



Tree schools

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The *Tree School* is a gathering place for groups and individuals interested in learning from each other and in sharing common urgencies based on lived experiences. The *Tree School* could last for days, months or years depending on the participants' interests. It is a space of conviviality and the joy of learning together.

Learning under the shade of a tree is a common practice rooted in many cultures around the world. The tree, is a living being, with its particular story and mythologies. Its connection with other plants offers a physical and metaphorical space for sharing knowledge.





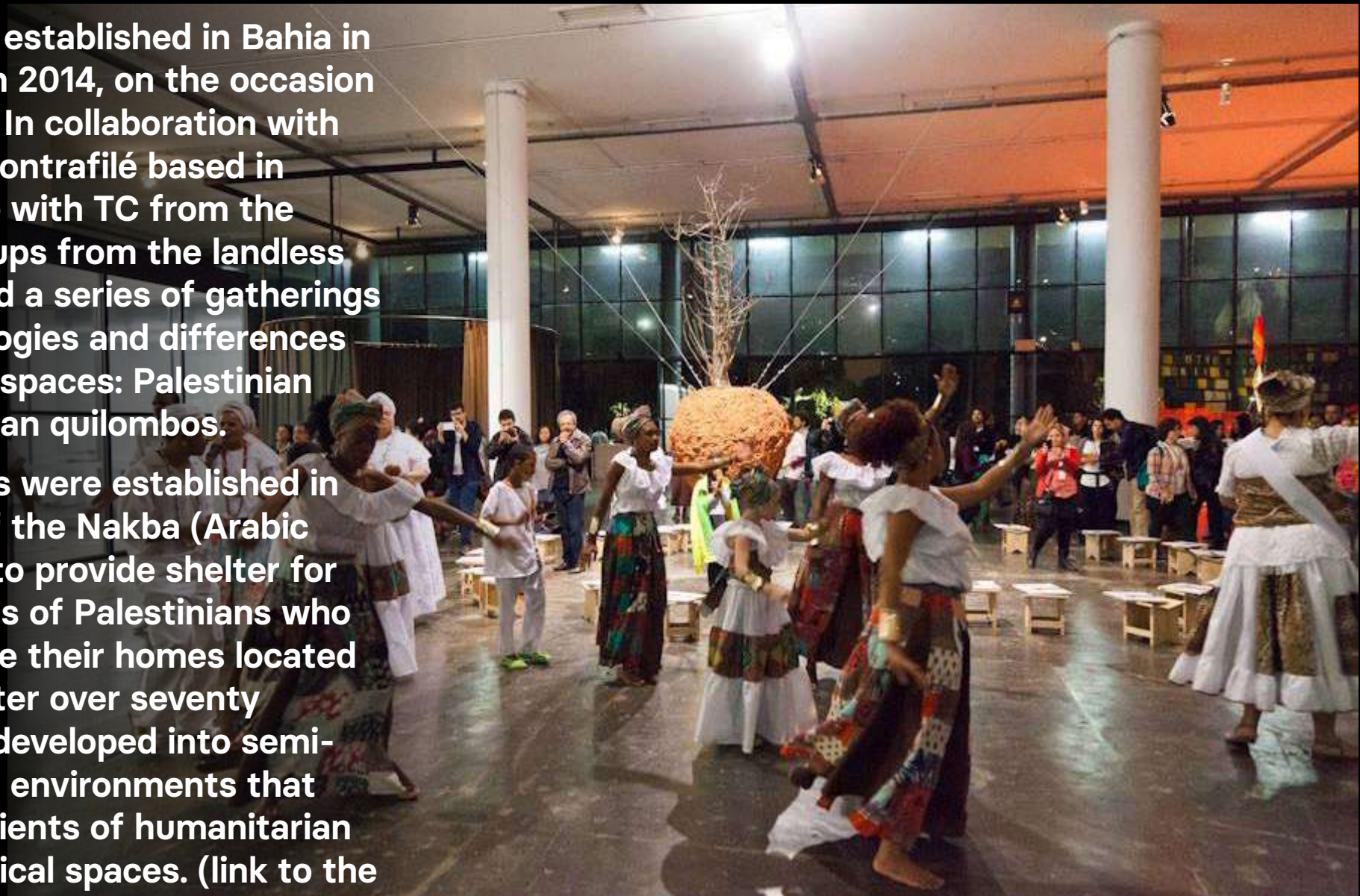
In 2012, we established an experimental educational program in Dheisheh Refugee Camp in Palestine engaging young participants in new forms of visual and cultural representation of refugee camps after more than seventy years of displacement. After three years of spatial interventions¹, and the creation of a common vocabulary², we felt the need to expand the conversation to people and sites that share similar urgencies.

