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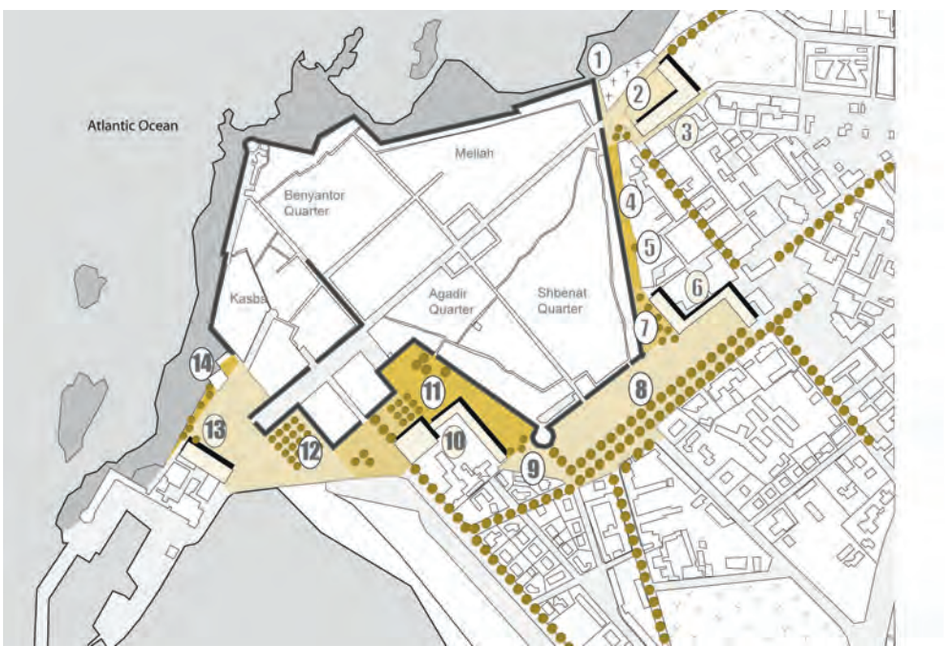
Contested Sites and Strategic Urban Projects

Three strategic urban projects in Morocco, Kenya and Vietnam show how cities may be structured and transformed by staging, rather than resolving, urban contestations. Urban design is used as a tool for negotiation towards a workable synthesis between conflicting realities.



Throughout history, built spaces have been as much sites of contestation as of negotiation and mediation. From stone walls and fences demarcating agricultural property, to erased slums and contested monuments in urban contexts, to territorial claims of waterways, space has remained representative of power, money, belief, identity and therefore an object of contestation. Contested territories are numerous and promise to increase due to globalization, migration, natural disasters, rapid urban growth and expansion, urban decay, poverty, lack of servicing and infrastructure, poor governance and security concerns. The city and its immediate periphery remain a battleground of property location, access, inclusion, and exclusion. The battle involves both the public and the private realm. Protection and expansion of the real public realm is often relinquished due to short-term

The Moroccan city of Essaouira is situated between the Atlantic Ocean and a dune forest. The proposed projects for the medina wall define a transition zone and restructure the area as a public open space alongside the compact city .



economic and/or political ambitions. The public surrenders to the private and public space masks private control and exclusion.

Due to the failure or conspicuous absence of effective planning and architecture, cities are increasingly being made-up of ad-hoc hybrid projects, processes and practices that compromise their structure and development potential. In Europe, during the last twenty years, "strategic urban projects" have become the most effective and dominant mode of transformation of cities. Urban projects are considered the principal means for strategically structuring and transforming cities and form an alternative to the worn-out tradition of master planning. The urban project holds the potential to point to an important nexus in the formation and transformation of cities – particularly, it could be argued, in non-western contexts of development. The "urban project" can define a significant moment in the formation of cities in which a clear paradigm emerges, as a moment of (temporary) synthesis in which a concrete economic, political, social and cultural constellation is mobilized in order to co-act in the production of the city. The urban project, as a co-production, engages (in very different combinations) three parties: the public (state), the market (capital) and civil society, it combines vision and reality, is strategic and feasible.

Strategic projects are a foil to visions – a broader frame of reference that steers urban development. Visions generate a general, open and flexible development strategy and frame social commitments which strive to enlarge the civic realm, enrich urban culture and create new, sustainable urban spaces; they are premised upon attractive long-term perspectives and the structuring of the city as a whole. The abstraction of visions (allowing for adaptation to evolving circumstances, yet protecting non-negotiable, consensually agreed upon principles) are made concrete through the development of strategic projects. Strategic projects confront visions with a specific context, in other words with the realities of urban life and development: a real site, a concrete problematic, actual programs, limited resources, actors in flesh-and-blood with tangible interests and legitimate (or other) concerns. The



An urban park was suggested to stop further damage to the dunes. The linear park creates an urban front and provides public open spaces and community facilities. The vision includes urban agriculture, platforms and belvederes.



