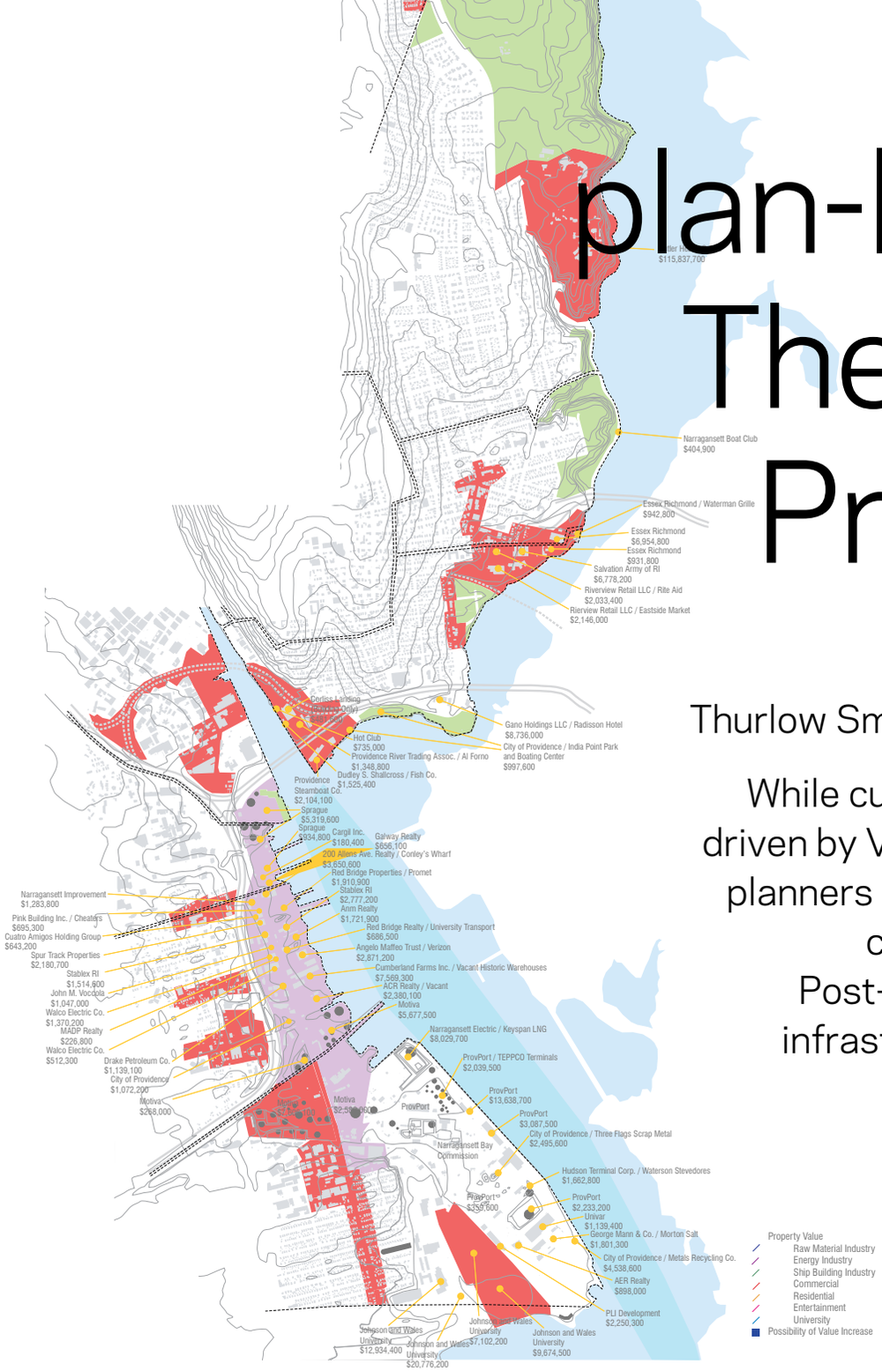
plan-less-ness*
The Bay City Project

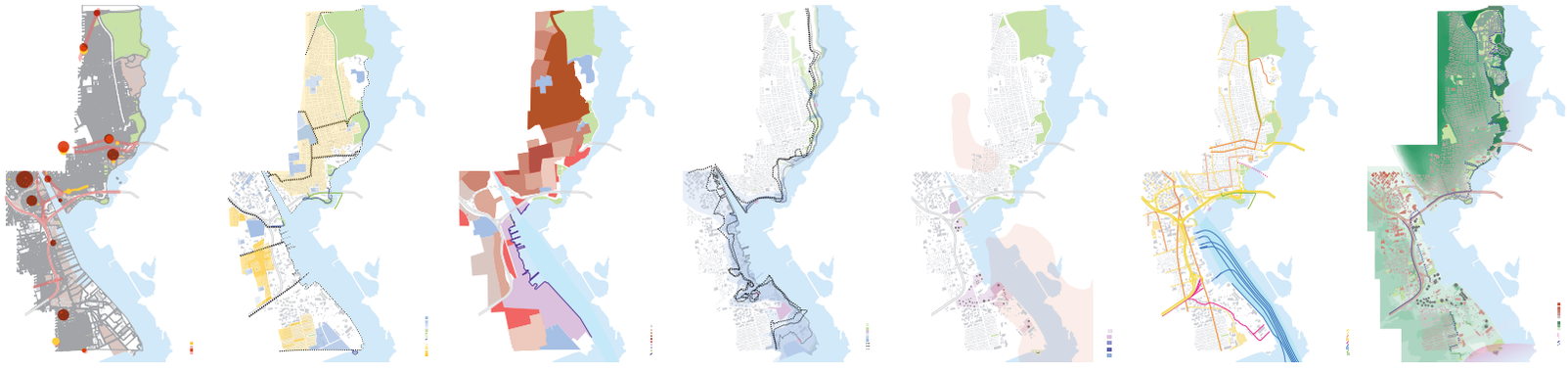
*systems-based urbanism

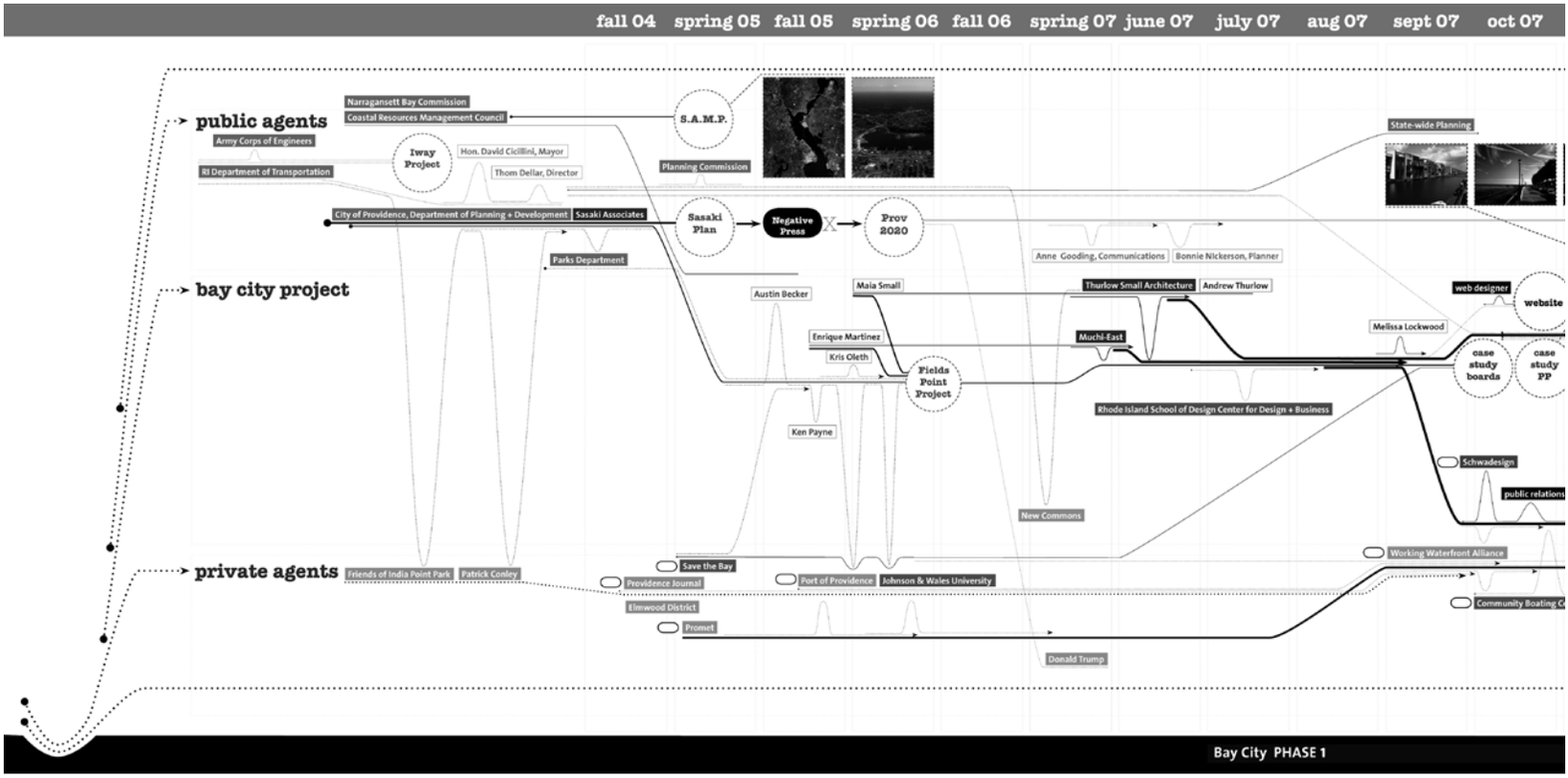


Thurlow Small Architecture with Muchi-East

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

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



