



Campus in Camps: The Politics of Imagining a Public Sphere

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The refugee camp is a lived space that functions in a state of exception. As the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has pointed out, this status is both extraterritorial and extra-judicial.¹ But the camp is by definition provisional, created to respond to a disaster. It is meant to provide temporary shelter, food and other basic services to a group of people that have been displaced by a radical rupture in the fabric of everyday life. In recent memory, we can recall refugees from natural and military disasters in places such as the Congo, Syria or Sudan.

But refugee camps are also a space of administration, at the nexus between the motivations of both state actors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These ideological vectors become more pronounced over time, which is why the case of Palestinian refugee camps, established following the wars of 1948 and 1967 and still existing today, is so complex. This essay will look at Palestinian refugee camps through the lens of *Campus in Camps*, a unique organization that acts as university, art project and think tank for creative urbanism.

Campus in Camps was established in 2012 as a two-year project by the architectural team of Sandi Hillal and Alessandro Petti. It brings together young people from five camps in the West Bank: Fawaar, Arroub, Dheisheh, Aida, and Beit Jibrin to discuss and produce new forms of visual and cultural representations of refugee camps. It includes lectures and seminars given

by both local and international scholars and practitioners. *Campus In Camps* draws from a wide coalition of support including UNWRA (United Nations Works Relief Agency), Al Quds University, the German government and others.

The Catastrophic Context of a Prolonged History

The backdrop for this project is the bizarre situation of Palestinian refugee camps. They were originally established in 1948, following the Arab-Israeli war and are administered by the United Nations Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNWRA). They began as tents, and over time developed into shacks, and eventually became cities as the Israeli occupation of the West Bank was prolonged indefinitely and the resolution of the right of return for Palestinian refugees was perpetually put off. They have evolved to accommodate the needs of an increasing population but, as I will explain below, the right of return and the fear of normalization have prevented these informal urban entities from functioning in a developmental way that suggests progress and permanence.

Nakba is a term in Arabic that means catastrophe. It is commonly used to refer to the events in 1948 including the Arab-Israeli war, the establishment of the state of Israel and the expulsion of Palestinian refugees.² At the start of 1948, Arabs were the majority of the population of Palestine between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River – 1.4 out of 2 million people. At that time Arabs owned 90% of the land but after the war, by

October 1948, more than half the country's Arabs – 750,000 people – were expelled or forced to flee. After that, 150,000 remained and Israel controlled 78% of the former British mandate of Palestine. Those that remained quickly became a persecuted minority within a Jewish state whose population exploded because of immigration. The rest became refugees in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt and elsewhere.³

The stories that result inevitably include a few themes. There is the frantic hustle to pack up a suitcase of clothes and a few essential items. Then the family locks the door and takes the key with them. People often point to this key as the symbol and proof of the last moment that they lived in their homes and homelands. As the poet Mahmud Darwish put it, "He felt for his key the way he would feel for his limbs and was reassured."⁴

Some other themes that are included in these stories include details of the lost architecture or landscaping. Often, an orange tree, a fig tree or a cyprus is invoked. Sandy Tolan's book *The Lemon Tree*,⁵ about one such family's exile from their home in Al-Ramla, takes its name from this symbol. The fruit tree represents a cyclical and sustainable way of living in and with the land. It represents a family's long-term commitment to a place. Planting and tending to a tree that each year provides the fruit of this labor reveals an interrelatedness with the land. The key provides access to not only a house, but also to this relationship.

Stories of the *nakba* are typified by a deeply poetic nostalgia for the past and a frustrating sense

of the impossibility of immediate return. These include that of Rema Hammami, an anthropologist and second generation Palestinian refugee who found her grandfather's house in Jaffa turned into a school for Jewish special needs children: "When I saw the arches, I had a sudden shock of recognition based on a family photograph taken in front of this veranda."⁶ Or more famously, when Edward Said returned to his family's home in Jerusalem in 1992 for the first time in forty-five years: "I remembered the house quite clearly: two stories, a terraced entrance, a balcony at the front...[but] I could not bring myself to go inside...it was as if there were a part my past which was really over and associated with the fall of Palestine which I couldn't reinvestigate."⁷ Or Raja Shehadeh, the writer and lawyer whose family lost their Jaffa home and as a result, lost their relationship to Jaffa, the pearl or "diamond studded lantern rising from the sea."⁸

