

ABU ATA, ARCHITECT: A PLAY IN FOUR ACTS
Sandi Hilal

ACT ONE

May, 2008. An open space about seventy square meters in area in a crowded neighborhood of the Fawwar Refugee Camp in the West Bank. The ARCHITECT sits on a chair in the center of the space, turned to her left to face a group of about twenty women of all ages, who are sitting in chairs or on the ground. They include HADIYAH, AMEENAH, HALAH, HAJAH SALMA, and JAMILAH. To her right, a group of about the same number of men, also of all ages, but with a large proportion of young men, or *shabab*, sits or stands silently. They include AHMED, ABU RABIAH, and ABU RAMI. A *shader*, or cloth canopy covering, protects everyone from the sun.

HADIYAH¹

(Emphatically) There is no problem with building a plaza for our neighborhood. But it has to be only for the people of our neighborhood and not for all the people of the camp. Casual passersby cannot use this plaza. Young males that have nothing to do can't just come and hang out in our plaza. Yes for the neighborhood, no for the camp.

The WOMEN nod vigorously.

HADIYAH

I will give you a concrete example of what I am speaking about. Yesterday, as soon as the shade (gestures to the *shader* covering overhead) and lighting were installed, this plaza was immediately transformed from an invisible plaza for the neighborhood into an attractive hangout for the young people from the entire camp. A bunch of young *shabab* that I had never seen before came and spent the entire day in front of my house. Yesterday evening I wanted to go to my sister's, but when I opened my door to leave, I immediately felt that the plaza was not mine anymore and that it had been taken over by these *shabab*. I felt shy about crossing through them and I had to find a different way to get to my sister's. Do you understand what do I mean? This is *my* plaza, this is the plaza of our neighborhood, it is not a plaza for everybody. This plaza must maintain its invisibility.

¹ Names have been changed to respect the identities of the people involved.

The WOMEN nod and some make eye contact with the ARCHITECT to signal their complete agreement.

ARCHITECT

The Head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Camp Improvement Program in the West Bank

(Aside) I tried to understand the difference between a plaza for a neighborhood and a plaza for a camp by asking about the ways these women imagined they might use the space.

(To the WOMEN) Would you ever come to this plaza and have morning coffee together, out in the sunshine?

AMEENAH

A strong woman with a hard face, dressed in a glamorous purple *jilbab*.

(Forcefully, but with humor) What woman would leave her home, her kids, and come to drink coffee in a plaza? It would be a shame for a woman to leave her home without a proper reason. Do you want us all to come here in the plaza and have coffee and tea? Do you want them to write about us in *Al Ah'hiram*?² We already cannot deal with our husbands; nevermind us going out and having tea and coffee in the plaza!

The other women laugh and break into amused side conversations. AMEENAH looks around at them with an air of victory. 1st FAWWAR WOMAN comes out of one of the adjoining houses, carrying a coffee pot, and 2nd FAWWAR WOMAN exits a different home with cups for everyone. The women begin distributing coffee to everyone in the plaza. The ARCHITECT takes the cup offered to her and looks around incredulously. The WOMEN settle down with their coffee, still laughing and talking among themselves.

ARCHITECT

Then why are you doing just that right now? Look at us! We are sitting here happily and enjoying our coffee.

AMEENAH

² One of the most important Egyptian newspapers

We are sitting here while our husbands are at work. (Boldly locking eyes with the ARCHITECT) Do you think that they know that we are here?

The other women look at each other, at AMEENAH and the ARCHITECT, and many renew their laughter. Some cover their faces because shyly, but they are really enjoying what their brave neighbor, AMEENAH, is saying. Other women, however, are pensive and a bit sad.

HALAH

A serious woman dressed in a black *jilbab*

(Making eye contact with the ARCHITECT, and speaking seriously) Do you want us to gather and have coffee and tea here together? This is a problem, darling, it is a real problem.

HAJAH SALMA

An older woman dressed in a Palestinian dress with a black headscarf and a walking stick

(Breaking in emphatically, and punctuating her words with her walking stick) *I* will come and sit here by myself. I don't care what anybody says.

ANOTHER HAJAH nearby, dressed in the same manner, makes a motion to silence her. Undaunted, HAJAH SALMA turns to her challengingly.

Nobody would dare to tell me that I cannot sit here in front of everybody.

ARCHITECT

(Soothingly) Is there any activity you could do here?

(Aside) Even if the answer is "nothing," this will still be a way to lessen the tension and change the direction of the conversation.

1st FAWWAR WOMAN:

Any other cultural activity would be acceptable. We could see a film or come and have a lecture. But not tea and coffee. A cultural activity is OK, but not a leisure activity.

ARCHITECT

(To the WOMEN) But if you got together, all of you, to prepare tabbouleh, would this be considered a cultural activity or a leisure activity?

HADIYAH

(Laughing hard, and trying to cover her face) Darling, tabbouleh is a prohibited activity.

The WOMEN redouble their laughter, and HADIYAH joins in.

ARCHITECT

But wouldn't you like to get out of the house and get some sun and fresh air?

AMEENAH

(Sharply) Of course we would like to, but we are controlled.

HALAH

(Breaks in sadly) The women here in Fawwar don't participate in activities anyhow. A few days ago there was a great activity for the girls – our daughters – at their school, and very few women attended. Even if making tabbouleh together out of doors was considered totally permitted in Fawwar camp, how could we imagine that these women, who don't even participate in school events, would come?

ARCHITECT

But don't you think that to change this situation will require some time, and that if people in Fawwar begin to see women outside of their homes, they would get used to such a new reality and slowly begin to accept it?

1st FAWWAR WOMAN

(Shaking her head) Not in Fawwar, darling.

2nd FAWWAR WOMAN

(Shaking her head) Not in Fawwar camp.

3rd FAWWAR WOMAN

(Shaking her head) This might happen in the Dheisheh camp or in the Arroub camp, but not here.

4th FAWWAR WOMAN

(Shaking her head) Here everything is prohibited.

