

Campus in Camps: Knowledge production and urban interventions in refugee camps

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FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE

Introduction

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.

There is therefore a gap between the image that we have in our mind when we think and talk about refugee camps and the actual materiality of camps today. This challenges us to find meanings in a reality that is in front of our eyes, but we can hardly understand. Camps are no longer made of fragile structures. Yet, at the same time, they are not cities either. Cities have a series of public institutions that organise, manage and control the lives of inhabitants. In the camp today, despite that The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East's (UNRWA) role as a purely humanitarian agency has been challenged by the refugee community, it does not govern the camp. The camp, as we know, has developed its own form of social and political life. We lack the right vocabulary to describe this new condition as the prolonged exceptionality of its condition has produced different social, spatial and political structures.

In 2012 in an effort to intervene in such unstable and socially and politically charged urbanity of exile we¹ founded "Campus in Camps" as a means to address the numerous needed spatial and social interventions in Palestinian refugee camps. "Campus in Camps" was created as an experimental educational programme with Al Quds University (Al Quds/Bard Partnership) and hosted by the Phoenix Center in Dheisheh Refugee Camp in Bethlehem. It was implemented with the support of the GIZ Regional Social and Cultural Fund for Palestinian Refugees and Gaza Population on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), in cooperation with UNRWA Camp Improvement Program.

Taking Campus in Camps as a case study in the following pages I'll try to answer to some of the following questions: what is the role of the university in the greater transformation of society? How can the knowledge that is produced inside its walls be relevant and useful for students that live in marginalised communities? What kinds of structures or institutions are required for the accommodation of interests and subjects born from the interaction between students, 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? And how to reconcile theory with action, and combine a rigorous understanding of the problems with pragmatic and effective urban interventions?

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Neighbours schools

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 organisation 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 among Palestinian communities. Learning was not limited to the hours spent sitting in classrooms; mathematics, science, literature and geography were subjects that could be imparted among friends, family members and neighbours.

In order to resist the long periods of curfews imposed by the Israeli army, these self-organised 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 by the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA). The national Palestinian educational curriculum continued being drawn on the basis of the Jordanian national system, ignoring these challenging and rich experiences.

However, most of the leaders of this underground network became key figures in the Palestinian non-governmental sector. For many, the state-building process of the last years became centralised, bureaucratised and, in some cases, authoritarian. The non-governmental sector is the space where these 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, often pursuing 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 marginalised 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 theorised.

Critical learning environments

In this context, Campus in Camps originated from of a collective cumulative thought that aimed at bringing together theory and action, learning in a contextual environment and project based interventions in refugee camps. The desire for such a programme matured in an on-going 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 on-going dialogue emerged the 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 al-Quds Bard University, a liberal arts college based in Abu Dis, 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 democratisation of society. In particular, I became convinced that ‘moving’ the campus to more marginalised 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 marginalisation’. In conversation with al-Quds Bard students from refugee camps, I realised 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 able to combine critical reflection with action.

The programme engages young participants in dealing with new forms of visual and cultural representations of refugee camps after more than sixty-six years of displacement. The aim is to provide young Palestinian refugees who are interested in engaging their community with the intellectual space and necessary infrastructure to facilitate these debates and translate them into practical community-driven projects that will incarnate representational practices and make them visible in the camps. The group of participants in the programme 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 volunteered in organisations or have been involved in community-based projects.

Campus in Camps pedagogical approach is fundamentally based on the strict relation between knowledge production (*the Collective Dictionary*)² and urban interventions (*the Initiatives*)³. The *Collective Dictionary* is 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 *Collective Dictionary* aims to establish a common language and a common approach among the participants. This was achieved through education cycles, seminars, and lectures. First months of the programme are dedicated to a process that we called ‘unlearning’, healing from pre-packaged alienating knowledge, knowledge that is not linked with life. We involved professors from universities and community members for lectures and seminars. Based on these first encounters, the participants, together with the project team, discussed the opportunity to involve the guests in a cycle⁴, which was usually structured as biweekly meetings for a minimum of one month. The decision to involve a guest is 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. 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 fields⁵. These areas of interest included citizenship, refugee studies, humanitarianism, gender, mapping and research methodologies. Many of these events are open to the public and are the mechanism to connect with members of the camp community as well university students. The first year culminated in an open public presentation of two days in which more than 100 people from the local community participated.

