Prospects

Towards an Enhanced Practice of International Design Studio Collaborations

Hanna, John

Publication date
2023

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Design Pedagogies in Times of Crisis

DESIGN PEDAGOGIES IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Six Universities - Six Studios on Post-Blast Beirut Reconstruction

CPCL
SERIES

DESIGN PEDAGOGIES IN TIMES OF CRISIS
Six Universities - Six studios on Post-Blast Beirut Reconstruction

(cc) (i) **4.0**

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF
Giovanni Leoni, University of Bologna, Italy
Carola Hein, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands

SCIENTIFIC COMMITEE
Manola Antonioli, ENSA Paris La Villette, France
Pier Vittorio Aureli, Architectural Association, United Kingdom
Alessandro Balducci, Milan Polytechnic, Italy
Claudio Calvaresi, Milan Polytechnic, Italy
Andrea Cavalletti, University of Bologna, Italy
Neera Chandhoke, Delhi University, India
Paolo De Martino, Delft University of Technology
Gregor Fitzi, Potsdam University, Germany
Kalliopi Fouseki, UCL London, United Kingdom
Elisa Giaccardi, Technical University Delft, Netherlands
David Gissen, California College of the Arts, United States
Torgrim Guttormsen, Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage, Norway
John Hanna, Delft University of Technology
Noriko Inoue, Otemon Gakuin University, Osaka, Japan
Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic
Antonio Lucci, Humboldt University, Germany
Thomas Macho, Linz University of Art, Austria
Sébastien Marot, EAVT Paris-Est, France
Achille Mbembe, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa
Alain Milon, University Paris Nanterre, France
Sarah Nuttall, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa
Joan Ockman, University of Pennsylvania, United States
Agostino Petrillo, Milan Polytechnic, Italy
Sofia Psarra, University College London, United Kingdom
Federico Rahola, Genova University, Italy
Henrik Reeh, Copenhagen University, Denmark
Hilde Remoy, Technical University Delft, Netherlands
Kun Song, Tianjin University, China
Teresa Stoppani, London South Bank University, United Kingdom
Pieter Uyttenhove, University of Gent, Belgium
Rashmi Varma, Warwick University, United Kingdom

GRAPHIC DESIGN
Douwe de Jager, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands
Stefano Ascari, University of Bologna, Italy

COORDINATION
Zuzanna Sliwinska, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands
Erkan Mestan, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands

COVER IMAGE
Hala Tawil

2

PARTNERS

PORT

CITY

FUTURES
Leiden-Delft-Erasmus

T̃U Delft

T̃U Delft | Deltas, Infrastructures &
Mobility Initiative

Water, Ports and Historic Cities

UNESCO | uniTwin

unesco

Chair

3

H
 A U
    P

Prospects

Towards an Enhanced Practice of International Design Studio Collaborations

John Hanna interviewing Mona Harb

Scholars of architecture use the epistemological practices of science and art to imagine alternative futures and identify their spatial prerequisites. Despite, or perhaps because of, the protected laboratory setting of academia, design studios have the potential to demonstrate and illustrate the possibilities of foregrounding different politics. Beirut is a city in perpetual social, economic and political crisis. Tackling case studies during times of crisis, such as Beirut, introduces a particularity to academic studios owing to the pressing urgency to identify levers of change. The academic design studio exercise as an epistemological exercise can generate knowledge which can spill outside the academic setting to affect prevailing public discourse. However, this can lead to a tension in education between a) training students how to solve real world problems versus b) having students produce knowledge that can help solve real world problems.

In this chapter we engage in a discussion with Prof. Mona Harb from the American University in Beirut to highlight the limitations and potentials emerging out of decisions regarding how to run a collaborative studio, from distance in a post-disaster situation. We ask her about the different power dynamics which are involved in such collaborations, what outcomes could be expected? whose interests do these collaborations serve? And what are the best practices to maintain the productivity of such encounters?

Interview

John Hanna: I would like to start by asking you about Beirut as a hot topic for design studios. I understand this has been the case since the civil war. Studio Basel explored Beirut in 2009. The Bartlett in 2012 and the ETH between 2017 and 2019. How do you see this, and what kind of challenges and opportunities can you identify?