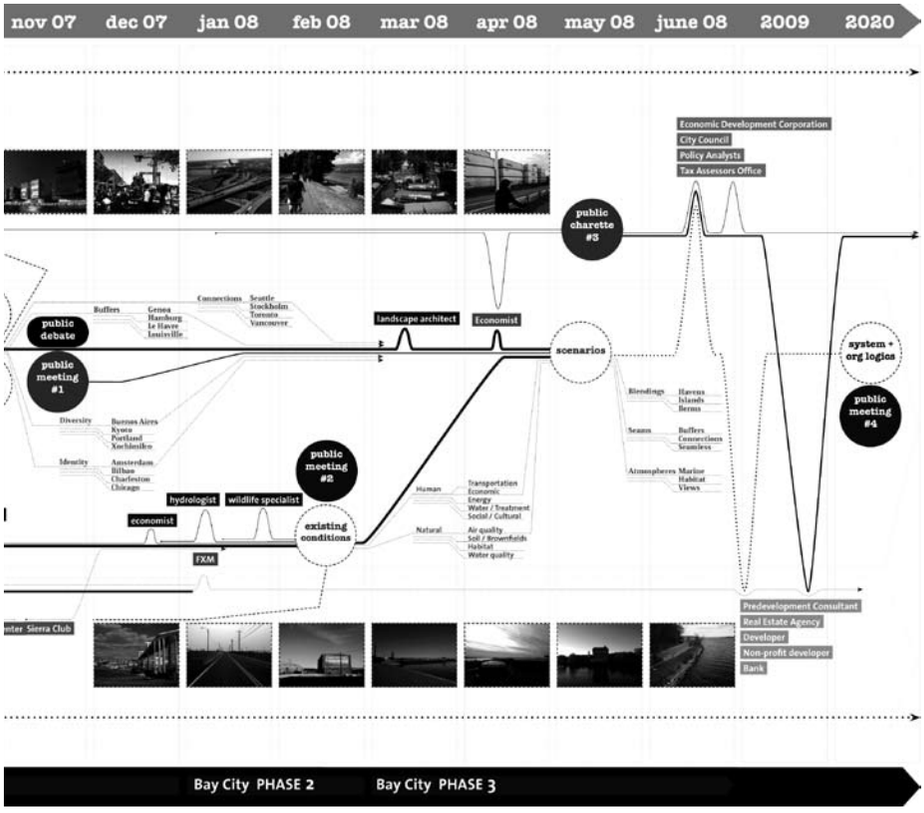


In the mid-twentieth century, when the American economy flourished and modernization took hold, the process of urban growth appeared simple: cities or developers hired designers who were governed by a particular set of rules; between them, they shaped the built environment. Today, economic instability 