New Proposal

1 Njoro River Riparian Reserve
2 New sewage
3 Honeymoon Hill
4 Power way leave
5 Main entrance park
6 Crescent Hill
7 Old sewage, wild corridor
8 South Cemetery
9 Hyrax Hill
10 Neylan historic site
11 Sirikwa holes
12 (back)-gate park

time perspective is short to medium-term and the scope is limited: a specific node, a crucial place, a special quarter, a problematic area, a vexed question. Their structural position accounts for their leverage and inevitable spin-off effects. Strategic urban projects do not merely make a difference – they make a fundamental difference. They turn the tide, in a lasting way, of the fundamental characteristics of a city. They change the face and perception of the city. They are indicators of the future development – producers of identity. They support and strengthen the identity of the city and its inhabitants. This characteristic necessitates considerable design skills and aesthetic sensibilities, qualities that are often neglected in urban development initiatives. Creativity and innovation are necessary to transcend the grey and unconvincing compromises which often result from rounds of consultation and participation. The city produces grey by itself. Strategic urban projects are of no use if they only add to the greyness of the city.

In addition, the mediating quality of such projects rests in the fact that they engage actors, often with diverging agendas to strive towards a workable synthesis in contested territories. Their spatial role in mediation stems from the numerous gaps and anomalies of the built environment – including missing or divided urban functions and the coexistence of contradictory or opposing elements. Also, strategic projects mediate by organizing links and creating synergies, which consequently implies that strategic urban projects are multi-dimensional and combine spatial aspects with social, cultural and economic components addressing very different stakeholders, sectors and authorities. As such, these projects provide a real life "learning-by-doing" experience in co-producing the city. Finally, the visibil-

In Nakuru, Kenya, a park helps to create a buffer zone between the built-up area and the edge of the international safari park of Lake Nakuru. The regeneration of the city's boundary includes new social and recreational spaces.



ity of such projects is such that they do not disappear in the anonymous grey fabric of the city – their feasibility and ambition strengthens and eventually revises the long-term vision.

The Local Agenda 21 (LA21) program of UN-Habitat was a 10-year project (1994 to 2004) in which the Department of Architecture, Urbanism and Planning (ASRO) of KU Leuven, Belgium was actively involved. The capacity-building program created visions, identified and developed strategic projects to deal with the sustainable development of three secondary cities – Essaouira (Morocco), Nakuru (Kenya) and Vinh (Vietnam). In each of the cities, a local team was established and workshops and technical sessions were organized in order to bring various stakeholders together. Design was used as a tool for negotiation.