AHMED

A young man with black hair and thick eyebrows, wearing a track suit; it's clear that he is as comfortable in this plaza as he is at home

(Thrusting himself suddenly into the discussion from the men's side of the plaza) Don't you think you are complicating the situation, all of you, by exaggerating things?

AMEENAH

(Furiously) Shut up. You would be the first one to gossip about these women if you were to see them sitting here. Even if we walk alone in the street everyone speaks badly about

us behind our backs – how much worse would it be if we were to start sitting in the plaza?

AHMED retreats, crushed.

ARCHITECT

(Aside) It's so clear that AMEENAH has complete control of the discussion that it's really hard for me to believe that such a strong woman would not be able to challenge the society in the same way, or easily organize a gathering for women to sit and have coffee in the plaza.

(To the women) What would you like the plaza to look like?

JAMILAH

An unmarried young woman with a black head scarf, living with her brothers and one niece

(Pulling on her black scarf, and speaking with emphasis) We want a *closed* plaza, with walls around it, so that all of us women can come here and finally use it.

(Beat) *Maybe* we could finally use the plaza.

AMEENAH

(To JAMILAH, bossily) What is the meaning of a closed plaza? Did you ever see a closed plaza? Is it a home or a plaza?

JAMILAH

I mean, the plaza should be walled in, and part of it should be for men and the other part for women, and we should prohibit men from coming into the women's section of the plaza. Even if we agree to come to the plaza, our brothers and husbands would not let us go if it's not segregated. They would tell us, 'what are you going to do, are you going to sit in a plaza where there is a mix between men and women?'

HALAH

(Confidently) The real problem is the women in this camp. Even if you enclose the plaza they will still not come. They will never leave their work and their homes and come and gather in the plaza.

ARCHITECT

(Aside) It was clear to me from what I had heard from the other women that HALAH did not want to enclose the plaza because her home was directly in front of it. She was worried about the plaza cutting off sunlight and air to her home.

HALAH

(Tensely, anxiously) I would not accept walls around the plaza. No way.

JAMILAH

Well, you might not accept it, but I *might* accept it.

ARCHITECT

Is it that you *might* visit a closed plaza, or are you *sure* you would be able to?

JAMILAH

For myself, I would come as long as this is a very closed place where nobody could see me. I could come here with my niece. While she is playing with the other children, I could get some fresh air, and it would be better for her to play here instead of going to play in the streets with the cars.

ARCHITECT

(Aside) JAMILAH is clearly unsure that she will be able to use the plaza, but she is trying to come up with a scenario in which this would be possible.

The women fall silent. The ARCHITECT shifts her chair ninety degrees, so that she is now facing the group of young and old men who had up until now been listening to the conversation. ABU RABIAH is sitting in the center of the group. He beats the ground with his walking stick to call the meeting to order. Everyone falls silent and listens.

ABU RABIH

The oldest of the camp's elders, and one of the most important, wearing a black robe over his white *dishdasha*, an ankle-length, long-sleeved robe, with a very white *hattah*, or scarf, on his head. He carries a walking stick

If you think that this plaza would be open to anyone, whoever he is, to come and bring his chair and sit, or to have fun or to stay during the night, you are absolutely on the wrong track. This is unacceptable in Fawwar camp. Mixing between men and women would be unacceptable, especially mixing between young ladies and young men.

ARCHITECT

What do you think the plaza should look like?

ABU RABIH

This is a good plaza. It has to be taken care of by the neighbors. People should not be allowed to come here and cut firewood in the winter. People have to take care of this plaza as if it were their home. This is the real secret for the success of this plaza.

ABU RABIH is sitting next to ABU RAMI, who now draws himself up, looks around at the group, and begins to speak in clear,

classic Arabic as though he giving a formal lecture.

ABU RAMI

Another highly esteemed camp elder, he wears a khaki *dishdasha* and a white *hattah* and also carries a walking stick

This plaza should be organized. We should have a guard on duty at all times because our kids will not be able to take care of it without supervision. If this plaza were to be open for people to come and go as they pleased, it would never work. People would steal and destroy everything. They would rip up the pavement, they would take the ironwork, nothing would stay put. The plaza needs to be organized and *official*. It has to have a door, it has to have a lock, it has to have a key and it has to have a guard. (He gavels his stick to signal the end of his speech.)

ARCHITECT

(Aside) ABU RABIAH and ABU RAMI are considered among the founders of this camp, having already spent sixty years in exile. They are among those who witnessed the tents of Fawwar replaced by masonry homes, and now they are living to see its inhabitants begin to consider the spaces between homes as well. Surely ABU RAMI is remembering how difficult the decision to build concrete walls instead of maintaining the tents was. Would this move let the world forget that what they really wanted was to return home to their villages rather than settle permanently in the camps? And now they are not only building homes but also beginning to shape common spaces. Is this another concession – another way of accepting the permanency of the camp and giving up the dream of return? Is the plaza merely a wretched attempt to mitigate the conditions of total subjugation? Or is the plaza the physical indication that the refugees have abandoned their strategy of convincing the whole world of their misery through their architectural misery; that they are instead initiating a new strategy of capitalizing on their strengths as refugees rather than their weakness as victims? ABU RAMI's father had been among the main opponents of building more durable homes. No doubt he remembers his father telling him, 'Son of mine, if you ever begin to enjoy your life in the camp, you will forget the land you came from.' Would his father have even agreed to be part of the discussion taking place today? Is it historically acceptable to think about the public space of a temporary camp? Of course what is claimed as "private" in the camp is not really private, because the homes are not registered as private property, and what is claimed as "public" is not really public because neither the host government nor the residents themselves recognize it as such. The UNRWA claims that it does not administer the camps, only its own installations and programs. How does one define "private" and "public" in a camp?

1st *SHABAB*

Wearing a dark blue jacket and jeans, with a shy manner

(Addressing ABU RABIAH and ABU RAMI respectfully, but earnestly) This plaza will serve this neighborhood very well; here the kids will play, here we will have our important occasions, here we will have our weddings and funerals. It is the only open

space in this big neighborhood: how come you think that we will not take care of it? This plaza will be a treasure for all of us.

