

Campus in Camps
Collective Dictionary

PARTICIPATION

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CAMPUS IN CAMPS

Campus in Camps is a two-year experimental educational and project oriented program, engaging the participants from the West Bank's refugee camps in an attempt to explore and produce new forms of representation of camps and refugees beyond the static and traditional symbols of victimization, passivity and poverty. The program aims at transgressing, without eliminating, the distinction between camp and city, refugee and citizen, center and periphery, theory and practice, teacher and student.

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The content of this publication does not necessarily represent the views and opinions of the institutions mentioned above.

The Collective Dictionary is a series of publications containing definitions of concepts.

The terms proposed are those considered fundamental for the understanding of the contemporary condition of Palestinian refugee camps. These words have emerged as a result of actions and active dialogs with the camp community. Written reflections on personal experiences, interviews, excursions and photographic investigations constitute the starting point for the formulation of more structured thoughts.

The Collective Dictionary is both the reference and conceptual framework for all Campus in Camps projects and interventions.

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Al-O'una, participation then and now

Bisan Al-Jaffari

When I started thinking about the definition of participation and what it means to me, I searched for its origin and how its meaning changed over time. Participation means to me one's desire and ability to cooperate and interact with others to accomplish something. Through my stories, I'm going to show how this concept is changing in different societies.

When I asked my grandmother about her own definition of participation, I felt as if she had wanted anyone to ask her this question in order to talk about many things that seemed to be marginalized.

She talked about how she and her neighbors were happy together; she said that they used to deal with each other according to what is called *Al-O'una*. I asked her about the meaning of *Al-O'una*, and she said: Helping another accomplish something that could develop the whole society. For example, if a man from the camp wanted to build a house, all the neighbors and the residents of the camp, whether men or women, would help him build his home.

The men were responsible for working in the concrete, and the women were responsible for carrying the mixed concrete from one place to another or for cooking for the workers.”

“Another example that can show the meaning of *Al-O’una* is when a woman has a baby. You would find all the women of the neighborhood in her house helping her till she becomes well again. Some women were responsible for bringing the chickens, others for making the soup, and others for cleaning her house.”

She continued: “I still remember that we lived outside of the camp during the first Intifada, and in this period the soldiers used to besiege the camp and announce curfew. We used to buy a huge amount of flour and distribute it to the whole camp by giving it to the children who would sneak in through the small alleyways of the camp.”

I felt so disappointed while listening to these encouraging stories about our society in the past and how happy and cooperative our families were.

One day, I met a woman in her forties in front of a women’s center and asked her about the activities that women can participate in and how cooperative the people are.

She told me that she lives in the middle of the camp and that she has good relations with her neighbors, but she visits them only during special occasions. “Recently, we were told of an activity held by the women’s center where women can share their experiences in cooking,” she said. “We went there, but we were asked to bring money. Unfortunately, I hadn’t the money they wanted. So I went only to watch without participating, but nobody even asked me to participate. Since then, I lost interest in these sorts of participation.”

Sharing can make people happy, especially when they see the good results of what they’ve done. When she told me this story, I realized how much the concept of participation has changed in our lives. I wonder if this is due to technological development or financial development or the changing in the social relations among us as human beings.

A day of amazing participation

Ayat Al-Turshan, Nedaa Hamouz

PHOTOS BY
Sara Pellegrini and Giuliana Racco

It was like a dream which can't be achieved without leaving an effect behind, a day which carries a lot of tension, hard work, happiness, laughter and waiting for unknown results. You can't imagine that this great activity required a month of work and each day brought us so many wonderful sensations and hopes. This activity is the first step of our project (Women Create Life) for which we began by meeting with the women in their houses to talk with them and prepare for the first big event for women in the camp.

