

# REVISTA ARQUIS

ESCUELA DE ARQUITECTURA DE LA UNIVERSIDAD DE COSTA RICA

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# Towards a territorial praxis

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## Reseña

José Alfredo Ramírez Galindo  
 Clara Olóriz Sanjuán

Invitados internacionales  
 Architectural Association School of Architecture

<http://groundlab.org/>

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### Jose Alfredo Ramírez

Architect co-founder and director of Groundlab and currently director of the Landscape urbanism MA at the Architectural Association. He studied Architecture in Mexico City and graduate from the AA Landscape Urbanism graduate programme in London 2005. Alfredo has worked and developed projects at the junction of architecture, landscape and urbanism in a variety of contexts such as China, Mexico, Spain, among others. He concentrates mainly in large scale developments like the Olympic Master Plan for London 2012 or the International Horticultural Exhibition in Xian China 2011. He has lectured on the topic of Landscape Urbanism and the work of Groundlab worldwide.

### Clara Olóriz Sanjuán

PhD architect, tutor and practising architect. She graduated from the ETSA Universidad de Navarra and obtained her PhD on the relationship between architecture and technology focusing on industrialized systems of production at the ETSAUN and at the AA. Previously, she has worked for Foreign Office Architects and Arquitectos Cerouno. Currently, she teaches at the AALU masters program as a design tutor as well as at the ETSAUN. She is also co-directing the AA Visiting School 'Computing Topos' in Bilbao and the AA Research Cluster "Urban Prototypes."

## Resumen

Hoy, la profesión de la arquitectura se ha visto disminuida y el impacto de la disciplina, en algunos casos, es casi irrelevante para la producción de nuestro mundo contemporáneo. En comparación con otras profesiones, economistas, políticos, desarrolladores, científicos de la computación; los arquitectos juegan un modesto papel en la configuración social, política y física de nuestro mundo. Pareciera que con mayor frecuencia la arquitectura le importa sólo a los arquitectos, puesto que el trabajo que se produce es admirado por la singularidad del objeto diseñado. Es elogiado por su capacidad técnica o características estéticas, pero fuera del ámbito de la vida cotidiana de la mayoría de las personas. Dentro del Programa de Posgrado Landscape Urbanism del Architectural Association School of Architecture y el estudio Groundlab, se aborda el surgimiento del "territorio" como campo para el ejercicio del diseño e investigación y como forma de intervenirlo mediante el diseño, con la finalidad de incorporar la arquitectura dentro de un marco cada vez más amplio y a la luz de las urgentes condiciones contemporáneas.

**Palabras clave:** arquitectura; academia; groundlab; paisaje; territorio.

## Abstract

Within current contemporary conditions the profession of Architecture has been diminished and the impact of the discipline in some cases is almost irrelevant to the production of our contemporary world. Compare to other professions, economists, politicians, developers, policy-makers, computer scientists, architecture plays a tiny role in shaping our world, socially, politically and physically. Architecture seems to increasingly matter only to architects and the work that is produced admired for the singularity of the designed object. It is praised by its technical ability or aesthetical features but outside the realm of the majority's everyday life. In this essay we explain the emergence of "territory" as a field of design praxis as research and praxis by the Landscape Urbanism Master Programme at the Architectural Association and at Groundlab in order to incorporate architecture into a wider framework within current and urgent contemporary conditions and as way to intervene within it through design.

**Keywords:** architecture; academics; groundlab; landscape; territory

Landscape Urbanism at the AA (Architectural Association) explores the emergence of “territory” as a field of design praxis. Through this lens the programme operates within contemporary conditions whereby urban environments are understood, not as discrete independent collections of objects, but rather as interconnected and related landscapes with specific/far reaching implications at local and global scales. Their implications are best reflected in current environmental concerns such as climate change, energy crisis and widespread pollution, but less apparent in their social and political implications, currently being disguised by ecological and sustainable design driven agendas for the “urbanised world”.

The production of Treaties (i.e. European Landscape Convention), Networks (Delta-Net), governmental plans (Room for the river - Netherlands) and other local policies and agreements, with potential impact on specific geographies, is symptomatic of the demands for implementation of synchronized responses and projects at the scale of territory. However, they have rarely been seen as a space for research-led projects by design practices, given their potential impact on the production and/or reconfiguration of their space.

Territory, understood in Elden’s terms as a “political technology”, has the capacity to involve designers in complex processes, - social, political, economic - that are the engines - historically, geographically, conceptually - behind these contemporary conditions, but most important it allows them to intervene in those realities in alternative ways via the production and development of innovative -yet critical- design projects of territories.

Thinking about practice through the concept of territory, the agency of the designer can be extended beyond its current disciplinary confinements: those of architecture, planning, urban design, landscape architecture, engineering, etc. as well as those of the various (un)-disciplinary re-alignments and hybrids in which these are currently configured. In the process, geographic knowledge and practices, such as cartography and geomorphology, are re-appropriated and mobilised as the means to ask and respond to these fundamental questions.