During the second year, we put more emphasis on the kind of knowledge that emerges from actions. Gatherings, walks, events and urban actions are meant to engage more directly with the camp condition. What is at stake in these interventions is the possibility for the participants to realise projects in the camps without normalising their exceptional conditions and without blending them into the surrounding cities. After over 66 years of exile, the camp is no longer made up of tents. The prolonged 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 marginalisation, poverty and political subjugation.

Campus in Camps today is made of two essential and interdependent pillars. The first pillar is constituted by self-organised courses established according to the participants' interests and camps urgencies. The second pillar is the Consortium formed by local and international Universities: Goldsmiths University (London – United Kingdom), Mardin Artuklu University (Mardin-Turkey), Leuven University (Leuven -Belgium) (Birzeit University (Birzeit), International Art Academy (Ramallah), Dar El Kalima (Bethlehem) that are offering courses, seminars and workshops in Campus in Camps for refugee and non-refugee students. These activities are in constant dialog with the Popular Committees of Southern West Bank Refugee Camps and UNRWA. These strategic partnerships have already been tested in the past years and have, for the first time, brought together institutions and organisations that rarely work together. At end of year annual public presentations in 2013, the Director of UNRWA Operations in the West Bank, Felipe Sanchez, described Campus in Camps as inspirational. “We hope to replicate this effort across the West Bank,” he said, “Campus in Camps has connected people to people, institutions to institutions and camps to other camps”.

Campus in Camps continues to work as an educational platform that connects young generations in the camp and other generations in the surrounding cities and universities, in order to break isolation surrounding refugee communities and to offer them a platform to engage in a positive and productive way with the rest of the world. Moreover, Campus in Camps aims to create a generational leadership able to introduce new ideas and initiatives in camps that can challenge stereotypes and dominant power relations.

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 “university” but its literal meaning is ‘a place for assembly’. Among the several urban interventions realised within Campus in Camps, the construction of the Concrete Tent in Dheisheh refugee camp, maybe condense the limits, paradox and potentiality of our pedagogical approach.

The Camp as Heritage Site

In December 2013, as part of a collective investigation about *The Unbuilt*⁶ in the camp, Campus in Camps’ participants found a plot of land in Dheisheh refugee camp called the “three shelters”. The three shelters’ site consisted of three original 1950s UNRWA-built structures (three rooms, one communal toilet and a water reservoir) that were still standing. The plot, no longer in use and closed behind a gate, narrates the camp’s foundation and its history. How are we to reconcile this condition with the fact that the camp is always understood and described as a temporary situation of the present with no past, as something that has been established in order to be quickly dismantled and destroyed? Camps are built on the destruction that began in 1948, and for this reason they are ‘historical sites’ that are constantly destroyed and rebuilt. Refugee camps are also a reconstruction of the demolished villages, re-assemblage of people and social relation. Camps are the embodiment of the Palestinian struggle to exist. Yet it seems that we consider their importance only when they are demolished. Only when they cease to exist.

For instance, when Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in Lebanon was destroyed during the battle between the Lebanese army and the Islamic militias, Palestinian refugees promptly demanded its reconstruction. And they did so not by asking for tents, but by demanding the exact reconstruction of their concrete houses that were built through several years of sacrifice. The same happened after the 2002 invasion of Jenin refugee camp. Here the significance of the camp and the rebuilding of its exact structures only began to surface once it was lost through military violence.

Further, how do we make sense of the demands of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon to ‘Return to Nahr el-Bared camp’? Or, in the case of Syria, what do Palestinian refugees mean when

demanding the ‘Return to Yarmouk camp’? What does it mean to demand to return to a space never intended for permanence and without a history?

But how can a space that is supposed to be dismantled and disappear actually even have a history?

At this point we understood that claiming that the camp has a history, and a history that needs to be preserved for its cultural, political and social values, was the best way to try to answer the question of ‘what is a refugee camp today’.

What appeared to us as a historical heritage in need of preservation was not just the architecture of the three shelters, it was also the immaterial culture and the meaning of a communal life that people experienced when living in these structures. In fact, we can argue that the entire camp embodies a unique form of a communal form of life against the humanitarian ideology that reduces refugee to numbers and statistics.

After surveying the project site, and in discussion with the local inhabitants, a collaborative design process about the possible preservation and transformation of the plot unfolded among the Campus in Camps’ participants. Considering the value of the architectural structures that are anchored to the collective memory of the residents, a non-intrusive approach was selected for the preservation of the site as well as for bringing new uses to the space and, by extension, to the whole camp.