2nd *SHABAB*

This is a good plaza. It has to be beautified with some graffiti and some slogans expressing that this plaza belongs to the society of Fawwar. But in my opinion, it has to stay open. It has to be taken care of by its neighbors, who should have responsibility for it.

AHMED

I don't think that the idea of enclosing the plaza is a very good one. I am against keys, I am against locks, I am against doors, I am against the idea that this plaza would open and close at certain hours. How could our kids play here? How we would feel that we own this place? I am not against having a guard to take care of this place, but no keys, no locks, no closing time. Because if we use it this way, we will cancel out any idea of a common plaza and it will function like a private space.

ARCHITECT

(Sharply) AHMED, what were you saying earlier about the women in Fawwar?

AHMED

(Confidently) The women in Fawwar used to get out and sit outside their homes in the afternoons, even late in the evening --

ABU RAMI

(Interrupting) Old women could do this, but not young ones.

The ARCHITECT looks from one man to the other doubtfully.

2nd *SHABAB*

This plaza should be a plaza for our children, first and last. My young friends and I will not come and play with the kids, so the women – the mothers of these kids – could come and take care of them without being bothered. I believe that at the end of the day the plaza should be for the kids and their mothers.

ARCHITECT

He is giving up his right to this space in order to assure everyone that they don't need to worry – that the *shabab* won't take over the plaza.

3rd *SHABAB*

I believe that children have the right to play near their mothers and that their mothers have the right to be near their sons while they are playing. This would give more confidence to the kids themselves: as the proverb goes, 'the child will play with a strong arm.'

ABU RAMI begins to beat the ground with his stick nervously.

3rd *SHABAB*

(Glancing at ABU RAMI, swallowing, and continuing) If his mother is sitting nearby a child will feel secure and protected from any bad thing that might happen to him.

ABU RAMI beats the ground more slowly and softly and then lapses.

ARCHITECT

(Aside) All of a sudden the plaza has become the site for a young generation to negotiate their rights with the older generation: the place to discuss what is right and what is wrong, what is possible and what is not possible. In the past people haven't had the chance to discuss matters in a common space. All the previous negotiations and conflicts were focused on the problem of how to enlarge individual homes at the expense of shared space. Homes in the camps are very small and crowded – they were built within the original footprints of the tents they replaced – and the main concern of the camp inhabitants until now has been ensuring that there is at least one bed for each child in the family. Until now, the common space and how to use it has been the last thing on their minds.

END OF ACT 1

ACT TWO

Two years later. Inside the Youth Program Center, the ARCHITECT, ABU TARIQ (the Camp Service Officer), ABU SAMI (the Principal of the Boy's School), the DEPUTY DIRECTOR of the Youth Program Center, as well as many of the other male members of the community, including many of the camp elders, are waiting. The air is abuzz with simultaneous conversations, most of them referencing a man who is not present, ABU AHMED. People keep exiting and entering and monitoring their cell phones to check on ABU AHMED's whereabouts. A table with a plan of the plaza and pens is in the center of the room. The ARCHITECT is standing near the table. ABU AHMED finally arrives.

His manner is aggressive and determined.
He turns to the ARCHITECT.

ABU AHMED

A very tall man, about forty-five years old, wearing
khaki military-style fatigues

You will never be able to continue this plaza if I cannot park directly in front of my home.

ARCHITECT

(Aside) The design is already done, and we are in the middle of construction. ABU AHMED has stopped the work.

(To ABU AHMED) But as far as I can tell, your car could be parked only five meters from the entrance to your home. This is a very short distance in any part of this world. To be honest, I can't really understand your problem.

ABU AHMED

(Nervously) I want to park my car immediately in front of the door of my home. It's my wife's right to step out of the front door and find the car waiting for her, and I have the right to be able to unload my groceries right in front of my house.

ARCHITECT

(To AHMED, calmly) What is the real reason behind this demand? The plaza's main purpose is to be a safe play area for kids, and to give the people in the neighborhood a place to sit outside on hot summer nights and get fresh air outside of their tiny homes. This is a plaza for weddings and funerals. This is not a plaza for parking cars.

ABU AHMED

I'm not asking to turn the plaza into a parking lot. I want to be the only one allowed to drive in.

ARCHITECT

(Incredulously) What do you mean, the only one? How you would resolve the problem, from your point of view?

ABU AHMED takes a pen from the table
and begins to sketch on the map.

ABU AHMED

I would suggest that we would put a gate here. I will be the owner of the keys to the gate. I could open and close it only when needed and that's it. I will be the guard of the plaza.

ARCHITECT

(Surprised) Who appointed you the boss of the plaza? Did the people in the neighborhood elect you to keep the keys?

ABU AHMED

(Throwing down his pen and shouting angrily) Either this or you will not be able to work in the plaza.

The men in the room try to calm ABU AHMED down.

ARCHITECT

Who do you think you are, to be able to stop a plaza that is owned by the whole neighborhood? This is not your plaza, it's not your property. It's everyone's.

ABU AHMED

I work in the security services in the Palestinian Authority, and I will absolutely be able to stop this if you will not accept my demand.

ARCHITECT

I will tell you for the thousandth time that this is not a parking lot, it's a plaza. It's not for you and it's not for others; it's for all. I still cannot understand why you can't park your car only five meters away. If every person in the camp demanded to be able to park in front of his entrance, we would be obliged to be demolish half of the camp's homes in order to fulfill this request. And don't forget that we only managed to achieve this plaza after we demolished two homes in order to make space for it. What more do you want?

ABU AHMED

(Glaring angrily at the ARCHITECT) For me it's not only the parking.

ARCHITECT

(To the group) Here comes the real issue.

ABU AHMED

(Calming down) If I want to build a new storey on my house, I will save a lot of money if I have staging space for heavy equipment rather than being limited to manual construction, but the design as it stands now makes this impossible.

ABU RABIH

But you are not even sure, ABU AHMED, that you will be adding another storey on top of your home.

ABU RAMI

Yes. Why are you creating problems now?

ABU AHMED

Even if the possibility is remote, I want at least to know that I am doing everything I can to ensure a better future for my family.

