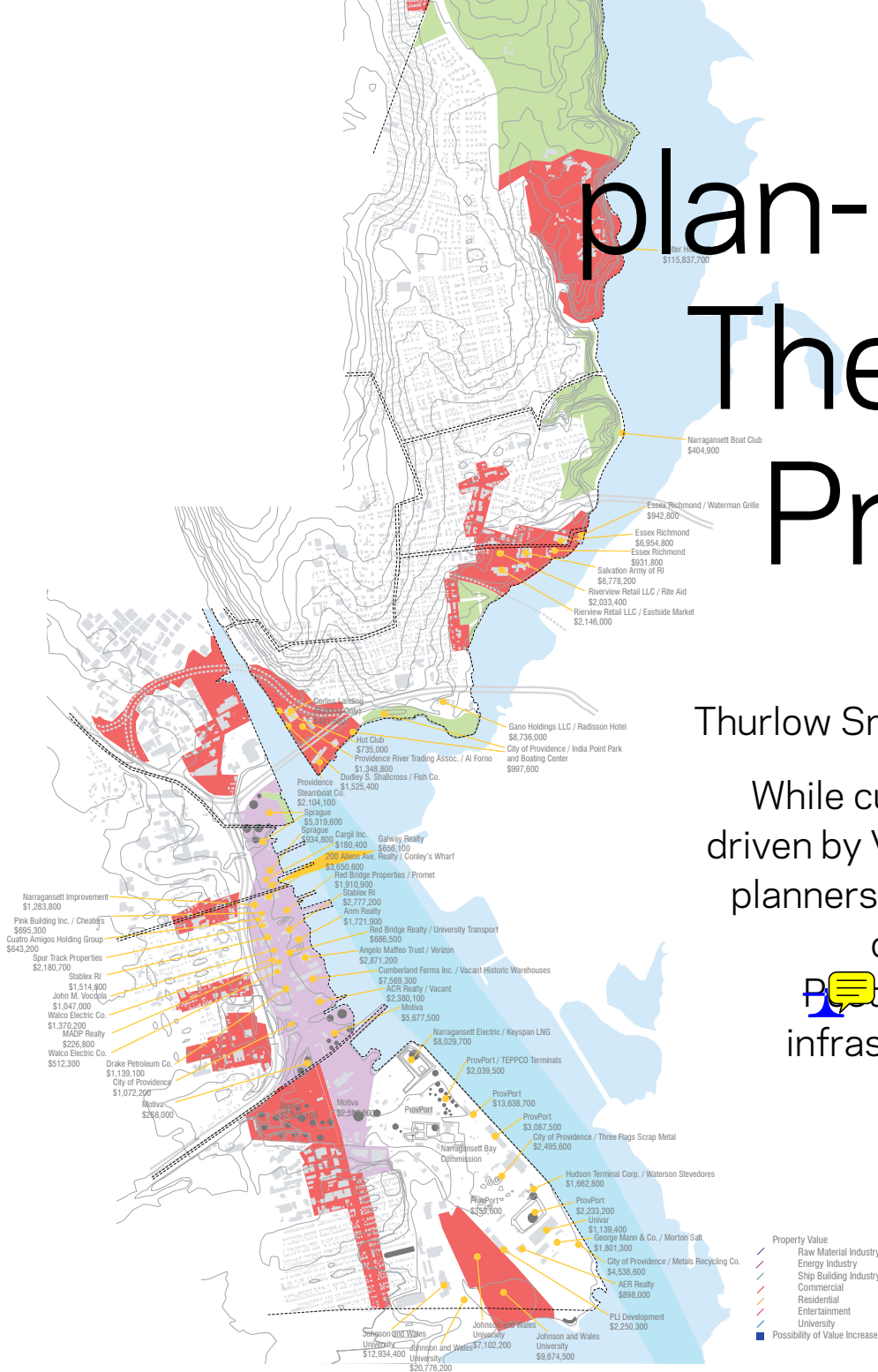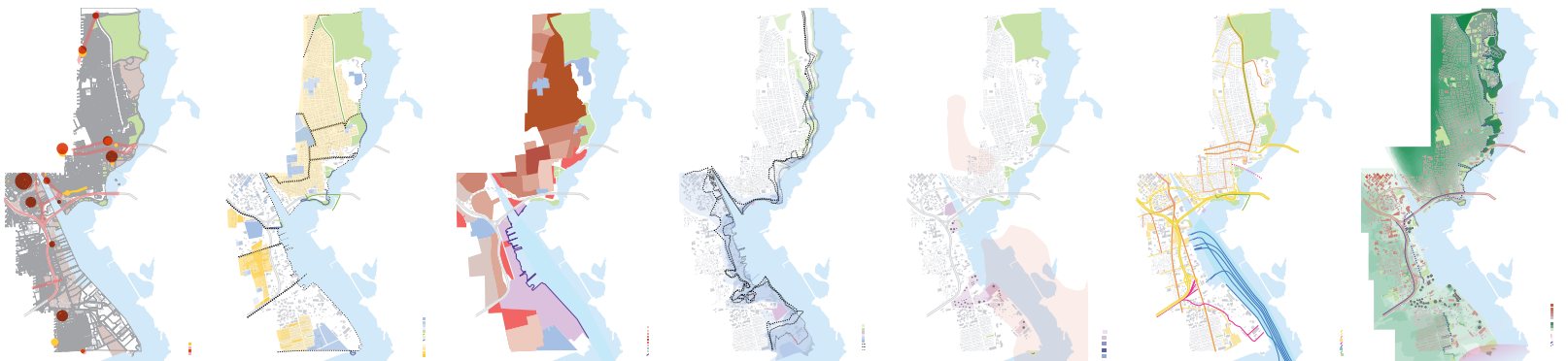# plan-less-ness*