---

1   An earlier version of select questions was developed in collaboration with Nadia Alaily-Mattar, Riwa Abdelkhalek and Paolo De Martino.

124

Mona Harb: I would like to start by saying it's not just about studio teaching. Let's reflect more on design pedagogy rather than just the studio teaching.

I think that Beirut has been an object of study and a topic of interest to foreign researchers since a very long time. This is not even just about the post Civil War phase. I think the Civil War catapulted Beirut to a place to study post-war reconstruction, so it became interesting to designers and planners who are interested in conflict, post-conflict, and post-war contexts. But I think if we want to place it historically, Beirut has been a city that has attracted foreign designers, planners, and urbanists since the 1950s.

I'm thinking about Michel Ecochard, Raymond and René Danger, and Constantinos A. Doxiadis. These urba experiments have been happening in Beirut for a very long period of time. And, it is not exclusive to Beirut. This is also the case for Syria, Egypt, Morocco, and many post-colonial countries. The Gulf countries are also another very interesting geography where you can see that happening. It is important to reflect on the fact that these are terrains that attract the attention of foreign scholars and foreign practitioners because of the very possibility of doing experiments that maybe are not as possible in their own contexts. There is always this exotic interest or gaze on these territories.

And I'm not saying this interest is something that comes just from the foreign experts themselves. It's also a demand by many locals. There's a demand from rulers, decision makers, university presidents, and heads of departments for these experts to come and collaborate.

There is an interesting dynamic of interaction around these terrains that is important to note without value judgment. There have been many publications about it. I'm thinking about the very good book of Joe Nasr and Mercedes Volait, Urbanism: Imported or Exported?, or people like Eric Verdeil, who also highlight these influences in several countries, and of the works of many French urban scholars who work on this topic too. For me, it's important to historicize all this and to place it in a larger geography and history.

Now to go back to Beirut itself, I think your question raises a key issue. There are both opportunities and challenges in this, the opportunity is clearly a learning opportunity. We learn better when we are exchanging ideas with each other and when we are comparing our context and our case-study to other cases and other contexts. Learning is expanded and amplified. It becomes enriched through these diversifications of ideas. The opportunities that are created by such exchanges are very clear.

With regards to the challenges, I don't know how much it is clear for people who engage in such programs, but I'm very conscious of it. Maybe

because I have been engaged in several such exercises. They relate, I would say, foremost to language. Most of the time we are dealing with people who do not speak the local language, whether they are educators or learners, students or professors. This creates gaps in knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange. Sometimes, these gaps are important and difficult to bridge.

The other major challenge is time. There is often not enough time to build substantive exchanges, so we often stay at the level of exchange that is at face value. We don't have the opportunity to go more in depth to explore further issues. The type of work that comes out can be more descriptive than analytical.

I feel there's always a missed opportunity of going more in depth because of this lack of time. I mean, because we're stuck in semester calendars that are often not aligned among all partners. The calendar of the semester in one place is not the same in another place. There are also other academic limitations related to learning outcomes or due dates or to pedagogy in general.

And often there is no follow-up. I think it's interesting what you are doing, that you are trying to explore your exchange through a publication where there is some sort of follow up that can happen through the publication itself, and you can reflect and be more analytical about what has happened. This is a great example of possibilities of how to take the conversation further, but it comes more from West-based scholars because they have more time and more resources. They have an opportunity to take this further. But the people on the other side, in the studied places of conflict or of war, are less able to engage or come into the project at the same level.

What you are doing with this publication is already more engaging than many others. I mean that you are inviting me to reflect on this. Others would not even take the time to do this. In that sense, sometimes there is erasure of the natives' voices that happens. That is an actual risk.

Most of the time it is not an outcome of ill intentions, and it is mainly due to circumstances, to structural considerations of institutions rather than wanting to exclude or wanting to erase. This is the way academia works and this is the way scholarly exchanges work. And they sometimes are stronger than the intentions of people with regards to whom to include and whom to engage.