1 – campusincamps.ps/skill/initiatives

2 – campusincamps.ps/skill/collective-dictionary

The first *Tree School* was established in Bahia in the south west of Brazil in 2014, on the occasion of the São Paulo Biennial. In collaboration with the art collective Grupo Contrafilé based in São Paulo, and in dialogue with TC from the quilombos along with groups from the landless movement, we established a series of gatherings that revolved around analogies and differences between two exceptional spaces: Palestinian refugee camps and Brazilian quilombos.

Palestinian refugee camps were established in 1948 as a consequence of the Nakba (Arabic for catastrophe) in order to provide shelter for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were exiled and had to flee their homes located in what today is Israel. After over seventy years, these camps have developed into semi-autonomous, dense urban environments that are no longer simply recipients of humanitarian aid, but rather active political spaces. (link to the refugee heritage) Quilombos were communities established by enslaved Africans and Afro-descendants who fled their oppressors as an active form of resistance.



Later, they became spaces of refuge for many other groups in Brazil. A shared interest in these spaces and communities provides a key for reflecting and understanding the relationships between communities, territories and politics beyond the idea of nation-state.



The Baobab tree was chosen for the Tree School in Bahia. It became a gathering space for quilombos communities, schools and visitors to the São Paulo Biennial.



An upside-down tree: the baobab creation.

At the dawn of life, the Creator made everything in the world. First he created a baobab and only then did he continue making everything else. Next to the baobab there was a pool of still water. Sometimes its surface was as flat as a mirror. The baobab stared at itself in that water mirror. It stared at itself and complained: "Well, maybe my hair could have more flowers, maybe I could have bigger leaves." So the baobab decided to complain to the Creator, who listened carefully. Whenever the baobab took a breath and interrupted its complaining, the Creator commented: "You are a beautiful tree. I love you, but let me go, for I must finish my work. You were the first being to be created and therefore you possess the best features among all creatures." Still the baobab begged him: "Please, make me better here, make me better there..."

But the Creator, who had to make people and all the other creatures of Africa, left him alone. So the baobab followed him everywhere he went, wandering to and fro (and this is why the tree exists all over Africa). The baobab looked at everything that had been created and continued begging for improvements: "Creator, make that tree over there a little better! Creator, that river is too dry, can't you put more water in it? Creator, is that mountain high enough?" Of all beings, the only one that was never satisfied was precisely the one the Creator thought was so wonderful, the one that didn't resemble any other, the first to be created! One day the Creator became very, very angry, for he didn't have time to do anything else. He was furious. So he turned to the baobab and said: "Stop bothering me! Stop complaining and stay quiet!" But the baobab didn't stay quiet.

So the Creator grabbed it, pulled it out of the ground and planted it again. But, this time, upside-down, with its head in the ground, so it would remain silent. This explains why today the baobab looks so strange, as if its roots were on its head... The baobab is just an upside-down tree! And still today it is said that its skyward pointing branches resemble arms that continue complaining and begging the Creator for improvements to the planet.

At the end of the exhibition, the Baobab tree was planted with a ceremony in the Tainã Cultural Center, part of the Mocambos Network.

