From 1975 to 1990, the Lebanese capital, Beirut, became the epicentre of one of the most violent and brutal armed conflicts to erupt in the second half of the 20th Century. Fuelled by sectarian tensions emerging from the volatile geopolitics in the Middle East, the Lebanese Civil War left an estimate of 150,000 fatalities, more than 100,000 people injured, and around 900,000 displaced.

Sixteen years later, in a period of relative calm, in July 2006, Beirut again became the target of deadly airstrikes and heavy artillery fire. However, this time around, the attacks were not launched by local militias but by a vindictive Israeli Government, determined to destroy the country’s vital infrastructure and neutralise Hezbollah’s paramilitary operations.

Fourteen years since reaching a ceasefire with Israel, and in the middle of a profound sociopolitical and economic crisis, in the early evening of 4 August 2020, the sound of a large explosion and sight of a towering plume of smoke grabbed most of Beirut’s residents attention. Yet, the massive blast was dwarfed only a few minutes later by a much larger explosion, which experts maintain was the sixth largest non-nuclear man-made detonation in history.

Only second to the sheer scale of human loss and tragedy, the legacy of these violent events is the total or partial destruction of the Lebanon’s infrastructure, as well as of its towns, neighbourhoods, and buildings. Nevertheless, even if scarred, some of these structures still stand today — damaged, but waiting to be resurrected.

Unfortunately, Beirut’s circumstances are not at all different from similar situations occurring around the world. This bears the question: what can architecture do in the wake of these violent and tragic events?

In this context where violence and architecture intersect, Architecture in the Aftermath — Case Study: Beirut, invites students to engage in a process of historical analysis, design experimentation and solidarity approximation to the physical and political matter of architecture. As a case study, students will work in the Port of Beirut — the area most affected by the 4 August 2020 explosion. Caused by a corrupt political system that ignored the risks of storing almost 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrate close to a densely populated area, the blast left at least 220 people dead, 7,000 injured, and 300,000 displaced. The explosion also obliterated the vital port and destroyed (or severely damaged) more than 70,000 buildings, including schools, hospitals, markets, shops, offices and dwellings.

While addressing these challenging circumstances, the studio will ask students to reflect upon this crisis not as a development opportunity, but as a chance to provide the affordable housing, social services, public space and infrastructure that Beirut’s citizens so desperately need.

With its focus on one of the most unstable areas in the Middle East, Architecture in the Aftermath provides a rare opportunity for Architecture students at MADA to apply their design and thinking skills outside the Australian and Eurocentric context. Avoiding western narratives and sites that typically underpin Australian architectural design education, this program seeks to decolonise the architectural design studio, as well as its delivery, assessment methods and results. Ultimately, the intention is to amplify our students’ cultural, political and historical awareness, as well as to equip them with the necessary tools to become engaged architects and global citizens.