Bow, thinking how neatly the economy of private transport nestles in the underbelly of an older collective infrastructure.

I pass under another railway bridge - so many lines splitting and crossing each other, so many people carried over these streets each day - and turn right off Campbell Road, along one side of a park. I stop to take a picture of a building whose double doors still stand

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<sup>1</sup> This piece was a result of my first outing as thinker-out-of-residence with the Scarcity & Creativity in the Built Environment project led by Professor Jeremy Till at the University of Westminster.

under the wrought-iron letters: PUBLIC LIBRARY. The doors are closed, though, and the buzzers indicate that it has been converted into flats.

This is the first in a series of encounters with buildings whose former “public” status remains highly evident - there are the closed-down pubs on street corners, and later, when I drift off the bottom of the map as far as Crisp Street market, the brick bulk of the old Public Baths. (A newer sign warns trespassers of the danger from deep excavations.)

Maybe it's just the rain getting to me, but I begin to read something more into these signs. The way they have been left in place seems to flaunt the closure of public life, even where this is not strictly true. So the old library retains its name, while its replacement is branded an “ideas store” in which “you can choose from 900 learning courses.”

There are so few people on the streets this afternoon. Except for one encounter with an old man sitting on his porch, I am left to devise my own meanings from the place. “Move in For Spring 2011,” announce the posters below one new-build apartment block. “Hurry!! Over 90% Sold.” Another developer is more blunt:

MASSIVE SAVINGS ON BRAND NEW APARTMENTS!

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF PREVIOUS  
BUYERS FAILURE TO COMPLETE

These signs read like an induction manual for the new scarcity. They tell us how to inhabit this freshly private world: go shopping for learning, scramble over each other for a bit of desirable space. (How are they getting on, selling all these flats, I wonder? Do the urgent signs reflect a scarcity of buyers - or, at least, buyers in a position to complete?)

On the other side of Devas Street, straight across from the block with “Over 90% Sold”, a banner hangs two-storeys high on the stained wall of Broxbourne House:

Poplar HARCA

100 Day Promise

Brighter

Cleaner

Safer

As a visitor, wandering through the area for the first time, something about the promise unnerves me: its fragments of bold language, not quite connected, offering a non-specific crackdown on darkness, dirt and danger. If the property developers address me as an individual in an economic war of all-against-all, what do I become in front of this set of initials? Something to be tidied up?

In 1998, Tower Hamlets began transferring its council housing to the Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association, a new social landlord created for the purpose. A year after the first transfer, residents on a second round of estates voted against the transfer of their homes to the HARCA. They were then consulted until they changed their minds.

Perhaps if I lived here, the banner would have me looking forward to a brighter, cleaner, safer Bromley-by-Bow. Like motherhood or apple pie, these are hard things to be against. Or perhaps that is part of the trouble? If the HARCA stands for motherhood and apple pie, what ground does that leave for those who still have Defend Council Housing posters in their windows?

I find myself thinking about another kind of ground, the dirty, untidy, fertile patches from which things grow. Because the aspiration to brightness and cleanliness, even as it responds to real fears and real desires for a pleasant place to live, is always at risk of leading to sterility.

I notice this in the signs which police the usage of the walkways and patches of park I come across. As in any neighbourhood, these are overwhelmingly forbidding. Spaces are defined by the games we can't play there, the activities which won't be tolerated. “Occupied homes,” reads a sign on a building site. “Please refrain from using obscene language at all times.” That one redeems itself, because I can't read it without imagining that it was put up in response to actual incidents, the inevitable abrasions when people rub up against one another. As with most of this genre of signage, though, I'm reminded

of Slavoj Žižek's observation that the rights regarded as inviolate today are all versions of the right to be left alone, to isolate ourselves, to remain unaffected by each other.

