**The spatial practices in the Palestinian refugee camps**

“The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule”—Walter Benjamin1968.

**1.1. Introduction**

The Palestinian refugee camps, as they stand today, are the result of long and ongoing spatial processes. The refugees have been constructing houses and businesses to accommodate their needs. With the fourth generation of refugees born in exile, the spaces of the camps have become fully utilized as a living space. The camps have become overcrowded highly built urbanized spaces.

Despite all the constructions, the camps retain the 1950s grid plan with intersecting ever-narrowing streets and alleys leading to the main plaza with the mosque. From the principle streets, smaller alleys (like corridors) transect the refugee camp, dividing it into smaller blocks. Neighborhoods are named after the villages or towns of origin. In other occasions, the neighborhoods are named A, B, C, and so on. The UNRWA offices and services are set at the edge of the camp. As a result of the camps’ expansions, these have become part of the camps, eliminating the boundaries between center and periphery, between the administered and the administrator. As a result of the intensive construction activities, on the same plot of land, little structures of the early camps survived the processes of urbanization.

Because they were built in proximity to the Palestinian villages and towns, and because of the urbanization pressure on ‘area A,’ where Palestinians can build following the Oslo Accords, the refugee camps have become an integral part of the built up landscape of the near-by villages and towns. This is true for the Palestinian refugee camps in the five fields of UNRWA operations. In Jordan, residential areas surround the refugee camps. The Government of Jordan invested large amounts of funds to provide camps with infrastructure.[[1]](#footnote-1) Therefore, the camps have developed into quarters resembling the neighborhoods around them. In the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Syria, and Lebanon, it is no longer easy to distinguish the geographical boundaries between the camps and non-camps spaces, unless the camp was set at fair distance for surrounding villages or towns such as al Far’a, al Arroub and al Fawwar in the West Bank.

Reading into the history of the Palestinian camps and into the stories of the refugees, I have realized that Palestinian refugee camps constitute a human and politically ‘troubling’ phenomenon. Refuges have evolved into habitat, and temporary shelters have unmistakably developed into permanent living spaces. The *urbanization* of the refugee camps did not come about abruptly; rather, it was developed in lingering processes of making and unmaking of the camp. I use the terms making and unmaking of the camp because the process of ‘making’ (establishing, constructing, developing and urbanizing) involves the ‘unmaking’ of the camp as humanitarian temporary space as well as the ‘unmaking’ of refugees as humanitarian subjects. I also use the term ‘urbanization’ to refer to forced relocation of huge rural population into highly congested areas. This I suggest resembles the global urbanization processes of moving population, albeit voluntarily into cities. Urbanization in an essence is a process that is very much linked to modernism and industrialization and has been accelerated with globalization. If Najwa Makhoul (1981) argued that the Palestinian labor went through *skilling* without urbanization, I argue that the Palestinian refugees (mostly peasants) were forcefully urbanized without passing through ‘the rite of passage’ to urbanization. They neither followed the process of the urbanization of capital nor the urbanization of consciousness (Harvey 1985).

**1.2. Theoretical framework: *space ‘recollected’***

***1.2.1. Fada* and *Makan:*** I will be using space and place commensurably though I am aware of the unsettled differences. For me there is no such abstract space that we need to rework into a place. The ‘space’ could be as intimate as the familiar ‘places.’[[2]](#footnote-2) In Arabic, there is a stark difference between *fada* (space) and *makan* (place). While *fada* refers to the astral infinite emptiness, *makan* refers to the empowerment (*makkana, tamkin*) and to the existential verb ‘to be’ (*yakoun*). The purposeless speech is referred to as *fadhi* or *ala al fadhi* (for nothing). If someone takes a position in a purposeful discourse, or takes a stance regarding an issue, it means that he gained his *makana* (status). When I use space and place commensurably in this dissertation I refer to the Arabic *makan,* the powerful, the status and the existential verb ‘to be.’

***1.2.2. Time and space:*** As early as the 18th century, Immanuel Kant asserted that, “All outer appearances are in space, and are determined *a priori* in conformity with the relations of space… [And] that all appearances whatsoever, that is, all objects of the senses, are in time, and necessarily stand in time-relations” (Kant 1963[1787]:77). Yi-Fu Tuan not only calls for an experiential perspective to space but argues that we creatively do many things efficiently but unthinkingly out of habit” (Tuan 2008[1977]:68-9). The second half of thetwentieth century witnessed a return to space as a unit of analysis and as a tool for understanding memory, sociality and human behavior. Edward Hall argues that people not only structure spaces differently but experience them differently (Hall 1966). Frances A. Yates writes, “If we wish to remember much material we must equip ourselves with a large number of places” (Yates 1966:7). Bourdieu points to the power inherent in the spatio-temporal embodiment of practices that these “temporal forms or the spatial structures structure not only the group’s representation of the world but the group itself” (Bourdieu 1977[1972]:163). A similar conclusion was made by Doreen Massey who argues that it is only by looking onto both space and time that we can avoid abstractions and representation of space and human relations (Massey 2006:27, 80).

In this article I show that spatial practices on the grounds of the camps are complex wholes that cannot be captured within the existing theoretical frameworks on space. It has become conventional to engage with space on the terms of the growing body of literature described as “the spatial turn” (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). Henri Lefebvre (1974) work has been so far the most celebrated conceptual and theoretical framework that helps understanding space, not only as perceived and conceived (the abstract and the relative), but also as lived and experienced (the social relational). His takes on the appropriation of both one’s body and one’s space as necessary elements for any possible social change (1974:267-9), makes it particularly helpful in my endeavor to understand refugees making and unmaking of the space as the eventual making and unmaking the refugee himself, the individual body. Michael De Certeau (1984) has been ‘the charming presence’ with a ‘frameless’ frame that loosely travels beyond spatial categories. He argues that only by tracing the ordinary man’s everyday creative practices could we reveal the human subjectivities of roaming, making, and altering space. For him moving in space resembles the uttering of the language that contributes to the making of identities. This is particularly important because I explore architecture and spaces as meaningful structures (the *etic*)[[3]](#footnote-3) that need to be deciphered into their rudimentary elements (the *emic*). An invested Marxist and ‘cheerful’ militant like David Harvey (1989), openly points to the political economy anecdote of the urban experience and urbanization, and maps the relations of production and reproduction embedded in the capitalist understanding and appropriation of the space. This insight is helpful in situating the space of the camp in the larger economic context/sphere.

Notwithstanding these rich contributions and discussions of space, along with other endeavors that add to the complexity some more layers, such as time, scale, affect, symbolism, governance and surveillance (Massey 2005; Brenner 1999; Tuan 2008[1977]; Casey 1997; Bourdieu 1977[1972]; Foucault 1977; Rabinow 1989) to capture a more holistic view of *‘what is really going on,’* in the Palestinian camp, it problematizes any single theoretical framework that tries to map the reality on-the-ground. This stems from the fact that not only is the camp space lived, experienced, creatively (re)ordered or incorporated within the market economy, but is also invested with memory and symbolism that refuse, or at very best beyond, mapping.

*In my endeavor to unravel some of this messiness, I engage with a broad body of literature that moves beyond space as envisioned by singular frameworks to a collective cybernetic approach that problematizes spatial categories and brings up notions of memory, poetics, politics, symbolism, territoriality and (de)colonization to the fore.*

Freud’s psychoanalysis framework is an interesting approach to navigate beyond the material world. It is broadly indebted to the archeology of human memory that reveals an intrinsic relation between one’s past and present. The reading, or understanding, of the refugees’ oral histories—the autobiographies—would reveal hidden diagrams of resistance and identification, and may lend us new insights to the spatial material world.

Furthermore, the body of literature that speaks of memory as an art—acquired through the embodiment of space and the organization of memories into fictitious rooms, palaces and places resembling the things to be remembered (Yates 1964)—is particularly interesting for my work. I want to uncover the origins (the archaeology) of these highly urbanized spaces by reversing “the art of memory” process in which the spaces of the camp serve as the fictitious rooms, palaces and places that hold the pieces of the puzzle (or the play) for the actors (the refugees generations) to embody and iterate.

The architecture, as the locus of memory and social (gendered) relations (Bahloul 1996), is an essential component of this constellation. It is through the material symbolism of architecture itself (Lefebvre 1974; Harvey 1989), and the way it serves as a “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1977), that one might read into the representations of the space of the camp. Maps and plans constitute in my constellation both the material world as well as the metaphoric representational of (gendered) relations and the reworking/negotiating of the territory/space in the post-colonial discourse (Pandolfo 1997).