The project was materialised as a sort of black frame surrounding the historical structures, a 15 cm thick reinforced concrete platform, seemingly suspended but resting on a compact base course.

FIGURES 3 AND 4 NEAR HERE

This was meant to leave the existing shelters as well as the communal toilet, water reservoir and the olive trees intact as a sign of respect for the past in this new beginning. The platform had a surface area of 120m² and the capacity to host activities with more than one hundred people. The black platform was like a theatre stage, ready to host community gatherings, music performances and collective rituals.

The participants of Campus in Camps spent several months in dialogue with the neighbour, and the owners of this site. Together they not only discussed the aim of this project but, with their consent, they began hosting activities such as concerts and screenings. It was crucial for the participants to involve the neighbour in the project. From there an agreement was signed between the popular committee and the owners.

Construction plans began with the excavation for the foundation of the project. After ten days, one member of the large family prevented the labourers from working on the site. The family, the popular committee and leaders of the camp spent several weeks trying to find a solution. However, this family member stated that, despite the initial agreement to guarantee the collective use of the land for the two coming years, he had now decided to sell it realising that new attention was brought on this abandoned land. In a single night all the shelters were demolished.

Needless to say, this was an extremely frustrating moment for members of the refugee community who witnessed the destruction of this historical site, and a great disappointment for the youth of Campus in Camps, who lost the opportunity to see the materialisation of their new discourse around what constitutes a camp today.

That said, this incident also created a collective awareness on the importance of preserving the camp and its history. This incident brought a new understanding of the camp, no longer as a place without history, but rather as a place full of stories that can be narrated through its urban fabric. These stories have been repressed for fear of normalisation. This moment pushed us to start thinking about how the notion of preservation in a refugee camp is key in order to give meaning and historical importance to a life in exile. And conversely, thinking aloud about the concept of preservation and cultural heritage to question ways in which systems of values are decided and represented.

Claiming that life in exile is historically meaningful is a way to understand refugeehood not only as a passive production of an absolute form of state violence, but also as a way to recognise refugees as subjects of history, as maker 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 offers instead the possibility for the camp to be an 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 toward it. Claiming history in the camp is a way to start recognising the camp's present condition, and actually articulate the right of return.

Architecture is able to register various transformations that make the camp a heritage site. And in camps every single architectural transformation is a political statement. Therefore, architecture registers political changes.

When refugees forced by the first rigid winters in the early 1950s decided to replace the tent with concrete walls, they were forced to confront the necessity to protect their family from the adverse conditions and provide more decent living conditions. They were forced to accept the risk of making life in exile more stable and permanent.

To force people to live in miserable conditions does not bring them closer to return. To negate their right to a life in dignity today is just another form of violence imposed on the most vulnerable segments of Palestinian refugees. Here we need to seriously consider why it is that the right of return should negate the existence of the camp or call for its destruction. In other words, how can we articulate the right of return from the point of view of the condition of the camp?

After the destruction of the 'three shelter' site, the popular committee of Dheisheh offered to build the new structure in a plot of land inside the Garden of Al Finiq, a community centre entirely built by the refugee community. The garden is constantly being reshaped and transformed in an on-going design process, an architectural laboratory for the camp.⁷ The centre is named after the Finiq (the phoenix), from the legendary bird reborn from the ashes, in the same way the refugee community seeks to rebuild their culture on the ashes of destroyed villages.

Campus in Camps participants saw in this new occasion to build a gathering space in the garden of Al Finiq, a possibility to materialise, to give architectural form to narrations and representations of camps and refugees beyond the idea of poverty, marginalisation and victimisation.

The project tried 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 anymore. 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, an attempt to engage the present political condition of exile.

FIGURE 5 NEAR HERE

The Concrete Tent is today a gathering space for communal learning. It hosts cultural activities, a working area and an open space for social meetings. We are aware of the danger of monumentalisation and oversymbolism, but we decided to take the risk in order to make architecture that engages with social and political problems that concern the refugee community that we work with. Too often architecture in our context is seen simply as an economic asset with no social and political value. Too often architecture has been humiliated in void formalism, to look green or sustainable or efficient, apolitical answers to political problems. Too often within the humanitarian industry, architecture has been reduced to answering to the so called 'needs of the community'. Rarely has architecture been used for its power to give form to social and political problems and to challenge dominant narrations and assumptions.