But in the early years following 1948, the term *nakba* was not used so widely since these events were seen as a moment of weakness and humiliation. There was still a belief that these events were temporary and that the Palestinians that were now in refugee camps in Lebanon or Jordan would soon return to their homes. In the 1950s and 60s more euphemistic terms were often used such as *al-ahdath* (the events) or *al-hijra* (the Exodous) or *lamma sharna wa tla-na* (when we blackened our faces and left).⁹

Even in the 1970s in Lebanon, with a vibrant sense of Palestinian nationalism evoked by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the main message was one of optimism, revolution and renewal. It was not until the 1990s when

Yassir Arafat was negotiating peace treaties that the notion of remembering 1948 was evoked in order to caution against letting go of the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

Thus the *nakba* not only refers to the events of 1948 but in particular it refers to Palestinian refugees, most importantly, those that live in the camps set up by The UNRWA. This focus on the *nakba* moves past nostalgia for houses or fruit trees, using keys to symbolize their loss. This use of the *nakba* is about millions of refugees, symbolized by the camps, and their right of return. This is why the present reality of the camps, and their utilitarian function as social spaces, is constantly oriented outside of the present and pivots toward both the tragedy of their founding and the promised possibility of their abandonment once the right of return is fulfilled.¹⁰ This sense of the *nakba* turns the

camps into towns or cities in waiting, constantly resisting the taboo of normalizing the occupation.

The Camp: Present Reality and Imagined Future

Campus in Camps seeks to find a third space between the binary options of treating the camps in ways that either normalize the occupation on the one hand or embrace the victimhood of the refugees on the other. This third space allows for the camps to be sites that give the refugee agency to determine the nature of the space in which they live. Most importantly, *Campus in Camps* seeks to produce a space of the common.¹¹

One of the projects that *Campus in Camps* has embarked on is the creation of a Collective Dictionary,¹² written collaboratively by students and faculty, which includes terms that help to flesh out the meaning of a phrase like *the common*. For



Communal learning in *Campus in Camps*, where knowledge emerges from a collective effort centered on the drives of the participants rather than preconceived educational model. Photo: BraveNewAlps (*Campus in Camps*) 2012

instance the Arabic word *Al Jameah*, translates to university but has a literal meaning of public space. So *Campus in Camps* is setting up an informal university that also creates a public space of and through discourse. Similarly, the word *Mujaawara* could mean either neighboring or forming and being a part of a community. This subtle play between the idle and the active senses of social spatiality allows for an examination of the present reality that exists within the camps as a means to leverage its more positive aspects. According to Allesandro Petti “The participants claim that the Collective Dictionary is their constantly amended

“constitution”; it is their theoretical and practical reference, the guide for their actions within the camps.”¹³ Other terms in this dictionary include: vision, participation, responsibility, citizenship, relation, knowledge, ownership and sustainability.

The theoretical groundwork for this project involves lectures and seminars by global and local scholars. One visiting scholar, Michel Agier, is a French anthropologist that has studied refugee camps around the world, especially in Africa. He has proposed that the administration of refugee camps is often reminiscent of totalitarianism,



From the project, *The Pathways: Reframing Narration*, contributors: Aysar Alsaify, Murad Odah. Photograph by Tamara Aby Laban

keeping the undesirables out of sight and in a state of permanent emergency.¹⁴ This echoes Petti’s historicization of the camp through the work of Michel Foucault which looks at the camp as a modern invention in the 19th and 20th centuries whose goal was to control populations by governing disorder and preventing chaos. This form of Cartesian humanitarianism was often practiced as a part of a larger colonial project, thus Petti cites examples of French camps in Algeria, German camps in Namibia or Belgian camps in the Congo.¹⁵ It also is an example of a comparative model used in *Campus in Camps* exemplified by a summer course offered by Linda Quiquix, *Autonomy in Global Perspective: The Zapatistas and the Other Campaign*.

But these theoretical and historical examinations go hand in hand with practice-based investigations of urbanism. These initiatives include: the garden, the square, the bridge, the pool, the pathways, the stadium and others. For instance, in the Garden, *Campus in Camps* focused on the Al Feniq center in the Dheisheh refugee camp. The center opened a garden in 2004. According to a pamphlet about this project published on their website, “This *Campus in Camps* initiative aims, in this sense, to deliver a new program of activities supported by design elements, to redefine the dynamics between the garden and the refugee camp as well as inside the garden itself, in order to bring it back to the common.”¹⁶