“One of the largest quilombos in Brazil, Quilombo dos Palmares, dated back to 1630. It lasted almost a hundred years before it was destroyed. There were almost 30,000 people living there and it came to be known as the first democratic republic in the Americas. The quilombo is born out of the phenomenon of people becoming refugees and autonomously finding and choosing a place of their own. Nowadays in Brazil, there are at least three thousand communities remaining from the original quilombos. Most of them are located in rural areas. These are huge territories and there is the possibility of sustainable living because there is only collective land and no private property.”

TC Silva is a musician and one of the founders of Tainã Cultural Center, a political space for cultural and educational production.





In the winter of 2015, the *Tree School* travelled to Serralves Museum in Porto, hosting gatherings around art and participatory education with activists, educators, and cultural producers.





Tree School in Bahia

[[download the pdf](#)]



After the Tree School in Bahia, we asked ourselves if it were possible to bring the *tree school* with us wherever we went. On the summer of 2013, on the invitation of Academy of the Arts of the World, we organised a series of gatherings at the Hiroshima Nagasaki Public Park.

"What struck me most, sitting under the Tree School at Hiroshima-Nagasaki Park, was that many different things were happening simultaneously throughout the public park: people were chatting, playing music, playing football, reading, enjoying the sun. This gave the place its own specific tone, and a sense of belonging to all the different people. The Tree School attracted the curiosity of many and some even came to our circle to listen to our discussion. This welcoming atmosphere led me to consider the importance of public spaces and to further imagine how to cultivate these multiplicities of activities in our common spaces in the camp."

Isshaq Al-Barbary, Campus in Camps participant.



In January 2015, the tree school was invited to Tepostlán, Cuernavaca (Mexico) by Estudio SITAC and Alumnos47. Here, the tree school offered educators from different parts of Mexico the space to reflect on their pedagogical practices in a workshop inspired by the teachings of Ivan Illich, who established the CIDOC, an informal university in Cuernavaca that attracted a diverse group of intellectuals and seekers from around the world. The tree school lasted for a few days, during which a close group of participants were offered the space and time to critically reflect on their practice; to take a distance from their respective sites of intervention; and to reflect collectively upon the role of radical pedagogies in the transformation of society.



The tree school took a different form in the spring of 2015, when we had the rare occasion to design a school in a refugee camp in Jerusalem based on the tree school principles. Shu'fat camp has been enclosed by walls and fences built by the Israeli government since 2002, trapped in a legal void neither inside nor outside Jerusalem's borders. Is intervention at all possible in such a distorted and unstable political environment?

