

DECOLONIZING KNOWLEDGE

In 1987, in an attempt to suppress the *intifada* (the Palestinian civil protests against its military occupation) the Israeli government banned people from gathering together and closed all schools and universities. As a reaction, Palestinian civil society grew through the organization of an underground network of schools and universities in private houses, garages and shops. Universities were no longer confined within walls or campuses, and teachers and students began using different learning environments in cities and villages.

These gatherings and assemblies reinforced the social and cultural life of Palestinian communities. Learning was not limited to the hours spent sitting in classrooms; mathematics, science, literature and geography were subjects that could be imparted amongst friends, family members and neighbors.

In order to resist the long periods of curfews imposed by the Israeli army, these self-organized spaces for learning included self-sufficiency activities such as growing fruits and vegetables and raising animals. Theoretical knowledge was combined with one that emerges from action and experimentation. Learning became a crucial tool for gaining freedom and autonomy. People discovered that they could share knowledge and be in charge of what and how to study.

The classical structure, in which 'expert teachers' transmit knowledge and students are mere recipients to be filled with information, was substituted by a blurred distinction between the two. A group dynamic opened this new learning environment to issues of social justice, inequality and democracy. The First Intifada was, in fact, a non-violent movement that not only aimed at changing the system of colonial occupation but also at creating new spaces for social change. For example, youth and women now had the opportunity to challenge traditional and patriarchal sectors of Palestinian society. Within these processes, education was perceived as an essential tool for liberation and emancipation. The knowledge produced within the group structure was no longer distant and alienating, but rather grounded in the present political struggle for justice and equality.

At the beginning of the 1990s, this open and community-based system of learning was not considered

When Palestinian education services and public gatherings were forbidden by Israel during the first *intifada*, networks of knowledge production flourished in the quotidian spaces of daily life. While quickly abandoned in the state, these learning processes fostered a radically non-hierarchical relation between knowledge-bearer and -receiver. With *Campus in Camps*, Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal sought to revitalize such forms of knowledge production in refugee camps, in turn not only revolutionizing the Palestinian system of higher education, but also the politics of refugee subjectivity.

by the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA). The national Palestinian educational curriculum continued along the basis of the Jordanian national system, ignoring these challenging and rich experiences.

However, most leaders of this underground network went on to become key figures in the Palestinian non-governmental sector. For many, the state-building process of the last years became centralized, bureaucratized and, in some cases, authoritarian. The non-governmental sector is the space where experimental practices in health, environment, human rights and education have continued developing.

In Palestine, most NGOs today, much like the PA, are internationally funded. Although donors are operating in support of the local population, they are in fact not accountable to the people, but instead often pursue the cultural and political agendas of the donor states.

Philanthropy has thus become one of the main vehicles for Western intervention in the politics and culture of Palestine.

Bearing these dangers in mind, the network of NGOs still seems to be an important tool for developing different policies. In particular, non-governmental spaces are able to react more efficiently to the needs of marginalized sectors of society that are not represented by state policies. A new type of common space has thus emerged through NGO culture, one that has not yet been adequately understood and theorized.

Critical learning environments

In 2011, after three years of teaching at al-Quds Bard University, a liberal arts college based in Abu Dis, I co-founded *Campus in Camps*, the "first university in a refugee camp." I was convinced that the university can play a decisive role in creating a space for critical and grounded knowledge production connected to greater transformations and the democratization of society. In particular, I became convinced that 'moving' the campus to more marginalized geographical areas and sectors of society could create a truly engaged and committed university. The university campus and the refugee camp are both 'extraterritorial islands', of different sorts of course: one utopian and one dystopian. Both are removed from the

rest of the city. Campus in Camps aimed to transgress the borders between the 'island of knowledge' and the island of 'social marginalization'. In conversation with al-Quds Bard students from refugee camps, I realized that their narrations, ideas and discourses were able to flourish in a protected space, such as the university, but needed to be grounded in context and connected with the community. Reciprocally, by moving to camps, the university was able to open its doors to other forms of knowledge, to an experimental and communal learning process able to combine critical reflection with action.