In doing so, the programme explores the types of project, forms of documentation, theories, technologies and techniques required to rethink and redefine the temporal production of territorial spaces through the praxis of design. It engages critically with a range of social and material formations in given territories, and with the conflicts that resonate at geographical scales of the local, the regional and the continental.

## Territory: Why, What and How

Understood in this sense Landscape Urbanism offers a great opportunity to redefine architect’s agency and its profession within current contemporary conditions, with the aim of making architect’s influence more relevant and increase the impact of architect’s role in the design and production of urban environments.

Because of this, Landscape Urbanism advocate a strongly transdisciplinary approach which has led the programme’s research towards the development of specific types of projects. These projects are a speculation on how contemporary conditions can be the source for their development but also the possibility of them becoming alternative design approaches to organise territories in contrast to the current spatial practices at this scale.

This type of approach is necessarily the result of team work that might include, depending on the project, geographers, critical thinkers, geomorphologists, architects, engineers and landscape architects among others and can be framed under a territory as a design praxis.

## Why are we interested in this type of project and approach?

Landscape Urbanism at the AA is foremost interested in tackling and engaging with current contemporary conditions. To start with, these contemporary conditions are framed by an

exponential growth of the world's population which has led to a ruthless urbanisation of the world. We are now in the so called "Urban Age" in which the majority of people live, and we have been told, as architects and designers, to focus in the production of mega agglomerations that fit in the "Urban Age" agenda. In this framework architects must design the best, most efficient sustainable buildings and public spaces, but this narrow framework distracts us from the fact that these metropolises are intrinsically linked to other territories of which they are dependent.

Countless resources and energy are required to fuel this urbanisation, in the form of productive territories; such as vast mining and agricultural landscapes of the world. Along these lines, we have also witness an expanded effort to control natural resources in an optimized manner not only to use and distribute them but to maximise the generation of profit.

Alongside these mega engineering projects, and their aspirations for an efficient control of the environment and its resources, has been the unintentional provocation of so-called natural disasters, in which these rigid infrastructural systems have begun to collapse, as we can observe in recent flooding events across the world. But also, inversely, other regions are experiencing massive droughts because of resources over exploitation.

We also are aware of the ramifications of digital technologies in which we now have instant connection across the globe, but it is important also to emphasise that alongside these connections and flows of people, ideas, information and money... there is a material interconnection that is producing dramatic, direct and instant changes in both close and remote territories and therefore the attention of designers should not be concentrating in megacities only, but in the wide and vast array of processes that are caused by the urbanisation of the world.

It is in the establishment of this context, that we begin to ask ourselves, what role or AGENCY might we have as designers in relation to this? And what are the alternatives beyond the inevitable "urban age".

The production of Treaties, Conventions and policies such as the ones mentioned at the beginning, is symptomatic of the demands for implementation of synchronised responses and projects, for example, at the scale Europe. However, as mentioned, they have rarely been seen as a space for research-led projects by design practice. Given these agreements potential impact on and literal production and reconfiguration of space, we believe that we, as architects, landscape architects, urbanists, designers in general, can have both the tools and the cross-disciplinarian way of thinking to get involved in this conversation through design.

## What are we doing about this?

On the one hand Landscape Urbanism at the AA speculate in the type of projects we think will be relevant to redefine the role and agency of the architect.

For example, one of the project developed within the master programme called, 'Flooding Mechanisms, contrasts current large scale managerial approaches of water control' in Europe, specifically the North of Spain, which are directed towards the management of water resources and its associates landscapes, such as rivers and adjacent agricultural lands.

These existing policies not only highlight efficiency and optimisation with a solely economic purposes, they produce big and visible spatial changes. Examples of this can be seen in the drastic agricultural patterns, changes in the region of Arga and Aragon river in Navarre due to the introduction of a canal system that only permits the irrigation of 5 of more hectare plot size since 2003 (fig 01).

In a revelatory manner this policy impacts the space without the intervention of any design practice. The project 'Flooding Mechanisms' investigate possible alternatives and new approaches beyond these written "Water Management Policies". Through the incremental manipulation of the river, and the beneficial understanding of its flooding capabilities, the project proposes a new form of occupation of the territory through design. A series of political entities, which are floodable islands, are introduced in order to

manage and distribute water collectively, making use of micro-flooding as an alternative to diversify current technocratic conditions and expand on the spatial qualities they can provide to local people (Fig 02).