I would say that, I am at a stage in my career where I am very conscious of such requests that come very often. If we have a crisis or if we don't, if we have an explosion or if we don't. There are these temporal patterns. For instance, now in the summer, foreign students or experts visit Beirut because they have time and funding to visit, whereas this is the time for us

to write and to rest and to spend time with our families. The temporality of this is quite interesting: people come during their breaks, during the times that fit them. And they don't take much into consideration what's happening in the host country that is their object of study.

For me, I think the feeling is mixed. On one hand, there is an excitement of wanting to exchange with others and share knowledge and mentor younger scholars and meet colleagues and peers and grow ideas together. And there is a frustration of always being the object of study of other people—–the exchange is going in one direction. Mostly sharing the knowledge that people living in the studied context have been nurturing for decades, which has a very precious value. Sometimes one needs to be also cautious of what they are sharing, especially in these times of crisis where both sides of the exchange do not have the same opportunities and resources to publish as much or publish as quickly.

We take much more time to be able to write and reflect in a context where the crisis impedes our ability to produce. We have to worry about mundane things that people living abroad do not have to worry about, at least not to the same degree. To make it concrete, we wake up and need to deal with issues related to water and electricity crises, transportation, and care—–childcare and elderly care. These are things that are taken for granted in other contexts and there are social infrastructures and social protection networks that support women and men who are responsible for taking care of others—at least, partly.

This is not to ignore the other concerns that people abroad have that we don't have here, like the neoliberal university and demands for publications that are very high and competitive—–this maybe exists to a lesser extent in our academic institutions.

I am not saying that one context is better than the other. I'm just saying there are different temporalities for research and publications. Sometimes, especially when I was younger, I often felt that conversations I had with people who would come and visit would end up being published before I would even have time to work on them and publish them on my own.

I learned, I would say the hard way, to become careful about what I share, with whom I share, and with whom I work. The ethics of the people involved and their positionality makes a huge difference. When we are cooperating with people we trust and we know them to be ethical teachers and researchers—–like for instance, you know that one of our former colleagues was involved in this project (from Delft's side) early on and that was a huge seal of approval concerning ethics and morality. This is always helpful for the facilitation of the exchange.

When you know that there are people like them involved, you realize that these relationships are going to be more equal, more careful, more ethical,

127

and it facilitates the exchange enormously.

The Lebanese diaspora (and I would say unfortunately, the Arab diaspora) is growing so much in recent years as a result of the authoritarianism in our countries, which is making people leave to find work elsewhere. It becomes "interesting" that now whenever we need to cooperate with people abroad—at MIT, at Harvard, at TU Delft, or in France or London—there's always a Lebanese or Arab scholar who knows one of us and who is going to facilitate this exchange in a way that gives it the ethical seal I am talking about.

The fact that you are trying to find a way of doing this exchange that is more inclusive and more equitable is exactly what I'm talking about. It is a value set that is very important in these sorts of exchanges. I think this value set was not as common at the time when I started my work 20 years ago.

Maybe it was because we did not even have such a big scholarly diaspora abroad, and maybe this is something that is interesting to reflect on, that we have more of a generational shift. We have younger scholars abroad from the Arab region who are populating the institutions of Europe, the US, and the UK and maybe Australia as well. This generation can make these exchanges easier. Mediating these types of exchanges is very interesting and productive because they have this value set given their ability to navigate both terrains.

They know how to connect people in Beirut with people in the West and they can read the terrain of the authoritarian context well. They have been there, they know how it works, the codes, and which value sets matter.

John Hanna: With the Beirut blast taking place during Covid, many design studios in foreign universities were not able to travel and access the site. They had to do this from distance. What do you think is the main challenge of doing this? In your opinion, what do you lose as a design educator, particularly in a context similar to Beirut, when you run a studio at distance?

Mona Harb: It's a huge challenge. There's a lot that you lose when you pilot a studio at a distance. The feel of the terrain, the emotions, and the affective dimension. You lose all the sensory experiences that design educators feel when they're teaching. Also, learners miss a lot when they need to respond to a design brief of a site that they're not able to walk in, look at, feel it, hear the sounds around it, observe people and things and how they move around it. It's really hard to do that.