In my spatial descriptions, I will shed light upon the practices that are simultaneously the work of the individuals and the collective, the work of formal and informal groups, as well as the work of the conscious and the unconscious. In my opinion all these are equally important in the development of the temporary humanitarian space into a highly built urbanized space. My claim is that the camp space is simultaneously imaginary (symbolic) and real (material), oscillating between two discrete, yet interconnected, temporal and spatial worlds. Further, I claim that the organization of camps into neighborhoods following the villages of origin and kinship structures seem to be deeply related to the formation of the Palestinian identity via memory and spatial practices rather than a hegemonic top-down national identity. In this way the camps are places where the distinctly national identity is forged.

**1.3. The evolution of the camp into a highly urbanized space**

Throughout my research and fieldwork, I have come to distinguish three main construction booms in the refugee camps:[[4]](#footnote-4) the late 1970s, the post Oslo Accords (1993), and the emerging of the neo-liberal agendas in post Arafat era (2004). These construction booms are manifested in the interaction between planned structures and formats of the UNRWA (and host countries) and the lived practices of refugees. They show the interplay between the institutional structures (grammar) and refugees’ spatial practices (the parole) to yield what appears to be a highly structures ‘language,’ known as *the camp*. I use the *parole/langue* to think about the refugees’ spatial practices. This metaphor allows us to see the refugees’ subjectivity within the subject position-alities they embody in the camp/Diaspora. I see the refugees’ spatial practices as modes of expression that says a lot about longing for freedom, resistance, consumption, and ownership, to name but a few. Moreover, these booms of construction exist in time and space. The issue of temporality appears through the growth of refugees’ population and the development of the camps into highly urbanized spaces.

***1.3.1. Food rations and spatial governance:*** By the late 1970s, the UNRWA abolished food rations program, limiting it to the needy families known as the Special Hardship Case (SHC). The SHC is one of those programs that the UNRWA introduced in 1978 in the five fields of operation. Upon its implementation, the SHC program increased the amount of assistance to the needy families among the refugee population. In 1982, the UNRWA abolished the mass distribution of food rations. The SHC remained the only program that provides food rations for the needy refugees. This is why one still sees large blue trucks, with UN emblems and flags, filled with wheat flour sacks and other supplies at certain days of the month in refugee camps.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Before the UNRWA’s abolishing of the food rations, the rations had been used as a technology to govern camps’ spaces and refugees’ bodies. The refugees who wanted to keep clean records with the UNRWA and hence sustain their rations and other services, they had to comply with the UNRWA’s ‘order of things,’ including the licensing of any construction activity. When food distribution program was limited only to the SHC, the majority of the refugees were no longer recipients and were not governed by the same technologies. This does not only show the asymmetry of power but also shows how humanitarian technologies worked upon bare lives to produce humanitarian subjects. As a result of the abolishing of the rations, the refugees, ironically, had become ‘free’ and started an intensive wave of construction. This of course would not have happened without the economic ease as a result of joining the Israeli labor force or the receiving of the monetary transfers from close relatives working abroad. Add to this the diminished hopes for return and the rapid growing population, which eventually doubled between 1967 War and 1989 (from 3,071 to 5,900).

***1.3.2. Oslo Accords (1993) and socio-spatial mobility:*** following Oslo Accords, most of the refugee camps fall into the PNA administration. The establishing of quasi-autonomous Palestinian authority was coupled with two important factors that affected the camps’ spaces: *the first* was the emergence of the PNA as the main recruiting bureaucratic body for the unemployed Intifada rebellious youth. *The second* is the substantial withdrawal of the UNRWA’s humanitarian programs, and their shift towards Microfinance and Microenterprises Programs (MMPs), strangely enough, in 1993. Out of 81 refugees I interviewed in my fieldwork (2010-2011), 31 worked as government, UN, NGO or private sector employees. 39 refugees have had their own businesses, or have been making a living through daily wages. The rest (11 refugees) were unemployed, students or housewives.

Though the employment within the government within my informants was as low as 5%, we know that the PNA employs over 150,000 bureaucrats, civil servants, police, and security personnel, who provide living for over one million heads (almost 25% of the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank).[[6]](#footnote-6) The importance of the salary-based jobs for the general economy was tested when ‘life’ almost went paralyzed when Israel seized to transfer the taxes collected on behalf the PNA (according to Oslo Accords, and the subsequent 1994 Paris Protocol on Economic Relations), after Hamas takeover in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections.

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| ***Q29. What work do you do for living?*** | Frequency | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| Daily wage worker | 21 | 25.9 | 25.9 |
| Private sector employee | 18 | 22.2 | 48.1 |
| Government job | 5 | 6.2 | 54.3 |
| UN employed | 6 | 7.4 | 61.7 |
| Private business | 18 | 22.2 | 84.0 |
| Student | 2 | 2.5 | 86.4 |
| NGO employee | 8 | 9.9 | 96.3 |
| Housewife | 3 | 3.7 | 100.0 |
| Total | 81 | 100.0 |  |

These new political and economic conditions, accompanied with refugees’ sentiments of abandonment, gave birth to new dynamics that accelerated the construction and the reworking of the camps into urbanized spaces. IQ-A (former political prisoner, handicapped and founder of Ras Abu Ammar Association) and MA-A (a UN employee and founder of youth center) are active community organizers of the Ayda refugee camp in Bethlehem. IQ-A and MA-J engage in commemoration, community education, and political mobilization for the right to return. They see the PNA establishment disappointing for the refugees on two levels. *The first* was political: “the PNA continuously fails to bring into the center of the peace negotiations the refugees issue and the right to return.” *The second* was social: “refugees were left alone to tackle their everyday life and to cope with their hardship.” This drives them to “take matters into their hands and try to inflect social change by means of education, mobilization and sometimes by spatial practices. The construction of the world’s biggest key memorial at the entrance of the camp, or the negotiation of the water shortage with the new luxurious Intercontinental Hotel that walls the camp from the eastern side are among these discourses that non-refugees are spared.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

One should be clear about the fact that the establishing of the PNA has positively contributed to the emerging of new trends like these described above. The Oslo Accord had its implications on the ground: *First*, the withdrawal of the Israeli army from most of the Palestinian towns, villages, and camps following the Oslo Accords. Second, Direct confrontation with Israeli forces is no longer possible (or limited at the very best) as a result of the former implication. *Third*, the establishing of the PNA created a new environment in which the refugees were at ease to practice and venture into new modes of resistance. The new takes, whither it is education, mobilization, or commemoration, would not have been possible if the camps were under Israeli control. This political ‘relaxation,’ in the early Oslo era, was also manifested materially in the arrangement of public spaces and the investment in the infrastructure of the camps (street pavement, water, sewage, and electricity networks), as well as the construction of youth clubs, community centers, associations, mosques, martyrs’ memorials and the development of camps’ entrances.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The employment within the large state bureaucratic web in particular allowed sustainable income for many refugees who used this financial capital in either constructing new homes or upgrading the homes they owned. As Ramallah and the surrounding villages had been going through massive construction boom in the first years of Oslo agreement, unprecedented boom of construction was taking place in the camp starting with the building of the new mosque, the new youth club, and the Popular Committee premises. Early years of Oslo Accord were emblematic on ‘the body’ of the camp. One notes the dismantling of fences around the camps, the replacement of the sewer open systems with underground piping network, the refurbishment of camps’ entrances, and the construction of huge mosques with elaborate minarets. By the end of the 1990s, al Jalazone has become a highly built urbanized space.

***1.3.3. Post-Arafat, Post-structuralism:*** The post-Arafat era (2004 and on) is characterized by the West Bank/Gaza Strip political split (in 2007), emphasizing the de-facto geographical fragmentation the Palestinians had to endure since 1948 War. While Hamas (the Islamic group) took hold of the Gaza Strip, the secular Fateh took hold of the West Bank. Because the Gaza Strip had not been accessible for my investigation because its the closure imposed by the Israelis, I will not be able to describe firsthand ‘*what is really going on*’ economically, socially or politically. Hence, I will limit myself to the West Bank which is equally complicated but accessible.

The post-Arafat era West Bank is characterized by the structural adjustment (known broadly as the reforms of PM Fayyad) coupled with the rapid opening of the West Bank into market economy. Raja Khalidi recently termed the current PNA as “States of Liberalization and Stages of Liberation,” to note the inherent contradictions of structural adjustments under occupation.[[9]](#footnote-9) The era has been manifested in the activation of the stock market, the growth of mortgages and real estate business, and the ease on imports (mainly from China). The easing of formal and informal banking (micro-lending included) credit and mortgage programs allowed large segments of the Palestinian population to be relatively free from the ‘kinship capital’ obligations and limitations. The decrease of interest rates and the lessening of the prerequisites and commitments of clients to the credit programs led to a significant increase in the demand of credit products. The new demand contributed to a sharp increase in real estate prices, referred to by local art and spatial discourses as “*Ramallah Syndrome*” (2009).[[10]](#footnote-10) While these new dynamics helped many of the ever-diminishing middle class Palestinians to experience the modern (or contemporary) life, working class and low-wage workers would not afford such luxury.