While the garden initiative is predicated on practice, it is also rooted in research for the historical context in which this building is planned. Like many of the projects conducted as a part of *Campus in Camps*, this research is

documented on their website and through free downloadable booklets.¹⁷ The Al Feniq center is built on Anton Mountain, not far from Bethlehem. Until 1967, Jordan used the mountain as a military base, after the 1967 war when Israel occupied the West Bank, it became an Israeli military base and in 1994, following the Oslo accords, The Palestinian Authority used it as a police station. In 1997, the Dheisheh Popular Committee petitioned the Palestinian authority to use this land to construct housing in order to relieve the overcrowding at the camp. This wish was granted eventually in addition to the mandate of setting up a cultural center. In 2002, during the Second Intifada, the Israeli Military destroyed the center and once again established it as a base. In 2005 it was rebuilt once again as a cultural center and through 2011, a garden, coffee shop, fitness center and library were organized to construct a sense of civic space but the garden remained the least utilized. *Campus in Camps* set out to redesign the garden to maximize its use as a public space. They identified five issues: visibility and accessibility, spaces for different activities, shading, interaction, and safekeeping. In addition to redesigning physical spaces like the benches or walls surrounding the garden, they also redesigned the social spaces of the garden by programming lectures and seminars on literature and public art and establishing an outdoor cinema.

This garden project speaks to the larger project of the refugee camp as a laboratory for citizenship. For Agamben, the camp is exemplary of the modern experience¹⁸ and the refugee provides a model of statelessness that might help us out of the problems of nationalism. Agamben, following

Hannah Arendt, posits that there is a problematic relationship between the “Rights of Man” and the nation state whose laws protect those rights.¹⁹ The refugee, a stateless individual, exists within a state of exception from both nationhood and, as a result, its juridical protection of rights. The refugee reveals the rupture, the aporia that exists within the supposed universal protections of human rights in a system predicated on nationalism. A community such as the refugee camp has the potential to offer another model for citizenship outside of nationalism. A stateless public, constituted by the Palestinian refugee camp has the potential to create a common sense of agency that offers potential rewards for Palestinian civic life but also for the very notion of public space in general. *Campus in Camps* sets itself up as a forum of both theory and practice to develop concepts of the common for Palestinian refugees but it also serves as a model for us all.

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005)

² See Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: the Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), Walid Khalidi ed., *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992), Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and Ilan Pappé, *The ethnic cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006)

³ Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), p1

⁴ Mahmud Darwish, “The Eternity of Cactus” in *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone* (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2006), p28

⁵ Sandy Tolan, *The Lemon Tree: An Arab, A Jew and the Heart of the Middle East* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006)

⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod & Ahmad H. Sa’adi “Introduction: The Claims of Memory” in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948 and the Claims of Memory* ed. Ahmad H. Sa’adi and

Lila Abu Lughod, p1

⁷ as quoted in Susan Slyomovics, *The Object of Memory; Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p15

⁸ Raja Shehadeh, *Strangers in the House* (London: Profile Books, 2009) p3

⁹ Diana K. Allan “The Politics of Witness: Remembering and Forgetting 1948 in Shatilla Camp” in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948 and the Claims of Memory* ed. Ahmad H. Sa’adi and Lila Abu Lughod, p253-254

¹⁰ Decolonizing Architecture, a project by Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti and Eyal Weizman have written about a temporal pivot when addressing the nakba, from future to present tense: “Return is a political act that is both practiced at present and projected as an image into an uncertain future. But return cannot be understood only as the suspended politics of an ideological projection, but also as a varied form of politics constantly practiced, grounding a future ideal in present day material realities. This represents a varied set of practices that we would like to call “present returns”. <http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/site3-returns/>

¹¹ ‘The common’ is a term related to a wide array of theory that Campus In Camps engages in, including writings by Massimo De Angelis, Stavros Stavrides, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt among others.

¹² This notion of a set of terms or phrases providing a kind of political lexicon has echoes in both Raymond William’s *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* Rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) and the legendary Whole Earth Catalog.

¹³ <http://www.campusincamps.ps/en/about/>

¹⁴ Michel Agier, *Managing the undesirables: refugee camps and humanitarian government* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011)

¹⁵ <http://www.campusincamps.ps/en/architecture-exile/>

¹⁶ <http://www.campusincamps.ps/en/projects/01-the-garden/>

¹⁷ <http://www.campusincamps.ps/en>

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, “The Camp as the Nomos of the Modern” in Vries, Hent de., and Samuel Weber. *Violence, identity, and self-determination*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997. 106-118.

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, “We Refugees” Symposium, 49:2 (Summer 1995) p114