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Designing Post-Blast Beirut: Intersecting Perspectives Reimagining the Edges between Port and City at a Time of Transition

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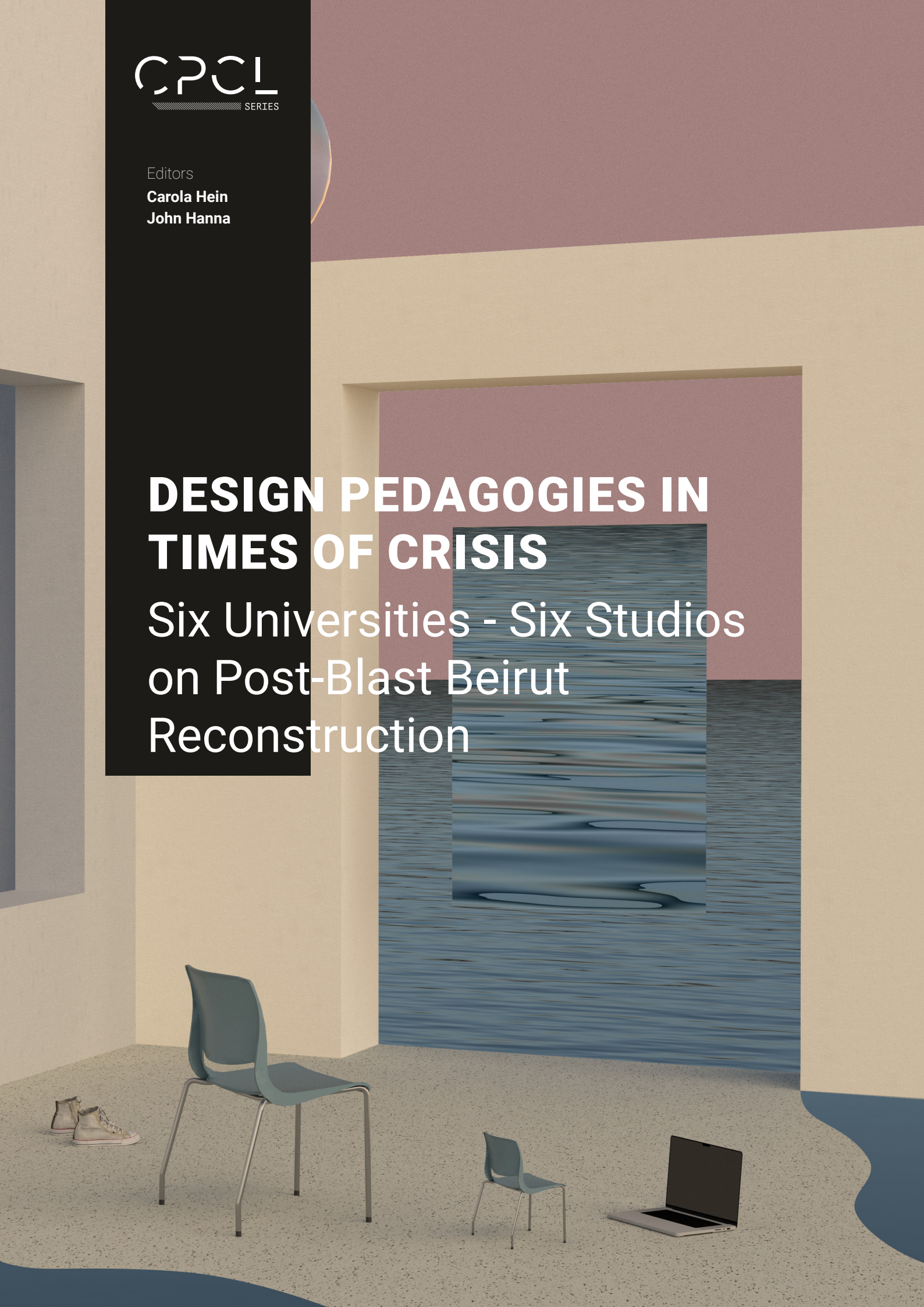
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DESIGN PEDAGOGIES IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Six Universities - Six Studios
on Post-Blast Beirut
Reconstruction





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Six Universities - Six studios on Post-Blast Beirut Reconstruction