The Bay City
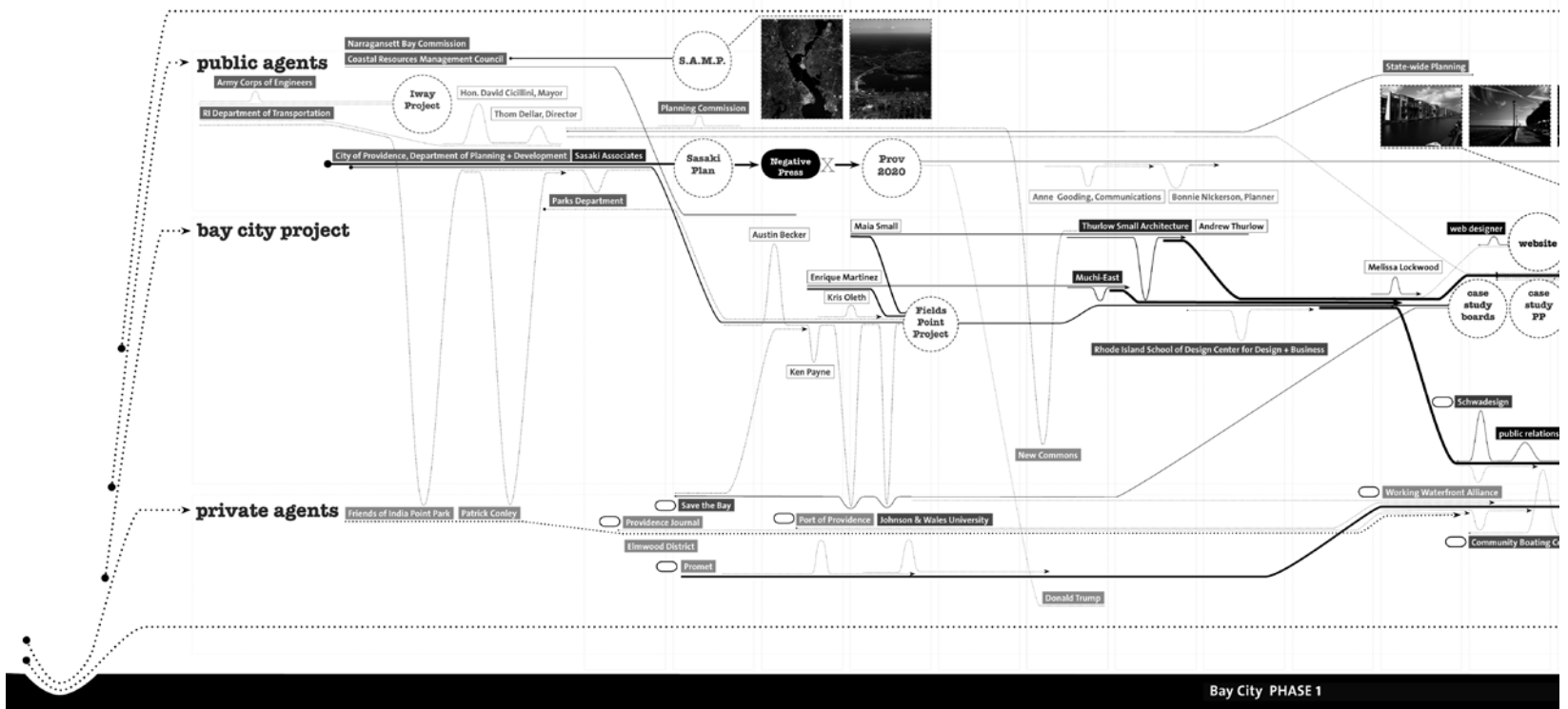# Project *systems-based urbanism

