The Design of Scarcity
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Scarcity is a good topic because it scares people. The book was made possible by EU funding.
We live in an age of austerity, and the future is very likely to be the age of scarcity. The age of false abundance is now behind us. We can no longer expect abundance.

As Sartre wrote: ‘Human existence is a struggle against scarcity’. But maybe it is not so much a struggle against, but a working with… In contemporary society scarcity is very much used as a threat, but it is also a reality. Things are running out. At base level scarcity is an insufficiency, a lack.

But what has constructed that lack? Our book (“The Design of Scarcity”) argues that scarcity is designed, by forces of capital but also in other ways. The upside of this theory is that designers can also design it back, work with it.

A brief overview of the content of the book, using its chapters as a frame.

1. Design
   We are used to a sublimated notion of scarcity, a way of creating new forms of architectural value, but also societal value, post WWII. Mies van der Rohe famously wrote that “less is more”. Later this was appropriated by capital, and designers were asked to do more with less, i.e. to create more things.
   Design is a promise, a promise that scarcity can be overcome by invention, that technological progress – or the future - will bring abundance. This is the promise of capitalism. Design is therefore complicit in this myth.

   Mostly, design is the design of obsolescence. Design is about desire, i.e. it promotes desire to encourage buying. The designer is an agent, implicated in the production of scarcity, in the sense that designers create desire: false needs.
   The future challenge for designers is to work out their position: either address needs, or construct desire. Currently the focus is on the latter (95%).

   One criticism of the Scarcity exhibition could be that it accepts the inevitability of scarcity instead of examining the issue of scarcity itself. There is no such thing as absolute scarcity. Education can be seen as means of constructing scarcity, We need to find ways to escape this, see the next chapter.

2. Economics
   To quote Lionel Robbins:

   “Economics…. Scarcity of means to achieve given ends”. “Economics is the science of choice under conditions of scarcity”

   Economics, framed as above, claims to be neutral. But that is a lie. Scarcity modulates the market, i.e. creates false desire, see the example of the iPhone which costs about $20 to manufacture.

   The spectre of Scarcity hangs over the market as the ultimate threat.
The scarcity postulate: Human needs are unlimited. Growth is the only healthy economic condition. But the means to satisfy these needs are limited. Scarcity, by being framed by neoliberal and neoclassical economics, doesn not allow us to look outside into other value systems. The market constructs scarcity. There is enough food in the world, it is just in the wrong place. The reason for that is a whole set of geopolitical macroeconomic forces. Scarcity has real effects, but it is an artificial construction, that does not need to be. But economy persuaded us that scarcity is an absolute and inevitable. It isn’t. Scarcity thinking runs through the construction of the built environment. The value we see in buildings is skewed, we focus on the single issue of scarcity thinking.

3. Inequality
Reference to the UK enclosures act in the 18th century. Scarcity of food was used as an excuse to make farming more efficient, with the result of dispossession of land, and increasing inequality among the people. Inequality again, is a way to produce scarcity. See also: Thomas Piketty - http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/05/economist-explains
Scarcity is an alibi for austerity. Both are disguised ideologies. Also austerity is not natural or neutral. Modern enclosure takes the form of the buying up of Africa by China and Europe for food or fuel production, which displaces local people due to appropriation of land based on the threat of future scarcity.

4. Context
It is hard to see the factual side of scarcity. Scarcity is not the same for all. It is not neutral. The first colonisers of Australia experienced the country as having very few resources, but the aborigines experienced it as a place of abundance. See Stone Age Economics by Marshall Sahlins, http://libcom.org/files/Sahlins%20-%20Stone%20Age%20Economics.pdf

Does absolute scarcity exist? See the famous graph by Malthus, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/lect/mod15.html supporting theories such as the need to restrict the population by attacking the poor, see the poor laws in England. http://www.workhouses.org.uk/poorlaws/

Research supports the notion that scarcity appears more of a software problem than a hardware issue. The role of the designer can be to look at the systems, things like regulations, procurement etc, as in the project Renew Newcastle. http://renewnewcastle.org/about/copy-the-model This is one sense in which we can be optimistic about design’s role in scarcity. If you just deal with the objects, the designers’ scope is limited, but if you deal with the software, the designers’ scope is radically expanded.

5. Progress & grow (interlude)
Growth is seen as progress and vice versa. But now we need to freeze time to get away from the myth of perpetual growth. We need to sever the conceptual link between progress and growth.

6. Constraints
The sustainability debate is focused on objects, but it should be expanded to processes. (Quote Isabelle stengers, 33.30)

7. Ecology
Cybernetic, ecological thinking is probably where answers have to be found. This deals with context. So, not in way that puts humans on one side and nature on the other. Humans, organic life, the whole biosphere, are one networked system, with nodes of very different kinds. Designers should engage in this networked, transscalar approach.

A relational networked way to look at how scarcity operates, helps to see where to intervene. The idea of scarcity as a problem to be solved should be abandoned. That approach would only lead to design more efficiency, new technology to do things better. Instead designers should try to intervene in the construction of scarcity.

8. Redesign
The book also asks us to look beyond the notion of scarcity as ‘problem’. Designers are very caught up in the habit of ‘problem solving’, based on a conviction that if we make things more efficient or introduce new technologies, we can solve the problem of scarcity. We can not.

The book also comes up with a series of redesign tactics, all labelled by a word: **Redistribution** is key solution, in social terms, material terms, economic terms. This is challenging designers. Because they define themselves a producers of the new. They wrap themselves up in monographs of the visible, of the production of the new.

That is why this is challenging, because a lot of this redesign could be invisible. Intervening in networks, intervening in software is invisible but more productive. Examples: Raumlabor, Time Bank eg of social aspects of redistribution,

**Optimise**, of existing systems.

**Adapt** Market creates redundant objects, single use objects. What if you build for adaptability? (Habakken is a great example)

**Upscale**. Upscale small scale initiatives, see for instance the transition towns. How does a designer get into that?

**Restart**, countering obsolescence. See for instance: the kill chip in a printer, hack it back to life.

**Redefine**: Rather than being given a problem, is to redefine it, see project ZeroZero. They were asked to redesign a school because the school had a problem with crowding in the corridors. The three million pund scheme was to widen the corridors, and build new stuff. Zerozero’s answer was to change the timetable.

**Appropriate**. Appropriating rules and regulations. Really dive in the regulations to find the loopholes there, For instance skips in Spain require no planning permission, which means you can use them for festivals. Here is where design becomes a deeply political act, because you are directly intervening in a political system.

For example: RIBA outline plan of work of 2007. A linear plan of how to design a building. The role of the architect has been reduced to a small zone between concept and design development. Therefore the zone of invention has been equally reduced.

With the strategies above the zone is radically expanded again.

To conclude: desire needs to be redefined, this is key issue. If desire is simply defined through the capitalism system as “I don't have enough and I want more.” Then
we can't actually think of new ways to be in the world. So the real issue is not redistribution of good, not optimisation of systems, it is using design in its original sense: of drawing out new futures.