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| *Figure 1.1. Ramallah’s real estate development (echoing Jewish settlements), as by 2010. © 2012 Khaldun Bshara* |

In al Jalazone refugee camp, for example, fewer numbers of refugees could buy land in the neighboring villages and towns of Jifna, Dura, and Birzeit, let alone Ramallah. The refugees, who purchased land before the death of Arafat, managed either to construct the dream home or invested their property into the flourishing real estate market.

During my fieldwork, I encountered refugees who reinvested their capital in real estate in the camp (some with regret) while others fled the camp. For example, FL-J constructed his five-story building to “accommodate his offspring and future business expansion” (January 2011). Alfadhi, a painter who mainly made his money working in the Israeli labor market, purchased the apartment he currently lives in as well as the two apartments below him. Now, he “leases out the two apartments and lives like a king…the money [he invested several years ago] won’t purchase a half dunam in Jifna, let alone the cost of construction” (Summer 2010). ITH-J, guiding me around his three-story building, believed that if he had invested his money in real estate outside the camp when it was possible, he would have built a palace by now” (December 2011). AJY-J, after he closed his blacksmith workshop, told me “his two sons [living and working in Ramallah] are currently considering the leveling down everything and investing in an apartment building for rent in its place” (Summer 2010). AJY-J disclosed to me with an ironic tone that he got upset, because his two sons not only left the camp to live in the town but also “didn’t want to build homes on a piece of land he bought more than ten years ago because it overlooks the camp” (Summer 2009). It is worth noting that the current price of the piece of land is several hundreds of thousands of dollars, ten times its initial cost ten years ago. AJY-J’s sons condense the madness of the post-Arafat era in which space and time have become the conditions of wealth. While ‘space’ has become the consequential material resource to achieve monetary wealth, the restraining capacity from immediate profits relies on ‘time’ as another resource. It is not spatio-temporality but it is space and time in the abstract *marketization*.

***Hope:*** *When the present is ludicrous, cruel and vain. When one cannot wrap his head around ‘what is really going on.’ Future got to be better.*

**1.4. The Palestinian refugee camps: *the thesis and the antithesis of the camp***

The refugee camp is usually described as a humanitarian temporary space. It is humanitarian in the sense that it reduces suffering and increases the possibility of survival. It is temporary in the sense that it is neither conceived nor designed as a space in which people would inhabit indefinitely. True for most refugee camps I know of, but not true when I try to describe the Palestinian refugee camps. These camps have been present for over six decades, and they are still expanding, *albeit* vertically in the absence of horizontal possibilities—space. The refugees are in their seventh decade of exile and the camps are continuously built and rebuilt; temporary does not reflect what is taking place on the ground. When these camps have been turned into urban spaces replete with production rather than consumption of relief goods, humanitarian would not be the quality that describes the spaces.

When I first lived in al Jalazone refugee camp for a three-month explorative fieldwork (July-September 2009), I thought I would be staying in a place that is very different from where I have been living since 1990—the towns of Birzeit and Ramallah. The issue that kept roaming over my head before I started looking for an apartment is whether I, my wife, and our nine-year old daughter, would be able to live in a place, which the university students named ‘Venice.’ This is to note the open sewer canals running through its streets and alleys. Actually, the open sewer system was one of the distinctive features that differentiated a camp from a regular Palestinian village or town.[[11]](#footnote-11) I also recall that these canals were not always small and shallow similar to those of al Jalazone. For example, al Far‘a refugee camp main canal was more than one meter-wide and two-meter deep. Al Far‘a refugees made use of concrete, wooden, or metal bridges to reach their shelters.

***Everyday life:*** *No romance, no beauty; it was everyday life.*

As an architect and anthropologist, I imagined what a camp is. My ideas are informed by literature, media, or by my life and experiences, being myself a Palestinian who lived nearby or interacted with refugee camps. These knowledge resources were never in agreement; the camp in literature is different from the one in media; the one in media is different from my lived experiences. The camp is *Auschwitz*, the par-excellence space that exempts people from their *bios* and civility. The camp makes people anonymous, replicable, and expendable. The camp reduces humans to their flesh—*zoë*. The camp is the paradigm of the modern state, is the exception, is slummy, is the place where suffering people gather, is (sometimes) a resistance hub, is a temporary shelter usually constructed hastily using tents, and is (but not always) a humanitarian space.

When I mentioned to my peers in Palestine or in the United States that I am conducting my fieldwork with refugees in camps, I had different reactions. Palestinian peers, refugees and non-refugees alike and who had never been in a refugee camp, nodded with surprise and murmured, “*Bravo*” or “*majnoun* (crazy).” My UCI friends dramatized, “Poor [me] with no running water nor electricity…how is it like to be living in a camp?” True, when we lived in the camp we kept water in more than twenty two-liter empty plastic bottles for emergencies. Also, we kept some candles handy because short-circuits did happen, and neighborhoods went off for long hours. But this was not the rule; rather, it was the exception. Though the camp is portrayed as the space of exception, in al Jalazone we lived the rule. In this, I would agree with Giorgio Agamben (1998),[[12]](#footnote-12) and long before him Walter Benjamin (1968)[[13]](#footnote-13) that the camp is the paradigm of the modern; the camp no longer represents the state of emergency.

***The antithesis of the camp:*** *the Palestinian camp is a space where politics and life are palpable, and so do the relations of production and reproduction. This led me to believe that the Palestinian refugee camp is the par-excellence antithesis of the camp.*

According to these insights, the camp would establish the boundary between *Bios* (people with political life) and *Zoë* (the bare life). Based on my fieldwork in al Jalazone refugee camp and other refugee camps, I found, and I will argue, that the Palestinian refugee camp challenges some (if not all) of the assumptions about camps. What I found is that the vulnerable shelters have turned into highly populated, densely built environments. I found that rather than being solely places for temporary humanitarian relief programs, Palestinian camps have become very busy places full of production and reproduction. And rather than being places of expendable bare lives (*Zoë)*, the camps emerge as highly politicized structures, with populations with an *“inalienable”* co-constituted individual and collective biographies (*Bios).*

Refugees, who “represent such a disquieting elements of the modern nation-state,” also represent the true “man of rights” as it is “the first and only real appearance of rights outside the fiction of the citizen that always covers them all…this is what makes the figure of the refugee so hard to define politically” (Agamben 1998:131).

The *Bios*/*Zoë* couple reminded me, throughout my fieldwork, of what it feels like to be a refugee, or how it feels like to be a subject under the same conditions the refugees had endured. Of course, as I have just said above, the Palestinian refugee camps have become the antithesis of the camp in a long process of making and unmaking of the camps themselves.

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| *Figure 1.2. Early Jalazone refugee camp (mid 1950s). Jalazone 3* ***©*** *UNRWA Archive, Amman.* |

However, this ‘eventual becoming’ should not mask the early years of exile, which segregated people into *Bios* and *Zoë* categories—citizens with rights and non-citizens with none. The refugees’ lives were reified and have become commensurable with their ‘living conditions’ exempting them from ‘normal’ citizenry compared to the Jewish newcomers, the citizens of the host countries, or the non-refugee Palestinians. The Nakba and early 1950s’ images of barefoot refugees on the road to exile, of the wretched elderly and children, of early shelters, and of food distribution or schooling, reduced the displaced Palestinians to their bodies and made them humanitarian subjects in the landscape of a merciless conflict. Early images of al Jalazone refugee camp, obtained from the UNRWA archive in Amman, show al Jalazone refugee camp indifferent in this regard (see Figure 1.2).

**1.5. Getting there, living in al Jalazone refugee camp**

From the first days of the Summer 2009 in the camp, I could see that my knowledge about the camp and about the refugees was partial, though I also claim I know better than an average educated non-refugee Palestinian. In no time, with the help of those I have known being an architect, or those I have come to know through a network of friends, I was able to explore different apartments. The first was at the edge of the camp, a five-minute walk to the main plaza. “Too far,” I noted. The second was one-floor house with a wall inscribing a small garden. This was closer to the center and perfect for a family. I could not get hold of the owner because he moved out from the camp. His nephew, a work colleague of a friend of mine who drove me around in a quest for an apartment, assured us that “he will get the house for us.” He called awhile after we left to tell us, “The owners are interested in selling the property, not leasing.” He was sorry; I was not, because the house was on a secondary alley. The following day, AQ-J, a former colleague of my driving-body, and a playing-card body of KAH-J,[[14]](#footnote-14) told my driving-friend that his brother MQ-J[[15]](#footnote-15) knew about a vacant apartment right at the center of the camp, one-minute walk from the plaza. “Khaldun will like it,” AQ-J asserted.