Thurlow Small Architecture with Muchi-East

While current American urban planning is driven by Victorian zoning logics, modernist planners and post-modern New Urbanism, contemporary American cities are Post-structural, driven by incremental infrastructure, development incentives and negotiated parternships
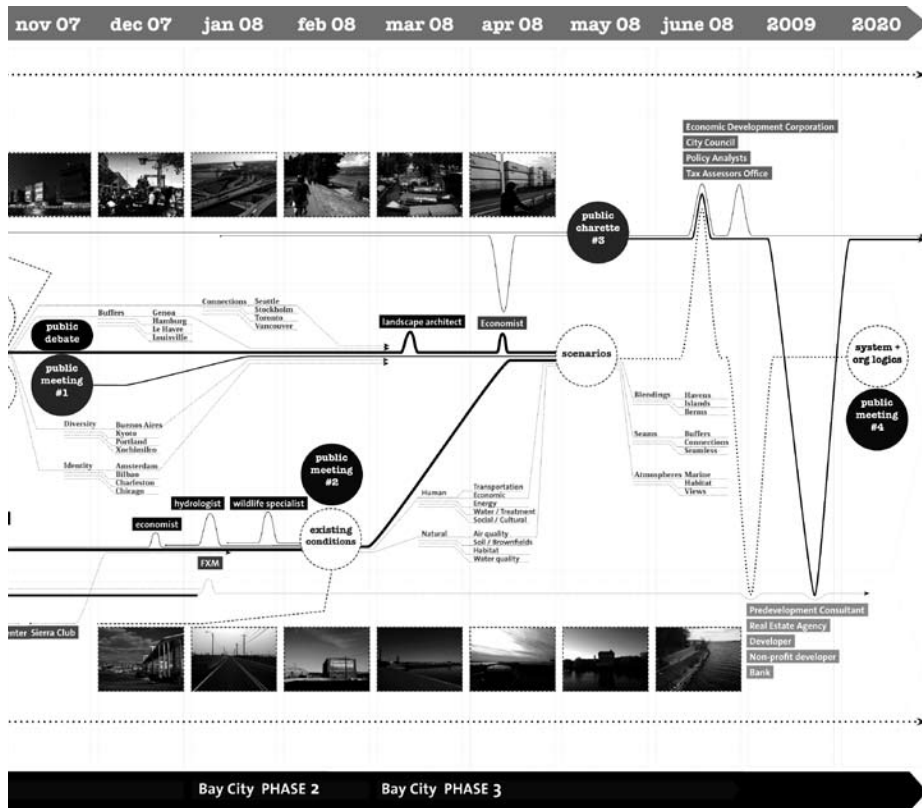

Map labels (property values):

Narragansett Boat Club $404,900
Essex Richmond / Waterman Grille $942,800
Essex Richmond $6,954,800
Essex Richmond $931,800
Salvation Army of RI $6,778,200
Riverview Retail LLC / Rite Aid $2,033,400
Rierview Retail LLC / Eastside Market $2,146,000
$115,837,700
Gano Holdings LLC / Radisson Hotel $8,736,000
Hot Club $735,000
City of Providence / India Point Park and Boating Center $997,600
Providence River Trading Assoc. / Al Forno $1,348,800
Dudley S. Shallcross / Fish Co. $1,525,400
Providence Steamboat Co. $2,104,100
Sprague $5,319,600
Sprague $934,800
Cargil Inc. $180,400
Galway Realty $656,100
200 Allens Ave. Realty / Conley's Wharf $3,650,600
Red Bridge Properties / Promet $1,910,900
Anm Realty $2,777,200
Narragansett Improvement $1,283,800
Red Bridge Realty / University Transport $686,500
Pink Building Inc. / Cheaters $695,300
Angelo Maffeo Trust / Verizon $2,871,200
Cuatro Amigos Holding Group $643,200
Cumberland Farms Inc. / Vacant Historic Warehouses $7,569,300
Spur Track Properties $2,180,700
ACR Realty / Vacant $2,380,100
Stablex RI $1,514,600
Motiva $5,677,500
John M. Vocdola $1,047,000
Narragansett Electric / Keyspan LNG $8,029,700
Walco Electric Co. $1,370,200
MADP Realty $226,800
ProvPort / TEPPCO Terminals $2,039,500
Walco Electric Co. $512,300
Drake Petroleum Co. $1,139,100
ProvPort $13,638,700
City of Providence $1,072,200
ProvPort $3,087,500
Motiva $268,000
City of Providence / Three Flags Scrap Metal $2,495,600
Motiva $2,510,600
ProvPort
Narragansett Bay Commission
Hudson Terminal Corp. / Waterson Stevedores $1,662,800
ProvPort $359,600
ProvPort $2,233,200
Univar $1,139,400
George Mann & Co. / Morton Salt $1,801,300
City of Providence / Metals Recycling Co. $4,538,600
AER Realty $898,000
PLI Development $2,250,300
Johnson and Wales University $12,934,400
Johnson and Wales University $7,102,200
Johnson and Wales University $20,776,200
Johnson and Wales University $9,674,500