The origin of the program

Campus in Camps originated from of a collectively cumulative thought that aimed to bring together theory and action, contextually-situated learning and project-based interventions in refugee camps. The desire for such a program matured in an ongoing dialogue started in 2007 between the UNRWA Camp Improvement Program, directed by Sandi Hilal, and the Refugee Camp Communities of the Southern West Bank. From this discussion emerged an urgency from the communities to explore and produce new forms of representation of camps and refugees beyond the static and traditional symbols of passivity and poverty. In three years of teaching at the al-Quds Bard University, and based on my previous research and experiences with DAAR, a studio and art residency based in Beit Sahour, I became convinced that the camp is the right place for the campus: a truly engaged and committed university.

Participants

The program, begun in January 2012, engages young participants in a two-year program that deals with new forms of visual and cultural representations of refugee camps after more than sixty-five years of displacement. The aim is to provide young motivated Palestinian refugees who are interested in engaging their community with the intellectual space and necessary infrastructure to facilitate these debates, to translate them into practical community-driven projects and incarnate representational practices to make them visible in the camps. The group of participants in the program was formed during a long three-month process of interviews, consultations with the community and public announcements in newspapers and mosques. There was not a real selection: instead a series of meetings allowed both us and the applicants to understand if we shared a mutual interest in embarking on such an experimental project. However, one thing the participants have in common is their engagement with the community. Most of them had volunteered in organizations or been involved in community-based projects.

The first year

The first year of Campus in Camps was mostly focused on establishing a common language and a common approach among the participants. This was achieved through education cycles, seminars, lectures and the publication of a *Collective Dictionary*. The first months of the program were dedicated to a process that we called 'unlearning', healing from pre-packaged alienating knowledge, knowledge that pretends to be universal and applicable in different cultural condition without taking into consideration the receiver. Participants had to heal from the knowledge and vocabulary acquired from the professionalized NGO system. For example they decided

not to use the words help and development since these express a colonial mentality. In this phase, Munir Fasheh, an innovator of forms of learning and knowledge production who is currently working with various groups in the Arab world to transform stories and storytelling into learning practices, was an amazing source of inspiration. We involved professors from al-Quds Bard University and guests from outside for lectures and seminars. Based on these first encounters, the participants, together with the project team, discussed the opportunity to involve guests in a cycle, which was usually structured as bi-weekly meetings for a minimum of one month.

The decision to involve the invited guest was based on the relevance of the subject in relation to the interest of the group. For this reason, the structure of Campus in Camps is constantly being reshaped to accommodate the interests and subjects born from the interactions between the participants and the social context at large.¹ Over the course of the first year, over a dozen seminars and/or lectures were held in addition to these cycles that gave participants further exposure to experts in a variety of fields. These areas of interest included citizenship, refugee studies, humanitarianism, gender, mapping, and research methodologies. Many of these events were open to the public and were the mechanism to connect with members of the camp community as well as traditional university students.²

The first year culminated in an open public presentation over two days in which more than one hundred people from the local community participated.³ During the event, the *Collective Dictionary* was also presented as a series of publications containing definitions of concepts considered fundamental for the understanding of the contemporary condition of Palestinian refugee camps. Written reflections on personal experiences, interviews, excursions and photographic investigations constitute the starting point for the formulation of more structured thoughts and serve to explore each term. Multiple participants developed each publication, suggesting a new form of collective learning and knowledge production.

The second year

During the second year, more emphasis was placed on the kind of knowledge that emerges from action. Gatherings, walks, events and urban actions were meant to engage more directly with the camp condition. What is at stake in these interventions is the possibility for the participants to realize projects in the camps without neither normalizing their exceptional condition nor blending into the surrounding cities. After over sixty-five years of exile, the camp is no longer made up of tents. The prolonged and exceptional temporality of this site has paradoxically created the condition for its transformation: from a pure humanitarian space to an active political space, it has become an embodiment and an expression of the right of return. The initiatives bear the names of this urbanity of exile: the garden, the pathways, the municipality, the suburb, the pool, the stadium, the square, the unbuilt and the bridge. The very existence of these common places within refugee camps suggests new spatial and social formations beyond the idea of the camp as a site of marginalization, poverty and political subjugation.

Our work intends to broaden the investigation on how spaces for communal learning are constituted and how knowledge can be grounded in action and emerge



Credit: Sara Anna/Campus in Camps

The Concrete Tent is a gathering space for communal learning. It hosts cultural activities, a working area and an open space for social meetings. The urgency and idea of such a space has emerged in discussion with the participants of Campus in Camps who saw a possibility to materialize, to give architectural form to narrations and representations of camps and refugees beyond the idea of poverty, marginalization and victimization.