ARCHITECT

(Aside) What would ABU RAMI's father say to such a problem? ABU AHMED is not only planning to have a concrete roof and extended columns for future floors. He is also looking to plan for the very far future.

(Speaking to ABU AHMED) We cannot really modify the entire design depending on what you *might* do in the future. This is a plaza for all the inhabitants to use and enjoy today.

ABU AHMED

(With finality) Either this or no plaza. I will not permit access to the site. From now on you will not be able to put a single stone in place.

ARCHITECT

(Aside) If this same person who is arguing over a meter here or a meter there were asked about the right of return by a journalist, he would aver without hesitation that he is ready to leave everything he ever built in the camp to return back to his original home and village in Palestine. How can refugees plan for a "possible" future and keep the hope of a return that may be impossible alive without one of these visions betraying the other? How can I blame someone that wants to ensure a better future for his family after he has lost everything he had for not taking the public into consideration?

(To the group) This is a plaza for all of you. If you are not able to convince ABU AHMED to allow the construction to continue, then let's stop the project immediately. I will not solve this problem. This is not my problem, it's a camp problem. If each person imposes his own desires on the others, then the camp is not ready to have a collective space.

The ARCHITECT exits.

END OF ACT 2

ACT THREE

One year later. An unusually large living room, about 30 square meters, in ABU ATA's home. ABU ATA, his wife, his seven children, the ARCHITECT, and the neighborhood women, including HADIYAH, AMEENAH, HAJAH AMEENAH, JAMILAH, and UMM ALI, and many men from the camp, including AHMED, are all sitting on four mattresses that line each wall. The TODDLER, the youngest member of ABU ATA's family, wears pink. She is fascinated by the ARCHITECT's red bag, and keeps trying to

explore it. She moves from one group of women to another, smiling at everyone. The adjacent plaza, where a number of kids are playing rambunctiously, is visible and audible through several open windows. The guests of ABU ATA take no notice of this activity.

ARCHITECT

(Aside) ABU ATA was one of the first and most adamant supporters of the idea of the plaza. He came up with the original proposal to buy the two shelters that were demolished to make the space for the plaza. He was responsible for managing many of the community negotiations that were needed to implement the design, and he was the one who insisted from the beginning that he would be the plaza's caretaker, in order to be an example to the rest of the neighborhood. He has invited all of the women of the neighborhood to come to this meeting at his home to discuss the issues around the plaza.

(To the group) What do you think now about the plaza, after all this time?

UMM ALI

An elderly woman dressed in black

(Gently moving the TODDLER, who is standing directly in her line of sight to the ARCHITECT, to one side, and making eye contact with the ARCHITECT) This is an *excellent* plaza. But now we can't wait to see it finished. We are tired of living with construction, and we are eager to see the plaza ready.

ARCHITECT

I know how much you are looking forward to it, but now you can finally imagine it: the rest is only finishes.

The TODDLER plants herself firmly in front of IMMAM HAMA as if the older woman is a character on TV, blocking the ARCHITECT's view.

UMM ALI

(Leaning to either side in a vain attempt to reestablish eye contact with the ARCHITECT while the TODDLER tracks her movements, and speaking with great authority) This plaza is open to kids until they reach thirteen years old. If a male older than that comes into the plaza, I will kick him out. I will tell him, 'This is not your plaza, you have no work to do here, and it's prohibited for you to remain. We have a lot of girls and women here who want to feel comfortable, who want to be able to get outside and hang the laundry, and I will not permit any stranger to be around our homes or in our plaza.'

ARCHITECT

(To the group) But are you using the plaza?

ABU ATA's WIFE

(Smiling broadly) Yes, I go out with my husband quite every day and sometimes I also go with my husband's brother and his wife. We prepare coffee, we go out, and we drink it in the plaza.

ARCHITECT

(Delighted) Then you are using the plaza! It's not unacceptable anymore to drink coffee and tea in public.

(Looks at ABU ATA) Do you remember how you were opposed to the idea of drinking tea and coffee or preparing tabbouleh in the plaza?

ABU ATA's WIFE looks stricken as she realizes what she has just admitted.

ABU ATA's WIFE

Maybe with time, you know? Sometimes we need time in order to get used to doing things we didn't formerly accept in Fawwar. (Rallies) Because now I am often out in the plaza with my kids, running after them and playing together with them, and this is why I believe that everything will come with time.

The WOMEN

(Speaking to each other) This is a very good plaza.

1st FAWWAR WOMAN

(With pride) My parents live in another camp, and when they came to visit me and they saw this plaza, they told me how lucky my children and I are to have this place to play near our home from now on.

ARCHITECT

What do you think about the final form of the plaza – a kind of home without a roof? What do you feel about the walls surrounding the plaza?

2nd FAWWAR WOMAN

Thank God the wall in front of our home is the highest of them all. It gave my husband and I the chance to create a private terrace in front of our home where we can sit outside without being seen. You didn't just create the plaza, but you also created very small plazas in front of all of the homes that border on it, where we can be outside in the sunshine and still enjoy some privacy. If the wall were not so high, my husband would not have let me come out and get some sun and have coffee outside while the *shabab* are playing nearby. Also, for me, it's not at all a closed plaza – why are we speaking about closed plazas? It has entrances and exits. We can easily come and go.

HALAH arrives, greets everyone, and sits down.

ABU ATA's WIFE

(To the ARCHITECT) Sandi, do you know HALAH?

ARCHITECT

(To HALAH) Yes, of course, I remember you. I remember every word of your opinion about the plaza. And now I am very interested to know if your opinion has changed with time.

HALAH

(Looking around the group, triumphantly) There were some *shabab* in the plaza a few days ago. I told you this would be a problem.

UMM ALI

(In a pacifying tone) Yes, but we kicked them out, and they left without any problem. We have control of the plaza, and there's no chance of it becoming a hangout for *shabab*.

IMAD

A self-confident man in his 40's, he represents the new generation in the camp. He is very active in NGO's and other activities, and he has a great deal of credibility.

If any *shabab* comes and plays in the plaza –

ABU ATA

The father of six daughters and one son, and his son, he is a jovial and dynamic figure in the camp.