PEER REVIEWED

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Designing Post-Blast Beirut: Intersecting Perspectives

Reimagining the Edges between Port and City at a Time of Transition¹

View From Delft (Delft University of Technology)

Paolo De Martino, John Hanna & Carola Hein

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How provocative can visions about the future be? What is the role that education can play in helping (re)imagining port-city territories at a time of transition? In this contribution we will answer this question through the lens of master's elective course 'Adaptive Strategies' for the 2020/2021 spring quarter run by Carola Hein, Professor History of Architecture and Urban Planning at the Department of Architecture of Delft University of Technology, and co-taught with Nadia Alaily-Mattar, John Hanna, and Paolo De Martino.

The design studio explored adaptive strategies through the lens of the port city of Beirut, where an explosion destroyed a large part of the port in August 2020, generating enormous environmental as well as economic and social problems for the surrounding neighborhoods. This raised the question of how to (re)imagine the port-city territory. This juncture was the point of departure for the design studio and an invitation to students to critically reflect on the role the port could play in designing the future of Beirut.

Guest lectures by Christine Mady (Notre Dame University, Lebanon), Robert Saliba, and Nisreen Salti (American University of Beirut), Jana Haidar and Tala Alaeddine (Public Works Multidisciplinary Research and Design Studio, Beirut), and Peter Grudina (former master's degree student at University of Ljubljana) introduced students to the city of Beirut. Alan Plattus, professor of architecture at Yale University, offered input on the theme of port-city relationships.

¹ Part of this essay was published earlier as a blog on the website of LDE PortCityFutures initiative. Alaily-Mattar and Hanna, 'Adaptive Strategies'.

