Spatial Ordering of Exile.
The Architecture of Palestinian Refugee Camps

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It is the camp and not public space our present and future socio-spatial and political horizon (Petti 2007) Petti A., Hilal S., Weizman E. (2013). Refugee camps have been at the center of radical historical transformations that have undermined the political existence of entire communities. Although states and non-governmental organizations have been and are participating actively in conceiving and managing camps, we are still struggling to fully comprehend how the *camp form* has complicated and transformed the very idea of a city as an organized and functional political community (Agier 2011). The birth of the camp thus has the capacity to call into question the very idea of the city as a democratic space. If the political representation of a citizen is to be found in the public space, what is found in the camp is its inverse, the place in which a citizen is stripped of his or her political rights, reduced to bare life. In this sense, the camp represents a sort of anti-city. But what effect does this anti-city produce on the public and political space of the city?

The state of radical economical and social transformation in which we currently find ourselves provides the terrain for a renewed proliferation of the camp condition in every part of the world. There are innumerable places of suspension where "dangerous" and "enemy populations" can be preventively detained, places for humanitarian interventions, camps that precede or follow wars, ships on which people remain imprisoned, refugee camps where people are born and die waiting to go home.

Refugee camps are meant to be the materialization of temporary architecture. Usually constituted of tents and shelters, they are designed for quick and easy assembly in order to respond to emergencies. A short-term form of architecture, they are not built to last. Although the establishment of refugee camps is rhetorically justified by humanitarian intent and technocratic design discourse, they remain an essentially political issue. Whether they serve temporarily or become more permanent is ultimately not decided by the humanitarian bodies tasked with

managing and controlling them, but rather by political conflicts. The prolonged exceptional temporality of the refugee camps could paradoxically create the condition for its transformation: from a pure humanitarian space to an active political space, the embodiment and the expression of the right of return. (Petti A., Hilal S. 2003).

At the same time, the camp condition has opened a new horizon of political and social configurations, and new ways of understanding the relation of the population to space and territory. The permanent temporality of refugee camps have produced spatio-political configurations that call into question the very idea of nation-state. And despite the fact that the "camp form" in origin has been used as a tool for regulating the "excess of the refugee political dimension" (Rahola 2004), the camp as an exceptional space could also be seen as a counter-site for emerging political practices and a new form of urbanism. In the following pages, we will move between these two interrelated aspects: between camp as site of discipline and control and camp as site of struggle and inventive practices.

The Camp as Site of Discipline and Control

If the city has historically represented the place where the rights of citizens (seem to) be recognized—often by excluding one part of the population kept outside its walls—the invention of the camp is a new mechanism of exclusion. The camp system goes beyond the inclusion-exclusion dichotomy that defines relations between citizens and non-citizens mediated by the borders of nation-states (Agamben G. 1995). The camp, in fact, excludes through its inclusion. It marks the degradation of conventional political organizational systems. It is a desperate attempt to preserve an outdated political order through constructing a space of suspension within which to confine all those who "do not belong." It is crucial that the space of the camp is no longer inside or outside, rather, it represents a sort of third area, a place in suspension, where an increasing number of individuals excluded from the polis are shut away. Here, spatial segregation takes on an added dimension, becoming a strict confinement under armed surveillance: once inside these spaces, the lives of the inhabitants may be at stake. The 'camp' signals the breakdown of any political relationship between territory and people, becoming the form of localization for those who do not belong. The camp is a 'space in suspension', a place in limbo, held within the "normal" spatial and social order of a territory (Agamben 1996a).

These spaces in suspension, summoned into being by security concerns, usually become powerful

forms of social and spatial control. They emerge every time the relationship between the territorial space and the population enters a state of crisis. They first made their appearance in the colonial context as a temporary measure for controlling local populations, and later reemerged in Europe at a time when the imperial spatial order was collapsing (Rahola 2004). Camps are once more becoming visible today, as the connection between territory, state, and citizenship has once again entered a crisis due to the disintegrative effects of migrations and the globalization of economies and communications. Called for as an exceptional means for preserving the established order, as a measure required to deal with temporary, short term geo-political crises (migrations, wars, terrorism), over time these spaces are often, in fact, transformed into more or less permanent expressions of political ideology and power.