Where are the suggestive signs, I wonder - the signs which invite you to try something you might not otherwise have thought of? (Answer: on the bus stops, advertising things which cost money.) Even the sign at Prospect Park which reads "Play Here!" feels like a command, rather than an invitation. (The detail on this sign is fascinating: play is illustrated with an image of a rainbow under construction, little people pushing wheelbarrows, toy-like cranes hoisting blocks of colour onto the scaffolding.)

Play, or its absence, may offer an angle from which to bring scarcity into focus. Pat Kane - in his book *The Play Ethic* - suggests that play requires "the assumption of abundance", the feeling that there is plenty of pleasure to go round. To get the sense of this, I draw a line between two ways in which people talk about "abundance": as an unrestricted supply of resources; or as the sense of having "enough, and then some". My friend Tom, who goes foraging in the woods of the Black Isle, tells me that in a hard year, the mice will squirrel away every nut they find at the first opportunity; but in a good year, he has noticed them playing with the nuts, rolling them around or making heaps in full view. So long as abundance is understood as "enough, and then some", play can break out in the simplest spaces and moments. Once it has been framed as "an unrestricted supply", the world becomes a domain of scarcity, life a constant, unplayful struggle to take advantage of each other.

I brought these ideas with me today, like the bag which is too heavy on my shoulder and the umbrella which almost keeps the rain off. If I had brought other ideas, I would have noticed other things. With that caveat, what I am seeing - what I am reading into these streets - is not a polarisation between the public and the private, nor a subjugation of one by the other, but a public-private partnership to construct a domain of scarcity.

The promise of a brighter, cleaner future; the urges to "hurry, while (housing) stocks last"; the forbidding signs; the ostentatious closure of older, commoner kinds of "public" space, which were not defined in terms of consumption - all of these seem to drive towards an experience of the world which has little room for play, because it insists that we are surrounded by scarcity, constantly looking over our shoulders.

And yet this is never quite the case, the reality falls thankfully short of the rhetoric, because there is something else I have been noticing all afternoon. Unsignposted, in pockets, neglected or secondary spaces, or on the boundaries between the private and the public, there are little outbreaks of growth and improvisation.

Plants, naturally, provide the first examples, because everything which grows speaks of the possibility of abundance. Back at Rounton Road, I stop to take a picture of a tree whose roots have worked loose the bricks planted around it, subverting their pattern. Behind the railway line at Purdey Street, a set of allotment gardens are order patched with chaos, the fencing cobbled together from all kinds of reclaimed metal, railings capped with a row of old plastic bottles for

reuse inside. (It looks like passersby have been adding their own empties to the bottle collection.) I doubt that the damp pile of rugs and carpet ends in the corner conforms to the HARCA vision for a brighter, cleaner Poplar, but they seem to have found another use, like the materials from which the lean-to shacks at the back have been constructed.

These allotments are only the largest eruption of an improvised, organic, hacked-together approach to making spaces which I meet throughout the afternoon. It's there in the backyard structures, held together with planks, corrugated plastic, part of a bedstead or the wheel from an old trailer. It's there in the garden shed which someone has erected on a first floor balcony. (Because - among other things - the unexpected use of space is always a kind of joke at the expense of power, the architectural equivalent of a moustache drawn on a portrait.)

I wonder about the parallels to the Jugaad culture of improvised technology in India which has begun to catch the attention of western designers. There's a similar sense of making things work from the materials which happen to be to hand, in ways no one would think of if starting from a blank canvas.

These outbreaks are not the dominant or the defining characteristic of this built environment, but there is a spirit to them which stands out from their surroundings. By contrast to their tangled playfulness, they bring into view the uncreative consensus between the public and private forces which appear to face each other across these streets. Looking back along Devas Street, now, I seem to see a

humourless symmetry between the HARCA and the private developers.

At which point, I realise again how little I know this part of London. And when we are gathered in the pub, warming ourselves with cups of tea, I wonder if these playful hacks which caught my attention might offer us some starting points, some stories to enquire into, as we try to understand the intersections of scarcity and abundance, restriction and creativity in the lives of the people who live here.