FIGURE 6 NEAR HERE

The Concrete Tent deals with the paradox of a permanent temporality. It solidifies a mobile tent into a concrete house. The result is a hybrid between a tent and a concrete house, temporality 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.

To conclude, in this article I aimed at broadening the investigation on how knowledge can be grounded in action and be embedded and visible in urban interventions in refugee camps. Based on experiences of Campus in Camps educational programme, I aimed to show and reflect on the ways in which universities can strengthen their social role by paying attention to forms of knowledge production and urban interventions that often remains undetected by academic

knowledge. I would like to think of Campus in Camps not as an isolated educational experiment but rather as part of a long path that had stations in the schools influenced by Khalil Al-Sakakini, where walks 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.

Recognising the importance of connecting the Palestinian reality to global urgencies in comparative contexts such the informal settlements in South American, India and the Eastern Mediterranean countries, Campus in Camps team has started a series of collaboration with other groups and universities, calling these environments tree schools. A tree is, in fact, the minimal element to form a school, a gathering place for people who share similar urgencies. The tree, with its characteristics and history, is the device that creates a physical and symbolic common territory where ideas and actions can emerge through critical and independent discussion among participants. The first tree school was established in Bahia, southern Brazil, on the occasion of the São Paulo Biennale. It joined together activists, artists, quilombola intellectuals, landless movements and Palestinian refugees in discussions of forms of life beyond the idea of the nation state and the meaning of knowledge production within marginalized sectors of society. After the Bahia experience, we have gone on to activate other tree schools in Shufat refugee camp in Jerusalem, in Cuernavaca, Mexico and in Curitiba, Brazil. Over the coming years, we would like to continue to activate similar environments in other contexts and with other groups who have already expressed interest: among these, a network of teachers and students from the in Beirut and Turkey; a group of architects in Bogotá, Manama and Medellin, who have already proposed similar learning environments in slums.

FIGURE 7 NEAR HERE

Images

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/4yjhljrgksdixku/AABK96mjzS-BJFVNXTGTjI3a?dl=0>

¹ Sandi Hilal and myself are the founding members and initiators of Campus in Camps, an educational programme based in Dheisheh Refugee Camp, with offshoots in other Camps in the West Bank. Our practice moves between art, architecture and pedagogy. Beside our interest in radical pedagogies, we are also the co-directors of DAAR, an architectural office and artistic residency programme that combines conceptual speculations and architectural interventions (www.decolonizing.ps).

² The collective dictionary is made by the Campus in Camps participants Marwa Allaham, Qussay Abu Aker, Alaa Al Homouz, Saleh Khannah, Shadi Ramadan, Ahmad Lahham, Aysar Dawoud, Bisan Al Jaffarri, Nedaa Hamouz, Naba Al Assi, Mohammed Abu Alia, Ibrahim Jawabreh, Isshaq Al Barbary, Ayat Al Turshan, Murad Owdah in dialogue with community members, associations and collaborators (see <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/common-1/>).

³ The initiatives have been inspired through dialogue with Alessandro Petti, Sandi Hilal, Mmunir Fasheh, and activated with Tamara abu Laban, Bravenewalps, Ayman Khalifah, Matteo Guidi, Sara Pellegrini, Giuliana Racco, Diego Segatto, Dena Qaddumi (see <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/02-the-square/>).

⁴ Guests professors include artists, architects, theoreticians, lawyers, scholars and policy experts such as: David Harvey, Michel Agier, Ruba Saleh, 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, Sari Hanafi, Michael Buroway, Gudrun Kramer, Sandi Hilal, Muhammed Jabali, Munir Fasheh, Aaron Cezar, Pelin Tan, Thomas Keenan, Shuruq Harb, Umar Al-Ghubari, Khaldun Bshara, Jawad Al Mahal, Ayman Kalifah (see <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/the-house-of-wisdom/>).

⁵ <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/reading-fanon-in-palestine-today/>

⁶ Isshaq Al Barbary, Ahmad Al Lahham, Aysar Al Saifi, Qussay Abu Aker (2013), *The Unbuilt: Regenerating Spaces*, Campus in Camps, Dheisheh Refugee Camp (see <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/09-the-unbuilt/>)

⁷ Qussay Abu Aker, Naba' Al Assi, Aysar Al Saifi, Murad Odeh (2013). *The Garden: Making Place*, Campus in Camps, Dheisheh Refugee Camp (see <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/01-the-garden/>).