

Hannah Arendt's essay 'Labour, Work, Action,' published in 1958, produces a definition of action and public space that is decidedly connected to a politically liberal-democratic tradition. Lacking any materialist nuance and explicitly anti-Marxist, Arendt's treatise proposes that the actions of individuals – their capacity to begin ever anew within a plurality of beings - is what distinguishes them and reveals the meaning of each human life. Every man's words and deeds form a part of their personal (and thus implicitly social) narrative. Arendt's depreciation of labour, both productive and reproductive, allows her to perform a theoretical reversal of Marx: instead, she privileges action as the main pillar of the human condition, arguing that labour relates to mere biological life and necessity.

From a Marxist perspective, it is clear that capitalist social relations are deeply entwined with each layer of Arendt's "human condition" and, while they may manifest most transparently in the realm of labour, they are inextricable from individual pursuits in terms of action and they permeate modern notions of both public and private space. In reality, the so-called "public realm" (the space of action in Arendt's reading) is not free or independent from state or economic imperatives. On the contrary, the public realm, as we now know it, is saturated with these concerns.

This paper will examine the fraught question of public space in the Palestinian context, with particular reference to on-going projects in the Dheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem in the West Bank. Public space and participatory spatial initiatives will be investigated to understand their relevance and potential in this context. Following the work of the Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency (DAAR) and Campus in Camps, we will position the case of the public realm and action within the theoretical and political framework of the "commons".



Bisan, Ayat and Nidà invited a group of women from Arroub refugee camp to visit the square recently built in Fawaar. (photo: Campsinccamps)



An building workshop intervention planned in the three shelters - the first planned common space in Dheisheh Camp (image: Dan Dorocic)

Public Space vs. the Commons

In her essay 'Feminism and the Politics of the Commons,' Silvia Federici writes: "the idea of the common/s...has offered a logical and historical alternative to both State and Private Property, the State and the Market, enabling us to reject the fiction that they are mutually exclusive and exhaustive of our political possibilities."¹ In opposition to Arendt's definition, the commons seeks to step outside the worn dichotomy that sees space as divided between the public (political/social) and the private (domestic). The commons is positioned against statist models of revolution that would seek a new state formation to challenge capitalism. Rather, the commons designate the shared resources ("the wealth of the material world"²) and social production that might be harnessed against privatizing impulses and in the service of an alternative political framework.

This theory is particularly useful in the context of bottom-up or participatory spatial initiatives in the Dheisheh refugee camp. Refugee camps in the West Bank are governed and maintained by a number of sovereign entities, including the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA), and host authorities such as the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israeli forces. Since the space in the camp is not the property of private individuals or of the camp's inhabitants as a communal whole and the living situation is (at least nominally) considered to be temporary, many difficulties arise in terms of planning and initiating camp

1 Silvia Federici, "Feminism and the Politics of the Commons," posted in The Commoner: A Web Journal for Other Values. www.commoner.org, p. 1

2 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2009. p. viii

improvements.³ There is widespread concern that improvements in the camp environment will undermine the political project of the Right of Return. Making the space more livable, taking care of it, implies a certain valorization that many inhabitants feel impedes the political project of returning to their homeland. Therefore, within Dheisheh refugee camp, the term 'public space' has become inoperable in its usual sense. Groups like DAAR find it more productive to imagine new alternatives to this discourse:

