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ZOKAK EL BLAT: PLAYFUL GROUNDS

by

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Zokak el Blat has Housed Schools for decades now. Most notably: CIS, Hariri 2, Saint Joseph de l’apparition, Ecole Patriarchal, Lycée Abed el Kader, El Maanieh and more recently, a newly built Public School. The area is located in a strategic spot in Beirut, within walking distance to Downtown, Hamra and the Sanayeh Garden. Despite its surroundings and its educational potential, Zokak el Blat fails to satisfy the students there. The streets are deemed too crowded, narrow and not pedestrian friendly, and the schools themselves aren’t providing a suitable educational space for the students.

Playful Grounds examines the ways in which abandoned spaces—more specifically rooftops and abandoned open spaces—can be utilized for the advantage of students, teachers, and also the community at large. The analysis will look into the School District in Zokak el Blat, whereas the design focuses on more specific areas: the schools themselves.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>00</td>
<td>Table of Figures</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS - PHASE I

| 02 | Problem & Project Statement | 5 |
| 03 | Objectives & Methodology | 6 |
| 04 | Theoretical Framework | 7 |
| 05 | Castle Stalks | 9 |
| 06 | Street Network and Connections | 10 |
| 07 | Land-use & Landmarks | 12 |
| 08 | Imagination Playground | 14 |
| 09 | Espacios de Paz | 15 |
| 10 | EIC Based Learning | 16 |

## Inventory & Analysis

| 05.1 | Castes | 17 |
| 05.2 | Natural Deficit Disorder | 18 |
| 05.3 | New Education Revolution | 19 |
| 06.1 | Physical Education Revolution | 20 |
| 06.2 | Educational Revolution | 21 |
| 07.1 | Physical Education | 22 |
| 07.2 | Educational Revolution | 23 |
| 08.1 | Concept 1: Temporary Haven | 24 |
| 08.2 | Concept 2: Elevated Education | 25 |
| 09.1 | Concept 3: Interactive Structure | 26 |

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS - PHASE II

| 10 | Schools | 27 |
| 11 | Street Network and Connections | 28 |
| 12 | Schools | 29 |
| 13 | Schools | 30 |

## TABLE OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig #</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>00</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Problem &amp; Project Statement</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>Objectives &amp; Methodology</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>Castle Stalks</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>Street Network and Connections</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>Land-use &amp; Landmarks</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>Imagination Playground</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>Espacios de Paz</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>EIC Based Learning</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Street Network and Connections</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beirut’s urban area is home to over 50% of the Lebanese population and is a central hub for the country where trade, business and educational facilities and institutions have been and continue to be established. What can be noted in the city is that cluster of similar institutions, be it educational or leisurely. Hamra is an example of a cluster of shops and restaurants, as is Verdun, whereas Zokak el Blat’s cluster is formed by the number of schools that occupy it - in addition to the cultural sites there. The district is currently divided into 2 main parts by the Fouad-El Chehab Highway: The Serail area, located north of the Highway and currently managed by Solidere, and the area to the south of the highway, known as the Patriarchate in reference to the patriarchal school.

**Area of Choice and Focus**
The focus of this study will be on the district of Zokak el Blat. The area is known to be of cultural and historic significance. Its name stemming from the fact that it was one of the first areas in the city of Beirut to be paved (“Zokak” meaning alley and “Blat” meaning pavement). The Fouad Chehab Highway highlights the dichotomy between these two areas with the Serail being the more executive and commercial part of the district, and the Patriarchal area being more residential and educational. The focus of this study will be on the educational zone in the Patriarchal part of the district.

The Zokak el Blat area is home to more than 7 different schools: CIS, Hariri 2, Saint Joseph de l’apparition, Ecole Patriarchal, Lycée Abed el Kader, El Maanieh and more recently the new built Public School. The area itself presents institutions and sites that can add to the educational experience in Zokak el Blat - notably within close proximity to the 7 major schools in the area - this includes the Orient Institute (known as the German Centre), the Old Heritage Homes (Dr. Dahesh’s residence), Red Cross etc. - in addition to open remnant spaces that are being used as parkings and improvised play areas.

