



LUCA CAPUANO

In practice DAAR

From Palestine to Sicily, the redefinition and re-orientation of heritage towards alternative purposes is an act of decolonisation, write *Sandi Hilal* and *Alessandro Petti*

In our experience, decolonisation has essentially been understood and practised as a double movement. On one side, it is a critical approach to the status quo and an antidote to normalisation; on the other, a movement towards the creation of meaningful and emancipatory forms of life. Concrete meanings have also developed in the context of Palestine, where decolonisation means, above all, liberation against the Israeli regime of occupation, colonisation and apartheid. We established DAAR – which stands for Decolonising Architecture Art Residency – with Eyal Weizman in 2007, a year after moving to Palestine.

DAAR is an architectural and artistic collective practice that aims to imagine the reuse of colonial structures for different purposes than they were originally designed for. We turned our own home – *dar* also means ‘house’ in Arabic – into an active learning environment, sharing our doubts instead of what we were sure about. By investigating emerging social and political practices in West Bank refugee camps, we challenge the idea of refugees as passive subjects; we aim to invert the conceptualisation that sees refugees’ everyday practices as, at best, a reaction or resistance to a sovereign power.

In 2009, we directed a team of architects to design and build a plaza in the Al-Fawwar refugee camp, a few kilometres from Hebron. Camps are political spaces and their built environment is a symbol of political struggle. Neither public nor private property exists here, and any urban element that resembles those of a city threatens the temporality of the camp, jeopardising the refugees’ right of return. As Elias Khoury wrote in his novel *Bab al-Shams*, or *Gate of the Sun*, ‘Now you see houses, but early on the camp consisted of a group of tents. Then after we had built huts, they allowed us to put roofs over them. It was said that if we put actual roofs on our houses we’d forget Palestine, so we just put up zinc sheets.’ Considered among the founders of Al-Fawwar refugee camp, Abu Rabiha and Abu Rami had witnessed the tents being replaced with masonry homes. Would a plaza be another concession – another way of accepting the permanency of the camp? Could it instead initiate a new strategy of capitalising on their strengths as refugees, rather than their weakness as victims?

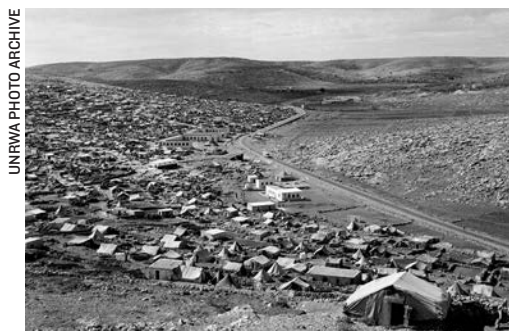
Discussions with the community led to a space enclosed by four walls. No locked doors or guards, but passers-by should feel that entering the plaza is like entering someone’s house – entailing respect and responsibility – rather than a space that does not belong to anyone. In a way, it was another ‘home without a roof’. Children would run around with their balls without disturbing neighbours, and it became a place to celebrate weddings and funerals. Later, as female members of the community – led by the young Ayat – organised to be active political subjects, it also became a place for women to meet for coffee or tea, hold cooking sessions, morning exercises and collective breakfasts. As a key protagonist in Ayat’s struggle to define resistance to the camp, the plaza was a place from within the community to begin to imagine their own future.

We would like this to be a story about how the plaza improved life and Ayat transformed women’s rights in Al-Fawwar, but the truth is, both the plaza and Ayat’s revolution are fragile experiments. The strong presence of the space within the camp is what makes it vulnerable: it challenges the very meaning of the camp. ‘I feel a lot of similarities between the plaza and me,’ said Ayat. ‘Both of us are roofless; my thoughts have no limits, but they remain within what is accepted by the walls of religion and society.’ The project for this ‘public square’ revealed that the process of decolonisation begins with negotiations, discussions and, inevitably, contradictions within the community. The struggle for liberation often keeps people under colonialism from dealing with important basic rights. Human rights are subsumed by one gargantuan struggle: the end of occupation.

As a paradigmatic representation of political failure, refugee camps are meant to have no history and no future; they are meant to be demolished and forgotten. Their history is constantly being erased, dismissed by states, humanitarian and international organisations, and even by refugee communities in fear that any acknowledgement of the present undermines a future right of return. The only recognised history is one of violence, suffering and humiliation. Our project *Refugee Heritage* emerged from the desire to see the culture that is built in exile recognised and celebrated, in spite of its subjection to injustice. Documenting, revealing and representing refugee history beyond the narrative of suffering and displacement helps imagine and practise ‘refugeeness’ beyond humanitarianism.