The day before, at 7 am we began by carrying the ingredients and distributing them to all the women who wanted to prepare some *maftoul* the following day. We went to the supermarket and bought the vegetables: 7 kilos of potatoes, carrots, tomatoes and zucchini. We then went to the poultry shop and bought 25 chickens and carried them to the house of one woman to clean and cook them. At 5 pm, we went to the man who wanted to bring the tent, chairs and tables, and he promised that everything will be ready

by 6 pm. After finishing all these missions, we went to Ayat's house to have dinner. We were very tired and hungry. And the dinner was very delicious, like a gift after all that hard work. At 7 pm, Ayat's brother Abdullah, who helped us a lot, called to tell us some bad news that the tent was ready: it was not covered on all sides as we wanted, so we had to go and check. We returned back to the plaza to see what happened, and we told the man to cover the sides because this is what we decided with the women when we meet them. So we soon solved the problem and returned back to Ayat's house to continue working and preparing the schedule and the flash cards for the English lesson. We stayed up working after midnight. In other words, you can say that we didn't sleep at all.



Setting up the tent in the plaza the night before



Early morning, the plaza ready to be used

Now it's the critical moment - it's the 19th of December. The morning of the day of the activity we start preparing ourselves as we would have for a wedding party. Then we went directly to the plaza. We start cleaning the place and organizing the chairs and the tables with the help of others. At 10 am the women began gathering in the plaza, bringing the coffee and tea for the others, others brought the *maftoul* ready to be cooked, and the rest came ready to cook and give a hand. At the beginning, we saw apprehension, shyness and tension clearly on their faces for being in this place for the first time. They whisper that there are some people looking at them from their roof or windows. Depressed for a moment, fear infiltrated our hearts, but as soon as we and the

women start to cope with this situation of sharing with others, we overcome this stress, behave naturally and start moving freely as if in our own houses. The women start cooking. They put the *maftoul* on the fire and start the cooking process in a cooperative way moments later. The women who were invited from Der Ballot and other guests arrive also to participate in this special day. They helped the women in preparing and showed those who didn't know how to roll the *maftoul* and cook it perfectly. Every one takes her turn and tries. It was a great moment full of enthusiasm and cooperation and singing Palestinian folklore songs.



Making the *maftoul*



Discussion among the women



Collective cooking

When the *maftoul* is ready, we start to serve the food for the guests and the women with their children. We all ate like a grand family and the food was enough for 100 people. After we finish eating, we have a short discussion about the whole project and how the women could be involved. They were motivated about the project, especially after the successful activity. After finishing the the discussion, we move to the English lesson. It is a unique lesson. The curriculum is composed of the words we used while making *maftoul*. We deal with English through games and flash cards. We think it's better than learning by a lecture based on a board and a book. In this way, we learned and had fun. We end the activity with a speech from Mualim Munir Fasheh. He talks about our system of nutrition and the simple healthy life we had in the past. He focuses intently on how making *maftoul* should be our curricu-



The English lesson

lum, as the nucleus and the mainstay for learning - its history, art, creation and heritage revival. There is a strong harmony between al-mualim Munir and the women. They agree with him concerning our new bad habits concerning food and the new useless boring curricula we use in our schools, and they share their thoughts with him freely.

Really it's fantastic and the women of the camp are fantastic and full of energy and helpful. We all felt that we are one family. We struggled a lot to do what we could in order to make this activity successful. Each women was ready to give and share every possible thing in order to accomplish this event. The day ended off with cheerful faces planning and asking about the next activates. Honestly, it's an unforgettable day for us all.



The collective lunch

Sharing

Nedaa Hamouz

Sharing is a wide concept that includes many different things. It basically means having something in common. This can also include feelings and thoughts. For me, it's a culture of cooperation and interaction. I can consider many things in my life as a type of sharing. I share my thoughts, my clothes, my food, and my emotions. I can really tell thousands of stories concerning this concept starting from sharing my clothes when I was a baby till sharing my thoughts with my fellow participants at campus.

My mother used the same baby clothes for all of us. I shared each small piece with my siblings. I saw my youngest sister wearing my shirts and dresses, but it really was a beautiful feeling. I think it's so impressive to see others profit from your own things. We even used to share the dolls. I used to play with my eldest sister's bear, and my other sister used to play with my small car.

