School in Exile

Education and Architectural form
SCHOOL IN EXILE

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Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency
Campus in Camps
This booklet is part of DAAR ongoing practice-based research that aim to reactivate and actualize the concept of Al-Masha’ – the common – in Palestinian refugee camps. It takes Shufat Girls School in Jerusalem, as a site to investigate and act upon the relation between education and architectural form with the aim of creating communal learning environments.

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Al-Masha’ or the return to the common

We would like to propose a critical understanding of the contemporary notion of the public by re-imagining the notion of the common. Rather than the term “commons,” more familiar in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, we prefer to use the Arabic term *masha’*, which refers to communal land equally distributed among farmers. This form of “common land use” was not fully recognized under Ottoman laws – for this reason, masha was not acknowledged under a written title in the Ottoman Code – and was dismissed by colonial authorities for its supposed economic inefficiency, yet it surprisingly still exists today in much of the West Bank.

Colonial regimes, interested in territorial control, see in *masha’* land a collective dimension beyond state control. Consequently, *masha’* have been transformed into state land and therefore fall under the control of public land managed by state apparatus. *Masha’* is shared land, which was recognized through practice in the Islamic world. It emerged as a combination of Islamic property conceptions and customary practices of communal or tribal land. *Masha’* could only exists if people decided to cultivate the land together. The moment they stop cultivating it, they lose its possession. It is possession through a common use. Thus what appears to be fundamental is that, in order for this category to exist, it must be activated by common uses.

Today we may ask if it is possible to reactivate the common cultivation, expanding the meaning of cultivation to other human activities that imply the common taking care of life (*cultivation* from Latin *colere* = taking care of life).
REFUGEE CAMPS AS COMMON SPACES
Refugee camps are sites where the categories of public and private enter a zone of indistinction, where neither public nor private property exists. After almost seventy years, Palestinian refugees still cannot legally own their houses (though in practice they do) and the camp is a space carved from the territorial state. Though states and nongovernmental organizations are actively participating in conceiving and managing camps, we are still struggling to fully comprehend how the camp form has contaminated and radically transformed the very idea of the city as an organized and functional political community. Thus, the birth of the camp allows for the calling into question of the very idea of the city as a democratic space. If the political representation of a citizen is to be found in the public space, in the camp we find its inverse: here, a citizen is stripped of his or her political rights. In this sense, the camp represents a sort of anti-city, but also a potential counter-laboratory in which a new form of urbanism is emerging beyond the idea of the nation-state.

Despite the fact that the camp form has been used as an instrument for regulating the refugees’ “excess of the political dimension”, the camp, as an exceptional space, is also a site for political practices yet to come. Similarly, although more recent scholarly work highlights the refugee figure as a central critical category of our present political organizations, these very conceptualizations have reduced the refugee to a passive subject, created by the exercise of power and lacking an independent and autonomous political subjectivity. By investigating emerging social and spatial practices in West Bank refugee camps, we would like to challenge the idea of refugees as passive subjects.
Since the first appearance of Palestinian refugee camps after the Nakba in 1948, the architecture of the camp was conceived as a temporary solution. The first pictures of refugee camps showed small villages made of tents, ordered according to grids used for military encampments. As the years passed, and no political solution was found for the plight of the displaced Palestinians, tents were substituted with shelters in an attempt to respond to the growing needs of the camp population without under-

After almost seventy years of exile, Palestinian camps are no longer made of tents. They are a completely original urban form that emerged by the necessity and creativity of their inhabitants. Spatial practices take the forms of rituals and architectural realizations, expressions of both rebellion and necessary adaptation to the present. They oscillate between pragmatic and creative solutions in a congested space and visionary celebration of an idealized past. These solutions, more or less unconsciously, constitute the will to reproduce the inner spatial qualities and characteristics of the villages of origin, as stubborn and spontaneous acts of preservation of memories.
precariousness and temporariness of the camp structure was not simply a technical problem, but also the material-symbolic embodiment of the principle that its inhabitants be allowed to return as soon as possible to their place of origin. The refugee community vehemently opposes any attempt made by the governments of Israel to resettle them in other areas. The camp becomes a magnetic force in which political powers try to exercise their influence. Every single banal act, from building a roof to opening a new street is read as a political statement on the right of return. Nothing in the camp can be considered without political implication.

mining the temporary condition of the camp, and thereby undermining the right to return. However, with a growing population, the condition in the camps worsened. The terrible situations in which Palestinian refugees where forced to live was used by the Palestinian political leadership to pressure Israel and the international community on the urgency of the refugees’ right to return. The
The camp condition has opened a new horizon of political and social configurations, and new ways of understanding the relation of the population to space and territory. The permanent temporality of refugee camps has produced spatio-political configurations that call into question the very idea of the nation-state. Despite the fact that the “camp form” in origin has been used as a tool for regulating the “excess of its political dimension”, the camp as an exceptional space could also be seen as a counter-site for emerging political practices and a new form of urbanism. In the following pages, we will move between these two inter-related aspects: between camp as a site of discipline and control and camp as a site of struggle and inventive practices.