The schools cater for students coming from different financial backgrounds (tuition fees go from 260,000 LBP a year to over 7 million). However, the area poses issues in terms of safety, walkability, connectivity and also the presence of open spaces. The new public school does not have any green space, neither does Hariri 2 nor Maanieh. The schools that do include a green space within their campus leave the students unsatisfied.

The purpose of this study is to identify the landscape issues that can hinder the educational process of the schools in Zokak el Blat as well as identify sites of intervention for “educational landscapes.”
Zokak el Blat is home to more than 7 different schools: CIS, Hariri 2, Saint Joseph de l’Apparition, Ecole Patriarchal, Lycee Abdel-Kader, El Mamlah and, more recently, a newly built public school. The schools cater for students of different financial backgrounds with tuition fees going from 260,000 LBP a year to over 7 million LBP a year.

What is interesting about the area is the potential of it being a campus-like space with already existing cultural and educational institutions that are either within the area itself: for example the Orient Institute (known as the German Centre), the Red Cross. It is also an area of rich and distinctive heritage: the old Bechara el Khoury residence or the Dr. Dahesh residence, which has been recently added to the World Monuments Fund watch list.

In addition to this, the Patriarchal part of the district also presents some remnant spaces that are sometimes used by local students and local residents as improvised playgrounds for children.

Despite the potential of the area, it remains, like much of Beirut, as a highly congested area which is not suitable for positive and safe learning environment. In addition to that, the schools themselves are lacking in green areas that are beneficial for student wellbeing and academic achievement.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- Identify the relationship between the schools and the surrounding area. This includes access points, streets, open areas and any other elements that seem significant.
- Understand the relationship that students have with the schools and the Zokak el Blat area.
- Define the distribution of the schools in relation to each other and other landmarks.
- Identify the areas of interest for intervention.

The general purpose is to combine the findings of the inventory and analysis to support the idea of creating “educational landscapes” within a “campus” around the schools and potentially within the schools themselves.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

04.1 Nature Deficit Disorder

Being exposed to nature has proven to have a number of benefits on both the physical and mental health of individuals. This generalisation rings true to both youth and adults. However, nowadays, urbanisation has been taking up what is left of the greenery in a city. The latest generation is the one known to have a lack of nature and the outdoors - and with that the many benefits that they hold on their wellbeing. This is referred to as Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD). NDD can trigger Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), increase childhood obesity, lack of creativity and curiosity, ignorance of local flora and fauna, and a diminishing sense of community (Louv, 2005). Studies have also shown that children growing up in an urban setting are at risk of not achieving their full academic potential (Faber Taylor et al., 2001). In order to remediate from this, strategies of reintroducing the students to their surroundings and increasing their interactions with them, in addition to adding greenery spaces, are needed.

Nature Exposure, Concentration and Attention

Concentration

The outdoors have a distinct quality to them: they refresh concentration as well as provide elements to focus on (Faber Taylor et al., 2001). This is crucial as concentration helps an individual focus on a given task or phenomena- making it easier to understand. A study conducted researches where children were moved from highly dense to highly green areas within an urban setting, and it was discovered that their levels of concentration increased when exposed to nature.

Attention

There are two different forms of attention: voluntary and involuntary - their effects are distinct well defined. Involuntary attention is put to use when observing and interacting with the surroundings. More natural settings offer a calm stimuli, whereas, a rigid concrete and urban setting can be mentally exhausting - thus hindering the cognitive abilities of students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

04.2 EIC Based Learning

Schools are starting to include nature and the outdoors are part of their curriculum. This approach is known under the following appellation: Environment as an Integrating Context for learning (EIC) - where education is not only class based, but also environment based. EIC is defined as being interdisciplinary, providing students with “hands-on” education. The techniques they use are outdoor classrooms, labs, green play areas, environmental field trips in natural settings, and even planting activities. The knowledge acquired in EIC programs is directly put to use and engages both practical and theoretical thinking (Liberman, Gerard A., 1998).