I can also share my thoughts and knowledge. I did that through the English classes that I gave to the children of our neighborhood. I feel that my own

thoughts and knowledge need to be practiced through sharing them with the others, I shouldn't keep them for myself. Here, I can also mention that skills can be shared too. I'm talented in drawing, so I decided my honest skill needed to be shared with the other kids in my family. I gave them classes about the basics of drawing when I was 14 years old. I really feel happy when I see them enjoy drawing.

Food can be also shared. We share our food with those who are in need. This can embody the cooperative spirit among people. We are always encouraged to help the poor who are in need. We share with them what we have. It seems that each kind of sharing make us feel happy. It shows how human and sympathetic we are. Unfortunately in our world, we can only see this type of sharing in natural crisis, hurricanes, volcanoes, etc.

Sharing is a precious concept that is represented in every small detail of our daily lives. We share all that can serve our community and our world. It shows our human nature and opens the door to a happy and secure life. I think our world will finally enjoy its eternal peace when we put all the rancor and hatred behind us and adopt the culture of sharing and cooperation.

Daily practice in public spaces

Sara Pellegrini, Giuliana Racco

Few activities figure so prominently in everyday life as does cleaning, one of our most frequent and necessary practices. Whether it is our bodies or the space around us, people are involved in the act of cleaning to the extent that if unable – be they too busy or physically incapable of doing so – helpers, assistants and other workers are recruited to carry out the task.

The general idea of a refugee camp is of a place of emergency and provisionality, one immediately thinks of an unhealthy and dense space, and hence, a “dirty” place.¹ Though this may be the case of many camps throughout the world, the particular conditions pertaining to camps in the West Bank, above all the endurance and political context, result in a different reality with the majority of domestic spaces presenting surprisingly tidy environments where considerable care and effort are dedicated to order and decora-

¹ Here we refer to the general perception of refugee camps on the part of people who are unfamiliar with the context.

tion. Nonetheless, other more ambiguous spaces, the so-called common areas, are very often littered. If the notion of public space, as conceived in Western tradition, has almost always been lacking in the West Bank, mainly due to the absence of a central state able to take care of the material commons, this is much more evident in refugee camps. Due to diverse political, social and cultural reasons, public space presents a troublesome issue within Palestinian society.

Since their establishment, refugee camps have grown enormously in response to familial needs and following personal initiatives. Any intentional urban planning proposal to shape the public space has been rejected due to the political and ideological aim of not settling permanently, and persistently looking toward a return home, thus rejecting the idea of enjoyment of transitory camp life. Moreover, the lack of such shared spaces in the camps themselves – aside from the narrow alleys – has not helped in building a collective perception and sense of responsibility toward what is common to everybody. And last but not least, the nature and use of public space is a crucial issue in Muslim culture, especially in relation to women’s lives and behaviour in public.



Renovation and Cleaning Works

أعمال الترميم و التنظيف

Solomon's Pools in Irtas form part of the aqueduct systems and may be considered Arroub's sister structures. They have now been privatized by the Solomon Pool Development Project and are destined to become a resort and entertainment destination point.

— ph. Brave New Alps
source: the Solomon Pools Resorts presentation book

Is it historically acceptable to think about the public space of a temporary camp?

Would people ever come to [a] plaza and have morning coffee together?

How would people plan to clean a [public] plaza?²

These were the kinds of questions the Head of the UNRWA Camp Improvement Programme asked herself and a group of people at the beginning of 2008. Four years later, for the first time in sixty-four years, a public square measuring 700m² would be built in one of the most conservative refugee camps in the West Bank, Fawwar, located near the city of Hebron.

Cleaning and Reappropriation in Arroub

The Ancient Roman pool by Arroub refugee camp is one clear example of a potentially common space that is underused. This historical heritage site is mainly exploited as a dumping ground.