True, I did. The apartment was very close to the plaza, where I would spend a quite good portion of my time, hanging out with informants over coffee and tea. I did not negotiate the rent price with the owner because it was far cheaper from any equivalent rent in Ramallah. My new friends were upset because I accepted the owner’s terms without bargaining; two rooms, opening into an L-shape corridor that leads to a bathroom and a small kitchen (see Figure 1.3. House 5). No doubt, it is a multi-purpose kind of an apartment; one could use it as a one-bedroom apartment with the other room as a living. This is the way the newly married couple in the first floor beneath us used their apartment. Instead, we could throw a mattress for our daughter in the living room, to turn the space into a two-bedroom apartment from which the living space is either floating or missing.

This multi-purpose space, a space that can become something or another, have become my way to inhabit, to re-think, and to “appropriate space freely.”[[16]](#footnote-16) We threw an inflatable mattress in the living room. We brought some of our furniture that we kept with friends in Ramallah; a one full-size mattress, transportable fashion-store-like hangers, the TV, the two dark-blue 1960s armed chairs, a small beech-wood dining table with four matching chairs, the refrigerator, an electrical cooker, a microwave, along with simple cookware.

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| *Figure 1.3. House 5, AH-J apartment, al Jalazone. © 2012 Khaldun Bshara* |

**1.6. Totems and tattoos: *refugees* *in between two worlds***

I thought only wooden boards and iron rods get miraculously turned into doors and windows in camps’ workshops. It was unpredictably miraculous to get everything done in the camp; an electrician to fix the satellite, a plumber to install a boiler in the bathroom, aluminum-maker to fix the mosquito mesh, a painter to lime-wash the walls, and somebody to clean the apartment before we moved in, all in twenty-four hours. I thought, “Why the hell it takes us forever to carry out such little things five kilometer away from here, in Ramallah, and at a double price!” By then, I started to understand what it does mean to have both the production and the consumption at the same place, at the same time. It is so efficient, so convenient, and so ‘*not*-*capitalist’* in a way.[[17]](#footnote-17) When everything and everybody is in the range of no more than a ten-minute walk, there is no need to subjugate space to gain time; there is no need for ports or carriers, no need for landlines or highways. *Space prevails and becomes the relativizing instrument that orders things and bodies in time.*

One of the most interesting concepts of Marx’s critique of political economy is the ‘*commodity fetishism*’ (Marx 1990:163), when relations of production and reproduction are masked by the regime of cash, or the like, value. The commodity fetishism is further amplified through the separating sales and purchasing in space and time (Harvey 1989:18). Nobody knows the carpenter who shaped the wood into the dark-blue 1960s armed chairs, nobody knows the plumber who would pick the phone and would drop by to fix the boiler, or who is going to put on the lime-wash on the walls of one’s apartment. All are anonymous bodies in the life of an anonymous market. This description fits very well the life of Ramallah in the time I followed my anthropology study—specifically 2007-2011. *Alo* (hello) gas, *alo* chicken, *alo* electrician, *alo* wedding*, alo* events, *alo* grocery, *alo* maintenance and *alo* *Argileh* (hubble-bubble), have become the symptoms of the *delivered* contemporary life, coupled with unquestioned belief in the individual, ‘the human *jinni*.’ Social relations and interactions are masked, and new life rhythms (for example the Thursday night parties) and new relations (such as the FC Barcelona fans) emerge.[[18]](#footnote-18) The prices and costs of living in urban centers such as Ramallah skyrocketed, exceeding those of Southern California’s rich counties during my study.

I repeated the process of searching for an apartment for my extended fieldwork (2010-2011). The camp, seemingly, grew attractive. It took me until December 2010 to retake the apartment I lived in during my explorative fieldwork in 2009. The process of searching for an apartment, however, gave me access to more houses and spaces that would be otherwise hidden or inaccessible. I also roughly sketched these houses on a draft book to remember their spatial organization.

Compared to 2009, I could sense an increase in the number of newer and bigger cars roving the narrow streets and alleys of al Jalazone refugee camp during my extended fieldwork (July 2010-December 2011). Coffee or tea in cafés was served at the price of around 40 cents (1.5 NIS), which is 50% higher than Summer 2009 (one NIS). However, the life in the camp has its own rhythm and speed. Of course, because the camp is very small, everybody intimately knows everybody. The refugees also believed in the ‘human *jinni’* that also got a name, a lineage, a nickname and a space of origin that differentiate *him* from other refugees. I ask somebody, he asks others, somebody will show up, and a new interaction would emerge from which friendship, social expressions, and experiences are not missing in the ‘world of deliverables.’ The people, who showed up to fix the place where I stayed, were not anonymous. HMD-J al Yafawi (from Jaffa) was the painter, al Nabali (from Bayt Nabala) was the name of the hardware store of the camp where we picked the materials and equipment, and Said al ‘Hadetheh (from ‘Hadetheh) was the Dr. satellite who recently refurbished his small shop façade overlooking the camp’s plaza with the flashy sign “Said al ‘Hadetheh for Electronics.”

Little by little, I have come to see the ‘spatial-*izing* of bodies’ as both an active anchoring of ‘bare lives’ in a spatial-time relations, and as a differentiation machine in the current space (the camp) when the space/time itself, being highly condensed and ‘somehow’ homogeneous (in terms of materials and living conditions), is incapable of differentiating.[[19]](#footnote-19) Yafawi, Nabali and al’Hadetheh are time/story/biography relations in the absence of the spaces of origin themselves. These space-associative names, which I will refer to as *Toponomy[[20]](#footnote-20) of bodies,* are tokens that function and signify beyond their spaces of origin. This is not peculiar to the refugees, but it is in the Diaspora that it gets amplified.[[21]](#footnote-21)

*‘Toponomy of bodies’* would seem a trivial detail in the crowded space of the camp. However, from what I observed, it gains different meanings in and beyond the camp creating subjects. MH-JE al Yasini is a refugee in his mid twenties and lives in Jericho. MH-JE makes my little over six-foot high petite compared to his seven, which approved helpful for him as a goalkeeper and as a bartender. He accompanied me to interview his grandmother who witnessed firsthand the massacre of Deir Yasin (1948). MH-JE is not content with the relation between refugees and non-refugees that is *spatially* expressed: “…we are still treated as *ghurbiyyeh* (strangers), they [the Jericho residents] call us Yasiniyyeh [from Deir Yasin].”[[22]](#footnote-22) MH-JE appears to be neither satisfied with being a ‘stranger’ nor a ‘refugee,’ though he and his grandmother are remarkably “proud Yasiniyyeh,” which implies both. MH-JE made me think that the trauma of the forced alienation of the refugees from their original habitats “fuels the desire to maintain a memory of what was lost” (Davis 2011:23) and at the same time creates the despised dichotomy refugee/non-refugee beyond the borders of the camp.

I say beyond the camp, because hailing, addressing, calling or yelling at somebody with the name of his village of origin, as a nickname (such as Nabali, Liddawi, Sotari, Innabi, Yafawi, Dawaemeh, and so on), does neither imply discrimination nor profiling (calling the subject into existence by the act of uttering to use the Althusser’s theorization on interpolation).[[23]](#footnote-23) Rather, it has become part of the embodied *‘parole’* of everyday life that slowly found its way to official documents (identity cards and passports for example) or associations, businesses’ names and shop signs.

Interestingly, these names function as a differentiation machine because they express qualities and attributes of a person by extension to his once-was the qualities and attributes of peers of the village of origin. This happens even if one was born like the rest of the refugees far away from the village of origin, and has been living under the same conditions of the others! For example, one may hear the phrases “a stubborn Dawaemeh Bedouin; uneasy Liddawi businessman; a charming Hadetheh; pick a wife from Lydda, but never allow your sister to marry a Liddawi,” and so on. In a way, the names of the villages of origin (spaces), conveying attributes and qualities of their descendants, were embodied like tattooed totems that get sharper with the passage of time.

In summer 2009, I noticed a very vibrant construction activity in the camp. From my kitchen window, I could see at least six buildings with pillars on top of older structures, waiting for other floors to emerge. I started to take notes about spaces being built around me. Most importantly was the building across the street. This would certainly block my picturesque early morning view of the camp.

***Aesthetics:*** *When the sunlight hits the camp’s clustered concrete surfaces, the yellow dilutes the slight material and texture differences, and highlights the clustering quality of the camp. In a sense, early mornings mark the camp into one continuous organic structure.*

I was not worried about my kitchen window view because the builders have just put the framework for the ground floor slab. I was pretty sure that it would take them at least three months to block my window. By then, I would be long gone to my school in Irvine with different time zone and views. From my window, I observed the building growing. AS-J, grey-bearded in his mid-sixties, was the contractor and the skilled builder who distributed the work among five other workers and monitored the process. The owner, FL-J, the shopkeeper of a medium-size ‘supermarket’ on the other side of the one-meter alley leading to ‘our courtyard,’ watched his building rising. His teenage sons carried materials over to the builders and occasionally fetched tea and coffee for the workers. In two months, AS-J and his workers blocked what otherwise was a brilliant sculpture, made by the sun.