It can be mitigated by having access to audiovisuals or YouTube videos that can also serve as a proxy for doing that. One can even conceive of commissioning videos ahead of time to share with students and with the design educators.

There are ways around it, but I think that it's still a big loss —I would say in any context you would lose a lot; my answer is not specific to Beirut. Even if you are studying a desert or an empty place, the feel of it is very important and so is the emotional dimension.

John Hanna: In response to this inaccessibility to the site, many studios decided to work together closely with Lebanese universities. Speakers were regularly invited to give input over Zoom, and some student groups worked closely with local students' groups who acted as their eyes on the field.

How do you see these power dynamics? For instance, when they ask the local students to go to the field and take photos for them, do you see some sort of asymmetry there?

Mona Harb: Absolutely. The asymmetry is there. There is a real danger of the students becoming like native "fixers" for the foreign commissioners. It is very important to think ahead about this asymmetry.

Today, for instance, I received an email from someone asking me to share data and maps for a particular area in Lebanon. This was coming from students and not colleagues. There is, sometimes, a sense of entitlement in requests for data coming from foreign students.

But I would say in the design studios and the way it happened after the blast, the requests we got from colleagues to cooperate on studios were generally professional. I didn't witness much of asymmetry, but I think the problem you are highlighting here is super important.

With regards to our local students, I think because we conceived the studios jointly, and because the cooperation happened early on, the requests for the local students to share field data were conceived in a more structural way, where they understood that they will be sharing with their foreign colleagues images, videos, and readings of the local context so that they could become integrated in the designs.

And in exchange, the foreign partners would also share their expertise on specific themes and topics. We were dealing specifically with TU Delft as a key center of knowledge on port cities and this was a possibility for our students to learn directly from the experts on the issue through comparative case studies.

From my experience as a colleague who was observing this, I thought that this was a win-win collaboration because we also had substantive content that was coming into the studio from the universities involved. It was designed in a way which I don't think made our students feel that they were working for someone else. The field material they shared was documentation they needed to do anyway for their own studio and they were sharing with a bigger group to reflect collectively on it. And I think

129

that is the right way to do it.

I think sometimes it is also interesting for the local students to hear reflections on a place from people who have never visited it. It brings a way of looking at the site that is very different. I'm not advocating that this should happen, but if it were to happen because of the circumstances, like what happened during the pandemic, it could become an interesting encounter.

It also happens when you have foreign students visiting Beirut for just for a week. The way they see Beirut is very different from people who have lived in the place. They ask questions that are very raw that we don't ask. There's a freshness or originality to the way the designer eye operates when you don't know the place. That can be very productive for the interrogation as long as it is coupled with the (local) eye that knows.

John Hanna: What impacts could foreign university-based design studios have on Beirut the city? And on the foreign institutions themselves? In which directions do you think students need to be steered to generate such impacts?

Mona Harb: I think one of the impacts is that they amplify the learning for both the Beirut-based institution and the foreign one. When you have multiple people from different trainings, journeys, backgrounds, disciplines, experiences, thinking about the same issue, it certainly enhances the way we think about it.

I think there are a lot of opportunities to take it further. There are opportunities in terms of dissemination and continuing the work beyond the exercise of the studio.

One possibility is to do publications in multiple media formats. To document what happened, producing websites or videos about the experience. Also, to document very carefully the methodology of the work itself, the teaching, the exchange, and to highlight what worked and what didn't, so that it becomes an attempt to take this further in another episode of learning beyond the crisis.

Institutions can start thinking about how to continue to work together by establishing MOUs, mobility exchanges, or trying to seek collaborative funding. If this was a productive experience for both, if there are working relations that got established between faculty members in productive and interesting ways, it is important that the foreign institution (which often has more time and resources) try to find ways of pushing it forward.