This pool was the starting point of the critical re-

² From Sandi Hilal, *Abu Ata, Architect: A Play In Four Acts*, from "Architecture is All Over" ed. Marrikka Trotter and Esther Choi



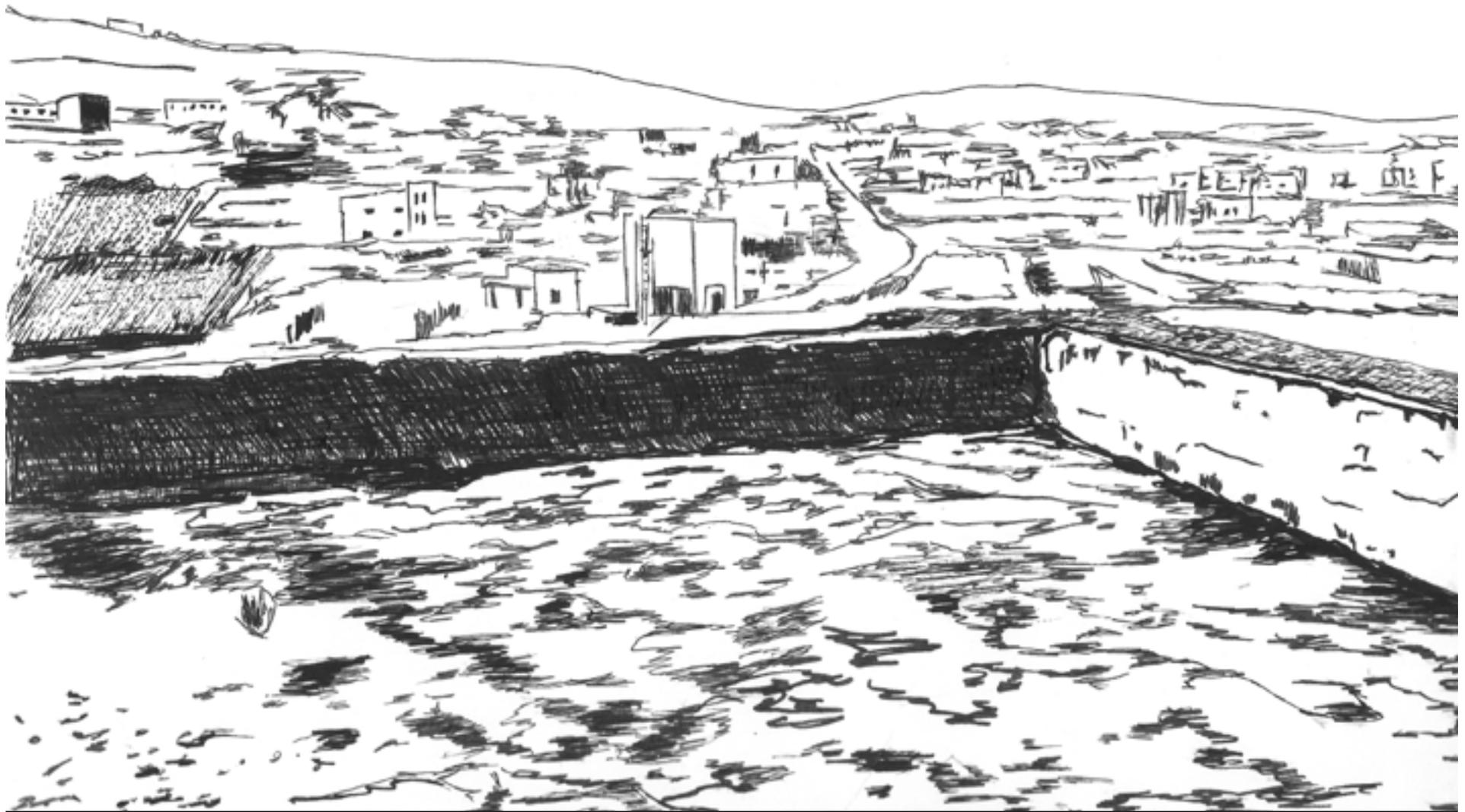
Arroub camp aerial view (the pool)

— ph. UNRWA

flections driving a group of people to search for the traces of the Herodian aqueduct, trekking over two days from Arroub to Irtas where Solomon's pools are located. This journey began with the extension of another everyday activity, that of walking, to the mapping and searching for traces of a destroyed conduit. The expedition was aimed at linking two refugee camps (Arroub and Dheisheh) which otherwise are considered detached.