It takes more than engineering capabilities, construction management, and financial coordinated resources to be able to implement such a project. Normally, Portland cement concrete requires four weeks to cure and to acquire most of its strength, in order to be able to bear the loads of the floors above. AS-J was not waiting this long. He *shored up* the fragile concrete while constructing the upper floor to come. In doing so, he managed to overcome the fundamentals of physics to conquer space and time.[[24]](#footnote-24) Because I thought that this is a complex engineering, I asked the owner from my window, “Who is your engineer?” FL-J nodded towards AS-J, “*lim‘alim* (the skilled), he is everything, the engineer, the contractor, and the builder.” AS-J, calm and smiling, added, “I have been doing this for generations. I worked with engineers. I know how to construct and carry out more complicated projects than this.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

What is more surprising is not the innovative engineering and AS-J’s acceleration of time, but the question was: “Why FL-J was constructing this five-storey apartment building in the camp?”

FL-J, born after the Nakba, is a self-made refugee whose family originated from Lydda. Their shop was one of the few small shops in the camp that originated in the early years of exile. “Our business was paying well because there was virtually no competition,” he says. “The life has changed a lot since then, and the business is no longer rewarding,” FL-J said. Moreover, “the refugees no longer *have their hearts on each others* [care about each others], no *su‘hbeh* (friendship). No respect for the elders. I don’t have *sulta* (authority) over my kids. This *jeel* (generation) is making me mad; I cannot understand them.”[[26]](#footnote-26) FL-J told me that he was putting up four apartments for the kids and stores on the ground floor. The four apartments are *identical* in plan and each will consist of two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen and a bathroom, a total of 100 square meters (little over 1000 ft2).

From my fieldwork observations, FL-J’ apartment building represents a new mode of spatial practices in al Jalazone and other refugee camps of the West Bank. *First*, though there are buildings in the camp that are as high as FL-J’ apartment building, this is the first building to be constructed in one shot unlike the other multi-storey buildings of the camp, which were normally constructed in successive phases. *Second*, this building has identical plans for all floors, a mass production, unlike other buildings, which have different floor plans responding to the family needs at a certain moment in time. *Third*, it will be the first building, which will be equipped with an elevator (despite the electricity shortages). *Fourth*, the building contains luxury materials such as; aluminum frames, ceramic tiles, and granite copings for the stairs. The granite steps extending beyond the staircase well is a reoccurring trend. The threshold as an important space to show luxury is a longstanding tradition in the traditional architecture in Palestine as well as in the contemporary practices. *Fifth*, the building is meant for leasing until his kids get married, unlike the buildings of the camp, which were usually constructed to host the family and its business. This will not happen soon, telling from their high-school look.[[27]](#footnote-27)

What I realized is that over time FL-J’ business was transformed from a small shop (with virtually no competition) to a minimarket (with full-scale competition with other businesses). Then, when FL-J accumulated enough *surpluses* to move out from the camp, he reinvested his capital in the camp and in real estate (and familial structures and future that FL-J has no *sulta* over). The camp, I witnessed, has been turning into a highly urbanized space, albeit without a master plan, but with what I will refer to as *‘micro-sophisticated-spatial processes,’* similar to the one discussed above.

**1.7. Micro-sophisticated-spatial processes**

I term these spatial practices as micro-sophisticated-spatial processes because they are locally and historically contextualized, technically complicated, socially invested with meanings and symbols, and lengthily negotiated within, and take into consideration, a broad web of relations. These processes combine the poetics and the politics of a Palestinian home in the Diaspora with dense rational calculations. I need to be clear about the fact that these processes have been triggered by different rationales and can neither be lump-summed nor reduced to a homogenous model. Every structure stands on its own as a distinctive case study within a collective and intense landscape of spatial practices and social relations. This is what makes the spatial practices in the camp different from the ‘individual’ and ‘individuating’ projects off camp. If *ad hoc* refers to the plan-less or the spontaneous takes on the here and now problems, the spatial practices I observed in the camps are *ad hoc* in essence but loaded with symbolism and signification that make them complex wholes. This complexity not only is expressed in rhetoric and poetics but is also expressed in the materiality of these processes.

***Material symbols:*** *By looking into the expressive and material complexity, one might understand the relation between the material and the immaterial, and would reveal hidden codes of subjectivity. My argument is that Palestinian refugees have been engaging in what I coin ‘micro-sophisticated-spatial processes’ in an ad hoc-like take on their living conditions, and at the same time use the material practice as a medium for expression, self-reflexivity, and signification.*

These micro-sophisticated-spatial processes are not limited to al Jalazone refugee camp where I carried out my fieldwork. Rather, what appears to be a new trend in al Jalazone camp landscape is also confirmed to have been taking place in Shatila, Nahr el Bared, and to a lesser extent in Ein el Hillweh (all in Lebanon), and Balata, Dheisheh, Kalandia, and Shu’fat of the West Bank.

***1.7.1. A political economy story:*** The Shatila refugee camp is a highly built up area. The majority of the buildings are multi-story buildings in which many of them are eight floors high. More than one third of Shatila inhabitants are Lebanese or Syrian low-income wage laborers who cannot afford housing in the expensive Beirut. This affects the demand for rent, and hence encouraged the investment in housing and triggers successive booms of construction especially after 1990 with ‘the end of civil war’ and the rehabilitation of downtown Beirut.[[28]](#footnote-28)

General Munir Maqdah, the PLO commander-in-chief in Lebanon, has just inaugurated an eight-storey hospital building, the highest building in Ein el Hillweh camp; he is in the process of putting together a gymnasium that is “beyond imagination.” All are implemented in an *ad hoc* process without preconceived plans, “we design while we construct.” Maqdah is driven by the will to “make healthcare available for refugees, who cannot afford the Lebanese healthcare costs,” as well as the making of “healthy bodies as rudimentary element in the doctrine of the resistance.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Maqdah’s postulate of designing while constructing signifies the messiness of the designing/constructing couple that appears not to follow the ‘modernist’ traditions of the construction industry. This approach not only does leave a whole lot of space for creativity, contingency and self-reflexivity, but also does promote the status of the *in situ* players and governors (builders, users and owners). *The site and the studio have become one.*

The Balata refugee camp, at the edge of the Nablus’ industrial zone, has been engaging in the real estate business since the 1970s (Tamari 1981:32), by reworking its periphery, stretched along the main street to Jerusalem, into workshops, mechanics, and small businesses. Similar processes have been taking place in the Dheisheh refugee camp following the Oslo Accords (1993) as a result of its proximity to Bethlehem industrial zone. The Kalandia refugee camp has also been going through such processes ‘benefiting’ from its location along the main road between Ramallah and Jerusalem; they worked out creative living strategies within the conditions the Separation Wall and Kalandia checkpoint have created (Abourahme 2011). Shu’fat, the only refugee camp within Jerusalem’s municipal jurisdictions, is home for over 18,000 inhabitants whom at least one third are not registered refugees. These inhabitants “moved into the camp in the last several years to avoid losing Jerusalem residency rights” (UNRWA 2012)[[30]](#footnote-30) following the requirements of ‘the Center of Life Policy’[[31]](#footnote-31) implemented by the Israeli Ministry of Internal Affairs. Cheaper rent, lower taxes and reasonable living expenses compared to regular neighborhoods of Jerusalem, make the *slummy* conditions an attractive place to live. The camp witnessed a substantial reinvestment in the real estate to address the rise of demand for affordable housing.

What is important in the above discussion, of different cases of the refugee camps, is to show on the one hand that there are a variety of urban processes taking place (and at different times). On the other hand, these processes reveal a whole set of different subjectivities, agencies and creativity of the refugees in dealing with their space *as* a resource.

The space as a resource not only helps the refugees live the absurd, but also has become the medium for creative configurations that lend itself to steadfastness against forgetfulness, as I will show in the following sections.