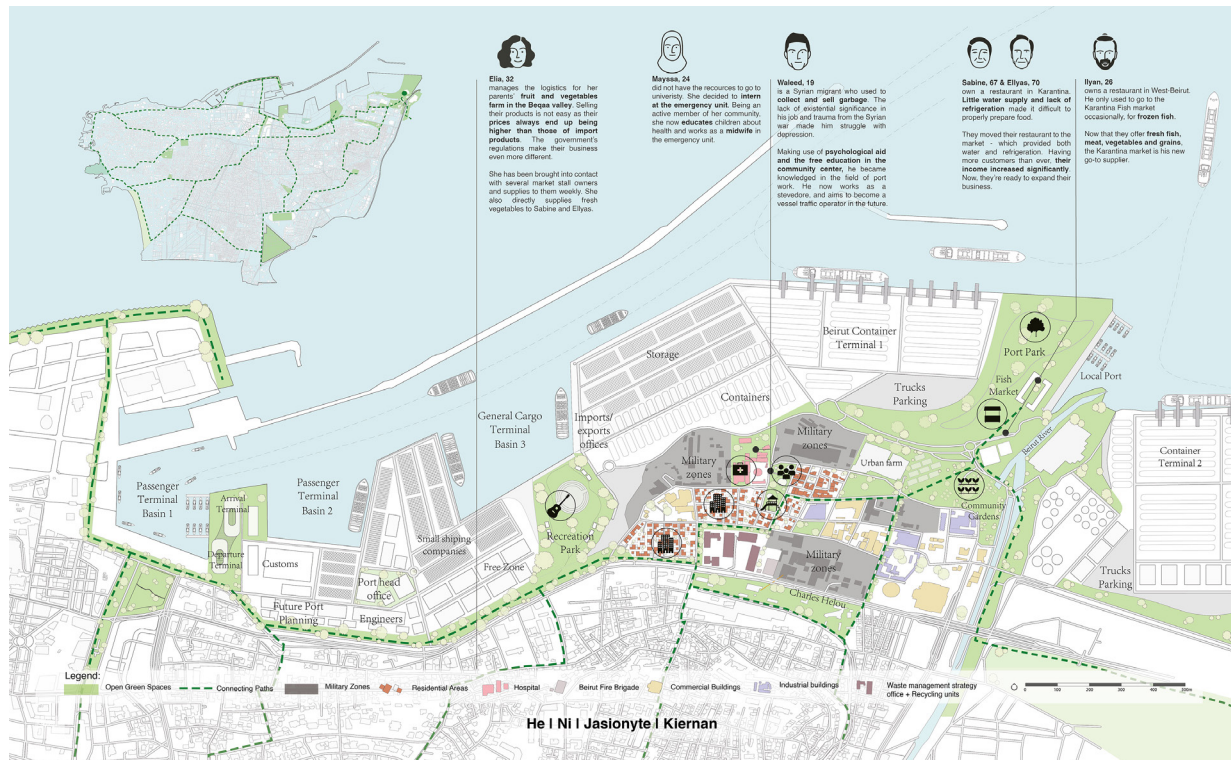


Fig. 1 Port for the People: A Citizen-First Vision for the Reconstruction of Karantina and the Beirut Port Cityscape (by Weiyan He, Sandra Jasionyte, Giulia Kiernan, Yinan Ni)

From a methodological perspective, the course proposed to apply a scenario-thinking approach. Scenarios are normally in the form of 'what if', and they fit perfectly within contemporary design approaches to understand the spaces that Bauman has defined as liquid.² In contemporary society, different visions coexist and collide and the role of the scenario is that of defining a vision, a fascination, an image capable of tracing a direction, leading the current, in a context made up of differences, complexities, and conflicts. These scenarios are reflections, points for discussion, which do not claim to plan the territory in an assertive way but rather suggest possible new narratives for the future. The scenarios developed within the design studios presented and discussed in this article respond to this need and the necessity to build new interpretative models, planning approaches, and cultural mindsets.

But what does it mean to use adaptive strategies? And what possible, probable, and plausible scenarios is it possible to imagine? Scenarios do not only deal with space and this concept can be decomposed according to different layers. All of them have to do with going beyond the traditional idea of the masterplan. Therefore, the definition of adaptive strategies requires reflecting on some important themes: a) temporality – in relation to the transformation of the territory and of the different actors who inhabit it, considering that space, institutions, society, economies change with different modalities and speeds (as discussed in chapter 1); b) scale:



Fig. 2 Public and Healthy Port District (by Ghassan Mosto, Scott Spoon, Bram van den Berg, Kimberly van Vliet)

as a need to look at the territory moving beyond port or city borders but on the contrary look at the implications on a regional scale and even beyond; c) design: as a process that requires thinking of design not as a final outcome, but as a set of steps to be taken to define a vision; d) urban acupuncture: as an approach that looks at the porosities of the territory and the opportunities that these can offer in a regeneration project.

These themes have been discussed with students leading to reflections during the seminars on the reconceptualization of a masterplan that is no longer conceived as a system of prescriptions and definition of urban enclaves. On the contrary, scenario thinking helped to reframe the urban plan as a tool to connect the fragmentations of the territory. Scenarios meant working on projects capable of looking at the possible relationships between the port and the city at different scales. The scenarios discussed below are not intended to plan space in the traditional way, but to provide a suggestion, an image, fascinations that leaves room for uncertainty, and in this sense, adaptive. Working for scenarios helps reflecting critically on the evolutionary history of the places and the communities of people who developed it. And this took place through the processes of mapping the historical traces, the signs that still remain, the permanence of space, the urban and territorial palimpsest³ as a first step to establish a relation with the port city.

The students were asked to focus their work on the Karantina

neighborhood, a largely neglected urban pocket on the southeastern borders of the port of Beirut. This neighborhood shares some features with similar areas located near ports around the world. They developed as places for housing port workers or as makeshift sites for the city's newcomers. Throughout the nineteenth century, Karantina was central to the development of the port and Beirut as a whole. Lebanese historian Toufoul Abou-Hodeib discusses how the construction of Beirut's lazaretto in the Karantina area in the 1830s contributed to the expansion of the port's regional role and trade volume. As a result of the port's expansion, Beirut transformed from a coastal town with a port to a major Eastern Mediterranean port city.⁴ During recent years, with the establishment of modern Lebanon as an independent state, Beirut's urban development efforts have been oriented more toward the land side. The port area and its surroundings slowly started to show different aspects of urban deterioration, such as the spread of perilous industries and informal developments. This has resulted in a strong visible and spatial separation between Karantina and the rest of the city.⁵ The port blast of August 2020 brought additional complications to the neighborhood of Karantina as its buildings and urban infrastructure incurred massive destruction.⁶

The students participating in the seminar were asked to propose adaptive strategies for transforming Karantina while taking into consideration how the relation between the city of Beirut and its port can be redefined. Such an exercise required careful selectivity rather than comprehensiveness. It necessitated the development of a phasing logic for the implementation of the strategy over different time intervals. In addition, the exercise called for taking the different actors and their roles into consideration. The students' projects covered a wide range of aspects regarding Karantina's relation with both the port and the city.