Crises never end, right? The crisis was there in Beirut before, and continues after the explosion. There are multiple crises, not just one. Acknowledging this and thinking like: "okay, the, explosion was an opportunity to forge links, but can we continue building those links on a more regular basis

and seek to institutionalize these partnerships?" An ideal scenario would be to apply for funding together to support the people we worked with at these institutions beyond that moment of crisis.

The publications you're doing are a very good example of how it could be disseminated further. There is a choice for approaching this with reflective effort, highlighting what worked, what didn't, and how we can improve. This is definitely something that is a good outcome of such a prospect, to take the time to do this, and to have the institution invest resources in this.

A long-term impact could also be seen in a possibility to continue the student exchange through workshops, visiting studios, but not only by bringing the foreign students to Beirut, but also to bring Beirut-based students to Delft.

I talked about this with colleagues regularly. It's very important that it is a two-way street, and I am not only talking about faculty mobility, but student mobility. I know it is much more expensive, but we need to find ways to motivate our institutions to fund these traveling studios or to find ways through larger funding schemes such as perhaps EU programs.

With regards to the impacts of such design studios on the city itself—that is a much harder question.

I've become very interested recently in how culture plays a major role in situations of crisis. I am thinking about exhibitions, performances, installations. Sometimes these types of interventions in cities are much more beneficial to the city than a paper that we publish, or a book that gets read by a few.

Beirut is a city that has many cultural activities happening and there are a lot of artists and designers that are intervening in the city itself. They are making interventions in public space, in open venues that can be accessed by passersby and residents. And that is an interesting opportunity.

Consider when you are doing something that deals with a city in crisis, that some of the outputs that could be more impactful in the long run and engage more people could be installations, performances and exhibitions that have a component that takes place outside the confines of the academic institution, and which could stay for a prolonged period in the city itself. That would engage more students, more residents, and a larger public.

John Hanna: Do you think these kinds of studios could be informative to the actual planning of the city in any way?

Mona Harb: We should not be overly ambitious. The studios are very confined by learning outcomes, and they're also very constrained by the abilities of students just to take stock of what they need to do for the

studio itself. We often load them with a lot of requirements and demands. We do not want to transform them into unpaid consultants.

For me, it's important that we acknowledge the fact that students are students and that they're here for the learning experience and the exchange, and that they also have a lot of limitations, especially in times of crisis. By crisis, I'm talking about youth everywhere because this is a generation that is dealing with a very deep malaise related to the crisis of capitalism. There are lot of burdens on mental health. It becomes hard to ask students to play a professional role, in addition to everything else.

If we want to impact planning at the level of the city, we need to impact public authorities and decision makers. We need to think about different types of collaborations between foreign and local institutions. There are many modalities through which this can happen. Through visiting professorships or experts' mobility, faculty can travel and give lectures or workshops.

At the Beirut Urban Lab, we have been keen in supporting the Port Authority of Beirut and the municipality of Beirut in the post-blast construction and recovery. We are able to host people who would come and support us to continue the work that happened in the studio ¬—beyond the studio. And, we have much more in-depth workshops with advanced professionals, local and foreign, to push our ideas further, and to come up with multiple scenarios which we can then pitch to decision-makers.

This also needs to be planned and organized in relation to funding. We need to hire people to draft, produce drawings and base maps, to collect information from places and prepare presentations. It doesn't need to be a fully-fledged consultancy like for a private firm, it can be conceived as action research. While this could also be beneficial for people in academic institutions, it can be conceived at the level of professionals where the students can take part, but then they would take part as part of a research team, not part of a limited design-studio. I would decouple the studio from the planning expert advice.

The co-director of the Beirut Urban Lab, Professor Howayda al-Harithy, did it the other way around over the past year. She taught a studio based on the research and professional work she had done with the team in Karantina. They had done a strategic plan for a network of open spaces in Karantina, but they could not design all of them. The brief for the studio asked students to design these open spaces and the students produced drafts for design projects for public spaces, based on high-quality research and professional analysis that was done before the studio started. The students' products could be taken up by NGOs or municipalities if they had resources.

John Hanna: Did you witness any difference between the approaches of the local design studios and the international ones when they addressed the blast? Or between the different local design studios?