The Camp as a Site of Political Invention

Although scholarly work highlights the refugee as an emblematic figure of our contemporary political economy (Agamben 1995, 1996, 1996a) and (Schmitt 1991), these same conceptualizations tend to reduce the refugee to a passive subject, lacking autonomous identity or agency. Certainly, emerging social and political practices in the West Bank's Palestinian refugee camps challenge the idea of refugees as passive subjects. In our work as architects, we aim to invert the conceptualization of the everyday practices of refugees as a reaction or resistance to an absolute sovereign power. We argue that in order to do this, one needs to consider the political agency available to refugees through everyday practice, as opposed to the military, statutory and legal apparatus used by authorities to repress their activities and expropriate what they produce.

The Palestinian refugee camps, which first appeared after the 1948 Nakba, were conceived as an emergency assistance to the massive expulsion, operated by Jewish militias, of almost the entire Palestinian population of that time. The first pictures of these camps, in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, showed small villages made of tents, arranged according to the same regular grids used for military encampments. In 1948/49, the UN general assembly established two main bodies: the UN Conciliation Committee for Palestine (UNCCP) with a mandate to find a political solution for the Palestinian refugees, and the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) with an exclusive humanitarian mandate. This created the conceptual and operational distinction that still undermines UNRWA interventions in the eyes of Palestinian refugees. When in 1966 the UNCCP ceased operations, having failed to mediate between newly established Israel, Arab States and the Palestinians, UNRWA was pushed by the refugee community to assume a more

clear political role even though it had no political mandate.

As the years passed, and no political solution was found for the plight of the displaced Palestinians, shelters were substituted with tents in an attempt to respond to the growing needs of the camp population without undermining the temporary condition of the camp, and therefore undermining the right to return. However, with a growing population, the condition in the camps worsened. The terrible situations in which Palestinian refugees where forced to live was used by the Palestinian political leadership to pressure Israel and the international community in terms of the urgency of the refugees' right to return. The precariousness and temporariness of the camp structure was not simply a technical problem, but also the material-symbolic embodiment of the principle that its inhabitants be allowed to return as soon as possible to their place of origin.

Israel refuses the international recognized right of return of Palestinian refugees. For this reason, Palestinian refugee camps have become a magnetic force field in which competing and unequally matched political entities – the host states, international governmental and non-governmental agencies, and the refugees themselves – attempt to exercise influence. Every single banal act, from building a roof to opening a new street, becomes a political statement concerning the right of return. Nothing in the camp can be considered without political implications.

However, during the Nineties and within the framework of the peace process, which subsequently led to the creation of an interim Palestinian Authority, the right of return was increasingly marginalized under the pressure of successive Israeli governments who have never been willing to acknowledge Israel's responsibility in the Palestinian Nakba. At the same time, the withdrawal of the Israeli army from most Palestinian urban areas created the conditions for some West Bank camps to become relatively autonomous and independent socio-political communities.

For decades, the political discourse around the right of return, and the associated imperative to stagnate living conditions to reaffirm the camp's ephemerality, forced refugees to live in terrible conditions. From 1948-49 to the present day, official political discourse has sought to prohibit any development in, or formalization of, the refugee camps. The fear was that any transformation of the camps would bring about an integration of the refugee community with the local environment and thus the political motivation for the right to return would be lost. This discourse was also based on the assumption that as long as refugees were living in appalling conditions, their suffering would pressure the international community to enact their right to return. Thus,

any improvement to camp infrastructure and housing was seen as a direct erosion of the right to return.