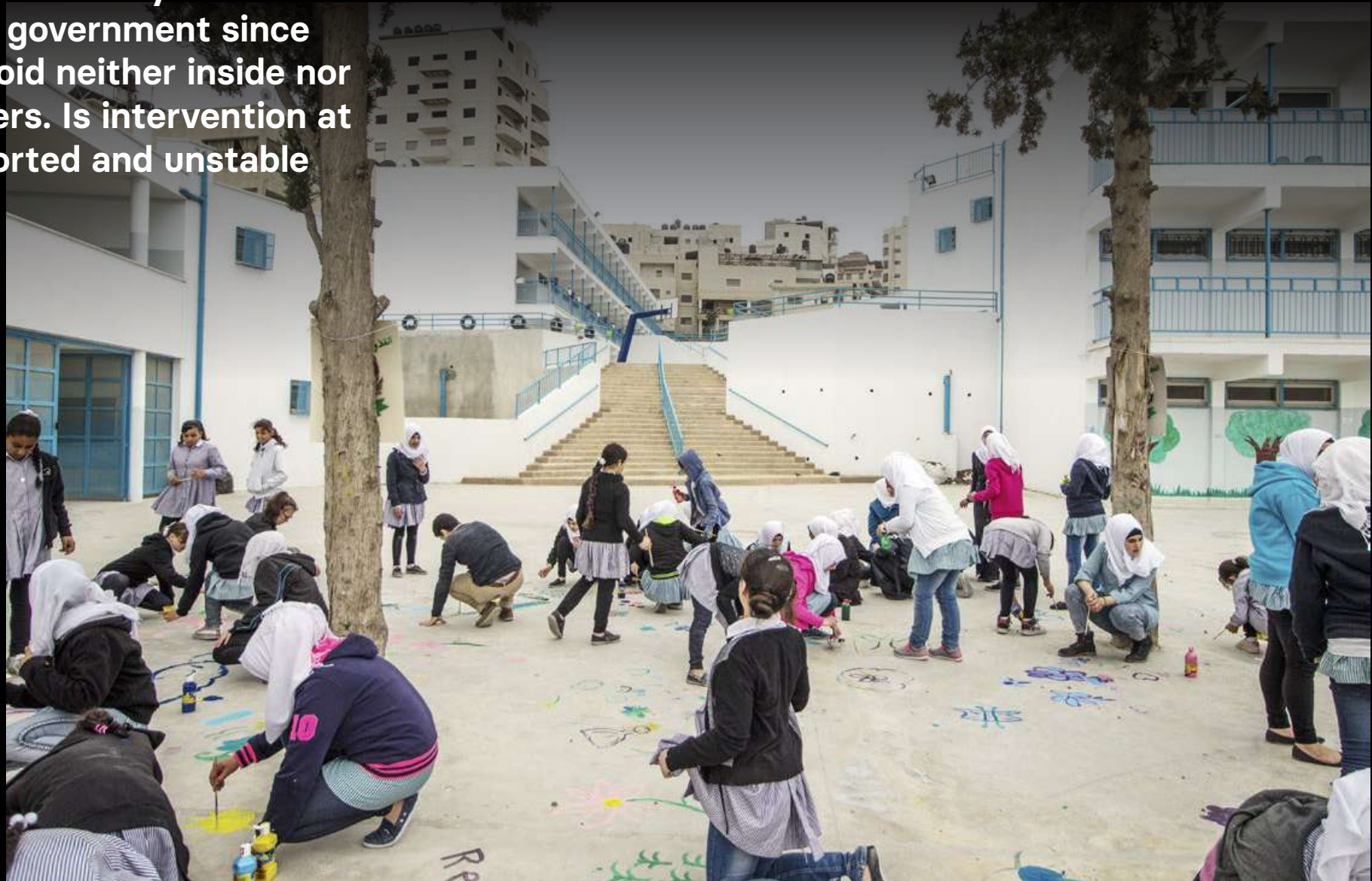
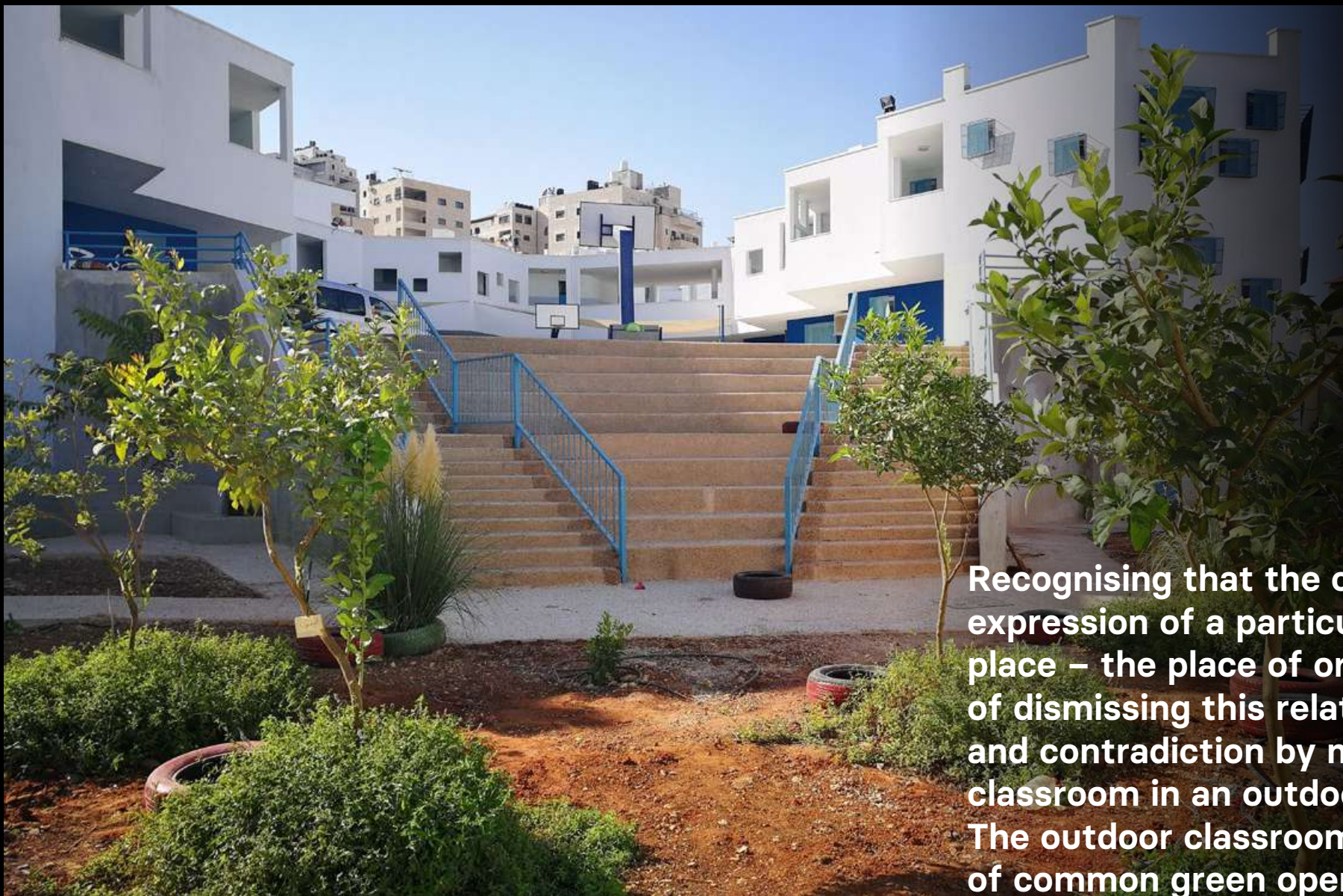