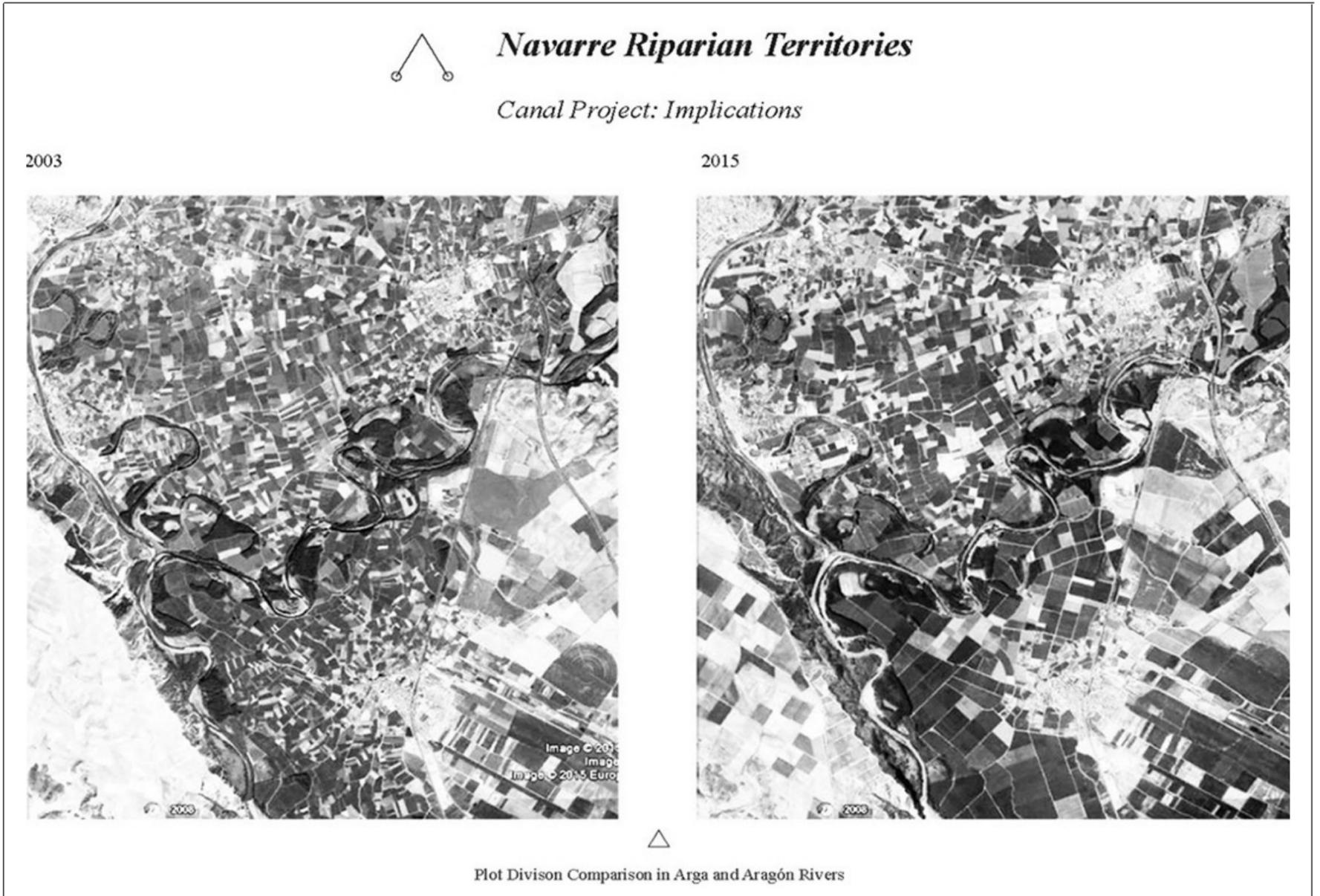
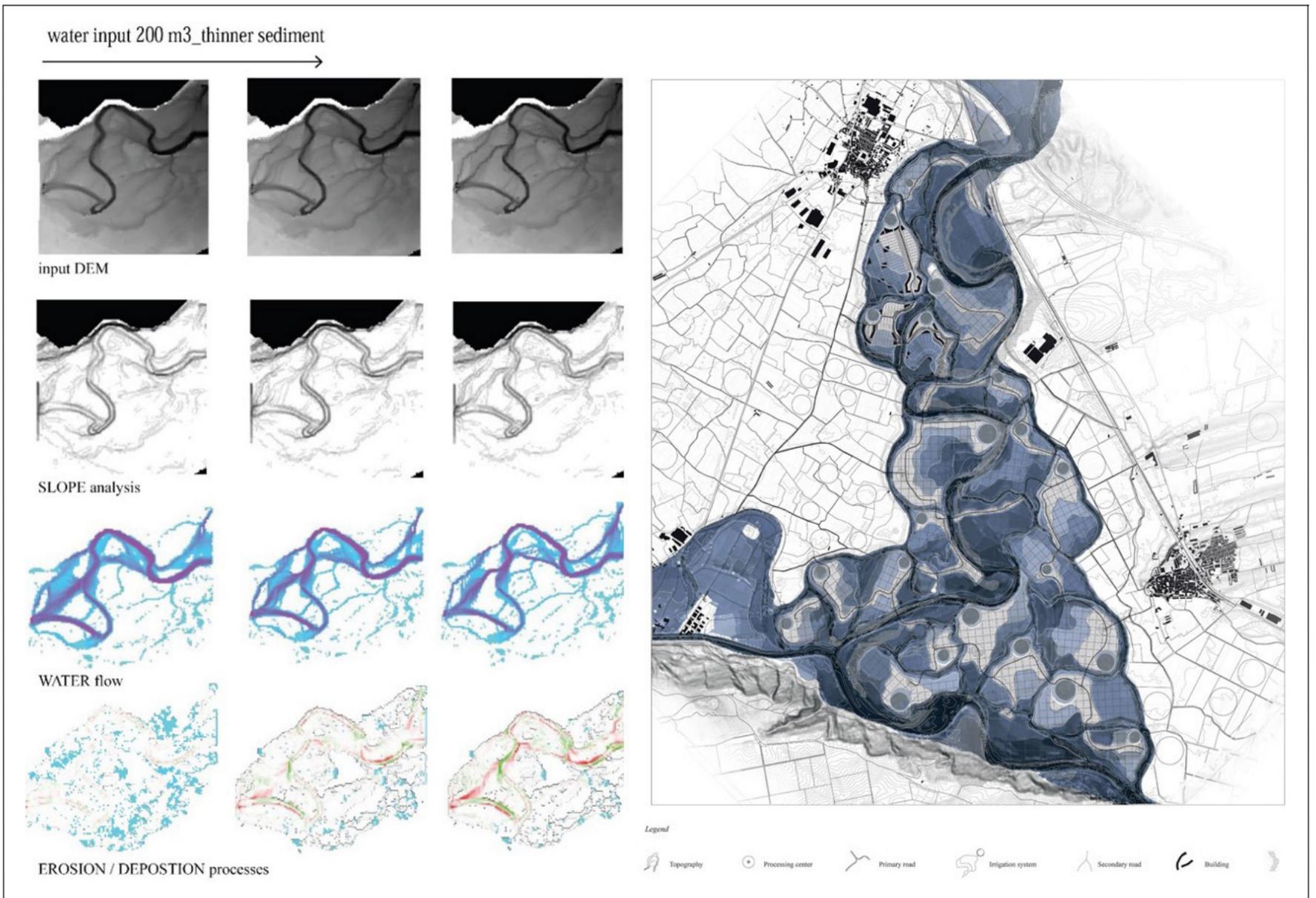