Refugee camps are meant to be the materialization of temporary architecture. Usually constituted of tents and shelters, they are designed for quick and easy assembly in order to respond to emergencies. A short-term form of architecture, they are not built to last. Although the establishment of refugee camps is rhetorically justified by humanitarian intent and technocratic design discourse, they remain an essentially political issue. Whether they serve temporarily or become more permanent is ultimately not decided by the humanitarian bodies tasked with managing and controlling them, but rather by political conflicts. The prolonged exceptional temporality of the refugee camps could paradoxically create the condition for their transformation: from a pure humanitarian space to an active political space, the embodiment and the expression of the right of return.
Today this imperative is being reconsidered: it is argued that improved living conditions in refugee camps do not necessarily conflict with the right to return. No longer a simple recipient of humanitarian intervention, the refugee is seen as an active political subject, through his or her participation in the development of autonomous governance for the camp. Today, refugees are re-inventing social and political practices that improve their everyday life; the refugee camp has been transformed from a marginalized holding area to an interconnected center of social and political life. It is however crucial that this radical transformation has not normalized the political condition of being exiled.
Within this context, in June 2011, the UNRWA Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program, directed by Sandi Hilal, decided to intervene in the conception and realization of a girl’s school in Shu’fat refugee camp. For the first time, a site specific and ad hoc design, not a pre-conceived and fixed architectural scheme, was produced.

Shufat refugee camp was established in 1965 and is inhabited by 20,000 Palestinians refugees that were expelled from 55 villages in the Jerusalem, Lydd, Jaffa and Ramleh areas. The political context that surrounds the project is extremely deteriorated. The Shu’fat camp is almost entirely enclosed by walls and fences built by Israeli governments since 2002, trapped in a legal void, neither inside nor outside Jerusalem borders. The inhabitants of Shufat are threatened to be deprived of their Jerusalem residency documents and therefore once again be forced to leave their homes.

Is architectural intervention at all possible in such a distorted and unstable political environment? And how could intervention be possible without normalizing the exceptional and transitory condition of the camp? How could architecture exist in the here and now of the camp, yet remain in constant tension with a place of origin?

Architecture is too often seen simply as a technical and bureaucratic solution with no social and political value. Too often, architecture has been humiliated in vacuous formalism; to look green or sustainable or efficient, apolitical answers to political problems. Too often within the
humanitarian industry, architecture has been reduced to answering to the so called “needs of the community”. Rarely has architecture been used for its power to give form to social and political problems and to challenge dominant narrations and assumptions. The Shufat School, unfolded in the next pages, embodies an ‘architecture in exile’: it is an attempt to inhabit and express the constant tension between the here and now and the possibility for a different future.

The architecture of the school does not communicate temporariness through an impermanent material construction. These materials are too often instrumentalized for a “politically correct” architecture that relegates refugees to living in shantytowns. Rather, through its spatial and programmatic configuration this architecture in exile attempts to actively engage the new ‘urban environment’ created by almost seventy years of forced exile. Perhaps this is a fragment of a city yet to come.
UNRWA operates one of the largest education systems in the Middle East, opening the doors of its 703 schools to nearly 500,000 pupils each day.

All refugee children of school age are eligible to enrol in UNRWA schools, which provide free basic education across nine grades in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Syria and Lebanon, and ten grades in Jordan. This includes six years of primary schooling and three or four years at a preparatory level. Secondary education is offered in Lebanon to address the problem of restricted access for Palestine refugees to the host government education system. In the remaining host countries, refugees generally continue their education beyond the preparatory phase within government schools.

Over time, UNRWA schools have built a reputation for high academic achievements and low drop-out rates, while groundbreaking progress has been achieved in gender parity since the 1960s. Today, literacy and levels of educational attainment among Palestinian refugees are among the highest in the Middle East.

Responding to the evolving needs and educational priorities of the learner, and in the context of major reforms of the education programme, the Agency strives to ensure that refugees receive an education which reflects international standards, and is guided by three mutually reinforcing pillars: the educator, knowledge and skills, and tools and resources.