Approximately one month later, the group returned to the source, Arroub³, to focus on the Ancient Ro-

³ The name Arroub translates into "source" in English since it is the site of a number of fresh water springs, hence its position along the ancient aqueduct.



Sketch of the Arroub roman pool

– Giuliana Racco

man pool itself and spent a day collecting garbage within the giant structure. This act of cleaning was intended as a first step in preparing the site to become a common space for future events related to Arroub and other camps. Can a simple daily action such as cleaning take on a political and social meaning if shifted from the private indoor sphere to the shared outdoor sphere? Can a voluntary and participatory action such as this incite a popular rethinking of an important historical site, thus re-activating it in contemporary camp life?

Some moments of the recent past have seen different sites being reclaimed through the humble and quotidian act of participatory cleaning:

The day after President Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down, protesters began cleaning the space, an act that highlighted the end of a regime and the beginning of a possible new era for the Egyptian people. The space was no longer perceived as public—the space of authority—but rather as the space of the people. Owning the space implied owning the future of the country. Cleaning the square was a gesture of reappropriation, ownership, and care. In fact, this apparently banal act demonstrated a sense of reconstituted community and collective ownership.⁴

In another continent and just days before the cleaning action of the Arroub pool, a similar (larger) event was programmed in Madrid, in Campo de la Cebada. *The Indignados movement*, having previously claimed an unused sports facility in the Latina neighbourhood, organized a “Jornada de limpieza” (Day of Cleaning) in order to emphasize the common nature of this reclaimed space which has become a hotbed of activism.

The first endeavour within the pool was small but satisfying, in a few hours a superficial result was achieved which nonetheless changed the face (or bottom) of this reservoir. With rubber gloves, garbage bags and two broken wheelbarrows, the participants of the action did their best, even fending off some stones thrown by children sitting on the rim of the basin. The hypothesis was that by organizing small moments of cleaning, a potential interest would emerge on the part of the camp inhabitants. A growing understanding of the historic importance of the site could instigate a desire to use this space. That is, that through a small but visible action of participation as simple as cleaning, the pace could be set for the regeneration of the site, transforming it into a common space for a variety of uses and activities.

⁴ Alessandro Petti, director of Campus in Camps, *Reimagining the Common: Rethinking the Refugee Experience* (forthcoming)



Cleaning the pool on December 2nd 2012

– ph. Matteo Guidi

Unfortunately, not enough time passed for the garbage to be removed from the pool when the collection of the day's labour were again strewn around the grounds: someone or something had entered the pool and returned it to its prior state. This raises the question as to who would feel bothered or threatened by this activity.

Cooking and Participation in Fawwar

QUESTION *Where do the camp women usually spend their free time?*

ANSWER *Usually in their homes. Even though most of the centers [in the camp] require only symbolic cover fees, many women still cannot afford these fees and prefer to spend their free time within their own homes.*⁵

The daily life of women in refugee camps is still a crucial and conflictual topic. Many women usually complain about the lack of personal time, the monotony of housework and a general want of scholarization. Social rules, often related to traditional Muslim

⁵ Interview with members of the Deheishe refugee camp Women's Centre (2006), from *Space, Time, Dignity, Rights. Improving Palestinian refugee camps*, edited by Philip Misselwitz, 2012

culture, construct a rigid framework for women's behavior and actions, both within domestic and public space, especially in conservative camps such as Fawwar. The following are excerpts of several conversations between inhabitants of a neighbourhood in Fawwar as they discuss the planning of a public space⁶.