Figure 01 ▲

Figure 02 ▼



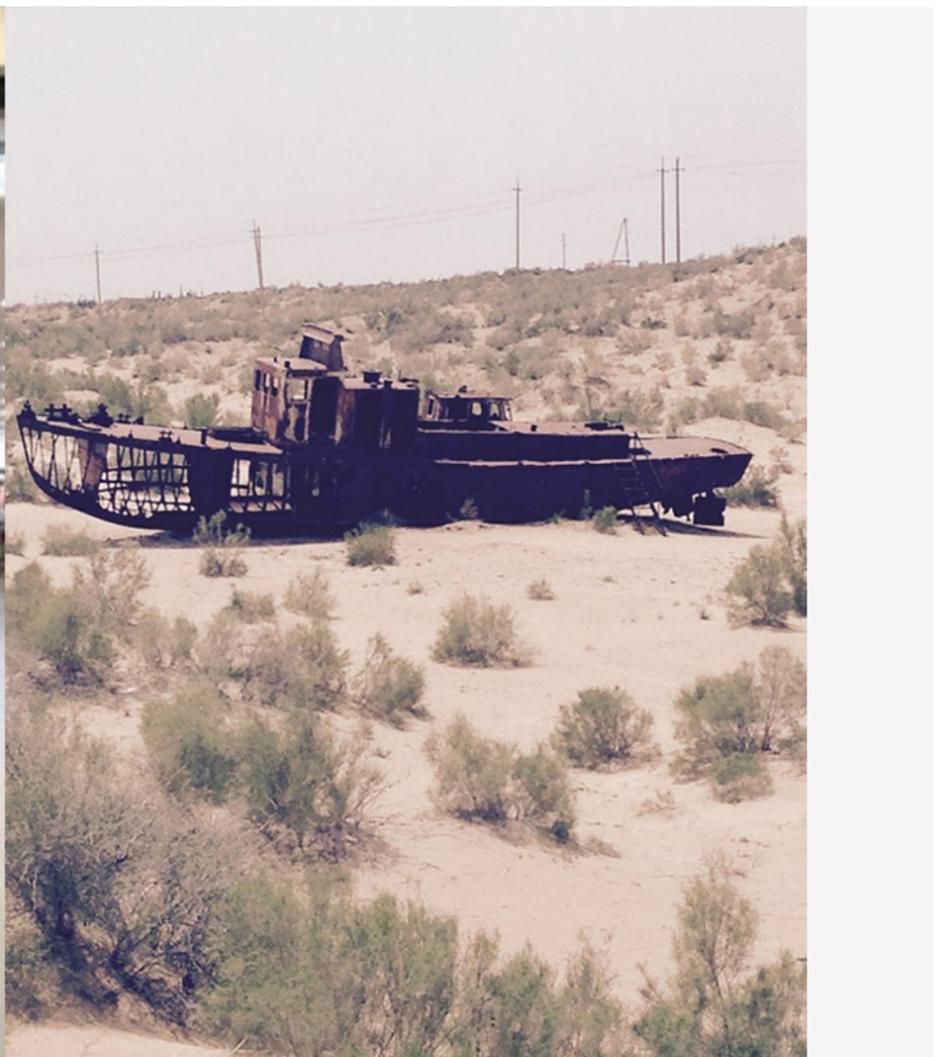
Another example is the project called Projective Sandscapes –This project deals with the idea of consequential or reciprocal landscapes, in a similar way as defined by Jane Hutton<sup>1</sup>. An example of this type of projects is the exhaustion of the former Aral Sea (Fig 03). Due to the overexploitation of its water resources for the production of cotton industries that were fuelled by western clothing markets, the aral sea territory was led to a desertification processes in the broadest sense. This has produced not just lack of water but the detereitorialization dynamics affecting existing inhabitants and forcing nearby cities such as Nukus to rethink their future (Fig 04).

