Scarcity upsets the assumption that architects should be defined solely through adding stuff to the world

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Sustainability in practice: The scarcity of our planet’s resources may shift how the architectural profession sees itself, writes Jon Goodbun with Deljana Iossifova and Jeremy Till

In a conference in Barcelona last week, the brilliant architect Anne Lacaton of Lacaton & Vassal showed a picture of a pretty, if slightly rundown, provincial town square in France, which they had been asked to renovate. ‘The place is already rather nice,’ she says to the client, ‘why bother to embellish it?’ And with this walks away from the job.

This was just about the most radical thing we’ve heard said by an architect in the past few years. The so-called boom of recent decades got the profession addicted to the idea that adding more and more shiny artefacts to the world was the supreme act of the architect. At a stroke, Lacaton dismisses that assumption. For the past two years we at the University of Westminster, together with partners in Vienna and Olso, have been investigating what these immanent conditions of scarcity might mean to the way that architects operate in the future. Starting with a straightforward definition of scarcity as lack, our observations and readings have led us into a much more complex reading of the subject.

Scarcity is real – things running out – but it is also constructed, in the way that wider forces of capital construct scarcity through inequalities. An obvious example is food: there is enough food in the world but it is in the wrong places. The machinations of the global food corporations, of farm subsidies in the global north, and of uneven demand have created skewed distribution patterns, resulting in hunger in some areas, mirrored by excess and waste in others. The same is true of the construction of scarcity of space: there is enough empty space in the UK to address housing and commercial need, but it is in the wrong hands, tied into certain tenures and locked up by systems of lending and planning legislation.

Still more disturbing is the way that scarcity is used to justify the imposition of inequitable social programmes. There is nothing new in this, ever since Malthus used the threat of future food shortages to justify population control, and the accompanying abandonment of the poor, scarcity has been used as a spectre, most clearly in the contemporary age where lack of capital liquidity and growth is used as the justification for the imposition of punitive austerity programmes.
For the architect, scarcity may cause the way the profession sees itself to shift. At present, the practice of architecture is defined through the design of buildings. Under sustainability, attention has focused on ensuring these buildings have as small a carbon footprint as possible. The competing systems of control and regulation (BREEAM, Passivhaus, Codes for Sustainable Homes, LEED, etc.) have the unfortunate effect of essentialising scarcity, treating it as a pure and inevitable limit, there to be measured and controlled.

The more complex readings of scarcity challenge this view of sustainability as a limit, in which attention is fastened to building as an object rather than what comes before or after it. Scarcity, if defined solely as lack and limit, would ask us to do much the same, but with less; this approach is exactly what is arising out of the current programme of austerity.

Against this, we argue that a critical conception of scarcity can upset much of that which neo-liberal economics is based upon (such as the notion of endless growth), and with this upsets the assumption that architects should be defined solely through adding stuff to the world (which in turn is a mode of extracting from the world). Architecture can be about much more than designing buildings.

Scarcity: Architecture in the age of depleting resources, edited by Jon Goodbun with Deljana losisfova and Jeremy Till, will be published by Academy Editions in July and the authors have also joint-edited the July issue of AD on scarcity. Their research is funded by HERA and can be read at scibe.eu