Photo: Luca Capuano, 2016



Recognising that the camp is a spatial expression of a particular relation to another place – the place of origin – the school, instead of dismissing this relation, inhabits this tension and contradiction by mirroring the indoor classroom in an outdoor green classroom. The outdoor classroom recalls a particular type of common green open space that existed in Palestine called Bayyaraat (from the Arabic for “wells”), resembling agricultural land constituted by plantations of citrus trees, gardens and a small number of buildings. The outdoor spaces of the school are transformed and reactivated into a space where students can cultivate different trees and reshape their learning environment.

School in Exile

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Notes on participation

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In the fall of 2019, we were invited to Hong Kong by Asia Art Archive, a nonprofit organisation with a library and a collection of archival materials about recent art in Asia. Over the course of two weeks, we met with artists, educators, community organisers, and students of different ages to speak about care, community, and the role of artists in shaping education outside of institutional settings.



We transformed the house in Shek O, a fishing island in Hong Kong Island, into an informal gathering space for groups and individuals to discuss the formation of learning environments. The roof top school offered the group a reminder of the establishment of these schools on the roof tops of Hong Kong at the time when people took refuge there. Unfortunately, due to the combined effect of government restrictions for the pandemic and the protests, we could not activate a series of tree school experiments in the city of Hong Kong in collaboration with teachers and students at the local schools, as we had planned to do.

In March 2021, within the framework of “Tree Story” an exhibition that brought together creative practices from around the world to create a ‘forest’ of ideas relating to critical environmental and sustainability issues, the tree school took the form of yarning circles, discussions and embodied conversations.

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic restrictions, we could not travel to Australia, and this limitation pushed us to think about how the tree school could be activated without our physical presence. In dialogue with the curators and together with artist and educator Moorina Bonini, we have involved faculties and students in a program of planned and unplanned activities. The tree school, in this case an informal educational space within a formal education structure, offered teaching staff and students the possibility to experiment with different forms of collective learning.