1 Hutton, Jane, "Reciprocal Landscapes: Material Portraits in New York City and Elsewhere," *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, 8:1, 2013.



Figure 03 ▲

Figure 04 ▼



The disappearance of the Aral Sea is a direct consequence of the ruthless urbanisation processes we now live in the “urban age”. Even though there are thousands of kilometres separating the markets and the origin of the production, the material and physical consequences are clear and visible in global scale (Fig 05).

In this project the team intervened within the nearby Nukus shrinking city, where shifting sands are moving over abandoned urban environments and existing productive grounds. The project attempts to choreograph dune formations as a way to re-sow new settlements around preserved clusters, transforming their morphological conditions with the use of productive landscape dynamics in the form of agroforestry. This intervention negotiates desertification and productive environments as an alternative to Nukus shrinking condition into an inland decertified archipelago (fig 06).

Figure 05 ➤  
Figure 06 ▼



In terms of professional projects, we develop similar ones within Groundlab, a design office-and research arm of the programme that produces and operates a range of projects that through commissions, self-initiative and competitions attempt to engage in certain type of projects with wider territorial implications.

An example of these projects is the consultancy project we were asked to develop for a Ravine Landscape Management Programme in the western side of Mexico City in 2013.

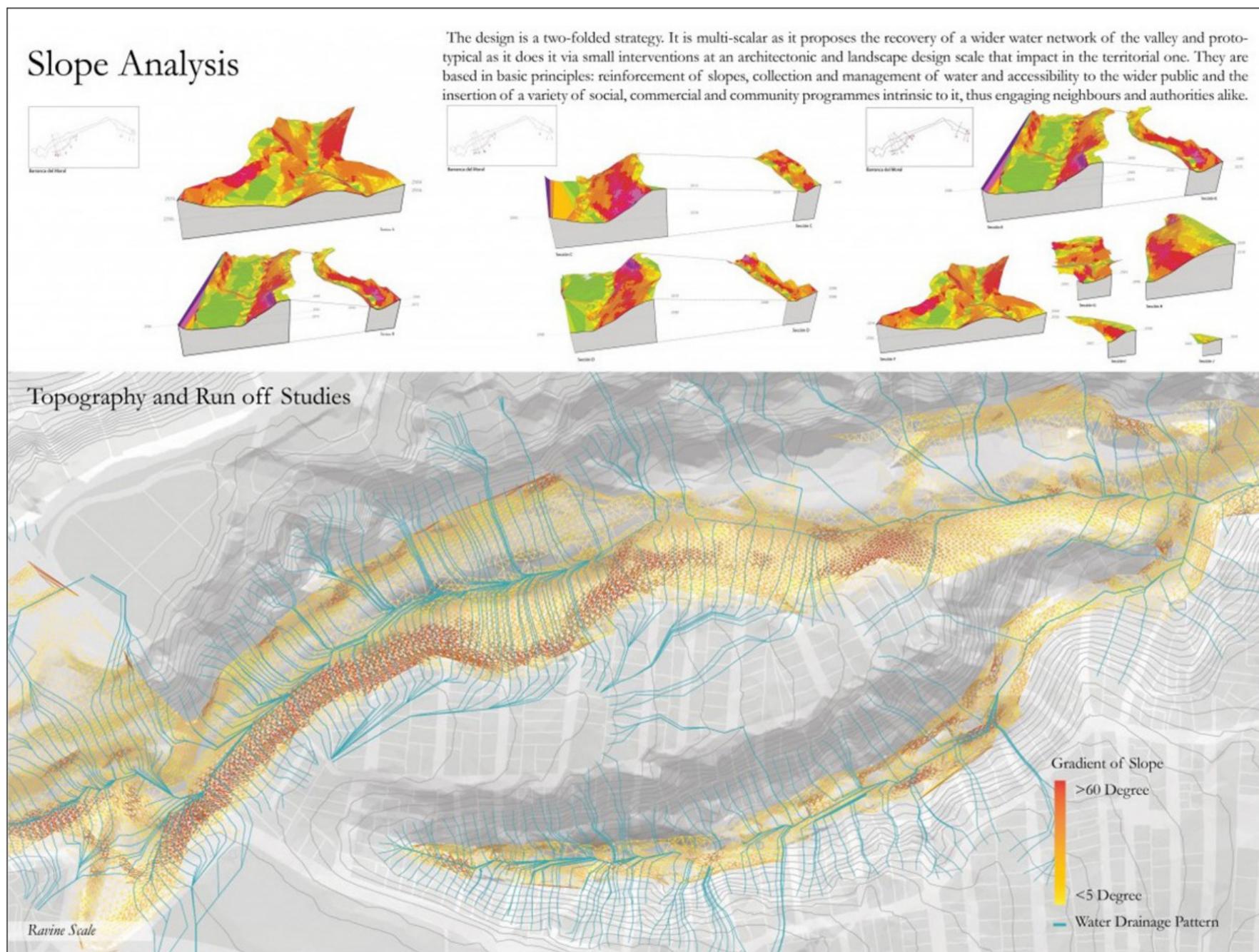
We saw this planning project in scope, as an opportunity to envision a scheme whereby these peculiar hilly morphologies, which are the last remnants of natural landscape in the city, could play a triggering role in the re-structuring of the city in accordance to its wider geographical setting.

