The graduation studio “New Utopias on the Ruins of the Welfare State”, was run as part of the Design as Politics Chair, a small graduation lab set up to investigate the possibilities and tensions between architecture, urbanism and the wider political context. The title explicitly implores for an analysis of the current systems and structures of a specific welfare state, while demanding a design response that reimagines the current malaise. In my case, this is the sprawling Solent region of southern England, a place emblematic of the rise and fall of the post war British welfare state. A series of impositions, either from London or other global centres of power have had wide reaching influence on the region, exposing the fragile nature of the welfare state in a place that only emerged from specific urban policies after the Second World War.

The centralisation of civic power and its antonym, devolution, underlies much of my wider research into the British welfare state, a defining theme that has had great implications for the civic fabric of the welfare state and the Solent region. The paternal roll out of welfare policies in the 1950s, and its subsequent reversal with the sale of important assets during the 1970s and 1980s were made centrally, in London, far from where its impact are still most felt. While piecemeal attempts to empower regional levels of government have been made throughout the last 30 years, generally following nationalistic lines, they have been counteracted by other government policies that consolidate power back to Whitehall.

The current scales of governance is set to change once more, as the British version of the welfare state reconstitutes itself in the face of the fiscal austerity and wider neo-
liberal doctrine. Many cities and regions are slated to gain civic powers, in matters such as health, transport and planning, alleviating the burden on central government while allegedly empowering local institutions to serve local needs. In “Localism”, David Cameron’s Conservative government lay claim to the foundations of this potentially dramatic restructuring of democratic power, as local government, predominantly cities, are granted civic powers currently far beyond any previous attempts at devolution. The conditions of this project follow this thread of decentralising representative democracy to a utopian conclusion; a radical restructuring of power away from the state toward smaller scale urban units. Regions and cities are granted unprecedented autonomy. A federal Britain emerges.

ANARCHY IN THE UK

The premise for the reimagining of the Solent, and in particular the Southampton docks, is underpinned by this radical devolvement of powers from London to the regions, brought about in the wake of moves to break up the union of Britain. Two fundamental questions informed the development of this utopian projection, with specific regard to the Solent region. Firstly, how would the Solent manage its infrastructure, in desperate need of expansion, and normally presided over globalised private initiative backed by central government? Secondly, how could the legitimacy of local democratic institutions, in a region without a civic legacy, be secured?

The design proposal attempts to make explicit the considerations of autonomy, anarchic social representation and infrastructure through the physical form and programming of the terminals and their connecting public piers. The establishment of a Solent Port Authority, a participatory institution not dissimilar to a transport co-operative, underlies a reclaiming Southampton's docks as a civic held asset, reconnecting the city to its waterfront while providing needed terminals for the expanding cruise and freight industries. The qualities of the port and its relationship to the public sphere are explored through the addition of two elevated piers that stretch out across the dock landscape, extending the waterfront to manage the growing demand. Drawing from British traditions of the seaside pier as a structure that condenses public life, the dock piers and the terminals they are connected by provide a new civic space that combines all manners of public programming. A series of concrete structures provide a stable platform beneath which the dock activities are maintained, while on the deck above, civic functions are arranged in flexible structures, changing throughout the year as the pier adapts to the seasonal nature of civic activities. The materialisation reflects these two qualities, with a solid concrete long span industrial base allowing for lighter and slender domestic structures of wood and steel, which house all things from dances classes to reading groups, sea scouts to pregnancy classes.

The piers are a reflection on the notions of public assets (not to be confused with state assets), and the possibilities of appropriation, whether civic or otherwise, in an anarchic territory.
METHOD
Exploring notions of civility, governance and infrastructure in a British radical political context can only be achieved through the unpacking of the traditions of utopia in the architectural project, a theme that was examined during the early stages of the project. Alongside this, as the events of the Scottish independence referendum unfolded, we undertook a workshop in Venice that explored notions of regional identity and its implications for the nation state and Europe.

By choosing hegemony and decentralisation as a lens through which I studied the changes of the British welfare state and their influence on the Solent, research was undertaken regarding the traditions of anarchism and its relationship to building in Britain, with the use of a handful of key precedents providing direction.

The challenge that emerged early and stayed throughout the process of research and design was managing a complex and varied series of conditions that underpin the project, whilst maintaining a coherent design proposal that could go some way in critiquing the current situation.

THE WIDER SOCIAL CONTEXT
The studio demands a wide political narrative, and the project engages in utopian projection that while radical, is tangible, especially as the political autonomy of cities and the nation state becomes a resonating theme for dealing with social and urban issues not only in Britain but around the world.

Local identity in the face of overwhelming global forces, attempts to establish ideals of collectivity that can bind emerging urban forms, civic appropriation of key urban spaces that are currently off limits; all themes that underpin the project and are prevalent in today’s literature as the profession attempts to grapple with the wider social concern of building. This project is a exploration of such pressing issues.