The benefits of EIC programs are not specific to any age group: this approach can be applied for kindergarten children as well as teenagers in their high school years (Liberman, Gerard A., 1998). EIC has encouraged social learning. Students following an EIC base program have developed communication skills and learn to interact with one another as they are put in both an educational and social environment where team work and interaction is key (Liberman, Gerard A., 1998). Students following these programs show to have less behavioural problems and interact with one another peacefully, thus contributing to a better learning environment (LAF News Blog, 2012).
Nature and the outdoors must be integrated within educational programs in order to provide children with a healthy and effective learning environment. The outdoors, be it an urban or rural setting, can be viewed as a space where creativity, social interaction and learning can merge into one. Zokak el Blat, being a highly congested and crowded area does not offer the best learning environment for students—despite its cluster of schools. Educational landscapes can be integrated within the area itself in order to provide the students of Zokak el Blat with a better learning environment.

The following is a series of case studies that either tackle the use of educational landscapes, or are located within educational institutions. Their nature and scale vary: parks, playgrounds, even installations. These case studies illustrate how the use of educational landscapes and playful elements can be feasible and implemented.
Participatory Design and construction that aims to engage the community with the urban landscape in high conflict. The idea is to take social dynamic in “zones of danger” and turning them into “zones of peace”. The design consists of “urban acupuncture” made of focal intervention in specific unused and abandoned plots. The design focused on the reclamation and implementation of 5 public spaces.

Espacios de Paz, Caracas, Venezuela, Urban Revitalisation
Firm: Kinnear Landscape Architects
Scale: 450 sqm

KLA wanted to make a playground that improved the behavior of children in the classroom. The design aimed to have more flexible environments to help the children develop a sense of place for "imaginative play." The design has little added greenery and focuses most on hardscape: white stripes that highlight the topography, movable objects, rotating stages and a "forest" of poles. This out of the ordinary environment encourages the children to engage in creative play despite the rigid lines.
Imagination Playground at Betsy Head Park and Burling Slip, NYC, USA, Interactive Landscape

How Social Creative Play works

Building the Playground in Burling Slip

Unboxing of the individual Pieces

2-Association

Structure

Child

Garoon Gateway To Science Park, Chicago, USA, Educational Park

Firm: Weinbach and Partners, Ltd
Scale: 5000 sqm
Context: Near a Lake/Camping Site

The park serves as an educational tool for the children located near the Jewish Community Centre. The design tackles "informal" education within the landscape - it encourages experimental education by adding structures, exhibits. These installations are interactive and engage the children in the garden to learn about sciences in a more playful manner, without compromising leisure. The result of such an interaction is called "experiential learning". Its target audience consists of: families and children ages 5 to 14.
Zokak el Blat, being a very complex and rich area had much to offer in terms of information. In order to try and narrow down the areas of study and focus, the most prominent data, significant to the problematic regarding education has been selected.

The data collection was in part direct information, making the inventory, and in others conclusions- which make the up the analysis. The data collected is based on both observation, research, analysis and interviews/surveys.
The area is home to a number of different landmarks.

a. Fig. 36 shows how the most prominent schools in the area are somewhat aligned and are fairly close to one another. Most buildings are residential and mixed-use. Schools are shown to be are also within close proximity to one another. Religious institutions, for example: the Church and Zokak el Blat Mosque are also featured as landmarks within the area.

b. Fig 37. The entire site is located on a downwards slope, facing north.

a. Fig. 38 Open spaces are mostly private and/or closed off. Some of them been turned into parking lots that sometimes are used as improvised play areas.

b. Fig. 39 A number of different institutions are also within proximity to the schools, interestingly enough, these institutions—including the schools, for example the Orient Institute, make up the landmarks of the area which give it its character. Other landmarks in the area also include old buildings classified as cultural heritage sites.
Streets network and sidewalks are major characteristics of any urban area. When properly designed, they can enhance safety, facilitate walkability and create a safer, friendlier environment. The following maps illustrate data that has been observed in the Zokak el Blat area regarding sidewalk and street network.