The project stands in sharp contrast to current engineering mentalities in Mexico City which see the import of water resources from far away valleys and the generation of large scale drainage system as the only way forward.

By using a prototypical approach where each of the 32 ravines that were included in the programme, could be understood as part of a wider hydrological system, each ravine could potentially provide water collection, water infiltration to the aquifer and water distribution to larger areas of the city (Fig 07). A city that is currently deprived of any water body on its surface could be envisioned with a provision of a hydrological network trigger by an existing and singular landscape such as the ravines, which that in turn can foresee the radical transformation of the structure and infrastructure of the megacity using its own local landscape and territorial conditions through the management of its intrinsic valley conditions (Fig 08).

A more recent and ongoing project is the one called: "Paseo Civico Metropolitano" which proposes to relink the requirements for an efficient public transport corridor along the "Alameda/Providencia" avenue, (one of the most important street in Santiago de Chile) with a strong civic, public and historical heritage and character embedded in the corridor (Fig 09). The project will create and enhance a new identity through the integration of

Figure 07 ▼



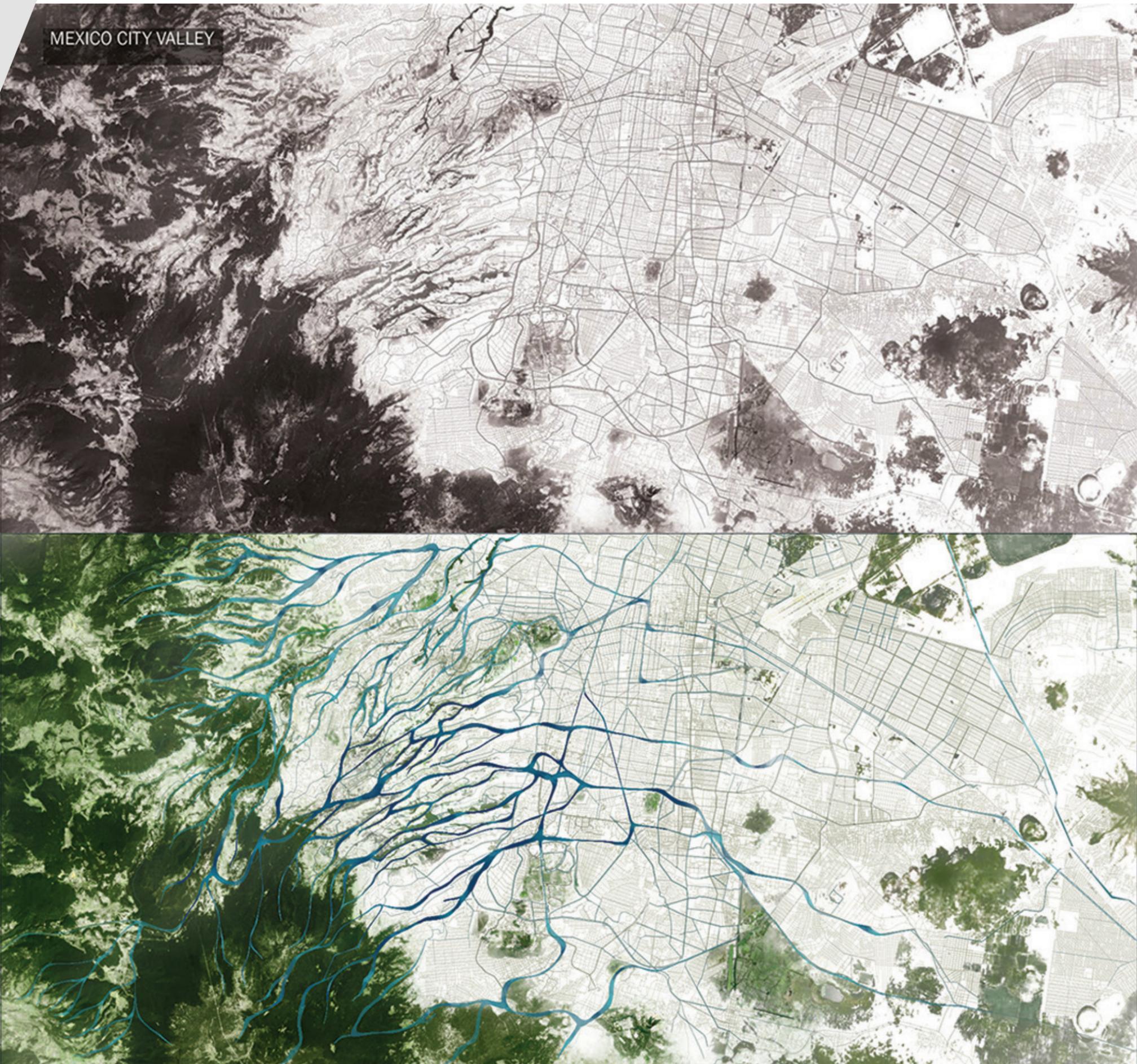


Figure 08 ▲

infrastructure, landscape, architecture, ecology and public space based on its original character. An Alameda (line-up shaded tree corridor) that provides an ideal shaded environment for the general public enjoyment.

