

Spatial Memories: The Palestinian Refugee Camps as Time Machine

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

—Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (1968)

The Palestinian refugee camps as they stand today are the result of long and ongoing spatial processes. The refugees have been constructing houses and businesses to accommodate their needs. With the fourth generation of refugees born in exile, the camps have become overcrowded, highly built urbanized space, as the spaces of the camps have become fully utilized as a living space. Despite all the construction, the camps retain the 1950s grid plan with intersecting, ever-narrowing streets and alleys leading to a main plaza with a mosque. From the principle streets, smaller corridor-like alleys transect the refugee camp, dividing it into smaller blocks. Neighborhoods are named after villages or towns of origin or given abstract labels: A, B, C, and so on. The UNRWA offices and services that were set at the edge of the camps have become, as a result of the camps' expansion, part of the camps, eliminating the boundaries between center and periphery, between the administered and the administrator. As a result of the intensive construction activities and the processes of urbanization, little in the way of structures of the early camps has survived.

Palestinian refugee camps constitute a spatial and politically troubling phenomenon. Refugees have evolved into habitat and temporary shelters have unmistakably developed into permanent living spaces. The urbanization of the refugee camps did not come about abruptly; rather, it was developed in lingering processes of making and unmaking of the camp. I use the terms making

and unmaking of the camp because the process of making (establishing, constructing, developing, and urbanizing) involves the unmaking of the camp as humanitarian temporary space as well as the unmaking of refugees as humanitarian subjects. I also use the term urbanization to refer to the forced relocation of a huge rural population into highly congested areas. This, I suggest, resembles the global processes of population movement, albeit voluntary, into cities. Urbanization is, in essence, a process linked to modernism and industrialization and has been accelerated with globalization. I argue that the Palestinian refugees (mostly peasants) were forcibly urbanized without passing through “the rite of passage” to urbanization. They neither followed the process of the urbanization of capital nor the urbanization of consciousness.¹

***Fada* and *Makan*: Space “Recollected”**

I will be using space and place interchangeably though I am aware of the unsettled differences between them. For me, there is no such abstract space that we need to rework into a place. The “space” could be as intimate as the familiar “places.”² In Arabic, there is a stark difference between *fada* (space) and *makan* (place). While *fada* refers to the infinite cosmic emptiness, *makan* refers to empowerment (*makkana*, *tamkin*) and to the existential verb “to be” (*kana*, *yakunu*). Purposeless speech is referred to as *fadi* or *‘ala al-fadi* (for nothing). If someone takes a position in a purposeful discourse it means that he has acquired his *makana* (status). Both “space” and “place” as they are used in this article refer to the Arabic *makan* – with its associations with power, status, and being.

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

The Evolution of the Camp

Throughout my research and fieldwork, I have come to distinguish three main construction booms in the refugee camps: the late 1970s; the post–Oslo accords period (after 1993); and the post-Arafat era (after 2004), which saw the emergence of the neoliberal agenda.³ These construction booms manifest the interaction between the planning of UNRWA (and the host countries) and the lived practices of refugees. They

show the interplay between the institutional structures (*langue*) and refugees' spatial practices (*parole*) to yield what appears to be a highly structured "language," the camp. The *parole/langue*⁴ metaphor allows us to think about the refugees' spatial practices and to see the refugees' subjectivity within the subject positionalities they embody in the camp/diaspora. I see the refugees' spatial practices as modes of expression that say much about longing for freedom, resistance, consumption, and ownership, among other things. Moreover, these booms of construction exist in time and space. The issue of temporality appears through the growth of refugees' population and the development of the camps into highly urbanized spaces.

Food rations and spatial governance: By the late 1970s, UNRWA abolished food rations program, limiting it to needy families known as Special Hardship Cases (SHC). UNRWA introduced the SHC program in 1978, increasing the amount of assistance to needy families among the refugee population. In 1982, UNRWA abolished the mass distribution of food rations. SHC remained the only program providing food rations for needy refugees. This is why one still sees large blue trucks with UN emblems and flags, filled with wheat flour sacks and other supplies at certain days of the month in refugee camps.⁵

Before UNRWA abolished food rations, they had been used as a technology to govern camp spaces and refugees' bodies. Refugees who wanted to keep clean records with UNRWA, and hence sustain their rations and other services, had to comply with UNRWA's "order of things," including the licensing of any construction activity. When the food distribution program was limited to SHCs only, the majority of the refugees were no longer recipients and were not governed by the same technologies. This shows not only the asymmetry of power but also how humanitarian technologies worked upon bare lives to produce humanitarian subjects. As a result of abolishing of the rations, the refugees, ironically, had become "free" and started an intensive wave of construction. This, of course, would not have happened without the economic ease as a result of joining the Israeli labor force or the receiving of the monetary transfers from close relatives working abroad. Add to this the diminished hopes for return and the rapid growing population, which eventually doubled between the 1967 war and 1989 (from 3,071 to 5,900 refugees).⁶