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-



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: Berms: 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 that 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 physical, 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.

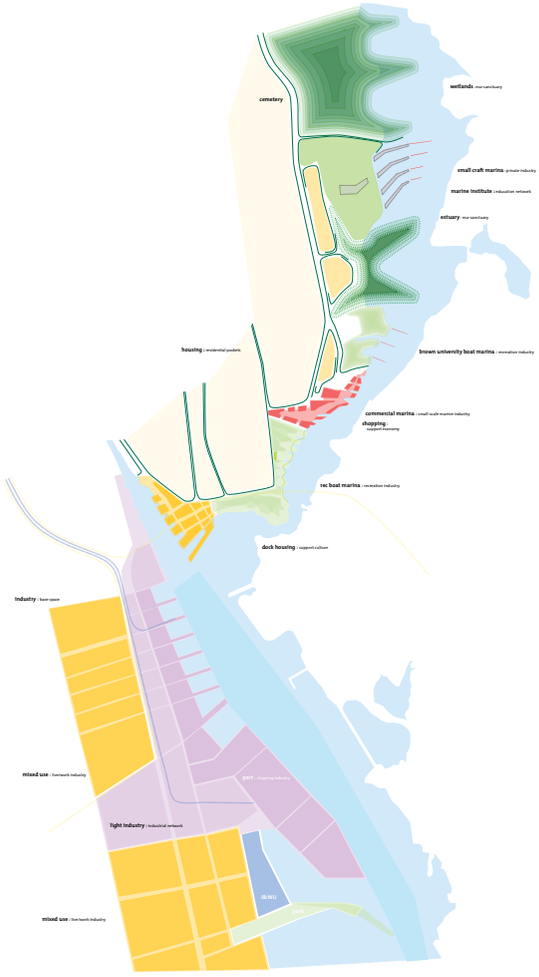
We have also realized that these issues aren't unique to Providence and, indeed, resonate in many other cities at this time of global economic, resource, and environmental change. This scale of civic dysfunctionality is terrifying. We are however, optimistic about the potential of planlessness to develop 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