In order to achieve this, the project put forward a unify and sober intervention integrating different types of flows, pedestrian, vehicular, cycling, that convergence along the corridor. The unifying urban landscape will choreograph different transport lines, re direct run off, infiltration and recycling of water as well as the movement of people and bicycles. In short, it will re-organised civic life along its spine (Fig 10).

The intervention allows to rethink the use of public spaces, locating dedicated bus lanes in the centre of its axis and allocating a shared surface for pedestrian, cyclists, private vehicles and public transport users. The re-organisation of flows will convert Alameda/Providencia corridor in a linear plaza, a truly "Paseo Civico Metropolitano" (Fig 11).



Figure 09 ▲

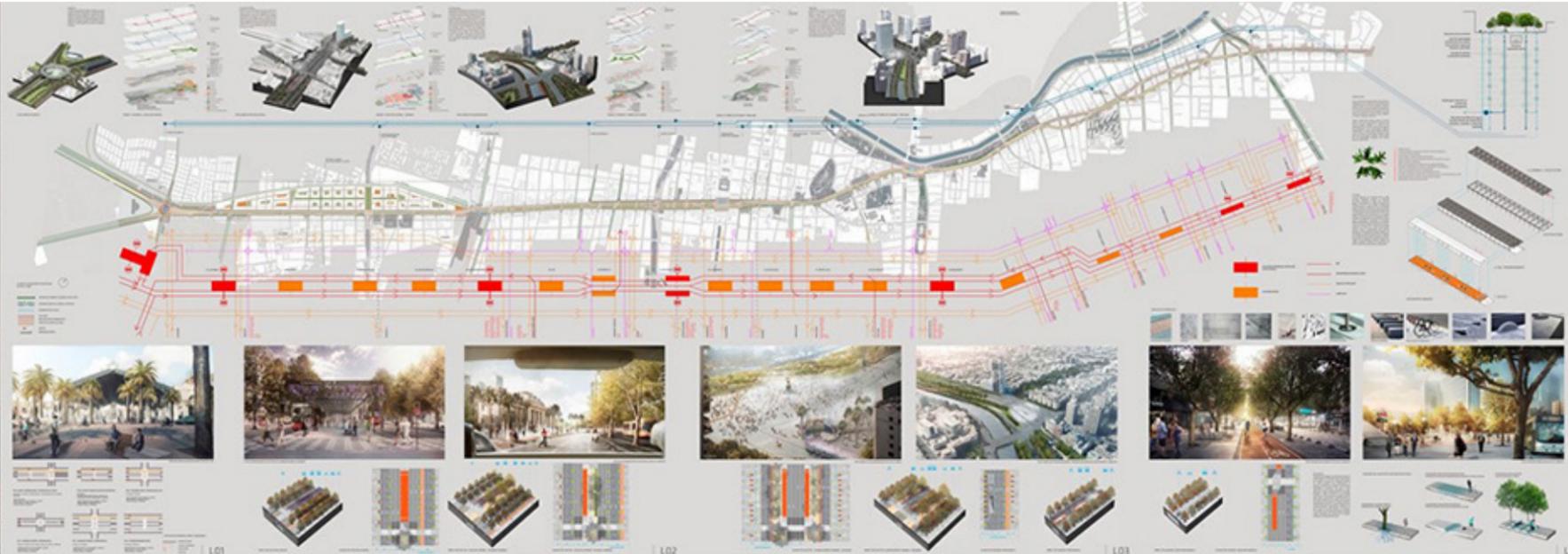


Figure 10 ▲

Figure 11 ▼



## How do we do this?

A re-appropriation of cartography as a projective tool is at the core of this approach. The cartography produced by Harold Frisk and the army corps to survey of the Mississippi river is a revelatory example of the influence of cartographies and the depiction of the concept of territory in a given context and time (Fig 12). With the primary intention to survey and measuring the land so as to further control it, this map suggests the power of cartography, its ability to provide specificity, accuracy, time based qualities, a sense of evolution, and the synthesis between the natural and the cultural and political. In this instance we can see how cartography is powerful tool that historically has been complicit in the production of territory.