Mona Harb: I was not involved with the design component of our studio, so I didn't fully experience that.

There's a time for different approaches and one needs to be very attentive and careful in traumatic moments like what we experienced, with the explosion and the fragility. There is a risk of erasing the trauma that people are going through by wanting to go to design experimentations that maybe appear to go beyond the problem.

It also has to do a lot with the pedagogies you suggest in the title of your book. At AUB, we teach architecture according to a specific epistemology. We teach architecture as a culture practice, and we teach it in interdisciplinary ways. We are very conscious of the social, economic, and political dimensions. We aim to integrate the process with the product, methodology, and representation. We are very far from the Beaux-Arts practice.

There are many other schools in Lebanon and the Arab world that teach architecture in the Beaux-Arts way, where it's not as interdisciplinary. It becomes much more about the product and the forms. It is much more about the representation, especially in these days of digital tools.

At the AUB's Department of Architecture and Design (ArD), most teachers are going to ask more questions about conceptual framing, about process, about political and social issues, and about economic issues. They are going to be less interested in the final product and more interested in modalities through which that final product will be defined. This distinguishes the type of approaches that will be followed. And I think this helped the collaboration with TU Delft, MIT, and Tsinghua: our similar design pedagogies. This is the way professors teach in their design studios, irrespective of case studies and crisis or not crisis. The briefs will be very similar. The questions asked during juries and reviews will be similar.

John Hanna: Even for local design studios, accessing the site of the blast and some of the surrounding areas like Karantina can entail some complicated power dynamics. How do you prepare your students for this within the working frame of the Beirut Urban Lab?

Mona Harb: Yes, absolutely. Especially this generation who is very immobile in their neighborhoods and their enclaves. And I would say not only in Lebanon. I mean young people are walking less and less in their cities and experiencing less and less the neighborhoods that they don't live in or work in. They only know the ones which they visit frequently because they have family there or for leisure.

Within the design studio, there are students who have never visited those sites, who have no rapport with those sites and who might have had a very distant relationship to the sites. Who might even have biases against these sites and prejudices against them depending on positionalities. Students can be prejudiced against the populations living there or the areas themselves because they are outside the city, or peripheral to the city, or because they are seen as "immoral" areas or poor areas.

Typically, the way we do it, is in the first phase of the studio, students need to record their impressions of the site, and do what we refer to as "reconnaissance." This is where we can identify who is familiar with the neighborhood, who's not familiar with it, who's worried about it, who's afraid of it, who has traumas related to it, and the histories of the place.

We send the students there without prior information about the site. We don't assign readings yet, and we don't talk to them about it yet. We send them off to capture their initial impressions of the field trying to minimize any influences on their readings.

It is always hard because they come back to you and they want to convey what they think you want to hear. We try to push them to get rid of these expectations that they think we have as well.

Following this first phase, we address upfront the preconceptions they have, the binaries, and their stereotypes about the place. We unpack them through discussions. Typically, students will feel differently about the same place. The discussions that take place between these students is very important. Then we assign sets of readings to go through. We ask them to refer to these readings when they reflect back on the site through more and more field visits. It is a very intense process that involves a lot of senses, emotions, and affect in addition to scholarly and scientific type of work to enable discussing the concepts related to cultural, political, economic, and social dimensions.

It is during this process where we unpack concepts of class, sectarianism, public/private, formal/informal, state, society, agency, and structure. We bring them to class and we discuss them together, sometimes through lectures or film screenings.

John Hanna: Do you include something on the ethics of field work or decolonizing ethnography, anthropology, or do you think it could be too much for architecture students?

Mona Harb: Certainly not too much. But we are not into the decolonizing framework because we'd like to think we are quite decolonized ourselves.

My colleagues and I are already very embedded in local realities and are rather aware of coloniality and have decolonized the curriculum a while ago. For us, decoloniality is not a frame we use, but we understand it well

because we practice it. We make our students very aware of the contexts within which concepts are conceived and developed and how they are imported into the context of Lebanon and we cross it with scholars who work on sectarianism and class and the works we've done ourselves on financialization, gentrification, sectarianism and territorialities.