Legend:
Property Value
Raw Material Industry
Energy Industry
Ship Building Industry
Commercial
Residential
Entertainment
University
Possibility of Value Increase

No wonder, **plans don't work**

public agents

Narragansett Bay Commission
Coastal Resources Management Council
Army Corps of Engineers
RI Department of Transportation
Iway Project
Hon. David Cicillini, Mayor
Thom Deller, Director
S.A.M.P.
Planning Commission
State-wide Planning

City of Providence, Department of Planning + Development | Sasaki Associates
Sasaki Plan
Negative Press
Prov 2020
Parks Department
Anne Gooding, Communications | Bonnie Nickerson, Planner

bay city project

Austin Becker
Maia Small
Thurlow Small Architecture | Andrew Thurlow
web designer
website
Enrique Martinez
Kris Oleth
Muchi-East
Melissa Lockwood
case study boards
case study PP
Fields Point Project
Rhode Island School of Design Center for Design + Business
Ken Payne
Schwadesign
public relations
New Commons

private agents

Friends of India Point Park | Patrick Conley
Save the Bay
Working Waterfront Alliance
Providence Journal
Port of Providence | Johnson & Wales University
Community Boating C
Elmwood District
Promet
Donald Trump

Bay City PHASE 1

In the mid-twentieth century, when the American economy flourished and modernization took hold, the process of urban growth appeared simple: cities or developers hired designers who were governed by a particular set of rules; between them, they shaped the built environment. Today, economic instability and resource depletion make the process less one of urban growth, and more one of transformation, requiring complex forms of engagement with an increasingly diverse group of players in a more fluid regulatory environment. Among them are neighborhood and merchant associations, quasi-public agencies and community non-profits, groups that, in many cases, emerged in response to the failure of prior public projects. Not only do planners have to contend with increasingly challenging infrastructural conditions, but they are simultaneously hampered (as they engage in larger and more polarized political battles) by well-intended legislation intended to prevent corruption. Rules such as these, that define how planners operate, significantly limit negotiation tactics that could more easily diffuse crises and build sustainable partnerships; the only options remaining to planners are fighting often futile battles or capitulating via easily hijacked design charrettes. A secondary layer of constraints are rules that define what planners operate on (namely codes and zoning regulations) which have further reduced cities to regulatory agents intent on eliminating detrimental projects rather than developing incentives for beneficial ones. Perhaps this approach makes sense when there is growth to regulate, but regulating no growth means doing nothing. In an environment that increasingly requires adaptability, the one-size-fits-all mentality of codes is crippling; traditional zoning, based on Victorian values, generally only serves to protect us from the dangers of an industrial economy that is barely evident in today's cities. We are in times of economic decline and regressive design interests, where public budgets are small, private financing unpredictable, and where there is an increasingly dismal view of the new, mostly as a result of the failures of the old. We believe that designers have a responsibility to not only reshape the physical world, but also to reconceive the process of growth as one of change by engaging the formation of projects themselves: the priorities, the principles, the players, and the possible.

Presented with the opportunity to engage this expanded set of conditions in the context of the Providence waterfront, our first design move was to design a process, not a master plan. The resulting Bay City Project entailed a public/private partnership between the City of Providence, two design firms (Thurlow Small Architecture and Muchi East), and the Rhode Island School of Design Center for Design and Business. Our decision to focus initially on the creation of a project, rather than identifying ourselves as project designers, intentionally shifted the emphasis from the production of solutions into an unfolding process of authorship and identity.

We immediately recognized that the future of the Providence Waterfront rests in a negotiation between three interests: a neighborhood organization focused on expanding recreational and public space; marine and public infrastructure industries fighting to preserve industrial zones with access to the existing 40 ft deep waterway; and the City of Providence, determined to expand its tax base by increasing high density housing. The role of the Bay City Project has been to expand the conversation between the various constituents, to gain a global view of the potential to satisfy existing stakeholders, engage a broader public, and foster a new waterfront identity—to elevate the project from compromise to opportunity. The organizing strategy was thus to develop a systems-based urbanism that does not result in a singular, static vision or plan, but rather projects inherent variability. Our strategy of "planlessness" comprises four modes of operation:

1. NETWORKS–Common among urban projects, the Providence waterfront has a long and complex history of failure and reconsti-

nov 07 | dec 07 | jan 08 | feb 08 | mar 08 | apr 08 | may 08 | june 08 | 2009 | 2020

Bay City PHASE 2   Bay City PHASE 3

tuted alignments between the political, economic, and institutional forces that shape the nature of the design question itself. Partnerships between interest groups have developed, and will continue to develop, out of identifiable and anticipated needs. As we map and construct the network of players, we also discover who is absent; these holes in the network reveal as much about where we aren't as where we are.