Today this imperative is being reconsidered: it is argued that improved living conditions in refugee camps do not necessarily conflict with the right to return. No longer a simple recipient of humanitarian intervention, the refugee is seen as an active political subject, through his or her participation in the development of autonomous political space. Today, refugees are re-inventing social and political practices that improve their everyday life; the refugee camp has been transformed from a marginalized holding area to an interconnected center of social and political life. It is however crucial that this radical transformation has not normalized the political condition of being exiled. (Misselwitz P., Sari H. 2012) and (Abourahme N., Hilal S. 2012).

Al Feniq Cultural Center, Dehesheh Refugee Camp, Bethlehem

The new social practices and the associated reformulation of the political discourse on refugeehood are exemplified by the Phoenix (Al Feniq) Cultural Center. Construction started in 1996 in Dheisheh refugee camp outside Bethlehem, which although less then one square kilometer in area, hosts more than twenty associations and non-governmental bodies. The construction of the Al Feniq Center challenges the assumption that continuing building the camp implies normalization or permanence. Rather, improving living conditions in the camp is seen as a tool for providing better leverage in the struggle for the right to return and at the same time to reaffirm the camp exceptionality(Sheikh H. I. 2012). Al Feniq is a multi-story social and cultural center created on a site that was historically part of a larger British military compound, before being used by the Jordanian army, and finally the Israeli army. When the Israeli army partially withdrew from the West Bank's Area A, the Palestinian Authority planned to build a prison, thus continuing the disciplinary history of the site. However, at this point, the refugee community took over the location and in a few months built a cultural center instead.

Both the appropriation of this site and its transformation from a prison into a cultural center provide clear evidence of the visionary and active power of the refugee community. Today, the Al Feniq center hosts a myriad of activities in its multifunctional capacity: it hosts a large hall for weddings (one of the most important social events in the camps), the Edward Said library, a gym for women, health and business assistance to the community, and a guesthouse. Al Feniq demonstrates the rich social and cultural values of the refugees in exile and, at the same time,

exemplifies new ways of thinking, fighting and acting for the right to return. The main discourse on the right to return hinges on refugees forgetting and repressing the culture produced in over sixty years of exile. Yet asking refugees to destroy their existing social network and life in exile in order to go back to their origins would be akin to a "second Nakba" in terms of its psychosocial impact. Thus, when Naji Odah, director of Al Feniq, was asked if building the center was a form of settling in the camp, he replied, "I'm ready to demolish it and go back home; or even better, I'd like to rebuild Al Feniq in my village of origin." The center is much more than a physical structure. It is, in fact, a symbol and a bridge that connects the site of origin and the site of exile, demonstrating how exilic status can be productive and evolutionary. One possible way in which this can be articulated is in Campus in Camps, the first university in a refugee camp.

Campus in Camps: a university in exile

Campus in Camps is an experimental educational program established in Dehesheh Refugee Camp and hosted in Al Feniq Center. Campus in Camps brings together every year participants from the West Bank's refugee camps in an attempt to explore and produce a new form of representation of camps and refugees beyond the static and traditional symbols of victimization, passivity and poverty. It aims at transgressing, without eliminating, the distinction between camp and city, refugee and citizen, center and periphery, theory and practice, teacher and student. This initiative stems from the recognition that refugee camps in the West Bank are in a process of a historical political, social and spatial transformation. Despite adverse political and social conditions Palestinian refugee camps have developed a relatively autonomous and independent social and political space: no longer a simple recipient of humanitarian intervention but rather as an active political subject. The camp becomes a site of social invention and suggests new political and spatial configurations.

The refugee camp is transformed from a marginalized urban area to a center of social and political life. More notable is that such radical transformations have not normalized the political condition of being exiled. For decades, the effects of the political discourse around the right of

return, such as the rise of a resolute imperative to stagnate living circumstances in refugee camps in order to reaffirm the temporariness of the camps, forced many refugees to live in terrible conditions. What emerges today is a reconsideration of this imperative where refugees are re-inventing social and political practices that improve their everyday life without normalizing the political exceptional condition of the camp itself. After sixty years of exile, the camps are now viewed as the village of origin: a cultural and social product to preserve and remember. What is at stake in this program is the possibility for the participants to realize interventions in camps without normalizing their conditions or simply blending the camp with the rest of the city. Campus in Camps aims at providing a protected context in which to accompany and reinforce such complex and crucial changes in social practices and representations.