(Interrupting) But listen: I am a *shabab*, and I swear to God that I was also playing in the plaza!

IMAD

Yes! Actually, that's true! Last time I passed through the plaza I saw ABU ATA playing with all the neighborhood kids. (Looks challengingly at IMMAM HAMA)

UMM ALI

There is a huge difference between a local *shabab* and the *shabab* off the street. Besides, you are not really a *shabab*– forty-five years old is a young old man (laughing).

IMAD

(To UMM ALI) If I come with my wife to drink tea with you in the plaza, what would you think about that?

1st FAWWAR WOMAN

Of course you would be welcome!

2nd FAWWAR WOMAN

You and your wife are among the best people in Fawwar.

3rd FAWWAR WOMAN

You are welcome any time.

UMM ALI

(Looking at the ARCHITECT, conceding) You know what, it's ok because his wife is my cousin.

ARCHITECT

So you want the plaza to be only a family plaza?

EVERYONE laughs.

UMM ALI

No, no no! Even neighbors are absolutely welcome! But not strangers, you know? Not strangers from outside the neighborhood.

A number of simultaneous conversations break out and the noise level increases. ABU ATA prepares to speak, and everyone falls silent to listen to him.

ABU ATA

(To the ARCHITECT) Sandi, sister of mine, I will tell you one very important thing. This is not a plaza for old people. This is not a plaza for the *shabab*. The *shabab* in this camp have other places where they can congregate. We have a Youth Program Center, we have a very big stadium; they have a lot of other places to go. They are independent enough to spend time in places that are not necessarily near their homes, but the small children still need to be around their mothers and close to where they live. We need to protect our young kids from the main streets and the cars. This plaza helped to preserve the open space we all need. Now we have a different life and a different perspective on the future. Now, when my wife sees me in the plaza, and you know, I am a very open person (chuckling), I tell my wife, 'Why don't you bring a cup of coffee or tea, and we will sit together and have it in the plaza?' The first time, she felt a bit shy. The second time she brought the coffee, and the third time she did not feel shy anymore.

ARCHITECT

But if someone from outside the neighborhood wanted to have his wedding in your plaza, how would you react?

1st FAWWAR WOMAN

How could we say no?

2nd FAWWAR WOMAN

This plaza is open for any wedding or funeral from any part of the camp.

3rd FAWWAR WOMAN

Everyone is welcome.

ABU ATA

(To the ARCHITECT) We are not just saying this to be polite. I have turned a small room that faces the plaza into a “service room.” This room is available for anyone who wants to hold a ceremony in the plaza to use, in order to distribute food or drinks, etc. I also let people use the electricity in my home for whatever they need, like powering lights and stereos for a wedding.

ARCHITECT

But would you expect that a lot of people from other parts of the camp would come and use this space for their weddings and funerals?

1st FAWWAR WOMAN

Of course!

2nd and 3rd FAWWAR WOMEN

Of course they will!

ABU ATA

(Doubtfully) You know, many people would prefer to hold their wedding ceremonies nearby their homes, for logistical reasons like food distribution. This is why, as a community, we are beginning to think about how to create similar plazas in other parts of the camp. The enclosure of the plaza was a very important step, I think, and absolutely essential. Imagine if the kids were to play soccer and kick the ball through one of the neighbor’s windows. These kinds of accidents used to happen all the time, but now we don’t have to worry about this issue anymore. The walls create a special and protected space, because a person who is simply passing through the neighborhood would never find himself in the plaza by chance. Before, if the kids were playing soccer and they hit someone with the ball, the person would have gotten very upset. Perhaps a pregnant woman might get hit by the ball! It’s something we can’t absolutely control.

(Triumphantly) But now, with the new plaza’s design, whoever is passing in the street can pass without interruption, and whoever wants to enter the plaza does so at their own risk, which means that the person has to accept the possibility that he might get hit by a soccer ball, which means in turn that if he gets hit by the ball, he will just laugh and be happy to be part of the game. For me, this is what makes this plaza a special one.

(Laughing) You know, I really like to play soccer. I go to the plaza and play with the kids all the time. You know what, all the kids of this neighborhood like me.

The WOMEN in the room nod in agreement.

1st FAWWAR WOMAN

Everybody likes ABU ATA.

2nd FAWWAR WOMAN

Actually the greatest joy for our kids is playing soccer with ABU ATA.

ARCHITECT

What nice news you are giving me! This means that the plaza did not create any problems for you, and all the issues that you were afraid of did not materialize.

(To HALAH) You remember how skeptical you were about this plaza.

HALAH

I never was able to picture what this plaza would look like. I never imagined that we would have been able to find a solution that would satisfy everyone. I have to be honest with you: this plaza created a lot of discussion and conflict in the camp.

ABU ATA

Yes. I suffered a lot as a defender of this plaza.

HALAH

Yes, you are right, and I can understand everything that you had to go through.

ABU ATA

(To the group) I took the plan of the plaza to the home of every person who was against this project, and I sat with them, reviewed the plan, and explained the design. I was so patient with everybody. I discussed each and every centimeter of this plaza with everyone, and now here we are, finally seeing its form, and finally many people are now reconsidering their opinion.

(To the ARCHITECT) You have to understand one important thing: neither my wife nor my sister-in-law are architects that can read a plan and understand how it will look.

HALAH

(With relief) Yes. You're right. I didn't understand the plaza at first because I am not an architect. I honestly was so afraid that this plaza would block the windows of my home, and that the façade of my house would become the wall of the plaza. This would have created a lot of problems for my family. This is why we were absolutely against the plaza at first. But during construction, when we started to understand it, my husband and I stopped being skeptical, and during the whole period of implementation, my family never created any problems.

ARCHITECT

(To the group) How do you plan to clean the plaza?

IMAD

We already have UNRWA cleaning crews that come through and clean the camp –

AMEENAH

(Interrupting, to the ARCHITECT) We women will be cleaning the plaza. Of course we will clean the plaza and take care of the plants.