A number of student groups identified the waste treatment plants that already exist in Karantina as an opportunity. Their proposals (featured also on the PortCityFutures website⁷) included a transformation of these facilities that currently pose a number of negative externalities and threats, while retaining their function. By considering the value chains of waste treatment and the spatial distribution of such value chains, one student group expanded the function of the waste treatment plant and reorganized it as a central component in the neighborhood. Titled 'Karantina with 3S'es: Sustainability, Sociality and Sentiment', one student project envisaged an active role for NGOs in this transformation process, in which the organization of the collection and recycling of waste becomes

4 Abou-Hodeib, 'Quarantine and Trade'.

5 Khalaf, Heart of Beirut.

6 Al-Harithy and Yassine, 'Post-Disaster Karantina'.

7 Adaptive Strategies Exhibition, <https://www.portcityfutures.nl/adaptive-strategies-exhibition>.

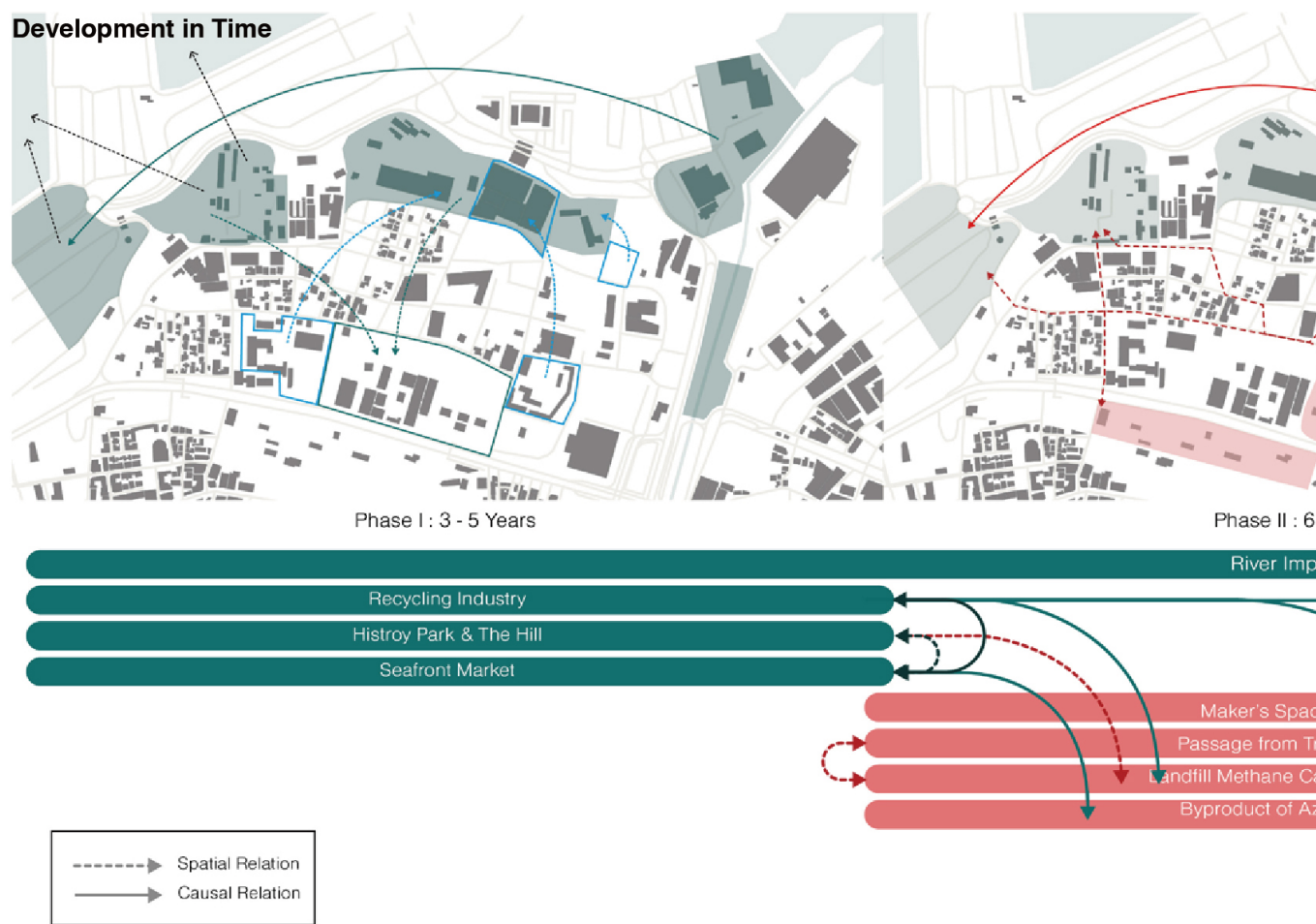


Fig. 3: Karantina with 3S'es: Sustainability, Sociality and Sentiment (by Hsiu-Ju Chang, Kianu Goedemond, Laura Wiedenhöver, Georgia Xypolia)

a form of 'urban manufacturing' that not only brings an opportunity for creating new jobs, but can also connect the residents of the city. In the words of the students: 'Where the confessional democracy in Lebanon fails, this initiated grass roots movement will increase understanding and cooperation across confessional boundaries. The sentiment of being dependent on a failing government will be replaced by a constructive positive attitude toward the offered local possibilities'.⁸

The challenge of the lack of connectivity of Karantina occupied a prominent position within the students' projects. Various projects featured proposals for addressing the pedestrian connectivity across the highway to the south and the connectivity to the Beirut River to the eastern borders of Karantina. The students proposed the introduction of new safe and friendly pedestrian corridors that can facilitate the mobility between Karantina and its surrounding neighborhoods. In many cases, these corridors were connected to new activities and urban nodes inside

8 Chang, et. al, 'TU Delft AR0110 Adaptive Strategies'.



Karantina in a way that brings the residents of Beirut closer to their port.