An inclusive, pupil-centred response to educational needs is an Agency priority, and involves engaging communities and increasing participation in learning. This approach focuses on identifying and supporting children with diverse needs, differential abilities, and varied socioeconomic backgrounds.

source: http://bit.ly/1OKgCyb
THE PEDAGOGY OF THE TREE SCHOOL
Translated to English as “the university”, the literal meaning of Al jame3ah is “a place for assembly”. As such, this educational approach is to create a gathering space and a pluralistic environment where participants can learn freely, honestly and enthusiastically, and where participants are involved in an active formation of knowledge based on their daily lived-experience.

Al jame3ah is a space that aims to contribute to the way schools and universities understand themselves, and
overcome conventional structures. In doing so, it seeks forms of critical intervention for the democratization of knowledge production.

For Louis Khan, schools began with a man under a tree who did not know he was a teacher, sharing his realizations with others who did not know they were students. In this pedagogical spirit, the spaces in the Shu’fat School offer the possibility for the constitution of ‘tree schools’, where people from the community could become teachers and activate community-based discussions around topics that the participants can choose according to their relative needs. The tree school is first and foremost a place of people gathering around a tree perceived as a living being. The tree, with its characteristic and history, is the device that creates a physical and metaphorical common territory where ideas and actions can emerge through critical, free and independent discussion among participants.

The tree school is a space for communal learning and production of knowledge grounded in lived experience and connected to communities. It reasserts what is urgent for participants, forming an active group that chooses words, constructs meanings, and creates useful knowledge through actions. The tree school is activated around the interaction and interests of the participants and its structure is consequently in constant transformation and open
community. It welcomes forms of knowledge that remain undetected by the radar of traditional academic knowledge. They form a Tree School, where new forms of knowledge production are made possible, when teachers and students forget that they are either teachers or students.

The first tree school was established in Bahia, southern Brazil, together with the Brazilian art collective Grupo Contrafilé on the occasion of the São Paulo Biennale in 2014. It joined together activists, artists, quilombola intellectuals, landless movements and Palestinian refugees in discussions of forms of life beyond the idea of the nation state and the meaning of knowledge production within marginalized sectors of society.

The tree school also took the form of a public installation on the ground floor of the biennale exhibition space, hosting thousands of students from São Paulo schools. At the end of the exhibition, the tree school was planted in Tainá Culture House, a central node of the quilombola network.

in order to accommodate changing urgencies. It can last days, months or years.

The tree school reclaims diversity in ways of learning. For many, knowledge is based on information and skills; the tree school places strong emphasis on the process of learning that cuts across conventional disciplines of knowledge, moving along a different vision, one which integrates aspects of life and is in dialogue with the larger
By activating critical and egalitarian learning environments with The Tree School, we want to mobilize marginalized knowledge that stays under the radar of traditional academic learning. These experiments are in dialogue with formal educational institutions in order to create new spaces for learning.

Quilombos were communities founded by enslaved Africans and Afro-descendants who fled their oppressors and established what later came to be known as the first democratic republic in the Americas. After the Bahia experience, we activated other tree schools in Cuernavaca, Mexico and in Curitiba, Brazil. Over the coming years, the tree school will be activated in other contexts and with other groups who have already expressed interest: among these, a network of teachers and students from Beirut and Turkey; a group of architects in Bogotá, Manama and Medellín, who have already proposed similar learning environments in slums; and in Bangalore, India, where we want to develop a non-Western based curriculum.
ARCHITECTURAL FORM
one classroom

four clusters + one court

one classroom + one garden

three courts

one cluster

five courts
DAAR in collaboration with the engineering department of UNRWA and with the participation of students, teachers and organizations from the refugee camps, imagined the ‘school in exile’ as an occasion to elaborate a fragment of a different approach to education and society – a school to be experienced by the students not as a site of repression and discipline, but as a site of liberation and responsibility.

The generative form for the school is a circular space around which people can gather to tell or listen to a story. Architecturally, the hexagon constitutes the single classroom, a space in which each participant is equally invited to speak.

Recognizing that the camp is a spatial expression of a particular relation to another place – the place of origin – the project, instead of dismissing this relation, inhabits this tension and contradiction. We created a double for each classroom: an outside open space, a piece of land to cultivate material and the cultural dimensions of the place of origin.
We believe in a dialogic education, in which knowledge is produced in a collective effort rather than understood as information to be transferred from authority to student. The generative form of the school is a circular space, a space around which people can gather to tell or listen to a story.
module (x 70 unit)

- to be extruded (1 mm)
- to be engraved (1 mm)