2. EXPERTISE–Design is the arrangement of ideas and structures from information; expertise is key to ideas and structures that perform. Planlessness requires local and global study of existing human and natural systems: transportation, hydrologic, water infrastructure, energy, ecological, social, cultural, educational, environmental, media, economic, and financing. Securing funding for this research is challenging. Missing expertise informs us about the priorities of partners.

3. SCENARIOS–Systems-based urbanism lets existing motivations and rules cultivate desired incremental change, with multiple partners creating a diverse and stable result. Logics, not objects, apply. Our directive for the Providence waterfront offers three one-hundred-year urban systems scenarios, each of which highlights the values of the three primary interest groups taken to their extreme conclusions: s: a system of water barriers and plateaus motivated by the desire for public space and a system of green links. Havens: a system of water inlets and jetties emphasize marine and industrial use. Islands: a system of physically independent yet linked zones that create new land to support mixed-use development and increase tax revenue.

The three scenarios are diagrams of systems operating at the limit—a maximum condition never intended to be implemented. Instead, partners and constituents are able to combine different percentages of the three inputs to produce a set of blended outputs. The percentages of the various systems can vary along the water's edge or change over time in response to evolving physi-

cal, social, or economic conditions. Here, adding together logics multiplies opportunity by three rather than distilling the needs of multiple users into an unsatisfactory compromise. When a pier is pulled up into a berm, perhaps public and industrial constituents discover compatibility through section? Then, through a further set of sectional microblends, a strategic series of formal moves adapts each site to promote new uses.

4. STRUCTURES–In planlessness, policy shifts, development incentives, leverage, and negotiation become design tools. Priorities, such as density, growth zones, and activity types, shape decisions; seemingly disparate actions are mutually reinforcing, becoming synergistic and catalytic.

While developments in the project have accelerated the urban experiment, our most profound conclusions in the political process have come through what is still missing and which we hope has still to evolve. The public is concerned with zoning in five years; our concern is with urban systems of the next hundred. In our network of participants, there are key omissions; crossovers between community leadership and design are limited; public engagement is ineffectual; and, while lessened, a lack of trust in the process remains. We do, however, fully understand that this is a long-term process and must unfold in its own way over time; "we" aren't constructing a "vision." Like a government and its constitution, individuals and decisions matter a great deal in the beginning; very quickly, they matter much less than principles; eventually, they ideally don't matter at all.

We have also realized that these issues aren't unique to Providence and, indeed, resonate in many other cities at this time of global economic, resource, and environmental change. This scale of civic dysfunctionality is terrifying. We are, however, optimistic about the potential of planlessness to develop a larger system with the capacity to inform projects in many locations. While planlessness shares certain affinities—in terms of community participation—with not-for-profit groups such as the Project for Public Spaces, the Urban Land Institute, and the Congress for New Urbanism, its benefits include a longer process and expanded partnerships; a greater complexity of design logics; and the inclusion and reward of local designer capability. Planlessness suggests that answers will not come from international debate or conference presentations, nor from an exclusive set of remote power players, but instead from matching global expertise and local knowledge through ongoing projects.