The students start combining theories that come from more colonial frames with decolonial and interdisciplinary frames. They work on urban politics, urban sociology, urban anthropology, and urban history, with a lot of planning case-studies from the Global South.

John Hanna: Particularly for studios running in foreign universities, to what extent do you think an awareness of the political history and present conflicts is necessary for running such studios? Do you think they can distract the students from the design task and limit their creativity?

Mona Harb: Yes, there is a risk of becoming hyperrealist. I don't know if we can call it a hyperrealism or falling into despair. For designers, they feel that there's nothing they can do to repair any of this through their designs.

We make sure to tell them that design cannot solve things. We scare them off with annihilating the power of design (laughs). It is a real danger. That's why, and this is something I learned from the designers in our team, we use the first phase of the design studio to ask students to share with us their raw impressions, before this somehow heavy input.

One of my colleagues does this exercise of what she calls visioning, where she pushes the students to envision another reality of the place without knowing anything about it. To envision something for the place and draw it in any possible way. The visioning can also be a collage of sorts. She does that in the very first two weeks before they read anything and as a response to their first impressions.

It becomes a phase where we try to capture that creativity or that instinct that is important for designers and planners. They put their ideas on paper and keep a record of them. They capture early on their initial impressions and then we go into the deconstruction: the scientific dimension and the unpacking phase, where they become more bombarded with the planning and social science bits which grounds them in different ways. After that, they need to (re)navigate the design part with the social science part. Then, at the end of the studio we expect them to go back to the visioning, but a visioning informed by all the knowledge they acquired through the readings, through the field work, but without losing the creative part –the imaginative part.

What we try to do is to also share with them examples of case studies, drawings, and design cases that can inspire them to reconnect to their creative core. Design and planning are very important and powerful

135

preconfigurative tools, because they help imagine another urban reality, and helps envision it. Even empirically through the drawings of students, we become able to imagine a different port of Beirut that could inspire other people to continue the struggle for a better future.

Through the power of their drawings, we can start having discussions about how amazing it would be if the Port of Beirut could be linked to the city center and to the rest of the city, or how wonderful it would be to have a green path cut across Ashrafieh and link its upper parts to the port through a beautiful green promenade. It is because they're able to draw this that we become able to talk about it and present it and share it. It inspires people to continue the struggle on the street. These types of discussions and these types of writings on urbanism as a powerful emancipatory force are important, and I lecture a lot about this in my classes because I don't want students to fall into despair. I want them to feel they could have the power to. Yes, the market forces are very hard. If they work in private offices, it will be very difficult for them to do that, but they still have the tools to do it, and they can do it by being engaged in the struggle for a more just city. They can work with NGOs, with research centers, or teach, and inspire other generations of students to do the same.

I try to take them there as someone who's not a designer or a planner, but who teaches designers and planners. I cannot just teach them to be to be depressed designers and to feel helpless facing so many forces that are bigger than they are. I take them through the work of Forensic Architecture, for instance. I try to show them how design tools can be very powerful for investigating situations of violence and conflict like they do in their work on Palestine or for the Port of Beirut. I also bring in the works of architects like Alejandro Aravena, who works on recycling building material at the borders of Mexico and USA into informal housing units. I show them the work of Ayham Dalal, who worked on the refugee camps of Jordan to show the agency of refugees and how in many ways architects can learn from what they do. I show them how design can be a tool of research to document and to learn from. I try to bring the work of our own Beirut Urban Lab, or the Cairo-based centers such as CLUSTER and Takween/Tadamun. The work of Catalytic Action is also a very good example: it is an NGO that has been designing lot of playgrounds for children in Beirut and in refugee camps in Jordan. It is led by an Architecture graduate of AUB. I show them examples of people they can relate to that have graduated from the same institutions, or from peer institutions in the region and who are trying to make an impact in the city, a real tangible, physical impact. I show them all of this and I try to tell them that there are real ways through which we can make impacts on cities through documenting, researching, and intervening whenever we can.