Other than the application for the Dheisheh refugee camp to be recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site – we did not expect to receive approval – the aim of *Refugee Heritage* was to start a needed discussion about the ‘permanent temporariness’ of refugee camps. Referring to the valued objects, traditions or practices that are passed down over generations, heritage has been adopted and

UNRWA PHOTO ARCHIVE



BRAVE NEW WELPS AT CAMPS IN CAMPS 2012



In the early 1950s, the Palestinian refugee camp of Dheisheh was constituted of tents (top); over the years it has become dense, solid and urban (above). In 2009, DAAR worked on a plaza in the Al-Fawwar refugee camp (opposite), and questions emerged about the political reality of refugee camps. As an embodiment of the paradox of ‘permanent temporariness’, DAAR’s Concrete Tent is a space for collective mourning and solidarity with Palestine. Originally built in 2015 in Dheisheh, it is seen here at the 2023 Sharjah Architecture Triennial (below)

DANKO STJEPANOVIC/
SHARJAH ARCHITECTURE TRIENNIAL



Alessandro Petti is from the south of Italy while Sandi Hilal and their two daughters are Palestinian. They now live in Stockholm but Palestine, and Dheisheh in particular, remain their 'centre of gravity', fundamental to the ways in which they understand the world and a place that they 'go back to when possible'. At the intersection of politics, pedagogy, architecture and art, DAAR's practice includes publications such as *Architecture after Revolution*, co-authored with Eyal Weizman in 2013 (below), and *Refugee Heritage* from 2021 (bottom)

defended by nation-states, and legitimised and globalised via international organisations such as UNESCO. This framework roots heritage firmly in a European, nationalist and materialist set of values that are in turn presented as universal. Recognising the heritage of a culture of exile suggests social, spatial and political structures can be imagined and experienced beyond the idea of the nation-state, towards non-hegemonic forms of life and collective memory. The camp, as an exceptional space, is also a site for political practices yet to come.

After more than a decade in Palestine, we moved back to Europe and started thinking about what decolonisation means here. Despite the fall of formal fascism and the end of both colonialism and modernity as they are historically perceived, these ideologies persist in shaping our understanding of urban space, approach to heritage and interactions with others. This is particularly evident in Italy. Entering a post office, it is common to be faced with one of Mussolini's racist speeches, or have a map of the former Italian empire hanging above your head. The normalisation of this toxic environment is underpinned by historical factors, primarily linked to Italy's 'loss' of its colonies during the Second World War, the lack of a thorough process of decolonisation and the regrettably interrupted course of defascistisation.

These inquiries prompted us to work on a site with a particular history: Borgo Rizza, one of the new rural centres developed in the 1940s in Sicily. Following the model of the Entity of Colonisation of Libya and the colonial architecture in Eritrea and Ethiopia, the fascist regime established the Ente di Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano (ECLS, Entity of Colonisation of Sicilian Latifundia) - what Antonio Gramsci called internal colonisation. Using different forms of violence, oppression and social engineering, fascism had identified an abstract, uniform and homogeneous geographical space deemed 'underdeveloped' and 'empty'. Sicily had become, in the eyes of fascism, the last front of modernisation.

It feels urgent to ask: who has the right to reappropriate, even subvert, fascist colonial architectures? Today, Italian cities are inhabited by migrant populations that come from the same places that were colonised - and suffered from it. We believe these populations and their descendants should have a say in how these buildings are reused, while descendants of former colonisers should stop normalising the relics of colonialism and fascism, and start questioning how this 'heritage' is still part of both their urban and rural environments as well as their imaginations, fears and prejudice. To date, the lack of a critical review process has meant that the cultural and political apparatus of colonialism and fascism has survived: among these, institutional racism, the widespread feeling of the presumed superiority of European civilisation and consequent dehumanisation of populations from the (post)colonial world.

Borgo Rizza's municipality was willing to be challenged and to think critically about its heritage; our project seeks to transform the 'entity of colonisation' into 'an entity of decolonisation'. Discussions could then be extended to other locations, allowing Borgo Rizza's lingering fascist ghost to meet other ghosts. Fascism constructed a facade that delineates who is deemed Italian and who is not; this facade still exists and we are interested in using art to create cracks in its solidified discourse. We perceive the realm of art as one of the few arenas still conducive to civil disobedience. Beyond their site specificity, our attempts at cracking the facades have demonstrated how insights in one context can be transposed to others, sparking diverse dialogues that collectively enhance the critical historical reading at the intersection of aesthetics and politics.

With the 'return' of fascism on a global scale and the increasing arrival of migrants from the former colonised world, the need to reopen the processes of decolonisation and defascistisation is more urgent than ever. We borrow from the philosopher Giorgio Agamben the concept of profanation; profanation does not simply mean abolishing, but learning to make new uses. If to sacralise is to separate - to bring common things into a sacred, separate sphere - then its opposite is to profane, to restore the common use of these things. To profane is to make fun of the dividing lines, to use them in a particular way. Decolonising architecture is therefore for us an act of profanation, which does not only mean displacing power, but using its destructive potential to reverse its functioning and subvert its uses. Secularisation leaves power structures intact; it simply moves from one sphere to another. Profanation, on the other hand, manages to deactivate power and return to common use the space that power had confiscated.

Architecture is not limited to the mere creation of buildings, it is a form of understanding and intervening in the world, always in relation to its social, economic and political context. Architecture is, as Giancarlo De Carlo used to say, 'too important to leave to architects'.



LUCA CAPUANO



ALESSANDRO PETTI

'It feels urgent to ask: who has the right to reappropriate fascist colonial architectures?'

In the 1940s, under the fascist regime, modernist architecture was employed to colonise Italy's southern regions, as seen in Borgo Rizza, Sicily (above). Informed by discussions with the municipality, local community and a summer school on-site (above right), DAAR's ongoing research project *Ente di Decolonizzazione Borgo Rizza* critically explores the reuse and subversion of fascist colonial architecture. One of the village's facades has been deconstructed and turned into modules that are both an art installation and a site for conversation. It has been presented at several venues, including the Venice Biennale's Arsenale in 2023 (right), where it was awarded the Golden Lion for Best Participation



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