a. **Fig. 40** Road network: The major schools—with the exception of CIS—are all located along the main roads.

b. **Fig. 41** Disconnected Sidewalk: The sidewalk is disconnected along the secondary roads—thus reducing the general safety of the area.

a. **Fig. 45** Parking Areas: In addition to a having narrow sidewalks that sporadically disconnected, cars take up space when parked along them. The presence of parking lots does somewhat alleviate the number of cars parked on the sidewalk—it is still fairly high however. Note: Cars are also parked at the entrance of some schools.

b. **Fig. 46** Obstacles are also present in the form of pillars, big walls (over 3 meters high) and other factors as well.
Walkability is a major issue in the area, with the sidewalk obstacles and its sporadic disconnected network.

**06.3 The Schools**

**Overview**

Zokak el Blat’s many institutions make it an area where residents have a number of different services within walking distance. Notably, the schools in that area take up a significant portion of the space each of them presenting a distinct character and a target student body.

- **a. Location of Schools and School info:** as previously mentioned, the schools are all within close proximity to one another. Despite that, they remain very different in terms of campus components and student body due to the different in tuition fees. This is illustrated in the table below.

- **b.** The schools differ based on whether or not they provide a green campus for the students. Noticeably, only two schools (CIS and Lycée Abdel Kader) offer a green campus. Saint Joseph de l’Apparition provides a small open area with a few planted trees, but it does not compare with the other two green campuses.

- **c.** Students were asked a set of questions that helped better evaluate the area and how effective it is. The results are shown in the pie charts below. A number of 45 students going to school in Zokak el Blat were interrogated; these students. Almost off the students wanted their school to supply them with a more suitable outdoors area.
### Summary of School Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Tuition Fee (LBP)</th>
<th># of Students</th>
<th>Green Spaces</th>
<th>Area of Facility (m²)</th>
<th>Density (person/m²)</th>
<th>History of Facility</th>
<th>Start of the Day</th>
<th>End of the Day</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>7,774,000</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4300</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>Armenian School</td>
<td>8 AM</td>
<td>3-4 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public School</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>4280</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apparition</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>2,776,365</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5490</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>Palace</td>
<td>8 AM</td>
<td>3-4 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hariri II</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>6,790,000</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3320</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>8 AM</td>
<td>3-4 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriarcale</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>3,254,000</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>8200</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>8 AM</td>
<td>3-4 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maanieh</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1850</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>8 AM</td>
<td>3-4 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lycée Abed El Kader</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>7,260,000</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14300</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>Palace</td>
<td>8 AM</td>
<td>3-4 PM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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#### The Schools

**Fig. 47** Schools Location / 1: 3000

**Fig. 48** Table / School Data Summary

**Fig. 49** Pie Charts / Survey Results

**Fig. 50** School Pictures

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Would you like your school to cater for extra-curricular activities and recreational facilities?

- Yes
- No

Would you like to school with children from other schools?

- Yes
- No

Do you feel safe walking around the area?

- Yes
- No
Fig. 51 School Access Points / 1: 6000
Results based on Open Spaces and School Data

Fig. 52 Easily Accessible Schools / 1: 6000
Results based on access points, sidewalk network and topography

Fig. 53 Schools in need of Open Spaces / 1: 6000

Fig. 54 Entrance to Lycee Abdel Kader

Fig. 55 Entrance to Hariri 2

Fig. 56 Entrance to Lycee Abdel Kader Masterplan / 1: 2000

Fig. 57 Entrance to Hariri School

Fig. 58 Entrance to Hariri School II

Fig. 59 Entrance to Open School

Fig. 60 Entrance to Open School II

Legend
School Access Points

Legend
Schools In need of outdoor area

Legend
Easily Walkable School Access Point

Legend
Easily Walkable School Access Point

Legend
Easily Walkable School Access Point

Legend
Easily Walkable School Access Point
The Schools

Fig. 58 New Public School Masterplan / 1:1000

Fig. 59 Open Spaces in Public School
Rigid-Stoic-Uninviting

Fig. 60 CIS masterplan 1:1000

Fig. 61 Open Spaces in CIS
Colourful-Inviting-UNUSED
General Conclusions on Schools:

a. Schools are not easily accessible.