When we think about refugee camps, one of the most common images that comes to our mind is an aggregation of tents. However, after more than sixty years since their establishment, Palestinian refugee camps are constituted today by a completely different materiality. Tents were first reinforced and readapted with vertical walls, later substituted with shelters, and subsequently new houses made of concrete have been built, making camps dense and solid urban spaces. The Concrete Tent deals with the paradox of a permanent temporariness. The result is a hybrid between a tent and a concrete house, temporariness and permanency, soft and hard, movement and stillness. Importantly, the Concrete Tent does not offer a solution. Rather, it embraces the contradiction of an architectural form emerged from a life in exile.



The project tries to inhabit the paradox of how to preserve the very idea of the tent as symbolic and historical value. Because of the degradability of the material of the tents, these structures simply do not exist any more. And so, the re-creation of a tent made of concrete today is an attempt to preserve the cultural and symbolic importance of this archetype for the narration of the Nakba, but at the same time engage the present political condition of exile.



Claiming that life in exile is historically meaningful is a way to recognize refugees as subjects of history, as makers of history and not simply victims of it. Claiming the camp as a heritage site is a way to avoid the trap of being stuck either in the commemoration of the past or in a projection into an abstract messianic future that is constantly postponed and presented as salvation. This perspective instead offers the possibility for the camp to be a historical political subject of the present, and to see the achievements of the present not as an impediment to the right of return, but on the contrary, as a step towards it. Claiming history in the camp is a way to start recognizing the camp's present condition and actually articulate the right of return. It is crucial that this radical transformation has not normalized the political condition of being exiled. The prolonged exceptional temporality of refugee camps has paradoxically opened a new horizon of political and social configurations, a counter-site for emerging political practices and a new form of urbanism.

as a group effort, rather than solely from external sources. What kind of structures or institutions are required for the accommodation of interests and subjects born from the interaction between participants, groups of teachers, and the broader social context? How can the attention of educational institutions move from the production of knowledge – based on information and skills – to processes of learning – based on shifts in perception, critical approaches, visions and governing principles?

Campus in Camps does not follow or propose itself as a model but rather as public space in formation. *Al jame3ah* translates to English as ‘the university’ but its literal meaning is ‘a place for assembly’. I would like to think of Campus in Camps as part of a long path that had stations in the early twentieth century schools of Khalil Al-Sakakini, where grades and punishments were abolished and walks and music were considered a form of knowledge, or to the informal and clandestine learning environment established during the First Intifada in which people were learning from each other and in context.

The aim of our research is to contribute to the way universities understand themselves, aiming to overcome conventional structures and to create critical learning and egalitarian environments able to influence educational institutions, while seeking a manner of critical intervention for the constitution and strengthening of civic spaces in contemporary realities.

- 1 Cycles were offered by Sandi Hilal. Tareq Hamman, Vivien Sansour, Ayman Khalifah and Linda Quiquix, amongst others. Fellows from al-Quds Bard University offered a series of intensive English workshops and classes not only for participants but also young students in the camps. Parallel to the cycles, a series of public lectures and seminars was organized that were open to all students from al-Quds University and other universities in Bethlehem. Daniel McKenzie in particular overviewed all the different and mutating needs of the group. Fellows from al-Quds Bard University also offered during the summer of 2012 English classes for young students in the camps. For the summer of 2013, Linda Quiquix led a two months summer seminar in which students from al-Quds Bard University, Campus in Camps participants and interested young people from the camps learned about the Zapatista movement. Parallel to the cycles, Campus in Camps organized a series of public lectures and seminars open to all students from al-Quds University and other universities in Bethlehem.
- 2 Among our guests: Beatrice Catanzaro, Basel Abbas, Ruanne Abou-Rhame, Wilfried Graf, Tariq Dana, Felicity D. Scott, Mohammed Jabali, Moukhtar Kocache, Hanan Toukan, Shadi Chaleshtoori, Jeffrey Champlin, Manuel Herz, C.K. Raju, Fernando Rampérez, Emilio Dabed, Samer Abdelnour.
- 3 In this occasion a sort of informal academic committee has been established: Sari Hanafi, Michael Burroway, Gudrun Kramer, Sandi Hilal, Muhammed Jabali, Munir Fasheh, Tariq Dana, Aaron Cezar, Thomas Keenan, Shuruq Harb, Umar Al-Ghubari, Khaldun Bshara, Jawad Al Mahal, Ayman Kalifah.