***1.7.2. Materiality—the rule and the exception:*** When I told AJN-J that I think that Abu Basel al Nabali new supermarket (inaugurated 2010) seems to be the first constructions with local stone claddings in al Jalazone official boundaries—other than the UNRWA clinic, the premises of the Popular Committee, and the two relatively new mosques—. He corrected me instantly telling me, “No, there is a house, which was built with local stone, longtime ago behind the camp gas-station across the street from the UNRWA offices.”[[32]](#footnote-32) AJN-J’s prompt answer evokes an authoritative knowledge about what constitutes the *rule* and what constitutes the *exception* in the camp’s spatial processes. AJN-J knows that the norm has been constructing reinforced concrete structures cladded with rendered concrete hollow-block walls. Being able to identify the only structure that was built a long time ago against all odds, in stone, means that *the refugees’ spatial processes are part of the everyday discourse and their materiality circulates and gets discussed.*

***Spaces in between:*** *For now, I suggest that the micro-sophisticated-spatial processes take place at the intersection between norm and exception, crossing material boundaries to express modernity and creating niches for consumerism.*

The ‘air-conditioned’ Nabali supermarket is, by far, the largest grocery store in the camp. The supermarket main façade is made out from regularly cut stone courses, similar to those used in towns and villages in the West Bank. Across the street from the old mosque, the façade consists of three large openings. The upper floor got large windows that are following the alignment of ground floor doors. A narrow balcony (one meter deep) runs along the façade. Windows of the first floor have no access into the balcony! The staircase was constructed at the backside of the building rather than the front façade as usual, in order maximize the display space of the supermarket. Two of the openings showcase behind glass beauty care and hygiene products while the third is the only entry and exit to the supermarket, furnished with black expensive granite steps. A flashy sign decorates the long façade of the supermarket. Inside, the store echoes the supermarkets in the surrounding towns. The checkout desk got a cash machine, and a surveillance monitor for the owner/the cashier to watch the clients wandering through the new white shelves loaded with goods (see Figure 1.4). According to my key informant and builder KAH-J, “this is one of the few buildings in the refugee camp that were built ‘*ala al usoul* (authentic or original)[[33]](#footnote-33)…the building got sound foundations and stone façade.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

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| *Figure 1.4. Abu Basel al Nabali supermarket, as by Summer 2011. © 2012 Khaldun Bshara* |

KAH-J knows what it takes to build something ‘*ala al usoul.* This is not easy in the camp because the builders have to deal with owner’s tight budgets even if this comes at the expense of the quality. Sometimes the contractor halts in the middle of the project because the owner’s resources were depleted. The contractor returns to the site once the owner builds up his financial means anew. No contractor would dare to jump into the job as far as the contractor, who started the construction, does not give a clear ‘go.’ This follows a non-spoken code of ethics of practice that has *never* been challenged, according to KAH-J. The contractor, usually, manages the site and dictates his forms on the owner especially if the latter is not familiar with the construction industry. A contractor would suggest a solution that is easier to implement even if it “*kills*” the existing house in terms of ventilation and lighting. KAH-J also claims that there are huge differences between construction on camp and off camp. Off camp, one needs to obtain a license from local councils and needs engineers’ stamps that cannot get as wrong as it might do in the camp. “Have a look on the buildings around the camp or in the village of Jifna, they are different and well-engineered.”[[35]](#footnote-35) AJY-J confirms KAH-J’s concerns about the quality of refugee camp’s structures. He recalls that the contractor who was constructing the third floor of the neighbor’s building “fled the scene and refused to cast the concrete slab because he was sure that the structure won’t hold and would collapse…the owners themselves did. The building is still standing.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

Since 2006, after I had been guided by AJY-J and AIK-J through the camp to explore the camp’s original shelters and its urban planning, I have been guiding especially foreign interested professionals to the camp as part of what I claim is “heritage worth preservation” (Bshara 2007). We usually started with coffee and chat with refugees at the plaza. In one occasion, I accompanied a German architect to see the camp. We sat at a table with other four refugees, one of whom was AJN-J, a young and successful blacksmith. The German architect, stunned with the vibrant plaza as early as 10:00 in the morning, asked me to enquire, “Why are refugees present in huge numbers and already playing cards at the cafés at an early time of the weekend?” AJN-J addressed the question in his sarcastic tone, and ambiguous face, “Tell her that we don’t have ’*hadaiq* (gardens) and *basateen* (orchards) in the camp. Our gardens and orchards are back near Tel-Aviv. In the camp, we try to escape our jammed shelters as early as possible and stay outside until late.”

HMD-J al Yafawi approves AJN-J existential conclusion that we are in the plaza because our shelters are not convenient living spaces. HMD-J is forty-five years old, a painter and father of six. After long humorous descriptions of his work in synagogues and Jewish settlers’ houses, he compared his home in al Jalazone to those of the settlers’. The stark differences for him are the houses’ sizes and the surrounding environment. Houses in settlements usually have two or three bathrooms, a study, a kitchen, a dining and living room, organized in split-level or multi-floor duplexes. The space around the houses makes the huge difference. HMD-J kept repeating that the houses in the settlement have four-meter setback for large windows. When he sketched his house for me, he described it as “*khankah* (stifling). It has only one window that overlooks the narrow street. The other rooms are windowless. [He] had negotiated with the neighbor a permission to open a bathroom window 40 by 40 centimeters. The neighbor was nice and allowed [him] to open the window, but it was located near the ceiling, high and small so none can overlook the neighbor’s property.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Off camp, “it is different and well engineered.” Some refugees would not agree with KAH-J’s postulate. AH-J, my leaser believes that construction off camp is more complicated. AH-J leases the two apartments and the store on the street level to make a living for his family. He cannot obtain a permission to work in Israel because he was imprisoned during the first Intifada. In the camp, AH-J added rooms, floors, extended his first floor a little bit over the street, and negotiated with his brothers the alley leading to *hosh* el ‘Hi‘hi (complex/courtyard). AH-J moved to Jifna after a long and fierce dispute with his brothers that left him literally homeless—and constructed his stone house on a piece of land he had purchased long time ago. He went through the complicated engineering processes and licensing. He also had to go to the court and hire a lawyer because the architect bureau sued him for not paying the consultancy fees. AH-J believes that the fees were not fair, because the design mistakes cost him a fortune. (Telling from the badly engineered apartment I lived in, I could not imagine AH-J being critical to any kind of engineering!). After two years, the litigation is not over yet. After two years AH-J comes so often to the camp and hang out with refugee peers—evidently not his brothers—in the plaza over coffee or tea.[[38]](#footnote-38)

While there is unexplainable trust within the construction world/processes on camp, there is unmistakable mistrust in regards to similar processes off camp, even among the refugees themselves. Dr. S-J, who is a proud socialist, lends some cash to a comrade who was tight on budget to complete his housing project in the nearby Jifna. (Some refugees refer to Jifna as the New Jalazone).[[39]](#footnote-39) The comrade could not pay back the debt. S-J, desperate to retrieve his money, offers to purchase one apartment in the building the comrade had constructed. The comrade accepts. S-J becomes the indebted to the comrade and a dispute erupts at the heart of which is “the true area of the alleged 150-meter square apartment [S-J bought].” I spent more than two hours with the two comrades to resolve the dispute, measuring the building at dusk of a hot summer day (2010). The area after hasty calculations turned out 149.8-meter square. S-J paid the rest and the case was closed. The main issue here is that Dr. S-J could not imagine that the area is calculated to include the thicknesses of the walls as well as the respective share of the common services such as the stairs. AH-J and the comrade already learned the lesson through the real estate industry off the camp. S-J never had to address such problems in the camp because homes share walls and sometimes structures in addition to the common space, which is simultaneously *theirs and ours,* and never factored in area’s math. Because the camp space is highly congested, the interior space of the refugee home has become the refugee’s cosmos, and ‘what really counts.’

When a house got its own enclosure or open space, as a result of purchasing the neighboring shelter or constructing the house on a segment of one’s plot, the open space fill into the social sanctions. In away, it simultaneously appears private and common. When I first settled in al Jalazone (summer 2009), AJN-J cautioned me about the use of my windows. He told me that “you cannot gaze through windows towards the camp…you need to be equally exposed to the refugees, otherwise it is not respectful and invading the privacy. The best way to make photos of the camp is from the rooftop where you announce your presence.” When I asked him about what he use his veranda for, he told me that “it would be impolite to pull a chair and have your coffee at the veranda… it is acceptable to get to the veranda to address somebody in the street, to have a short stretching, but verandas are not used as in villages and towns around… looking from above on refugee peers not only encroaches into their privacy, but it expresses arrogance (*shaeif ‘haluh*) and superiority to those who cannot afford such luxury.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

**1.8. Spatial Memory**

In the physical space of the refugee camp, memory is reproduced and reshaped in material forms. Here I refer to practices I noted during my fieldwork such as the process of making and maintaining houses, neighborhoods, memorials, and arrangements of private and public spaces. Analytically, I bring in the question of *time* “to restore to practice its practical truth” (Bourdieu 1977[1972]:8), and approach the refugee camp as a “social space” entangled in webs of “dialectical relationships” (Lefebvre 1991[1974]:70). This includes my emphasis on the obvious but overlooked fact that purportedly temporary shelters have become permanent homes. In the material practices this shift entails the examination of how temporary places become productive ones where memory and identity are (re)produced and altered in a number of ways. To see the socio-economic-political complexity of the building processes on the grounds of the camp, I bring up two particular projects, which were either carried out or planned during my study. The first is the Nakhleh clan quasi-public project; the other is the CH-J private housing project.