ABU ATA

Yes, but you will not be the only ones. Each time we have a wedding or a funeral, this plaza will be cleaned from top to bottom, because the bride and all of her friends will give it a thorough shower. We have only to help our children understand that they are not to pick the plants or cut the flowers. I will take care of this.

ABU ATA'S WIFE

(Complaining) ABU ATA has become the caretaker of this plaza. As if he has nothing else to do or think about!

ABU ATA

(Complacently) Look, I will give you an example of why this will not be a difficult mission for me. (Looking around at the group magisterially) If you serve *mansaf*³ to someone who is not used to eating meat or rich food, he will stuff himself. If you give the same person *mansaf* for a second day, he will eat, but perhaps a bit less. If you serve the same thing to the same person for a third day in a row, he will again be happy to have it, but he will certainly have a more controlled appetite. If you serve *mansaf* to this person for the fourth day in a row, he might ask you for some *m'jadarah*⁴ instead. In the same way, the kids will see the flowers in the plaza for the first time, and they might be tempted to pick them even though I teach them not to. The second day, they may grow a little more used to them, and so on. By the fourth day, they will see the *mansaf* as if it were *m'jadarah*, something that they are used to, and they won't pick at the plants. I don't think I will have a very difficult time of it. I am absolutely not worried. People will get used to the plaza even faster than we can imagine.

Side discussions break out anew about how the plaza will be used. The role of the women pops up again in their debates.

UMM ALI

(Insistently) I will never let my daughters or my daughters-in-law sit outside in the plaza by themselves and have tea or coffee.

The group shifts and subtly splits into two faintly delineated groups: a smaller cluster of mostly older men and women on UMM ALI's side and a much larger contingent of mostly younger men and women on ABU

³ A traditional dish made of lamb cooked in a sauce of fermented dried yogurt and served with rice or bulgur, usually reserved for special occasions like weddings in the camps.

⁴ An inexpensive, work-a-day meal made with rice and lentils and commonly eaten in the camps.

ATA and his wife's side. Those closer to ABU ATA begin to try to reason with UMM ALI and those in her group, telling them that they will change their minds over time.

HADIYAH

(To UMM ALI, in a confessional tone) Weeks ago, my neighbors and I went out to the plaza and drank coffee. (Looks at ARCHITECT shyly, as though revealing a secret) But the first time I have to admit that I felt shy about going, and I was worried that someone would pass by and see me, and say, 'what is this woman doing in the street?'

ARCHITECT

But maybe the example that ABU ATA gave us before is applicable here too: you might feel shy the first day, the second day less so, and the third day you will feel totally comfortable --

UMM ALI

(Interrupting, sarcastically) Yes, it will then become what we call in Arabic an agency without a door – a place where anything goes!

Everyone laughs.

ARCHITECT

(Aside) Yes, but one thing is very clear: what they used to see as a taboo three years ago is not a taboo anymore. They have already begun using the plaza, even though it's not finished, for the exact purposes they were not convinced they would be able to one year ago. Everyone is describing the plaza as though it has become the home of the neighborhood.

(To the group) Only one year ago your manner was totally different.

IMAD

(Confidently) A year from now things will be even more completely changed.

UMM ALI harrumphs discontentedly. The smaller group that had assembled around her shuffles back into the larger group, so that the assembly is no longer faintly divided into two groups.

UMM ALI

(Threatening, but with a comical edge) I will kick you all out if you insist on using the plaza in this way! All of you! And I will tell all of the women: Shame on you because you are doing things like this!

ABU ATA

(Looks at UMM ALI challengingly, and turns to the ARCHITECT) Listen, I promise you that I will take a photograph of UMM ALI together with her daughters and her neighbors in the plaza, drinking coffee and pulling *molokhiya* leaves off of their stems.⁵

The group laughs uproariously. Even the children in the room, who have not been following the discussion, smile and join in the merriment.

HALAH

I can see that this plaza will give us women a way to see each other more. We are neighbors and we hardly have the opportunity to meet. This place will give us more of a social life.

1st FAWWAR WOMAN:

(Kicks the ARCHITECT's leg lightly) I promise you that we will not drink coffee at home anymore. We'll have it in the plaza, absolutely. But we'll have our first cup of coffee with ABU ATA so he'll give us legitimacy, and then we'll go out and have coffee alone the next time.

Everyone laughs.

IMAD

(To the group) Listen. The habit of sitting out of doors is not new for us in Fawwar. On the contrary, it is an old tradition that all of us used to do when I was a kid: we would sit outside our small homes and have a bit of fresh air. I think that the main reason that this habit faded is the crowdedness of the camp. As people expanded their homes, the streets became narrower and narrower, until they became very tight alleys. If I were to take a chair outside and sit in the alley, I would block the entire street. This is why I think we lost this tradition, and people became unused to taking leisure time and having activities out of doors. For me, the main reason is therefore that we didn't have any adequate space where we could sit without feeling that we are basically sitting in the streets and blocking traffic. I think that the plaza is giving us the possibility to recreate that culture of using outside spaces, especially because, if you look at us as a society, we are a society where the relationships between neighbors are very close.

HALAH

Listen. I will admit one last thing: two nights ago, I had dinner with my husband in the plaza.

EVERYONE looks at her in astonishment.

⁵ *Molokhiya* is a spinach-like Egyptian plant that is prepared for cooking by removing each leaf by hand from the stems. The work is tedious and so it is usually done in a group setting where women can talk as they work, much like shelling peas.

EVERYONE

Dinner?

HALAH

(Sheepishly) Yes, and actually I have to admit we've had dinner in the plaza *twice*.

END OF ACT 3

ACT FOUR

Six months later. A large, rectangular meeting room on the fourth floor of the Local Committee Building in Fawwar Camp, with a bank of computers along one of the long walls and a large round table in the middle. The UNWRA has orchestrated a visit to the Fawwar Camp for members of the Talbieh and Hus'n refugee camps in Jordan. A number of men and women from both of these camps are sitting around the table, including Camp Service Officers as well as ABU RAJA and RAMSEY from Talbieh. From Fawwar, ABU TARIQ, the Camp Service Officer, are at the table, as are ABU RABIH, ABU RAMI, ABU ATA, IMAD, ABU SAMI. The ARCHITECT and members of her team, including SAMI MURA, are also present. The mood of the meeting is serious and ceremonial, and everyone speaks very formally. Everyone wears their best clothes or official uniforms, as if it was a Palestinian national occasion.