b. The surveys show that the schools are not making the most of the area they are in; be it on a private level where each school is not optimising the space for outdoor learning, or the Zokak el Blat area itself - which made way to private parking lots instead of smaller, more niche spaces where children can express themselves and learn from their environment.

c. There are a number of areas of interest that also add to the educational experience of the students.

d. The spaces within the schools, be it rooftop or the campuses themselves are interesting places for intervention as they offer a vast open space that can be manipulated to incorporate elements to further enhance their educational potential even implementing a space where an EIC educational program can take place.

After having carefully analysed and went through the different aspects and elements of the area, both on a social, urban and academic level, it is clear that the schools are in need of a better learning environment. Creating a more safe and academically friendlier environment within the congested area of Zokak el Blat is the driving idea of this project. The spaces designed will be mostly for educational and playful use. The main strategy is to utilise unused spaces, within and/or around the schools to provide the institutions with these spaces, as well as creating a general “campus-like” feel to the space.

On a more general scale, issues like walkability will be tackled, in order to ensure the safety of the students walking around the area, either for leisurely purposes or for their walk back home. At a smaller scale, creating educational landscapes - much like the ones discussed in the case study - to enhance the quality of educational environment is the strategy to follow through.
The first concept focuses mostly on the pedestrian network around the school, optimising it and utilising open spaces near the schools as education landscapes.

The second concept tackles the inner spaces in the schools, working solely on the connection between sidewalk and school, and optimising the existing green spaces within them.

The third concept mostly focuses more on utilising the rooftops of buildings as educational spaces for the community of schools in the area.

As a final concept, Playful Grounds, the synthesis of the first and third ideas seemed best and most suitable as it provided space for learning and safe mobility for the students, and adding open spaces to lessen the congested effect of the thick urban fabric around the schools, thus creating an environment that is more stimulating. The idea is to also connect the rooftop areas together via bridges where possible to create a larger space for educational play for the students.

The connectivity between the different spaces would be mostly visual, and will give the space a unifying factor. In addition, on the rooftops, activities such a green roof gardening, and educational elements are added in order to merge play and learning.

The final product would consist of a series of connected rooftop spaces that are used for educational purposes, connected visually and physically to one another, in addition to smaller spaces-where possible, in order to also add the entire “campus-like” feel of the area. This would require a general masterplan of the area, and then several focus area to develop as samples.
Making the area more education-friendly requires to think at both, a masterplan and a site design level.

The entire area follow an educational theme, aimed at making the spaces around and within the schools safer and more enjoyable. The area presents a museum and a library open to the public and within walking distance from the schools.

The streets near the school are paved in order to encourage pedestrian use. This also serves as a unifying factor the space.

Each open space (rooftop and ground-level spaces) is assigned a certain theme around which the design is built upon.
The street network, as previously mentioned is paved and also accommodates street trees in order to make it all the more walkable. In addition, alternate lighting on opposite sidewalks allows for good visibility at night, all whilst keeping the energy consumption at a minimum. The sidewalks are all to be at least two meters wide in order to allow a flow of pedestrian access and use.

The walls along the schools are no longer rigid; they take on a playful aspect. The walls’ use is no longer strictly to separate the schools from the existing sidewalk. It is used as an exhibition space for student work. This allows the students to leave their mark and the area, making them appropriate the space and make it their own.
The first open space is one that is used as an *impromptu* playground by the kids and students in the area. The idea is not to change this, but rather to build up on it, by adding proper seating areas in the shape of stairs to accommodate the maximum amount of people in such a limited space, as well as adding vegetation around these seating areas to provide shade for the users. This also allows for a small audience to sit and watch the games. Lines of football and basketball courts are appropriately scaled on the floor to provide the users with a sense of direction when engaging in these physical activities.