***1.8.1. The making of Jindas:*** Jindas is the name of a multipurpose hall. It is the first event hall of such scale in the camp. There are other two large halls in the camp. The first hall is the public youth club hall affiliated to the Popular Committee of the PLO built soon after the Oslo Accord (1993). The other is a private hall associated with a café and garden at the entrance of the camp (albeit outside the camp’s official boundaries), opened in 2008. By 2010, the hall was popular and was booked for weddings for the whole summer especially Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. I was perplexed with the name, which sounds like a weird name for a multipurpose hall specialized almost with, but not limited to, happy events. Literarily, Jindas means, “*run over by a jinni*.” When I enquired about it, the refugees told me that Jindas is a fertile grazing area of Bayt Nabala bordering the nowadays Ben-Gurion airport.

The hall is located exactly at the edge of the camp, albeit outside the camp’s official area. As such this explains the unquestioned use of local limestone to construct the 1,200 square meters, two story building, on a one-dunam plot, at a cost of several thousands of US dollars. AJN-J is one of the committee members who are behind the idea. AJN-J tells me that the Nakhleh clan, one of the four main clans who made up Bayt Nabala village, is the owner and the initiator of the project. Realizing that the clan is getting bigger, they needed a convention center larger than the little one they have. They presented the idea to all Bayt Nabala clans. The other three clans (Safi, Zeid, and Sharaka), refused to join because they were satisfied with what they already got. So the project was turned into Nakhleh clan.

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|  | Jindas Hall  Bayt Nabala  Nakhleh Association  Inaugurated in 2008 |
| *Figure 1.5. Jindas hall and the inauguration plaque, as by Summer 2011. © 2012 Khaldun Bshara* | |

*Making the common, making the private:* Nakhlehs commenced with the project on their own. They formed a committee to implement the project. The committee taxed every grown-up male of every household some USD 25 annually. They exempted from this tax the university students, the unemployed, and ‘the social cases’ (those who couldn’t afford it). If “sovereign is he who decides upon the exception” (Carl Schmitt 2005:5 quoted in Nguyen 2010:176), then the Nakhleh committee, in a sense, practices sovereignty in a zone that is practically in a limbo between different and contradictory sovereigns. By exempting ‘the social cases,’ Nakhleh committee unconsciously adopted the UNRWA’s HSC category. In a way Nakhleh committee replicated UNRWA’s humanitarian models that most of the refugees condemned. This shows that structures, social and institutional, influence each other and contribute to a common understanding of what constitutes ‘normal.’ Exempting the HSC from paying shares in the construction of the communal space is one example in which institutional and social systems justifies their power.

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| *Figure 1.6. Yasin family genealogy, Nakhleh clan, by Abd al-Qader Ali Nakhleh, al-Jalazone 1999* |

The committee also decided that only Nakhleh builders, contractors, technicians, workshops and suppliers would carry out the project, to ensure that the clan would benefit most from the process. Also, they decided that after its completion only Nakhlehs would run the business. MN-J, who is the DJ of the hall, also the founder and owner of the popular *café* *Hadi*, told me that they are planning to paint the Nakhleh clan’s genealogy tree co-produced by al Jalazone refugee and checked against information from Bayt Nabala elders in Jordan, according to AJY-J (see Figure 1.6) on the wall at the end of the central aisle of the hall. MN-J believes that “they first need to update the tree, made more than ten years ago in Jordan, to include the younger generation.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

*Toponomy:* Nakhleh clan also discussed the name of the new hall. Many wanted to name the hall after the clan, Nakhleh (because they paid the bills). Others preferred Bayt Nabala (emphasizing their village of origin). Some suggested to name the hall after the only still-standing building of Bayt Nabala, the school. After lots of discussions and debates, elders mentioned *Jindas* and all agreed. This was a pragmatic calculated solution. In this way they avoided possible accusations of being *clan*-oriented. They also avoided being the sole representative of Bayt Nabala, giving the credit to the village as a whole while not all monetarily contributed to the project. Jindas therefore is situated (like its geographical location in the camp, or its location at the edge of the Ben-Gurion airport) at the intersection of common and private, between the movable and the immovable. It talks differently to different Bayt Nabala descendants. It does not represent the whole because the other clans have to redeem their shares of the story. Since only elders experienced Jindas for real, for younger generation, the new Jindas serves as an imaginary space that oscillates between the two worlds, the village of origin and the camp.

On the inauguration plaque the Nakhleh managed to have many elements including the name of the association (Nakhleh), the village of origin (Bayt Nabala), and the name of the hall (Jindas) and the foundational date (2008). While they had consciously incorporated a palm tree into the plaque as an icon that stands for the family name Nakhleh, a palm, they unconsciously incorporated the two olive branches from the UNRWA’s logo. This shows that the practices on the camp (the parole) do not totally escape the grammar put forward by the UNRWA.

*Creating the private:* After the inauguration of the first phase of the hall, it has been generating huge profits. The committee is currently preoccupied with the furbishing of the first floor. In addition, the committee is planning to purchase the bordering dunam (1000 m2) to create a parking lot serving the hall. I learned also that other clans are exploring the possibility of replicating the idea. The DJ’s brother, AR-J, believes that “the other clans lost the opportunity to join the project because they have elder, corrupt and backward committees, unlike Nakhleh clan elders who surrendered their power to younger, trustful, and educated committee long time ago.” Yet, AR-J is still critical to the construction of Jindas on other basis: “it did not bring Nakhleh clan together; rather, the opposite.” AR-J adds, “The old Nakhleh guesthouse (known as *al Madhafah*) was more effective in bringing the clan together and generated more intimate relations between different generations. Since the inauguration of the new hall, we did not cook for the elders as we used to do in the old guesthouse for example. The new hall is huge and beautiful but no one goes there to hang out with other peers as we regularly did at the old *Madhafah*.”[[42]](#footnote-42) For AR-J, the hall should function to bring the family together. It is not about the space capacity or the material beauty; rather, it is the capacity to bring Nakhlehs together and to serve as a hangout kind of space.

Jindas and Ein el Hillweh hospital (and the new gymnasium to come), emphasize the spatial practices/making as a mode of knowledge production/making. The other Bayt Nabala clans could not see the prospect profit of Jindas until it was functioning. This is parallel to the inability to see the collective benefit from the empowerment of younger, educated, and trustful generations to inflict change. In a sense, the spatial practices open up the space into questioning of the taken-for-granted social structures that furnished the structures themselves unchangeable (the internalized colonial preconceptions). For example, the British Mandate in Palestine, the UNRWA, the Israeli military occupation fostered a mode of governance that relies on elderly notables (known as *Makhateer*) established by the late Ottoman era. The UNRWA followed the same pattern to assign tasks and responsibilities to the *Makhateer (*plural of *Mukhtar)* to be able on one hand to create an order and on the other to establish an indirect control over the refugees. Each camp could have more than *Mukhtar* from different villages of origin. The roles of the *Makhateer,* as the case with the Palestinian villages, diminished by the advent of the first Intifada (1987), when they lost their power and authority, but retained their symbolic status (Tamari 1981; Davis 2012).

***1.8.2. Uncle and nephews*:** CH-J operates a meat shop. His three nephews operate a small chicken abattoir. Telling from their huge bodies, chicken and meat it looks have contributed substantially to their bodies’ fat. The father of the three is a taxi driver. He was bankrupt a long time ago, leaving the three sons with huge debts to pay. The shop has been doing well and they successfully managed to operate the shop and pay their monetary obligations. Their uncle offered them a small piece of land near his house, which he a long time ago constructed in local limestone cladding at the edge of the camp. The plan is to build their own apartment building to host their families and to prepare an apartment for the youngest brother, who has been looking for the significant other to establish a fourth family.

SCH-J, the older brother, disclosed to me that this offer had been there for a long time but they did not take it because “ *illi ibalash ghali* (the free stuff is too expensive),” noting the inherent power asymmetry of the gift exchange. As their mother developed Rheumatism, their business was fine, and their father is working on a taxi, they were inclined to take their uncle’s offer. I also assume that the unbearable prices of land left them with no other alternatives. They approached me, as they knew that I do free architectural consultation for refugees’ houses upgrades. I was not interested in design per se; rather, I wanted to understand their motivations, the way they think about space and what math they engage with to calculate their motivations.