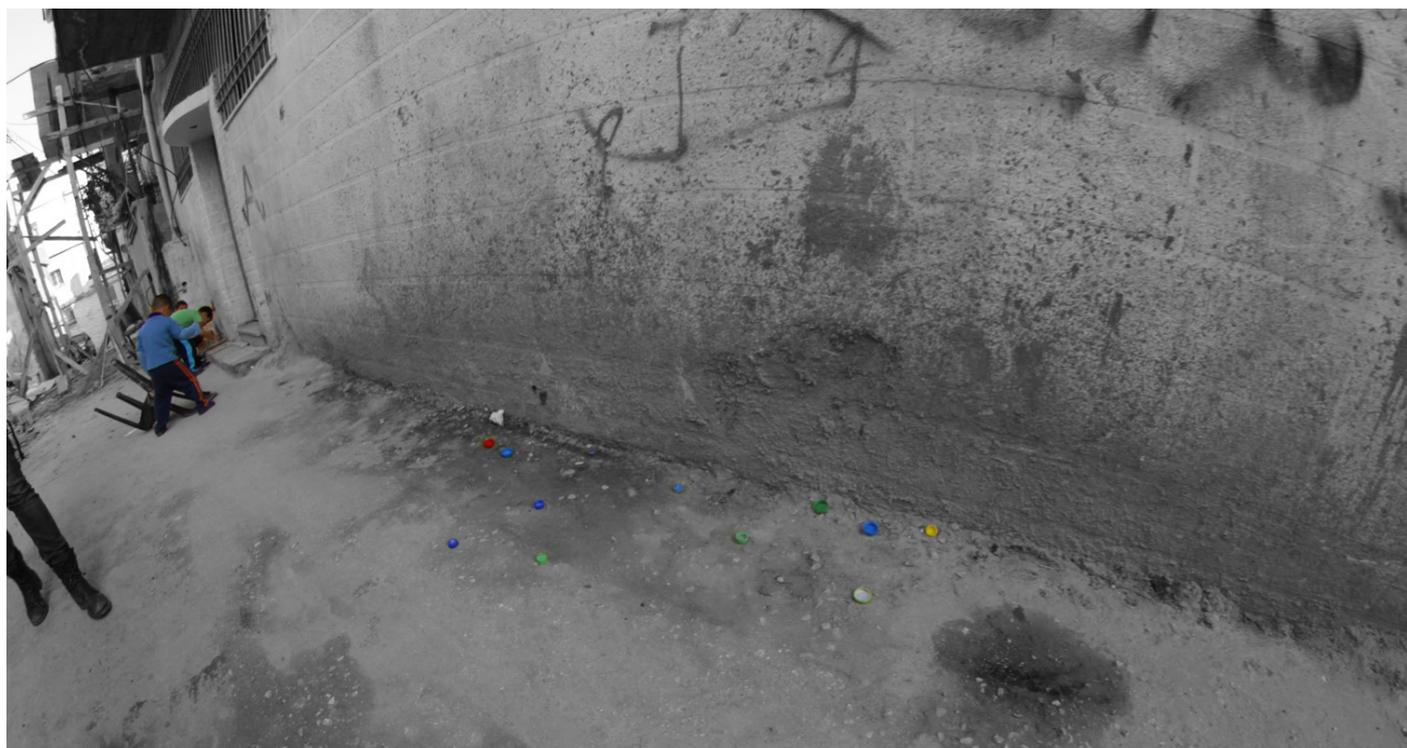
Decolonization today is about taking public squares – which, notably, have mostly been traffic roundabouts. In effect, these roundabouts have been turned into a form of symbolic public ground. But in Arab cities, the term 'public' is associated with the state and its repressive mechanisms; that is to say, the 'public' was never owned by the people. It was these places throughout the region that became the vortex of new common forums of political action.⁴

The Arendtian idea of “unique and free individuals” working on a collective project is problematic here. Instead, many refugees living in Dheisheh are seeking to actively build common political spaces that exist independent of institutional or governmental bodies, individualist pursuits or the apparatus of occupation. In particular, a group within Campus in Camps (an educational and project-oriented program developed out of the Camp Improvement Program) is interrogating the 'Unbuilt' spaces in Dheisheh.⁵ Participants have isolated several sites within Dheisheh that have the potential to be transformed for collective use. The mandate of Campus in Camps is to work on improvements within the common

3 Philipp Misselwitz and Sari Hanafi, “Testing a New Paradigm: UNWRA’s Camp Improvement Programme,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 28, Nos 2 & 3. UNHRC, 2010.

4 Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti and Eyal Weizman, “Architecture After Revolution.” Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2013. p. 33

5 Ahmad Laham, Aysar Alaify, Isshaq Albarbary, Qussay Abu Aker (Campus in Camps participants), *The Unbuilt*, June 2013. <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/09-the-unbuilt/>



A spontaneous bottle-cap game in Dheisheh camp (photo: Dan Dorocic)



One of the many messages on the wall as part of the “pathways” project in Dheisheh Refugee Camp (photo: Alison Hugill)

space of the camp, without seeking to normalize their refugee status or undermine their political demands for return.