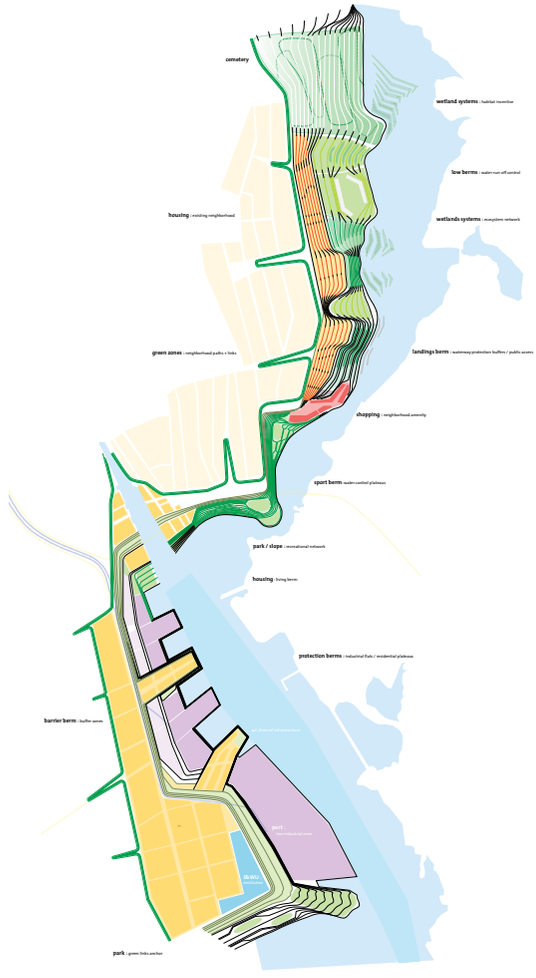


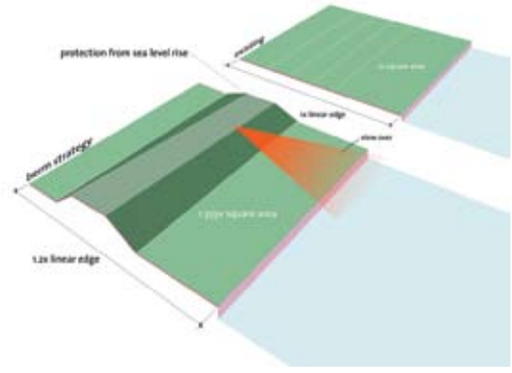
Havens

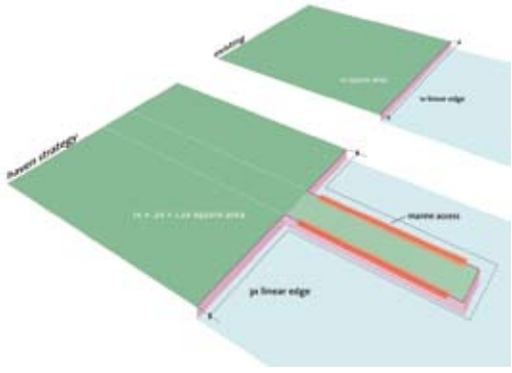
- multiply linear edge + surface area
- ideal for marine and industrial uses