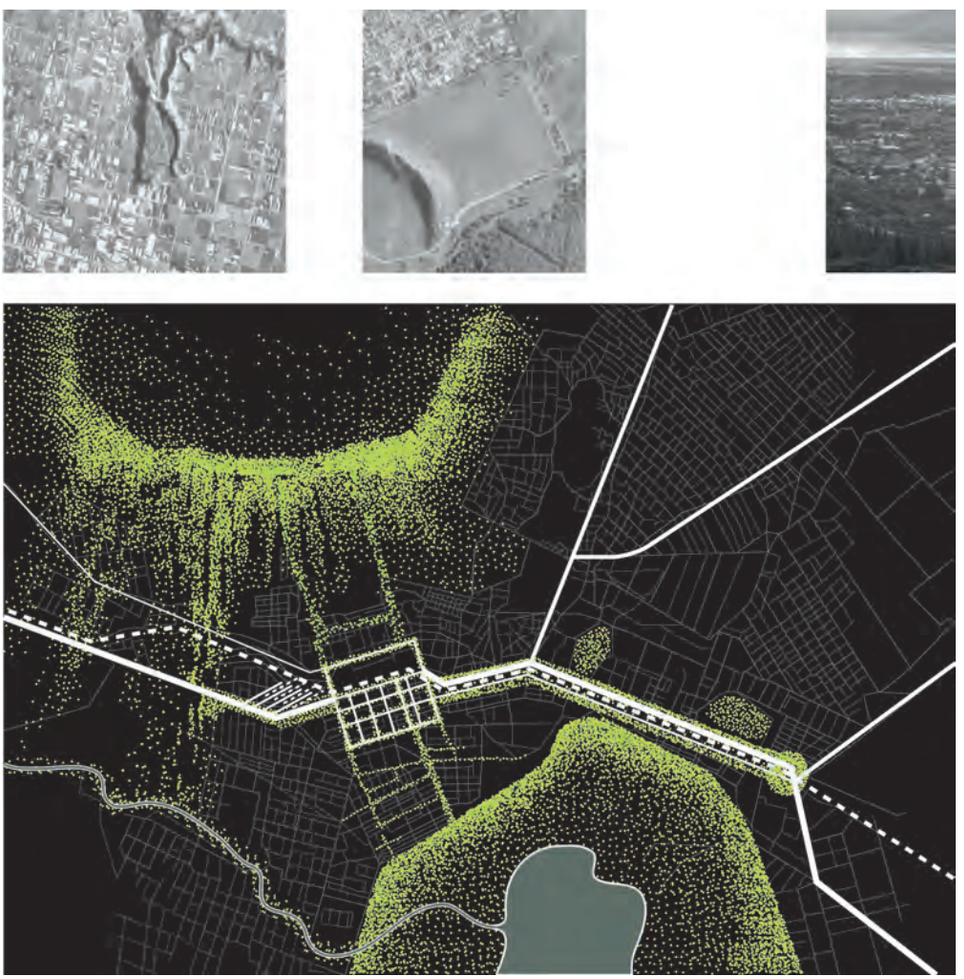
The compact city of Essaouira, on the north of the African continent, is nestled between the Atlantic Ocean and a dune forest. The city is challenged by exploitation of its natural and built patrimony. The seafront is threatened with ad-hoc speculative development, the *zone neuter* between the historic city, the medina, and the French colonial urban areas is perceived as a fragmented terrain vague and *lotissements* are unsystematically and quickly consuming the fragile dune landscape. The proposed series of urban projects for the medina surroundings – for Bab Doukkala, Hôtel des Iles and Bab Marrakech – would simultaneously strengthen and make more tangible the visions of a compact city confined within its walls and a city of hospitality and heritage, experienced in the multiple uses of the void surrounding the medina wall. Throughout its rich urban history, the surroundings of the medina wall created a continuous chain of differently programmed spaces – from playing fields to ceremonial space, to informal markets, to formal spaces, and shopping fabrics. The proposed projects begin with a re-appreciation of the area as a cohesive, public open space, clarifying the structure of the compact city (as a space of decompression) and making a transition zone to the *lotissements*. The elaboration of projects aimed to clarify and qualitatively change urban experiences (appropriation, representation, etc.) both in daily life practices (such as children playing in the shadow of the wall, women gathering at a particular place) and in the more unique moments of urban life (like ceremonies and festivities). Spatial

Nakuru's backyard was transformed into an attractive front to soften the impression of the impenetrable edge of the national park. The natural topography of the area allows inhabitants to overlook various parts of the park.

interventions included the selective introduction of buildings fronting interstitial spaces, and the planting of pockets of trees as hinges between different newly programmed spaces and much needed parking places. Finally, as a strategic project, design research mediated between particular needs – such as the request of the hotel to expand – and the collective cultural and social interests to maintain and improve the unbuilt space surrounding the wall on the city's eastern edge. An urban park was co-produced to stop encroachment into the dunes, create a new urban front to provide public open spaces (including urban agriculture and a system of platforms and belvederes) and community facilities (such as workshops, kindergartens, etc.).

Further south, in Nakuru, Kenya, the conflict between urbanity and the landscape – the dilemma between the city and its international safari park of Lake Nakuru (with the world's largest population of pink flamingos) – had reached a deadlock. The city was polluting the park with solid and liquid waste and the park formed an economically and physically impenetrable edge for locals. The strategic project of the linear urban park – which reconfigured the physical boundary and used natural topographical features of the area to create lookout points into the park for local residents – proved to be a powerful tool of negotiation between the Kenya Wildlife Service and the municipality. The project articulated and substantiated the vision of Nakuru as an eco-city which aimed to reverse the city/nature antagonism through accentuating natural features, protecting fragile ecologies, introducing more green to the urban tissue and articulating the northern crater edge and southern game park edge as public spaces. The specific redesign of the placement of the fence between the city and the safari park expanded the public realm (accommodating social and recreational spaces), restructured the city/nature interface and protected the park from damage to its fragile ecology. The city's backyard was transformed into a front.