***Rendering:*** *Architectural consultancies render explicit, give aesthetic realization to, render concrete, practices of Palestinian life that were rendered naked, devoid of infrastructure, in refugee camps.*

*Entanglement:* when I visited the plot with SCH-J, he told me “we want an open space on the street level for a future business. We do not want windows on the east where our uncle had built his barracks that smells awful. Because the neighbor built his house directly at the western edge of our plot, and he (against the law) already opened windows into our plot, we cannot do the same. We need to have a setback of three meters or more and construct our building. This way we will get windows and our neighbor will continue to have his own. From the south, it is our uncle; you can design without a setback. Also, because of the natural slop of the land, it would be nice to create a direct access from our uncle’s property to our parents’ apartment, without stairs, because of our mother’s health condition. The north side would be our view…the cemetery, where you can have verandas. We want four three-bedroom apartments. For my parents, you can have two bedrooms and use the other as a storage for my mother’s stuff because she keeps things indefinitely.”[[43]](#footnote-43) The younger brother joked later about the cemetery view, “The dead are the best neighbors.”

I designed what they requested. They all loved it, including their mother. I don’t know if they will ever construct it, and what material they will use (which I purposely did not propose). This is not important though I would love to see how their thoughts, my lines, contractor’s unquestioned authority, their uncle’s priceless (literary and literally) gift, and their neighbor’s reactions would interact to produce a materiality that settles all immaterial stakes. I also thought about their northern neighbors, the dead. EAR-J my solid waste-collecting buddy told me once leaning on the cemetery wall, “What do you think? Are we more alive than them? The only difference is that they are dead *there* and we are dead *here*.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

The CH-J apartment building project shows that spatial practices in the camp do not exist in a vacuum; on the contrary, they exist within a broad web of material and immaterial relations. East, West, South and North have different connotations than that of architects’ off camp. These are the conditions rather than the natural abstract resources. These are respectively, the barracks that smells awful, the neighbor who illegally opened his windows onto the property, the uncle who would not mind a closer spatial relation if we frame it in Rheumatism, and the Northern neighbors who would not think of our verandas as an intrusion to their privacy or a representation of superiority. These practices shake the modern (Platonic-like) empty and ready to be claimed or conquered space.

**1.9. Conclusion**

In this article I showed that what I termed micro-sophisticated-spatial practices are historically and politically situated within the real estate industry driven by high demands and political conditions created in post Oslo era. I also showed that the materiality and symbolism are intermingled to represent a longing for the missing self (the village and home of origin) while recreating reminders of these through the material practices. The refugees have been keen to recreate the common while creating the private, in terms of material and immaterial construction. Stone as the local/endogenous/precious construction material and naming as the process of investing meaning to what otherwise part of everyday life are fields of signification. In addition, the material representation in the spatial practices appears to have an embedded message of modernity and contemporariness.

What is intriguing in these micro-sophisticated-spatial processes is that the refugees sometimes consider a practice normal at the edge of the camp, and yet consider a similar practice abnormal on the grounds of the camp. In doing so, they establish the exception within the norm, or the norm within the exception. The construction in local stone is one example. The constructing of verandas is another. But even before the introduction of stone into the camp, there was humongous resistance among the refugees to accept the same building norms practiced off camp.

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1. According to the UNRWA reports, www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/jordan, accessed March 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is common to hear somebody saying, “I need my space,” referring to a certain bubble within his workplace, his home, and his room. This implies that the word space is also an intimate category. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Etic is the explanation of social phenomenon or practice from the researcher point of view. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Especially in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, correct to a certain extent for camps in Jordan. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. UNRWA Open Document. 31 October 2006. http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/OpenDocument. An electronic source accessed in March 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Calculated at 6.7 members for the average family size according to the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Interviews with IQ-A and MA-A in Ayda refugee camp, September 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Such as the metallic arches (arch de triumph) which decorate the camps’ entrances. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “After the Arab Spring in Palestine: Contesting the Neoliberal Narrative of Palestinian National Liberation.” March 23, 2012. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4789/after-the-arab-spring-in-palestine\_contesting-the-, accessed May 21, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ramallah Syndrome* is a public art intervention by Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti, and Yazid Anani. The artists argue, “Ramallah Syndrome is the side effect of the new spatial and social order that emerged after the collapse of the Oslo ‘peace process’. It is manifested in a kind of ‘hallucination of normality’, the fantasy of a co-existence of occupation and freedom. It is as if the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state – in effect, indefinitely postponed – will be achieved through pure illusion. The consequence of this perpetual persistence of a colonial regime has not been sufficiently discussed. The colonial legacy is a vital link in national identity, and it must be resolved. Ramallah Syndrome is ultimately about the critique and potentiality associated with forms of resistance and subjugation in a colonial context.” http://ramallahsyndrome.blogspot.com/, accessed May 21, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Apart from well-established towns such as Jerusalem, Nablus, Jenin, Hebron and Bethlehem, who relied on developed sewer networks, Palestinian villages and less fortunate towns under Israeli occupation relied on cesspits (cesspools) systems. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Giorgio Agamben writes, “the camp…will appear as the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity” (1998:123). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Walter Benjamin writes, “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight” (Benjamin 1968:257). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. KAH-J is a mason who worked for contractors I supervised several years ago, and during my fieldwork (2010-2011) has become one of my key informants. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. MQ-J is the UNRWA employee as camps’ solid waste manger. I joined his group in summer 2009 as a volunteer with the solid waste management. Through MQ-J I had access to the Popular Committee as well as to many new informants. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “The pulverization of space by private property and its segmentation into controlled social spaces are antagonistic to the ability to appropriate space freely” (Harvey 1989:198). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. David Harvey argues that the system of production which capital established was founded on the physical separation between the place of work and the place of residence and the division of time into “working” and ”living” time in two distinct spaces (1989:73, 173). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. What is happening in nowadays Palestine urban centers is a process that Harvey captures minutely in “The Urban Experience.” In such a process kinship ties were undermined, new networks of social contacts forged such as cafés, clubs and virtual groups, and new communities created that often managed to lock themselves up in protected spaces behind symbols and signs that emphasize the special qualities of their place (Harvey 1989:183). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. When space could be represented as abstract, objective, homogeneous, and universal in its qualities (Harvey 1989:177). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Toponomy is the scientific study of place names (toponyms), their origins, meanings, use and typology. The word ‘toponymy’ is derived from the Greek words *tópos* (τόπος = place) and *ónoma* (ὄνομα = name). http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/toponymy, accessed May 24, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Al Sinjilawi for Construction Materials, or al Surdawi for Jewelry, or al Tubbasi Pharmacy, all retail shops in Ramallah, are but a few examples that associate the names of people with their spaces of origin (all from West bank and non-refugees) when they function from, or open business in, other town or village. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Interview with MH-JE al Yasini, in Jericho, August 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Althusserian ‘interpellation,’ naming is the very act in which a “subject is constituted by being hailed, addressed, named” (Butler 1997:95). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Technologically speaking, ‘accelerated curing’ is possible. These techniques are especially useful in the prefabrication industry, wherein high early age strength enables the removal of the formwork. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Informal conversation with FL-J and AS-J in al Jalazone refugee camp, Summer 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Interview with FL-J in al Jalazone refugee camp, January 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Interview with FL-J in al Jalazone refugee camp, January 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Interview with AW-S in Shatila refugee camp, May 18, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Informal interview with General Munir Maqdah in Ein el Hillweh on May 19, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Shu’fat refugee camp. http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=121 accessed February 18, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Since 1996, Arab Jerusalemites, to be able to keep their social securities including the global Israeli healthcare services, they have to sustain *Markaz hakhaim* (a center of life) within the official Jerusalem municipal boundaries. Otherwise, Arab Jerusalemites risk not only losing the social securities but also their residency rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Informal interview with AJN-J in al Jalazone refugee camp, Winter 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Usoul* (Arabic plural of *asl*) means origins or authentic. In this context it means following the basics of construction technologies that are practically verified and acknowledged. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Interview with KAH-J in al Jalazone, Spring 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Informal interview with KAH-J in al Jalazone refugee camp, Spring 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Interview with AJY-J in al Jalazone refugee camp, Summer 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. HMD-J in al Jalazone refugee camp, Winter 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Informal interview with AH-J in al Jalazone refugee camp, January 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. This is true to other areas near refugee camps; some refer to Umm al Sharayet as the new Am’ari, to Semiramis neighborhood as the New Kalandia, the engineers’ neighborhood, east Nablus, as the new-Balata, and al Daw’ha new district south-east of Beit Jala town, as the new-Dheisheh. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Interview with AJN-J in al Jalazone refugee camp, Summer 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Interview with MN-J in al Jalazone refugee camp, Winter 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Interview with AR-J al Jalazone refugee camp, Winter 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Interview with SCH-J in al Jalazone refugee camp. Summer 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Informal interview with EAR-J in al Jalazone refugee camp, Summer 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)