Shu'fat School

Within this context, in June 2011, UNRWA Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program, decided to intervene in the conception and realization of a girl's school in Shu'fat refugee camp. For the first time, a site specific and ad hoc design, thus not a fixed architectural scheme, was produced. Rather than a bureaucratic category expressible in numbers, the inhabitants of the camp have been looked at as a complex community in exile. The political context surrounding the project is rapidly deteriorating. Shu'fat camp is in between walls, trapped in a legal void, neither inside nor outside the Jerusalem borders. The inhabitants of Shu'fat are threatened with the loss of their Jerusalem residency documents and, therefore, expulsion from the city to which they have always belonged. The school risks turning into a "happy island" surrounded by political violence.

Is architectural intervention at all possible in such a distorted and unstable political environment? And how could intervention be at all possible without normalizing the exceptional and transitory condition of the camp? How could architecture exist in the here and now of the camp, yet remain in constant tension with a place of origin?

The project of the school attempts to produce a space of existence between two polarized positions: on the one hand, that of refusing to intervene in any way because of a compromising political context; and on the other, that of maintaining the status quo instead of transforming the political reality. A team of architects comprised of myself and my colleagues Sandi Hilal and Livia Minoja imagined the "school in exile" as an occasion to elaborate a fragment of a different

approach to education and society – a school to be experienced by the students, not as a site of repression and discipline, but as a site of liberation and responsibility. We believe in a dialogic education, in which knowledge is produced through a collective effort, rather than understood as information to be transferred from an authority to the student.

The generative form of the school is a circular space, a space around which people can gather to tell or listen to a story. Architecturally, the hexagon constitutes the single classroom, a space in which each participant is equally invited to speak.

Recognizing that the camp is a spatial expression of a particular relation to another place – the place of origin – the project, instead of dismissing this relation, inhabits this tension and contradiction. We created a double for each classroom, an outside open space, a piece of land to cultivate material and cultural dimensions of the place of origin.

The twin classrooms form a spatial tension between an inside and outside, the camp and the home village, life in exile and the desire of return. The twin-classroom form is the invisible DNA of the school, able through its simple articulation to create clusters, clearly defined spaces. The spaces delineated by these clusters serve to develop a sense of ownership in opposition to an alienating, open space. Classroom juxtaposition and varied topographical elevations produce clusters. This configuration aims to define domestic spaces for a more intimate dwelling. The two entrances, with their generous open spaces, are available to public use for camp cultural and recreational activities after school and during holidays.

We believe the Shu'fat school embodies an "architecture in exile": it is an attempt to inhabit and express the constant tension between the here and now and the possibility for a different future. The architecture of the school does not communicate temporariness through an impermanent material construction. These materials are too often instrumentalized for a "politically correct" architecture that relegates refugees to living in shantytowns. Rather, this architecture in exile attempts through its spatial and programmatic configuration to actively engage the new "urban environment" created by over sixty-four years of forced exile. Perhaps this is a fragment of a city yet to come.

Palestinian Refugee Camps are not only sites of poverty and political subjugation. Their political, spatial and social prolonged exceptionality provided paradoxically the context where a different form of life and a culture of exile have emerged. Refugees, refusing categorically to normalize

their condition of exile, have opened up ways in which it is possible to rearticulate the sacred relation between territory, state and population. The extraterritorial condition of the camp, its new form of urbanity and social relations, suggests political configurations beyond the idea of the nation state. Their subversive practices of being inside but also outside nation states problematize the very foundation of our contemporary political organizations. We believe that the future of the refugee camps and their associated spatial, social and political regime force us to re-think the very idea of the city as a space of political representation through the consideration of the camp as a counter-laboratory for new spatial and social practices.

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