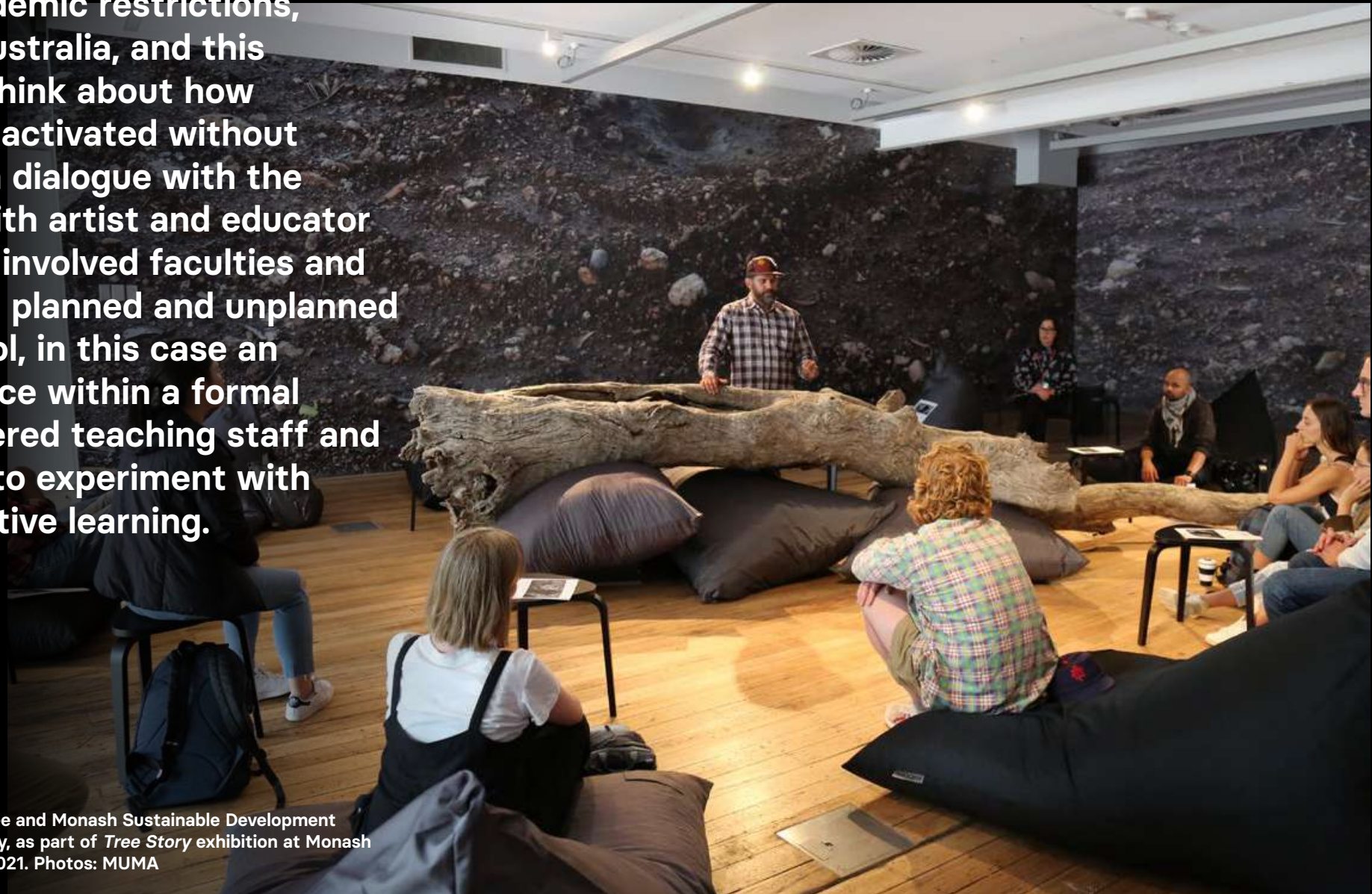