Spatial Initiatives in the Refugee Camp

To this end, the participants of Campus in Camps have developed a ‘collective dictionary’ in which they define key terms subjectively. Their booklet on the commons defines it as “everything in life used by the whole community for free.”⁶ Importantly, the commons cannot be included in capitalist practices, which undermine it in the pursuit of profit. The dictionary mentions that the commons is always in flux and can relate to specific sites within the camp at times, and at others (for example when a raid by Israeli soldiers occurs) it can expand to the camp as a whole. Public space, then, is no longer relegated to the traditional meeting points such as public squares or the equivalents of the Greek agora. Even domestic spaces can be a part of the commons given the right situation (a sense of communal need or shared resistance).

This kind of potential expansion of the commons transforms the duality implied in Arendt’s formulation, between private and public space, and seeks to imagine a form of collective living that eschews this false binary. If, in this context, the public spaces are not those imposed from the outside (as in conventional public squares or forums), then where are they to be found?

6 Neda Hamouz, Nabà Al-Assi, Mohammed Abu-Allia, Murad Odeh, Isshaq Al-Barbary, BraveNewAlps (Campus in Camps participants) “Common I: Collective Dictionary,” <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/common-1/>

The main square has traditionally been considered the site of the production of political space, the main site of protests and conflicts. The main square today, however, is a site often under the control of large corporate and political players. Here, the everyday conflict of slogans and advertisements is ongoing and often the events staged are widely covered by the media. Although these events create a narrative of political transformation in our memories, they bring little substantial change in our everyday reality. After the eruption of these spectacles, the return to normalcy and to work is immediate. By considering public space not as exceptional, but as expansive and malleable, we step away from the idea of designated protest areas or times that would be sanctioned within a mainstream political discourse.

Places like Dheisheh refugee camp, and other small neighborhoods and camps, have the potential to resist these powerful actors and serve as the real sites of production of political space. The potential of the camp comes from the precarious status of the community living within it, in relation to the wider political and economic context. The Campus in Camps initiatives emphasis “mental decolonization” as crucial to their thinking, which reimagines the definition of public space in terms of the commons. Historically in Dheisheh, as elsewhere in the Arab world, the common space was the mosque or the in-between space of the streets and covered enclaves. These spaces, although often public, aren’t always common. The main squares in Palestine, although legally public, are rigorously controlled by a number of hegemonic forces.

One architectural initiative run through Campus in Camps considers spatial agency in the Three Shelter site of Dheisheh. The site is named for the three different concrete UNRWA shelters from three different eras (the 50’s, 70’s, 90’s) that compose the site’s historical landscape. Starting in the mid-1950s, each recently displaced family received a 9 square meters shelter, and every 15 families shared one bathroom. Today, the area with three untouched UNRWA shelters still exists in the middle of the camp as a manifestation of an “era” that the camp endured.⁷ During the research phase of the project, we are considering, in collaboration with the Unbuilt group from Campus in Camps, how to stage activities and events to activate the site as a common space. There is a significant debate around the Three Shelter site, polarized between those who wish to memorialize it as commemorative of Palestinian expulsion and the difficult early stages of the refugee camp, and those who seek to transform this space for future use.

7 Ahmad Laham, Aysar Alaify, Isshaq Albarbary, Qussay Abu Aker (Campus in Camps participants), *The Unbuilt*, June 2013. <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/09-the-unbuilt/>



The pedestrian bridge in Dheisheh Refugee Camp is one of the many initiatives (photo: Tamara Abu Laban)

The proposed conversion project of the site in Dheisheh is not one of producing a public square, but works on the scale of small urban actions to re-appropriate spaces in the camp. For example, a tilted platform is presently being put in to the Three Shelter site, highlighting it as an archeological story-telling device for the refugees to explain the history of the camp to younger generations and to international visitors. The platform will not touch the ground, making a statement about the contested nature of the topic and the unwillingness to solidify new built projects or improvement in Dheisheh.

The walls throughout the camp are used in a similar fashion, to tell different stories about the everyday struggles of the refugees through painted murals. Other areas in the camp are being transformed as well. The pedestrian bridge across Hebron Road, linking Dheisheh camp to Doha refugee city, is being re-oriented as a Saturday flea market and exhibition space. Elsewhere - in Fawwar Refugee Camp near Hebron - there is an initiative by a group of women to take over the main square, where women are rarely seen and don't often feel comfortable. The actions taken on by the group include handicrafts, cooking and storytelling as ways of occupying the square. The goal is to make women feel comfortable to perform these actions in a public context, at all times.