While all student groups proposed a number of incremental low-cost interventions, particularly in the early stages of the transformation process, some groups linked these to subsequent bold and high impact interventions. They will only become possible after the ground has been prepared, both physically and emotionally. For instance, one student group conceived of transforming part of the port into algae facilities for producing clean energy. By proposing such farms on prime real estate at the vicinity of the port and within visual sight from the city center and the highway, the symbolic potential of these farms becomes in itself an additional dimension of this proposal. In their words: the 'proposal is to use the port of Beirut to make a statement that the port does not exist solely to make money, but to support the lives of the residents of Beirut and provide a bright future'.⁹

The reality of devising adaptive strategies for urban transformation

⁹ Mosto, et. al, 'TU Delft AR0110 Adaptive Strategies'.



Fig. 4 Weaving Mobility: Reconnecting Karantina after the August 2020 blast (by Tasos Antonopoulos, Michalis Psaras, Alice Sikiaridis, Shing Yat Tam)

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is a much tougher task than an academic exercise. Especially, when it takes place in contexts where a clear and a transparent mechanism for urban development and urban governance is largely missing. A main challenge for any transformation project for Karantina is how to manage ambitious and visionary thinking with the aspirations of those who need to be convinced of doing the legwork, transforming those ambitions into reality. Rebuilding trust between the local communities and the actors who will propose or even spearhead transformation processes is an urgent task which necessitates various levels of political reformation and promotion of active urban citizenship. The emotional sensemaking power of images should not be underestimated. Architectural thinking is powerful because it can generate images that make alternative narratives for the future plausible. With this power comes a responsibility of not being instrumentalized. Proposing changes to urban settings is therefore not a mere scientific or rational undertaking. In fact, such undertakings are always politically motivated, as disputes for finite resources need to be settled. The race to own the narrative will be won by those who deliver images the fastest. Unfortunately, a quick win is rarely a win for everyone. Academia can make a difference by introducing proposals that foreground long-term and collective interests.

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