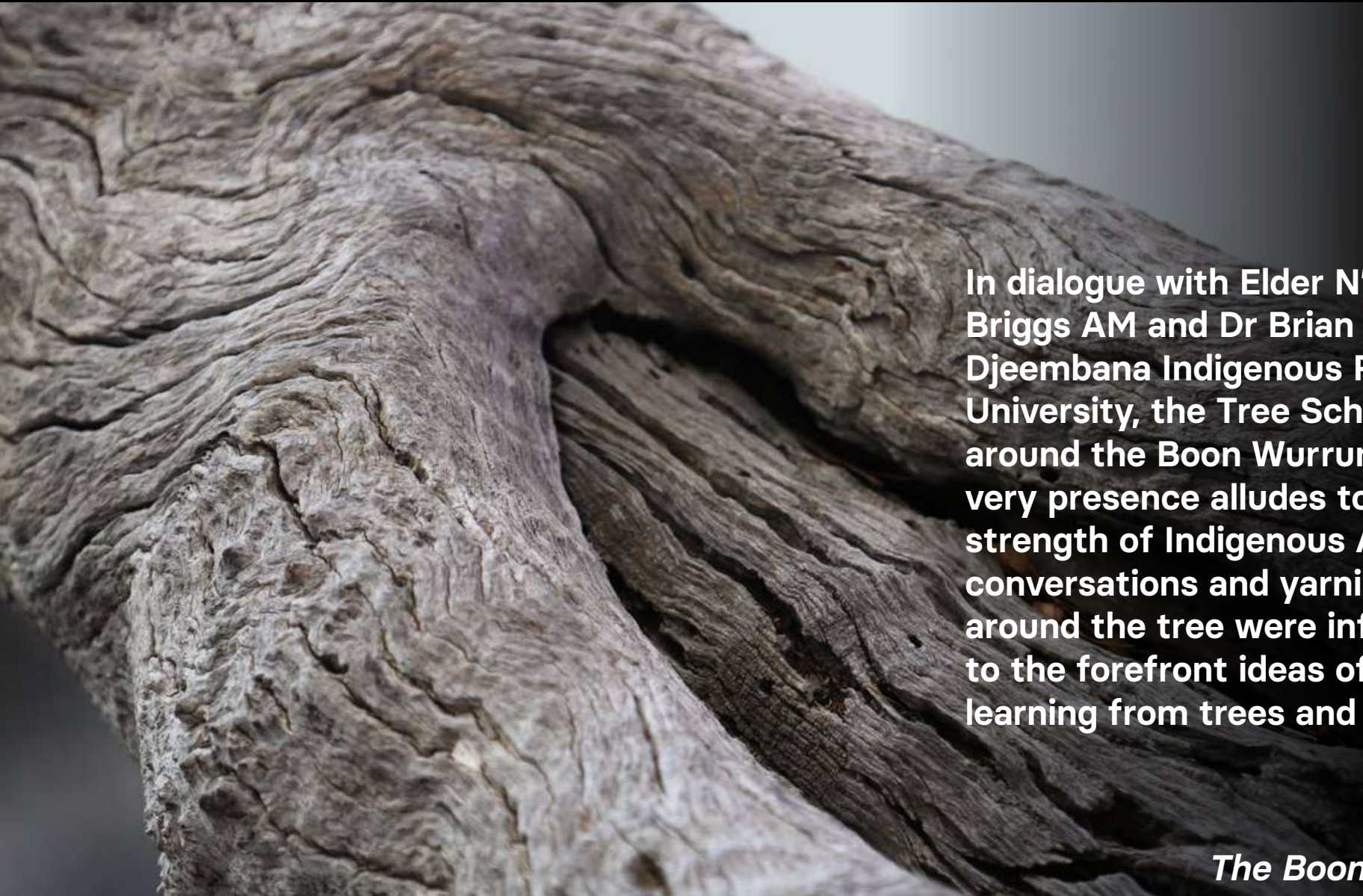