Scenarios

Thurlow-Small and Muchi East ~~developed~~ three ~~systems of developing~~ the waterfront . Each corresponds to the needs and desires of a different constituency: berms serve the needs of the residential community and environmental groups, havens provide greater docking capacity required for industrial waterfront uses and islands accommodate the interest of the city by increasing the amount of taxable land.
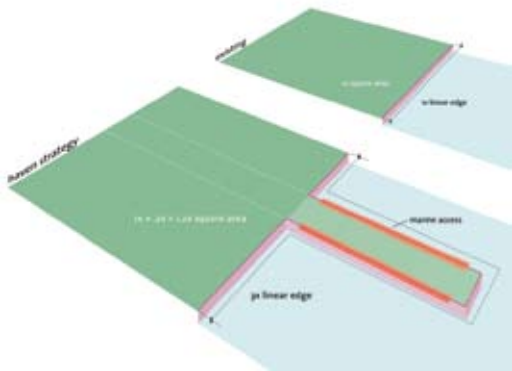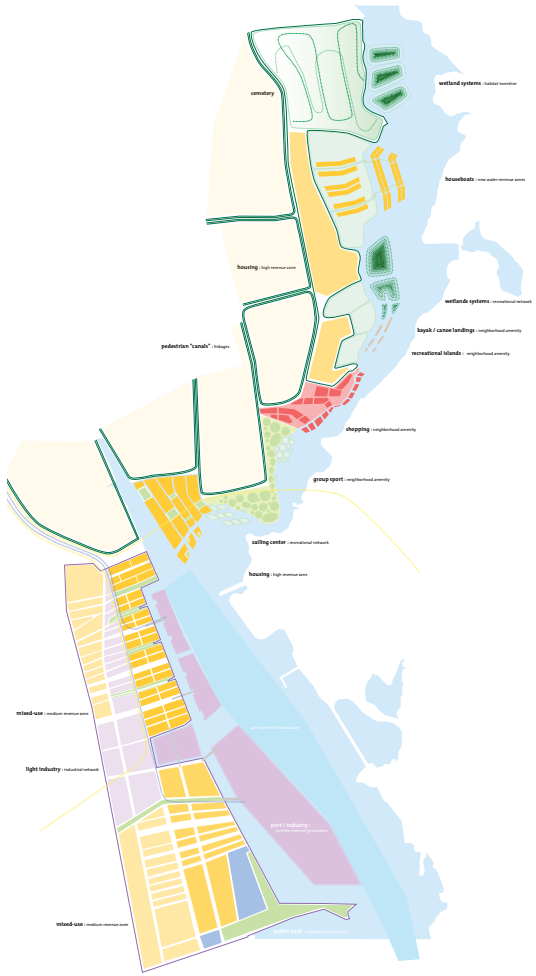
Berms
  - multiply surface area + create barrier
  - ideal for public space and environmental
    conditions
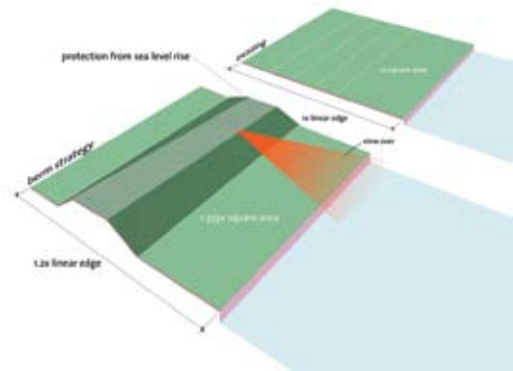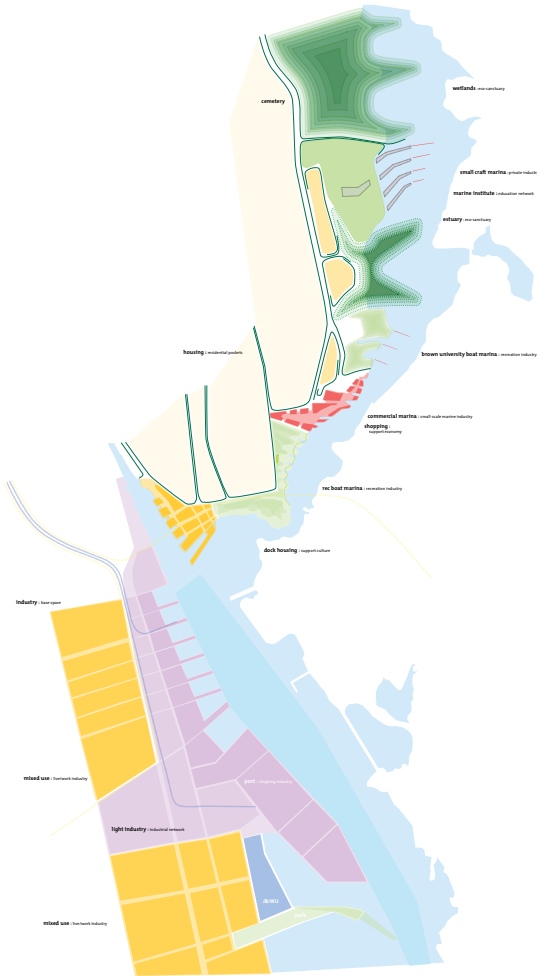
Havens
  - multiply linear edge + surface area
  - ideal for marine and industrial uses