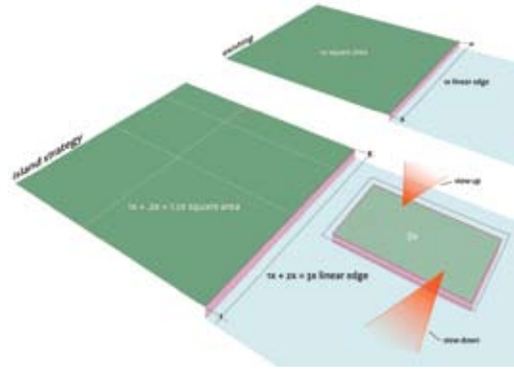
Islands

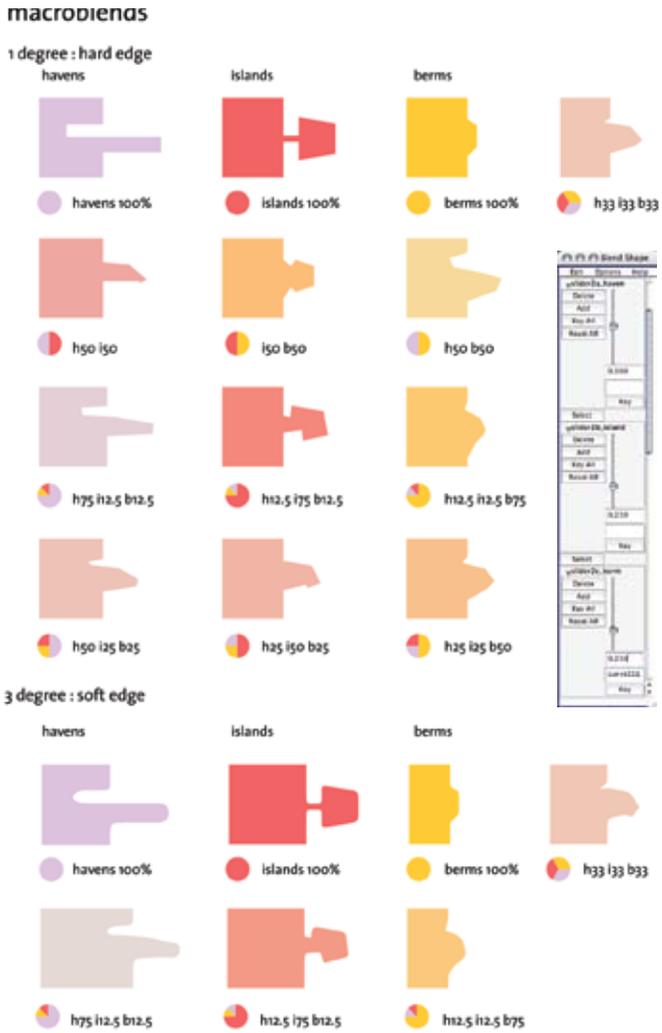
- multiply linear edge + surface area
- ideal for increasing tax revenue by increasing land