Image: David Tournier with the Boon Wurrung Tree and Monash Sustainable Development Institute students, *The Tree School*, MADA Gallery, as part of *Tree Story* exhibition at Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA), Melbourne, 2021. Photos: MUMA



In dialogue with Elder N'arweet Dr Carolyn Briggs AM and Dr Brian Martin of the Wominjeka Djeembana Indigenous Research Lab at Monash University, the Tree School was established around the Boon Wurrung Tree, which with its very presence alludes to the foundation and strength of Indigenous Australian culture. The conversations and yarning circles that took place around the tree were informed by it, bringing to the forefront ideas of caring for the Country, learning from trees and important narratives.

The Boon Wurrung Tree

[watch the video]







Between July 12 and 16, 2021, by invitation of the WHW akademija, we created a temporary tree school with students and invited guests in the forest of Sljeme close to Zagreb.

After more than a year of isolation due to the government Covid 19 restrictions, the tree school marked a renewed possibility for collective gathering. Students had the opportunity to share their work in informal conversations amongst themselves and with invited guests. The forest inspired the sharing of stories linked to political resistance and ancestral legends. Moreover, due to the nature of the WHW akademija, the group reflected on how independent and informal learning environments could influence formal educational institutions.

In all these different experiences of tree schools, we have been asked many times to extract a methodology. Fearing that the tree school will transform itself into an educational model to be repeated everywhere in the same way, and in order to preserve its informal, joyful, communal and spontaneous spirit, we prefer instead of extracting a methodology to share what we call the ingredients of the tree school. Ingredients comes from a Latin word meaning “entering into” (ingredi, from in- ‘into’ + gradi ‘walk’) a component part of any combination, recipe, or mixture. Therefore, tree school ingredients acquire different meanings, tastes and intensity according to how the participants put them in relation to each other, and how they “enter into” a relation to a specific location.

Rituals

Instead of prepacked planning activities, the tree school is organised around rituals that create a safe place for sharing emotions, feelings and spirituality. The unpredictability and un-planning requires setting group rituals so participants can join the unplanned collective thinking and connect to each other.

Unpredictability

The tree School is a temporary space based on trusting the knowledge of each participant that leads to unpredictable and unknown conversations. Being unpredictable does not mean being disorganised or careless; it is a way of learning to be open to the unknown, doubts and being exposed and honest.

Dislocation
The act of dislocation is fundamental in the tree school; it can alter who is the local and who is the outsider, who is the guest, and who is the host. Dislocating is an act which enables the tree schools participants to quickly build common foundations for learning from each other that are not located in one place but have different locations that interact with each other.

Unlearning

There is no preset curriculum or program or readings. What is at stake in the tree school is the possibility of unlearning and relearning. What constitutes knowledge? How do we unlearn modernist and colonial conceptions? How regain the right to learn from experiences and not only from books?

Ritrovo
In Italian, Ritrovo means getting together with the joy of being together as friends. By gathering under the tree, participants share individual memories which form the foundation of the tree school as a joyful space for learning.

Conversations

In the tree school we understand the conversation as the primary source of knowledge production and interaction. Conversations are ways to formulate thoughts and elaborate them collectively.

Cooking

Cooking and eating together is one of the most immediate exchanges of knowledge. Sometimes we might find it challenging to be open to other cultures, but we open up immediately for each other's different ways of cooking and eating; they constitute the base for the tree school.

Al-Atabeh

Al-Atabeh in Arabic is the space that connects the entrance of the house with its immediate surroundings. It is that space where a person feels that they belong to both the house and the outside, the unknown. It also means the space of transformation and the moving from one place to another. The tree school aims to create that space of both safely belonging and navigating the unknown. The tree school offers the space to safely be critical towards our own knowledge in connection with others who feel the need to do the same. Seeking knowledge at the Al-Atabeh and being critical does not mean that we are leaving behind the house and our local knowledge, yet we do not want to be confined within the walls of our own knowledge. Being at the Al-Atabeh in a safe place is being able to transform one's life experiences and be critical without leaving home behind.