Islands
  - multiply linear edge + surface area
  - ideal for increasing tax revenue by
    increasing land
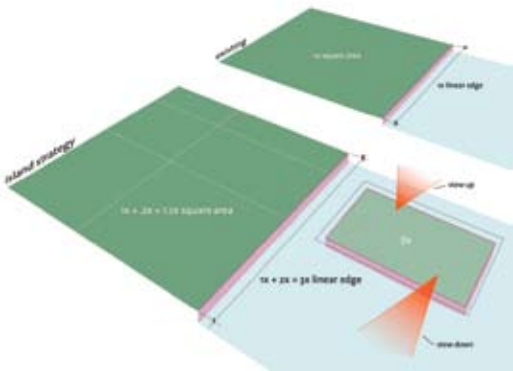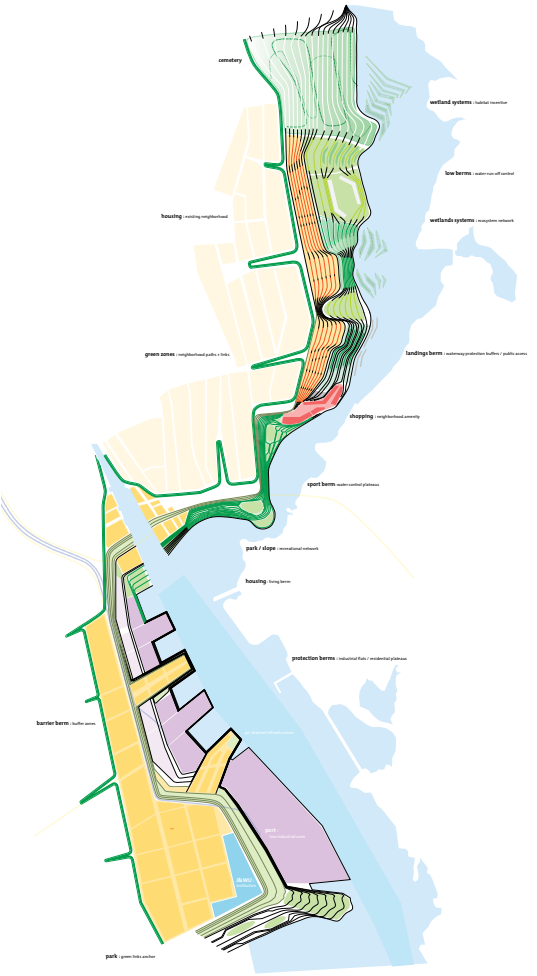
macroblends

1 degree : hard edge

havens   **islands**   **berms**

havens 100%   islands 100%   berms 100%   h33 i33 b33

h50 i50   i50 b50   h50 b50

h75 i12.5 b12.5   h12.5 i75 b12.5   h12.5 i12.5 b75

h50 i25 b25   h25 i50 b25   h25 i25 b50

3 degree : soft edge

havens   **islands**   **berms**

havens 100%   islands 100%   berms 100%   h33 i33 b33

h75 i12.5 b12.5   h12.5 i75 b12.5   h12.5 i12.5 b75

h50 io i50

ho i50 i50

h50 i25 i50
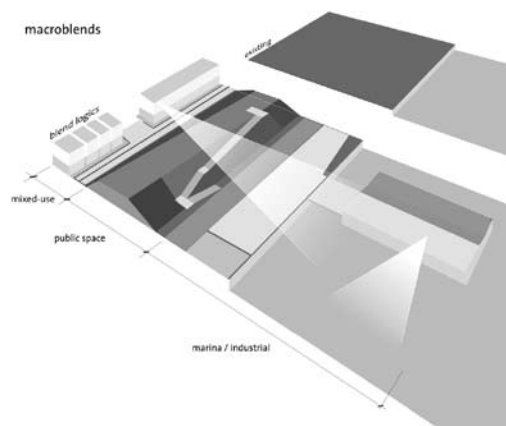

h12 i75 i12

h50 i50 io
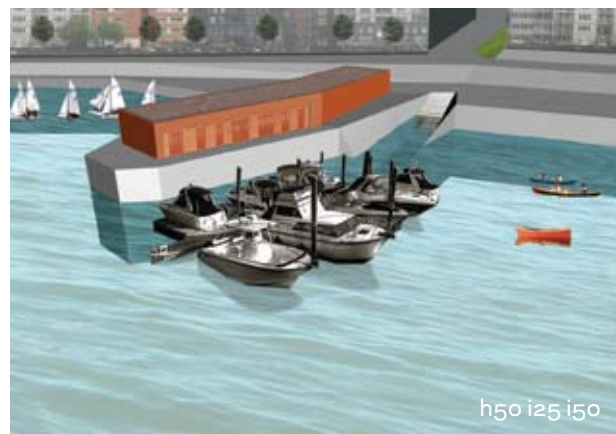
h33 i33 i33

Rather than provide a singular solution, the architects have developed a parametric process: form has direct programmatic, spatial and infrastructural effects. They have developed a series of "sliders" in Autodesk Maya Unlimited that allow for a virtually unlimited number of variations of "blendings" between the different scenario, depending on the particular needs needs and interests at any particular place along the site, they can dynamically adjust the percentages of the systems. Diagrammatic representative scenarios are illustrated far left, and possible outcomes for those blendings are indicated in the renderings.