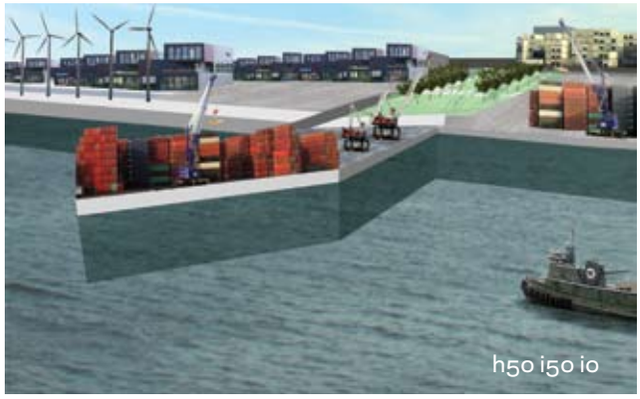


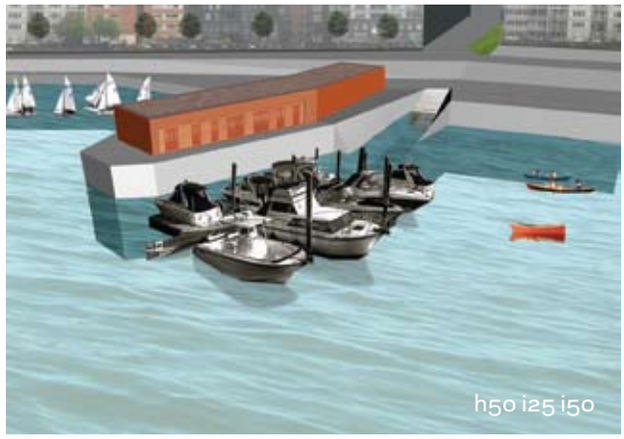






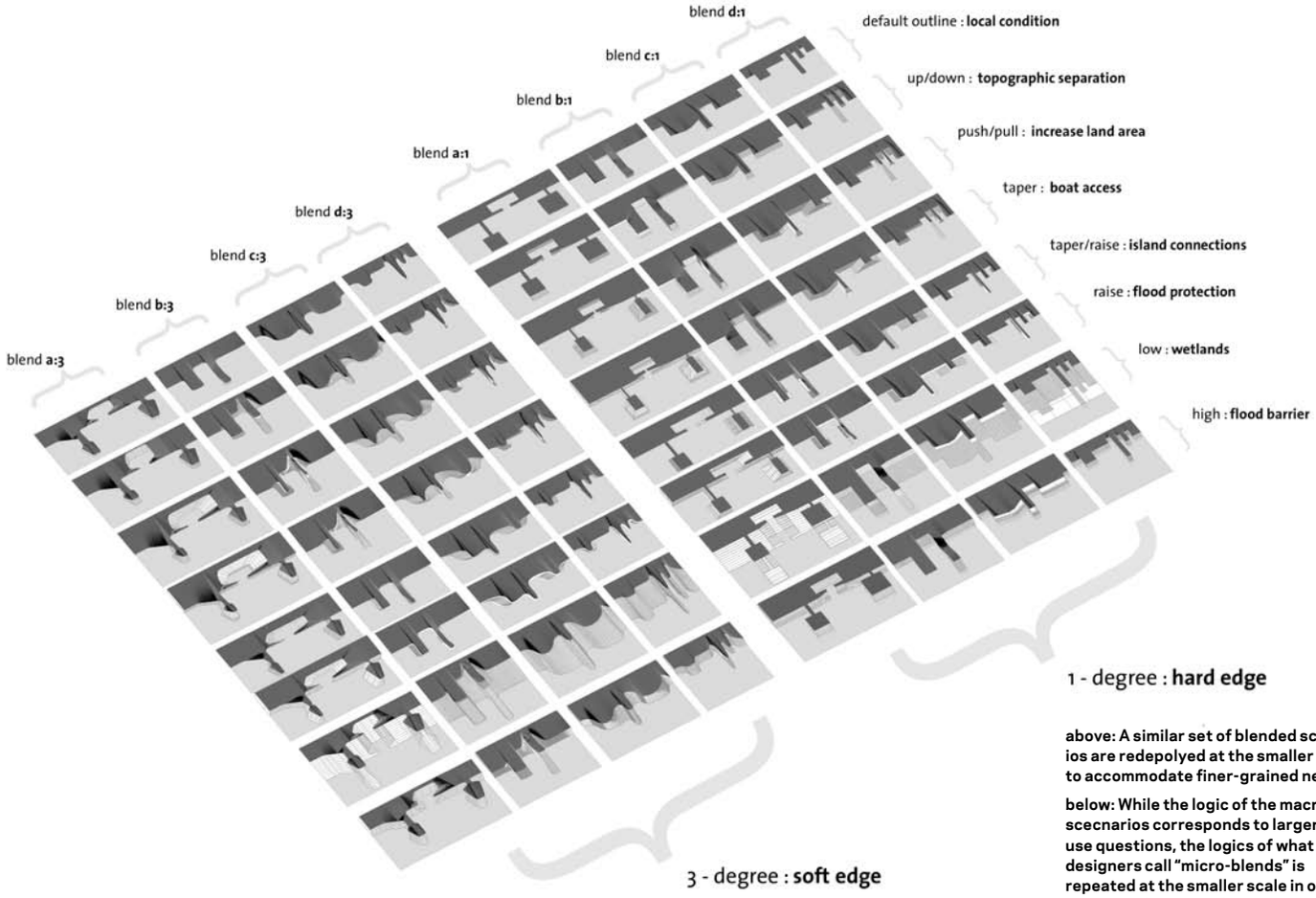






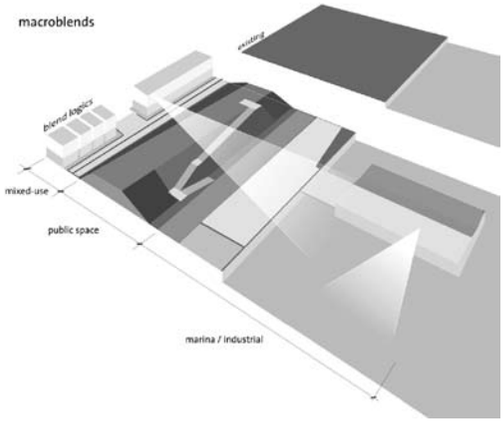
Rather than provide a singular solution, the architects have developed a parametric process: form has direct programmatic, spatial andinfrastructural effects. They have developed a series of "sliders" in Autodesk Maya Unlimited that allow for a virtually unlimited number of variations of "blendings" 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.