If we are to propose a new territorial praxis, we need to use or engage with the tools and techniques – new and re-appropriated- through which territory is produced and designed like cartographies or an understanding of consequential territorial processes and time, through dynamic simulations (Fig 13).

The capacity of these tools to impact in today's world rely on their capacity to read, understand and visualise the conditions specific to each territory, in short to diagnose current situations, and the way they can translate, envision, and imagine alternative scenarios to those contemporary conditions.



Figure 12 ▲

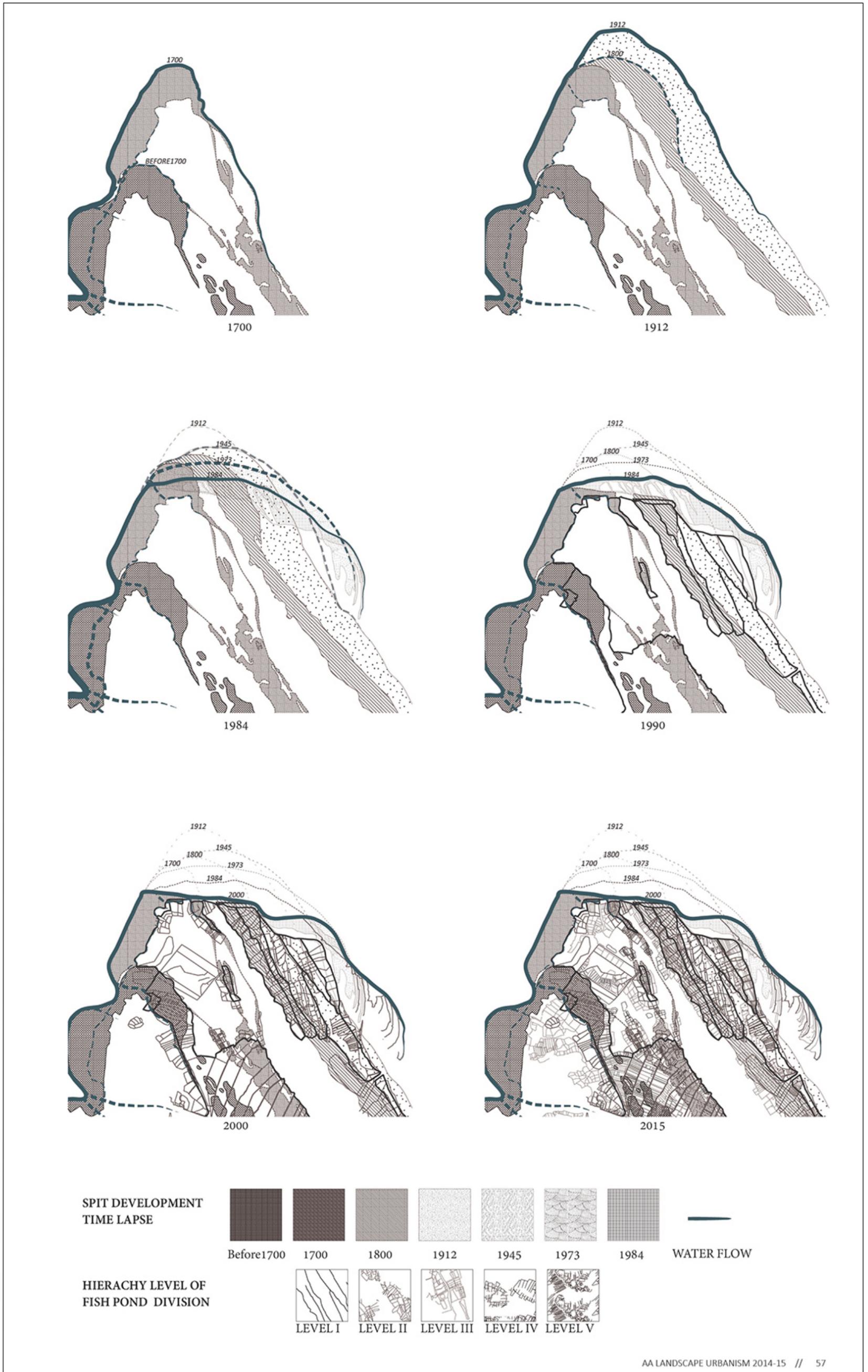


Figure 13 ▲