microblends

blend d:1
blend c:1
blend b:1
blend a:1
blend d:3
blend c:3
blend b:3
blend a:3

default outline : **local condition**

up/down : **topographic separation**

push/pull : **increase land area**

taper : **boat access**

taper/raise : **island connections**

raise : **flood protection**

low : **wetlands**

high : **flood barrier**

1 - degree : **hard edge**

3 - degree : **soft edge**
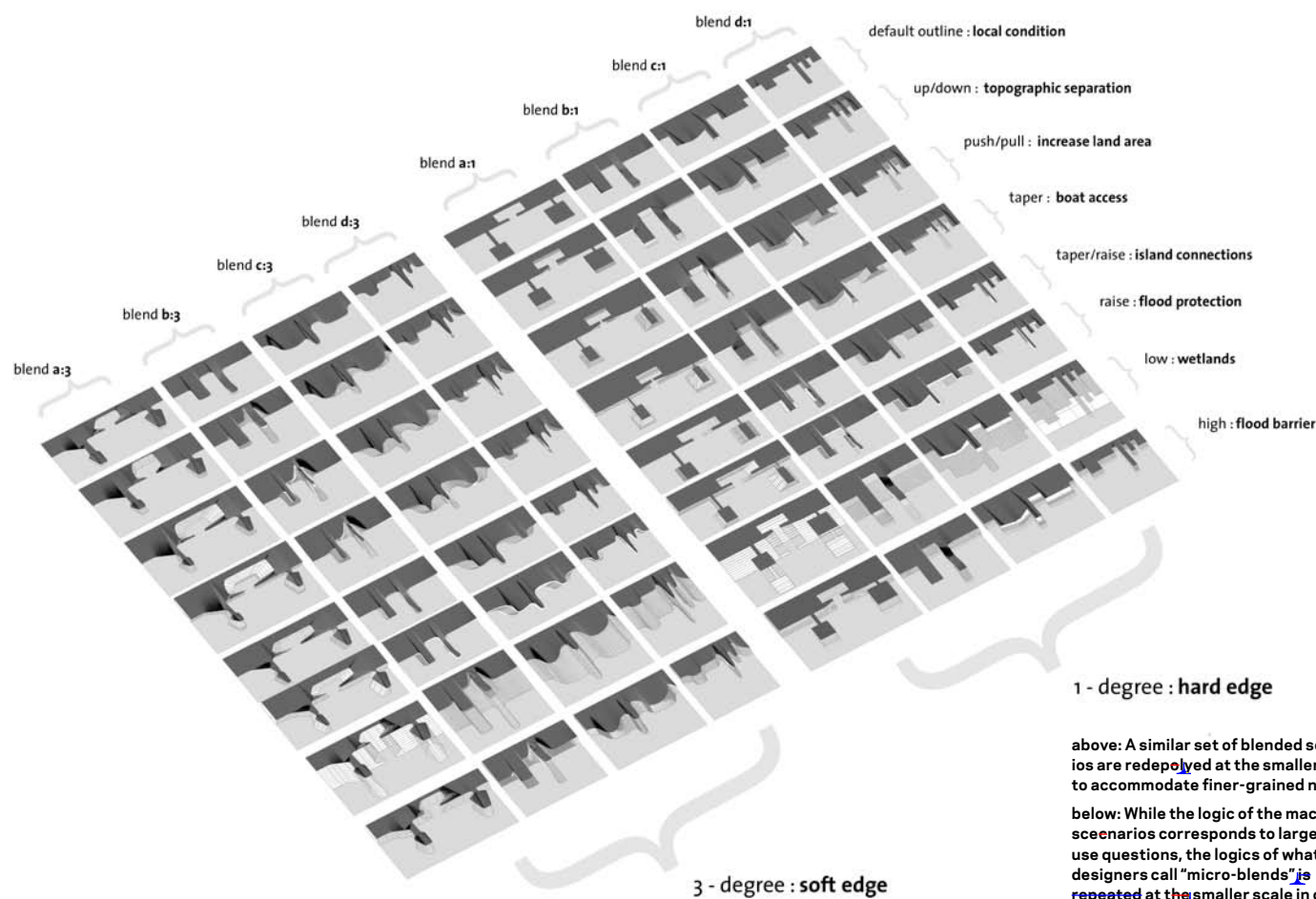
above: A similar set of blended scenarios are redeployed at the smaller scale to accommodate finer-grained needs.

below: While the logic of the macroblend scenarios corresponds to larger land use questions, the logics of what the designers call "micro-blends" is repeated at the smaller scale in order to accommodate specific program.

macroblends

existing

blend logics

mixed-use

public space

marina / industrial

microblends

existing

blend logics

mixed-use

public space

marina / industrial

public dune bikepath

road access

tidal water bridge island formation

public fishing pier

boat ramp

adjustable height marina boat access

leading unloading