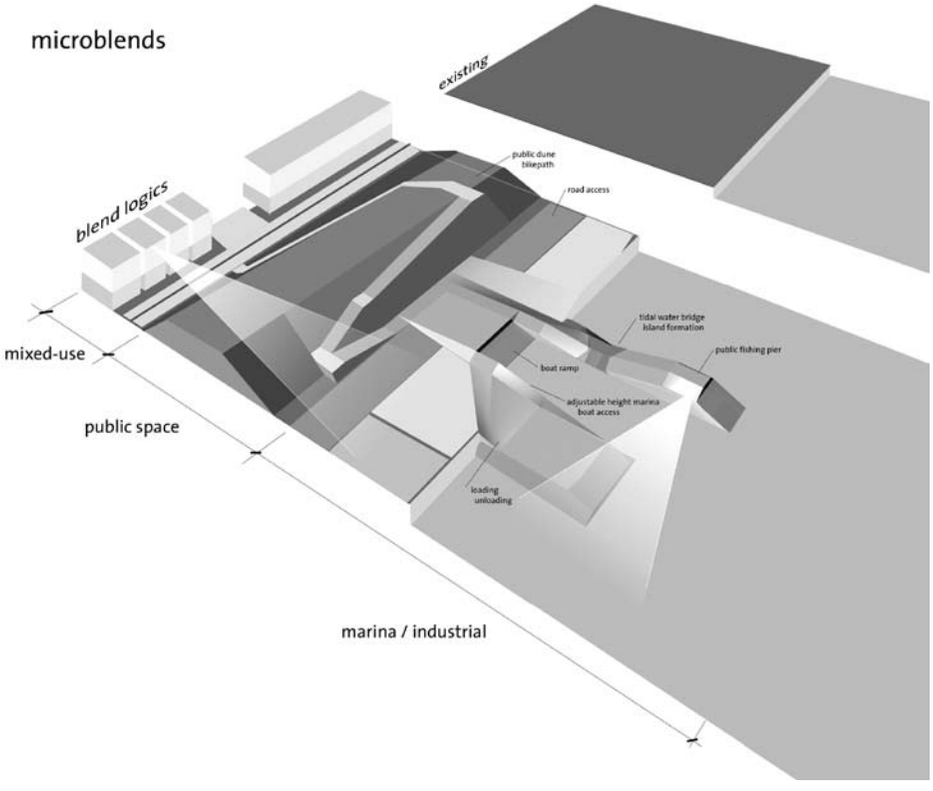
microblends



above: A similar set of blended scenarios are redepolyed at the smaller scale to accommodate finer-grained needs.

below: While the logic of the macroblend scecnarios 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.





Phase 1 and 2 Research Team (2007-08) Thurlow Small Architecture and Muchi East: Enrique Martínez, Maia Small, Andrew Thurlow; project team: Melissa Lockwood, Frank W. Y. Chen, Daniel Osborne, Joshua Ayares, Maria Escudero, Young Lin Kim, Chelsea Limbird, Jessica Metz, Cezar Nicolescu / **Clients** City of Providence Planning Department, RISD Center for Design and Business, and RISD Architecture Department / **Consultants** Schwadesign, brand design; Kris Oleth, wind power; Ken Payne, legislative; Austin Becker, water industry; Jay Baird port operations; Omay Elphick, environmental / **Phase 3 Urban Design Team** (2008-present) Thurlow Small Architecture + Muchi East: Maia Small, Enrique Martinez, Andrew Thurlow, Melissa Lockwood, Nicholas Proto / **Client** The BayCity Project