ABU TARIQ

The Fawwar Camp Service Officer, he is a well-known character in the camp, with white hair

(Dignified yet emotional) Welcome to our esteemed guests from Jordan. Let me tell you about the camp of Fawwar. The camp of Fawwar is the camp of resistance. It is located in the south of the West Bank, ten kilometers from Hebron. Now is our glorious moment of welcoming our brothers and our lovers from the refugee camps of the Diaspora. I want to ask if we could first introduce ourselves to each other, as this is surely the most important thing we could gain from this visit.

Everyone begins to introduce themselves to everyone else, identifying themselves as coming from their original villages rather than from the camps where they now reside.

ARCHITECT

(Aside, in a low tone) It's rare that any personal meeting takes place between refugees in the camps and refugees in the Diaspora. Often you will find relatives living in different parts of the Diaspora that have never met. For all of the visitors from Jordan, this is their first time to set foot inside what is known as historical Palestine. Even if they will not be able to visit their proper villages and cities, this still feels like a step toward return -- a kind of dream fulfilled. And in hosting the,, the people of Fawwar feel as if they are sharing in the same moment. This lends an air of unreality to the meeting. I notice that people are behaving as though they were characters in a great novel: the novel of their return. (Smiling) They speak self-consciously, as though their words were being broadcast on Al-Jazeera.

(To the assembly) I want all of you to give us a moment to discuss the important topic of the plaza, especially because we have the people of Talbieh with us, and they had a quite similar intervention in their camp. It is very easy to create a gathering space inside an institution because the institution will be the responsible entity. But what we've been trying to do in this case is understand how to create a collective and open space for the society without having to rely on an umbrella organization. I remember when we first broached the idea of the plaza everyone had a lot of fear about this foreign body that was being introduced into the camp. This is why I propose that while we are all sitting here under the same roof, refugees from both the West Bank and Jordan discuss the lessons we can draw from one of the most difficult questions we have to face: how to intervene in the common space of a camp that is not seeking an image of the public any more than it is seeking permanence, that wants rather to disband and to be erased. How does one give an image of a public space to a camp whose only desired self-image is that of ceasing to be imaginable? I realize I am raising questions we cannot answer right now, but at least I would like to formulate the questions.

ABU TARIQ sits on the edge of the table with great solemnity.

ABU TARIQ

(Importantly) The Fawwar Refugee Camp originally used to host very small open spaces. As you know, these tiny areas are used for the social occasions of the camp, such as weddings and funerals. When we first began to think about creating the plaza, the open area that we started with was around 200 to 250 meters square. Then, some of the neighbors of the plaza began to think about these two very small homes next to the open space, and began to ask if there was a way to include the area these two shelters took up in a larger plaza. We found a very creative way, working with the local committees, to buy the homes, compensate their former owners, and demolish them in order to enlarge

the dimensions of the plaza to 700 square meters. We decided that we also needed a safe play area for our kids. Fawwar is located at one of the main crossroads of the West Bank, and this busy intersection actually used to be the official playground for our kids because there was no other place where they could play. We were sure that we needed different spaces in the camp, but we were not sure how to create them, who and what would be permitted in them, and who would be responsible for maintaining them. We had a long and intense process of community meetings and discussions, from which it became completely clear that this plaza could work only if its neighbors took primary responsibility for it. We also began to understand how to use the space. We knew that it was to be a place for our kids to play, and that if we installed playground equipment it would become the most attractive playspace ever for all the kids of the camp. But we felt that this would simultaneously create a huge problem: the presence of the kids by themselves would cause tensions with the neighbors and among the children and their families. Actually it's enough to consider the Women's Program Center in Fawwar. They have a small play area for the kids, and after closing time kids of all ages try to climb the walls in order to get into the play area, which is dangerous for them and damages the equipment. We wanted to avoid anything that would create social problems like this when it came to the plaza. This is where the community participation became critical. We discussed every single thing, such as the distance between neighboring homes and the walls of the plaza, the height of each wall that would separate the private from the public, and issues that might arise in the future. Still, that did not save us from having a lot of problems even during the implementation. People opposed the project, or weren't happy with parking arrangements, or wanted things changed, and once they began to see the whole thing, everyone came up with fresh demands. We tried to deal with each case in the best way. And now, thank God, we are very near to the end of this project. We already did all of the structural work and now we are just doing the finishes, and we are quite sure that the plaza will be a success. And here it is very important to say that all the other projects we managed to do before this were sponsored by institutions. This is the only project that could be considered a collective project of the camp.

NAIM

The Project Manager of the Camp Improvement
Project in Talbieh Camp, Jordan

(Formally) I would like to reciprocate with some historical background on the case of Talbieh. Yes. We also had a similar experience. But before I begin to explain what we did in Talbieh I want to pose two questions to the people who are assembled here. The first question is: what is your definition of community participation? And second, did the idea of the plaza come from the people of the camp, and if not, how did it develop? Was the plaza one of the priorities of the residents of Fawwar?

ABU TARIQ

On community participation, we talked about this project intensely for five years. We spent so long discussing it that we started to feel as though the project were imaginary and that nothing would actually come out of so much talk. By the time we began implementation, we were all looking forward to seeing the first tangible results of a project which had until that point been entirely community participation and nothing else!

ARCHITECT

The Fawwar people weren't the only ones tired of endless discussions about the plaza – my team felt the same way! When it came to the plaza, I became the joke of the office. I was never able to deliver, but I was constantly pushing everyone to think with me about what a collective space in a temporary camp might look like.

The ARCHITECT looks over to her TEAM MEMBERS and smiles ruefully. They are laughing quietly. All of the people from Fawwar Camp are smiling as well, imagining the ARCHITECT's office as a kind of microcosm of their own endless site of discussion, the plaza.