The lighting is focused around the edges and the entrance of the space. The planting scheme is kept simple in order to maintain the familiarity of the area with *Sophora secundiflora*, used in its tree form, and *Pennisetum setaceum* and *Pennisetum setaceum rubrum* as groundcovers. The edges of the site that are not attached to a wall will be fenced in order to maintain the connection with the street.
The second open space is used as an outdoor exhibition area which hosts temporary exhibition by local artists, this includes paintings, installations and other forms of art. The sidewalk is extended one meter into the space itself in order to invite people to utilize this area. The existing pebbles are kept-this gives the space a more "raw" feel. At the center, an elliptical fair-faced concrete floor is added- this can be used as a play area when no exhibitions are being held, or as the support for any structures that can't be maintained on the gravel floor. At the edges are seating areas, surrounded with ground covers, making the space not only for contemplation, but also for relaxation. No fences or specified entrances are added in order to highlight the visual and pedestrian connection with the surroundings. In order to emphasize the relation with the other open space, *Pennisetum setaceum* and *Pennisetum setaceum rubrum* are also found as groundcovers. The Cypress trees are kept. The pebbles are already existing and merge well with the cypress trees and the proposed vegetation, creating a unified space of serenity. The lighting is emphasized at the edges, against the walls and near the benches, also it emerges from the fair-faced concrete floor in the center to highlight whatever elements exhibited there. The space is thus an area for art appreciation and for seating. It is open all day for the public to use.
The school rooftops are used as public open spaces. This helps maximise the number of open spaces in the area, and also allows easy access to the students during the school days. The rooftops are not open to the public on weekdays. However, on weekends, they can be used by both the students and the people living in the area. The rooftops are assigned themes: arts and crafts, science, planting areas etc. This ensures that each rooftop provides specific activities—making it part of the larger network of schools and open spaces.

The school rooftops provide education activities in playful and engaging matters that allow the users to interact, play and learn all at once. This is achieved through playful patterns on the floor or even interactive installations that also fall under the theme of educational play.
The first rooftop to be used is that of the newly built public school. This school was specifically chosen as it had little to no playful elements for the students to engage with. The patterns on the floor add colour to a previously dull and uninteresting space. Each part of the rooftops and the terrace provides different activities: arts and crafts, resting and planting.

Finally, this school provides access from the streets to the rooftops via a staircase that connects to the terrace, and then another staircase would take the user form the terrace to the rooftops which are connected to others via a set of bridges, ensuring pedestrian connectivity between the different zones.
The material used is limited to **coloured rubber** flooring for maximum safety. The floorings will be installed following the patterns shown in the plan. The terrace presents domes in which *Sophora secundiflora* are planted to provide shade for the users. This tree is used all over the arts and crafts area as well as it doesn’t need much maintenance and falls under the specifics required for rooftop planting.

The *plotting area* is divided into three separate spaces: a compost area, an ornamental and aromatic cluster of shrubs and finally perennials and herbs that are planted interchangeably throughout the seasons.

The arts and crafts area presents height *adjustable tables*, connected to *rails* into to maximise space flexibility.
The Hariri II rooftop follows a *science theme*. This theme is expressed by a number of different interactive installations. The first installation is a set life-sized *newton’s cradle*, followed by a tunnel of *pressure sensitive tiles* connected to pipes that release air depending on the pressure applied. These pipes have papers and confetti that make the movement of air within them visible. A space allocated for *building structures* using the imagination playground pieces discussed in the case study. In the backdrop are *distorting mirrors*. Finally, at the end of the rooftop are eight-way *life sized scales* and a *open classroom* area that provides a flexible space, via a set of panels that are connected to the fence. These panels can be distributed as one sees fit onto the allocated space, thus providing a multitude of different classroom areas every time of interchangeable sizes. *Shading Structures* are also a key factor of the space.
Fig. 86: Hariri II Technical Plan / 1 : 600

Fig. 87: Newton's Cradle Game

Fig. 88: Flexible Outdoor Classroom

Fig. 89: Eight-Way Scale Game

Fig. 90: Preliminary Photomontages of Pipe Tunnel