Part of our on-going project in Dheisheh focuses on the children of the camp: how to convert the streets and pathways of the dense camp into temporary playgrounds. Throughout the camp, children can be seen playing football and various games. Weaving down the street, in front of the densely packed houses, one encounters made up games all the time – for example, colourful bottle-caps lying in disarray in the corner where the street meets the wall: a game abandoned by a group of kids, temporarily recruited by their parents to re-tile the stairs. This informal form of play in the streets of the camp is the answer to a play-ground in a place where there are no playgrounds, or they are all sitting in ruins. Turning from play to pedagogy, we ask: what, then, is the appropriate expression of a school in the camp, as opposed to an institutionalized classroom (funded by USAid) within the walls of a school? Can the classroom be framed within the spaces between the houses of the refugee camp? Can a mobile platform be produced which could act as an informal classroom?

Performance of the State

After 65 years of existence, Dheisheh and other refugee camps in the area are increasingly urbanizing and, with this 'normalization' of the camps, property and everyday life become increasingly privatized. The Palestinian Authority is currently operating as though the region is in a post-colonial situation, while everywhere there are signs of the persisting



The Palestinian Museum currently projected for construction in 2015 (courtesy Henning Larsen Architects)

Israeli occupation. The PA have constructed elaborate headquarters throughout the region and concern themselves with the aesthetics, accessories and performance of a nation state (uniform, flag, etc.) while the people they represent remain – in the global context – virtually stateless. The state of emergency that was originally common in the Occupied Territories is now largely covered over by these accoutrements of Western, 'free' societies.

Some members of the Palestinian elite are building new suburban developments that seem to spring out of the desert (like the Palestinian planned city of Rawabi, which closely resembles an Israeli settlement), putting up prisons and police compounds and shopping malls, all of which use the built language of the Israeli occupier. This post-colonial Palestinian dream is happening within the still occupied territory of the West Bank. Thus the project within Dheisheh is not one of improving the camp in the manner of the UNWRA projects of the past, but of creating a model of spatial agency that will initiate an alternative narrative of the use of common space as a forum for discussing and preserving the complex nature of Palestinian identity. This is not to insist on a discourse of victimhood but to expose the still very real mechanisms of control at work in Palestinian society.

Dissensus and the Commons

Importantly, the idea of the commons employed here is not one built on a communal shared essence. The concept of dissensus – introduced by Jacques Ranciere and employed by Claire Bishop in her recent critique of participatory art practices, *Artificial Hells* – is helpful for our understanding of action and its relation to the commons.



Action during the bridge initiative (photo: Tamara Abu Laban)

Ranciere observes that there is a politics because the common is inherently divided. Whereas Arendt begins with the Aristotelian premise that man as a “speaking animal” is at the core of politics, Ranciere proposes that there is already a divide, from the beginning, within this so-called common capacity to speak (in public):

Aristotle tells us that slaves understand language but don't possess it. This is what dissensus means. There is politics because speaking is not the same as speaking, because there is not even an agreement on what a sense means. Political dissensus is not a discussion between speaking people who would confront their interests and values. It is a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as an argument on justice. And this is also what 'class war' means: not the conflict between groups which have opposite economic interests, but the conflict about what an 'interest' is, the struggle between those who set themselves as able to manage social interests and those who are supposed to be only able to reproduce their life.⁸

Those who are only able to reproduce their life through labour (disparaged by Arendt) are therefore excluded from the traditional definition of politics. The commons is, rather, thought as a space of dissensus, where political space is reimagined from the perspective of those whose interests are systematically suppressed.

In the context of Dheisheh and other refugee camps in Palestine, we recognize the potential for a more expansive definition of politics and the commons, as well as the correlative concepts of action and public space. The bottom-up spatial initiatives enacted by participants at Campus in Camps are actively seeking to develop a lived experience of the commons against traditional, liberal and neoliberal understandings of the political 'space of appearance.'

8 Jacques Ranciere, “The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics,” in Reading Ranciere. Eds. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp. Continuum. London and New York, 2011. p. 2.

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