The Vietnamese city of Vinh has had neither the fortune of an overwhelmingly beautiful natural setting (as Nakuru) nor a glorious urban patrimony (as Essaouira). It is one of the poorest cities in Vietnam and has suffered a devastating urban history (destroyed repeatedly in the First and Second Indochina Wars), has poor soil quality (thus limiting agricultural productivity), an inclement climate (with a dry hot wind from Laos) and has had little outside investment. Yet, the city's population is growing at an alarming rate (of more than two percent per annum) and the indiscriminate filling of lowlands and sprawling urbanity requires strategic thinking that goes beyond the country's traditional land-use planning mechanisms. At the same



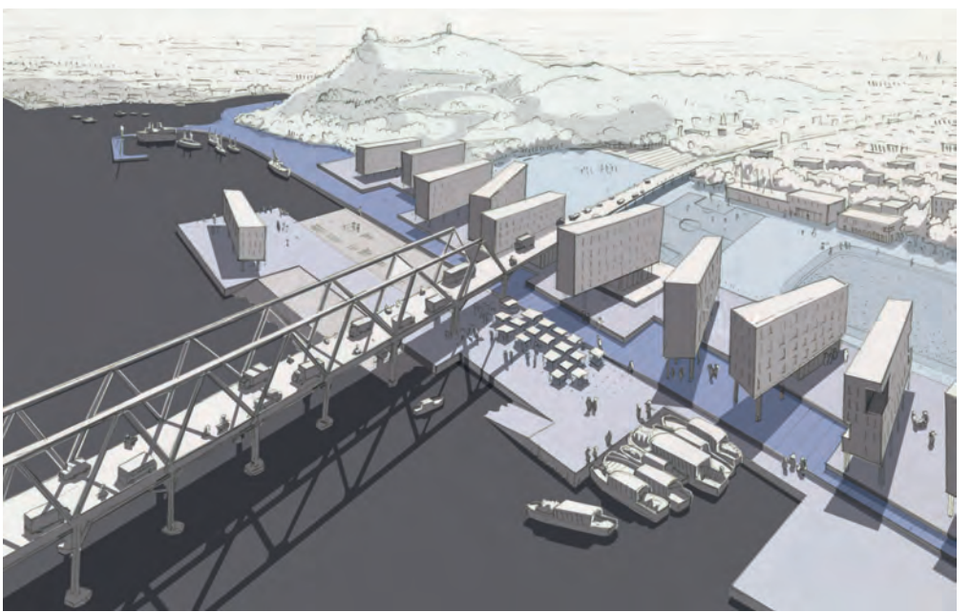
The vision of Nakuru as an eco-city aims to reverse the city/nature antagonism through accentuating natural features, protecting fragile ecologies and introducing more green to the urban tissue.

time, the shift from a water-based civilization to a road-based one has seen the waterways turned into open sewers of domestic and industrial waste. The vision of Vinh as a river city was expanded to embody an ecological component whereby the city could function as a sponge (a permeable land mass able to absorb and shed excess water) – to deal with the increasing severity and frequency of flooding – and strengthen the vision of a green city, with interconnected public open spaces.

Two strategic projects were developed to make the vision more tangible. The first was for the riverfront of the Lam River which has developed slowly and unsystematically. The project foresaw the riverfront as a new facade of the city, instead of a back, with public spaces and a diversity of programs (from north to south, intended programs could include a river harbor expansion, a congress centre and hotels, business and commercial development and a high-standard tourist area with a small marina); in the east-west direction, parallel to the riverfront, an alternation of built (buildings raised on pilotis) and unbuilt spaces could allow for the sunken land to act as a reserve basin for seasonal flooding and otherwise act as a recreational strip behind the mixed-use development. A second project, the reorganization of the city's central market not only tried to change the perception and use of the area's buildings and open spaces, but also that of the Vinh River. The back of the market (site of illegal solid waste disposal) was proposed to be turned into a front, cleaning and articulating the river's edge as a place for informal trading and a stop for a new water-based transport network.

Through design research in all three cities, abstract visions were refined, amended, polished, revised and, most importantly, substantiated. Notions such as heritage city, green city, river city were no longer conceptual, but translated into tangible realities. Central to strategic urban projects was the use of urban design as a tool for negotiation towards a workable synthesis between conflicting realities. Urban design and strategic urban projects prioritize public benefit and the shaping of the public realm – essential for today's world of ever-increasing contested territories.





The Vinh and Lam Rivers play vital roles in the Vietnamese city of Vinh. The market is reconfigured to address the Vinh River (top). New urban development creates a new city facade along the Lam River (right).