ARCHITECT

I was convinced that even if this took us five or six years to finish, getting this plaza right would allow us to replicate it all over the West Bank. On the other hand, if we failed, it would become the first and last plaza in the West Bank. I also didn't want to create a plaza and then imprison it within barbed wire. This would have simply proved the argument that we hear so often, that Palestine refugees are not ready to manage their own affairs. I have to admit that my fears were reduced each year, and I am now almost convinced that we managed to find a way to translate all of what happened these last few years into an architectural reality that is ready to be part of the whole texture of the camp.

The group nods in understanding and agreement.

ABU RAJA

A visitor from Talbieh Camp in Jordan, he is a man in his mid-40's, wearing a leather jacket with a white dress shirt and tie. He acts as an unofficial spokesman for the whole contingent from Talbieh

I want to underline my alliance with what Sandi just mentioned: the importance of having enough time to study all the ramifications of such a public project. And now I want to explain the story of the plaza in Talbieh Camp.

(Clears his throat) Talbieh is a camp that lacks any sort of open space. The plaza we managed to create is only twelve meters square.

One person in the group laughs.

ARCHITECT

(Aside) It's hard to know if he finds the idea of a twelve-meter square plaza ridiculous or ridiculously sad.

ABU RAJA

We also used the method of community participation. We discussed the plaza with all of the neighbors, all of them participated in thinking about how the plaza was supposed to function and what it ought to look like, and we reviewed each and every detail of the design. Our kids also participated in the process. We too spent more than two years figuring out how to implement the plaza. Like you (gesturing to the people from Fawwar), we also weathered challenges to the design during implementation that required additional meetings and negotiations. The final design featured an elaborate set of playground equipment, and this was what we all agreed would be the best. But when the equipment was finally installed and the plaza was finished, the place was overrun with kids and the neighbors became extremely upset. Older kids started visiting the playground after dark, and who knows what they were up to. Of course this plaza became *the* place to go for every kid in the camp – exciting equipment, nice pavement, everything perfect – and the neighbors didn't want them there anymore. This was the situation that we faced.

Among the group from Talbieh, many people begin speaking at the same time.

TALBIEH MAN 1

A lot of kids in a very tiny space.

TALBIEH WOMAN 1

But our kids want to play.

TALBIEH WOMAN 2

Many teenagers that were not really kids anymore used to come and play in this space, and of course the age difference created a lot of problems –

ABU RAJA

(Interrupting) Because of this we finally decided that the best way to use the plaza was to surround it with barbed wire to institute hours of operation. We installed a gate and a lock, we gave the keys to the neighbors, and we arranged for schools to use the plaza for certain hours of the day. We absolutely thought that the only way we could use it was to institute a very precise program under the supervision of the schools and neighbors.

RAMSEY

A very young man, a social worker from Talbieh Camp in Jordan, he is very involved and open to discussing and understanding social problems

What I think the people of Fawwar have benefited from is the first kid's park that they created inside the Women's Program Center. This gave them insight into many of the problems that they might face in the plaza. For us in Talbieh Camp, our plaza was our first ever experience of this kind... (Smiling wistfully) all those colors, all those colors! (Sighs) The plaza that we created in Talbieh was so amazing that it became an object of contention.

4th FAWWAR WOMAN

(Breaking in curiously) Could you please describe the place for me? What is it like?

RAMSEY

(Emotionally) It's a huge playground! It has a lot of places for kids to climb and jump, a lot of ways to get in and get out– it's really nice! It introduces new colors in the middle of the camp. Everybody was looking forward to such a thing... (sighs again) and this in my opinion was the reason the plaza was finally closed. (Pauses, then brightens a bit) But now we have another example of a plaza in the camp, which is a much simpler layout, more like your plaza (gestures to the people of Fawwar Camp); it is merely a paved space with some greenery. Neighbors totally refused to have anything else in this plaza, and the only thing we did was to improve the conditions that were already in place a little. The high visibility of the first plaza created a lot of trouble, so we made our next plaza invisible. We also planted a garden for the kids on the edge of the camp, and now they go there instead of crowding the old plaza, but the neighbors still feel very unhappy about it. The plaza became a kind of catalyst for opposition and a pretext for conflict.

ABU SAMI

The Principal of the Fawwar Camp Boy's School and an Arabic teacher, very elegantly attired in a suit and tie, he speaks in flawless classical Arabic in public settings.

(A bit testily) I don't think that you can consider the Women's Program Center experience a test case for the plaza. The Women's Program Center is a private institution that happens to contain a play space for their kindergarten. A public plaza where the entire camp is theoretically welcome is radically different.

The people of Fawwar Camp nod in agreement.

SAMI MURA, The Urban Planner for the UNRWA Camp Improvement Program of the West Bank, and a member of the ARCHITECT's team

I want to give my perspective as part of the design team for the Fawwar plaza. I don't think that this plaza was an architectural project. It's not enough to design a nice plaza and implement it in order to ensure that it will be a success. For me, the most important thing was how long it took to implement this plaza. We had different phases. Buying the two shelters, demolishing them, clearing away the rubble – all of this took time, and it gave people a chance to come to grips with the change. I think the main difference between the Fawwar experience and the Talbieh experience is that in spite of the fact that you (gesturing toward the visitors from Talbieh) had a lot of community participation during the design phase, the implementation happened very abruptly. Most of the project was finished within a month.

The visitors from Talbieh nod in agreement.

SAMI MURA

(Continues) Giving people the time to imagine and reflect is a very important thing. We spent more than one year building the basic form of the plaza – work that could have been done in three months. And of course we often had to stop work and allow for additional negotiations. But I think this gave people the time to shape the vision of what we were doing. We could have finished the plaza design in less than a month. We could have even arrived at the same design solution. But I doubt that people would have been as happy with the results. Without all the efforts of ABU ATA, for instance, this plaza would have been impossible.

The people of Fawwar Camp nod in agreement.

ABU TARIQ

(Smiles at ABU ATA) It's true! Without ABU ATA we wouldn't have the plaza.

ABU ATA

(Laughing) Now I feel ready to be an architect, specializing in plazas. (Looking at the ARCHITECT and her team) Would you hire me to be on your team?

END OF ACT 4