50 cm

5 stores ground

500 cm

textured soil

wooden basement

engraved lines

removable elements

level 01

level 02

level 03

level 04

level 05

elements

5 cm

5 cm
Since the camp is a spatial expression of a relation with the place of origin, the project, instead of dismissing this relation, inhabits this tension and contradiction. The twin classrooms form a spatial tension between an inside and outside, the camp and the place of origin, the life in exile and the desire of return. The twin-classroom form is the invisible DNA of the school, able through its simple articulation to create clusters, clearly defined spaces. The spaces delineated by these clusters serve to develop a sense of ownership in opposition to an alienating, open space. Classroom juxtaposition and varied topographical elevations produce clusters. This configuration aims to define domestic spaces for a more intimate inhabitation. The two entrances, with their generous open spaces, are available to public use for camp cultural and recreational activities after school and during holidays.
The Shu’fat Girls School “open spaces” were designed through a participatory process with teachers and students so that each of its classrooms would be mirrored in an outdoor space. While the school’s classrooms have been filled with students for the past few months, the outdoor spaces are yet to be fully activated.

To this end, we have created a participatory programme in Shu’fat School that supports teachers and students to reflect on the design of the school gardens and the ideas of ‘the healthy city’ it embodies.
The open spaces of the gardens have been implemented by DAAR with the participation of students, teachers and organisations from refugee camps in Palestine in coordination with UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency). They are spaces where gatherings can take place more informally outdoors and under trees.

In this pedagogical spirit, the open spaces of the gardens in Shufat school offer the possibility for the constitution of tree schools where people from the community become teachers and activate community-based discussions around topics that the participants choose according to their relative needs and interests.

Building on the experience of Campus in Camps, a series of participatory platforms guided the girls school parliament in the exploration of potential common learning environments in open green spaces. Through these activities, students and teachers were empowered to use the space of the school to its full advantage and to create a healthy friendly environment that supports the physical and the mental well-being of its inhabitants.
A particular type of common green open space that existed in Palestine were the Bayyaraat. The Bayyaraat (“wells” from the Arabic) indicate agricultural land constituted by plantations of citrus trees, gardens and a small number of buildings. They were particularly diffuse around Jaffa during the XIX century, but following the establishment of the state of Israel, the Bayyaraat owners were made refugees, and their land expropriated by the state. Today only few Bayyaraat remain in Jaffa.
In the spring of 2015 we visited one of them on the southern border of Jaffa. Surrounded today by the suburban expansion of the city, it is an island of green space frozen in time. In 1948 its residents were expelled and forced to find refuge in Gaza. Only one older member of the extended family decided to stay, despite attempts by the army to kill him. His persistent resistance grounded him the right to bring back the closest part of his family during the 50s. The actual inhabitants of the Bayyara were the descendants of this single family.
For years, the Israeli authorities ignored the Bayyaraat, considering them innocuous relicts of the past and never legalized any development. In the last years, the increasing pressure from the real estate market for new constructions in the area made the land of the Bayyara a target for expropriation, and its inhabitants the subjects of eviction. The Israeli authorities are now forcing the owners to divide the land and privatize it in some cases, in order to make space for new development and to individualize Palestinian property making it even more vulnerable to expropriation. The younger generation has opposed any form of ownership fragmentation of the property, fearing they will lose their collective rights. After many years the land in fact does not have a single owner. It is instead owned by the entire extended family, a communal form of use and property.
The status of the Bayyaraat today resounds in the legal void of Palestinian refugee camps. They are both legally anchored in the past but have not been stopped from transforming, paradoxically creating a space for a communal form of life. Both the camps and the Bayyaraat are extraterritorial islands where law is suspended. At the same time, their inhabitants fear normalization, a political consequence that might undermine the right of return.
The project brings together the space of exile and the space of origin by connecting the Bayyara of Jaffa to the refugee camp of Shu’fat. The open spaces of the school are transformed and reactivated into a space where students can cultivate different trees and reshape their learning environment. The Bayyara therefore is not a nostalgic place, but is a place of the present where communal forms of life are still existing and trying to resist expropriation, colonization and isolation. Linking the Bayyara and the Camp aims to bring together the past and the present, location and dislocation, and their common struggle for the right to stay. For the inhabitants of the Bayyara the struggle is to resist eviction, to have their collective rights acknowledged. As for the Shufat inhabitants the struggle is double, the right of return but also the right to stay, the right to live in Jerusalem.
01. Groves

 beyara

Communal learning environment under the trees.
Shared open space for lunch breaks.
Planting a dense flower garden in proximity of the library.
Planting and activation of farming fields.
Painting the ground floor external walls with chalkboard-varnish.
Outdoor game facilities.
Facilities and decorations.
Large meshes over the playgrounds.
09. BACKYARD

Grassfields, plants and seats.
Artistic intervention on the perimeter walls.