AMEENAH *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 [a] plaza and have coffee and tea?*

HALAH *You want us to gather and have coffee and tea here together? This is a problem, darling, it is a real problem.*

THE ARCHITECT *But if you got together, all of you, to prepare tabbouleh, would this be considered a cultural activity or a leisure activity?*

HADIYAH *Darling, tabbouleh is a prohibited activity.*

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

AMEENAH *Of course we would like to, but we are controlled.*

A WOMAN *Here everything is prohibited.*

⁶ Sandi Hilal, *Abu Ata, Architect: A Play In Four Acts*, from *Architecture is All Over*, ed. Marrikka Trotter and Esther Choi (forthcoming)

Within such a context even an activity as diurnal as cooking can carry controversial meanings and multiple implications. Though it represents one of the most fundamental and common practices in Palestinian society and everyday life, it could be transformed into a limiting cage of control and severity imposed on women by the entire community. At the same time, just as with the act of cleaning, by shifting the scene of this action out from the houses and into the “common” sphere, new perspectives, even bearing subversive and disobedient connotations, may surface.

When Nedaa and Ayat began discussing the idea of an all-female public gathering in the new community plaza of Fawwar refugee camp, they faced diverse



Fawwar camp aerial view (the plaza)

– ph. UNRWA

reactions from women of the camp themselves.

The plaza is the result of a four-year process carried out by UNRWA in order to provide the camp with an open space for meeting and socializing. Since 2008, the project (which in the beginning dealt with just 200m²) has been discussed and revisited a number of times with the neighborhood and larger camp community, due to its intrinsic problematic nature. One of the first issues concerned the ownership of the place: due to the almost total lack of open public spaces, the inhabitants of the neighborhood tended to imagine the plaza in terms of private ownership within their community. Some even proposed to fence it in, installing a gated entrance with a key only access.

ABU RABIH *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.*

ABU RAMI *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.*

Another main issue was the privacy of both those who live around the plaza and those who wish to enjoy the open space, especially women.



Preparing the event in Fawwar plaza on December 19th 2012

– ph. Sara Pellegrini

THE ARCHITECT *So you want the plaza to be only a family plaza?*

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

Following this, a broad debate was held as to the target of users of this new space: should it become the hang out spot for young people of the camp or should it be preserved as a safe place for women and families?

UMM ALI *I will never let my daughters or my daughters-in-law sit outside in the plaza by themselves and have tea or coffee.*

JAMILAH *We want a closed plaza, with walls around it, so that all of us women can come here and finally use it. [...] 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.*

Once the long communal decision making process was concluded - in 2009 two shelters were bought by the community and then demolished in order to achieve a space of 700m² - the new plaza became a central space for the neighborhood and the camp. Yet it still was apparently used in the most conventional ways possible: either for traditional gatherings, weddings and funerals or for street football played among the young shabab of the camp. Despite

this, a new perception of the potentialities of this space began to manifest itself: some people started using the plaza, though very discretely.

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

EVERYONE LOOKS AT HER IN ASTONISHMENT *Dinner?*

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

For the first time in the history of Fawwar, the public event held on December 19, 2012 brought women together in an attempt to share a moment of leisure and culture: cooking and preparing maftool followed by a discussion of these activities through a simple English language lesson. Once again, the central action is a basic daily practice, yet due to the participation and the specific setting, the activity takes on powerful and conflictual new meanings. Could some deep-rooted social rules be subverted through participatory actions such as collective cooking?

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.*

IMAD *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.*

A Matter of Context

The aim of these examples is to look at how three quintessentially quotidian actions – walking, cleaning and cooking – can take on socio-political connotations.

Simply by being shifted actions onto non-habitual contexts and opening them up to a broader and more aware participation, allows questions to be raised as to how inhabitants of the camps, and Palestinians in general, can reclaim spaces, create and consolidate relations and foster new forms of common knowledge. The challenge now is to create more moments of participation in order to provoke cracks in sedimented reasoning and push the limits of the realm of actions and places allocated to common use.

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