The Oslo accords (1993) and socio-spatial mobility: Following the Oslo accords, most of the refugee camps fell under Palestinian Authority (PA) administration. The establishing of quasi-autonomous Palestinian authority was coupled with two important factors that affected the camp spaces: *the first* was the emergence of the PA as the main recruiting bureaucratic body for the unemployed intifada rebellious youth. *The second* is the substantial withdrawal of UNRWA's humanitarian programs, and their shift toward microfinance and microenterprises programs (MMPs), also – strangely enough – in 1993. Out of eighty-one refugees I interviewed in my fieldwork (2009–2011), thirty-one worked as government, UN, NGO, or private sector employees; thirty-nine had their own businesses or made a living through daily wages; the remaining eleven were

unemployed, students, or housewives (see Figure 1).⁷

<i>What work do you do for living?</i>	Frequency	Percent
Daily wage worker	21	25.9
Private sector employee	18	22.2
Government job	5	6.2
UN employed	6	7.4
Private business	18	22.2
Student	2	2.5
NGO employee	8	9.9
Housewife	3	3.7
Total	81	100.0

Figure 1: Table showing a random sample of refugees according to their jobs (from a survey conducted by the author in 2011).

These new political and economic conditions, accompanied by refugees' sentiments of abandonment, gave birth to new dynamics that accelerated the construction and the reworking of the camps into urbanized spaces. I.Q.A. (former political prisoner, handicapped, and founder of Ras Abu 'Ammar Association) and M.A.A. (a UN employee and founder of a youth center) are active community organizers of the 'Ayda refugee camp in Bethlehem. I.Q.A. and M.A.J. engage in commemoration, community education, and political mobilization for the right to return. They see the PA establishment disappointing for the refugees on two levels. *The first* was political: "the PA continuously fails to bring into the center of the peace negotiations the refugees issue and the right to return." *The second* was social: "refugees were left alone to tackle their everyday life and to cope with their hardship." This drives them to "take matters into their hands and try to inflect social change by means of education, mobilization and sometimes by spatial practices. The construction of the 'world's biggest key' memorial at the entrance of the camp, or the negotiation of the water shortage with the new luxurious Intercontinental Hotel that walls the camp from the eastern side are among these discourses that non-refugees are spared."⁸

One should be clear about the fact that the establishment of the PA has positively contributed to the emerging of new trends like these described above. The Oslo accords had implications on the ground: First, the withdrawal of the Israeli army from most of the Palestinian towns, villages, and camps following the Oslo accords. Second, direct confrontation with Israeli forces is no longer possible (or limited at the very best) as a result of the former implication. Third, the PA's establishment created a new environment in which the refugees were at ease to practice and venture into new modes of resistance. The new takes, whether it is education, mobilization, or commemoration, would not have been possible if the camps were under Israeli control. This political "relaxation," in the early Oslo era, was also manifested materially in the arrangement of public spaces and the investment in the infrastructure of the camps (street pavement, water, sewage,

and electricity networks), as well as the construction of youth clubs, community centers, associations, mosques, martyrs' memorials, and the development of camps' entrances.⁹

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

Post-Arafat, Post-structuralism: The post-Arafat era (2004 and on) is characterized by the West Bank/Gaza Strip political split (in 2007), emphasizing the de facto geographical fragmentation the Palestinians had to endure since 1948 war. While Hamas took hold of the Gaza Strip, Fatah took hold of the West Bank. Because the Gaza Strip had not been accessible for my investigation, I will limit myself to the West Bank which is equally complicated but accessible.

The post-Arafat era West Bank is characterized by the structural adjustment (widely associated with former PA prime minister Salam Fayyad) coupled with the rapid opening of the West Bank into a market economy. Raja Khalidi recently decried the PA's "States of Liberalization and Stages of Liberation," noting the inherent contradictions of structural adjustments under occupation.¹⁰ This era has been characterized by the activation of the stock market, the growth of mortgages and real estate business, and the ease on imports (mainly from China). The easing of formal and informal credit (micro-lending included) and mortgage programs allowed large segments of the Palestinian population to be relatively free from the obligations and limitations of "kinship capital." The decrease of interest rates and the lessening of the prerequisites and commitments of clients to the credit programs led to a significant increase in the demand of credit products. The new demand contributed to a sharp increase in real estate prices, referred to by local art and spatial discourses as "Ramallah syndrome."¹¹ While these new dynamics helped many of the ever-diminishing Palestinian middle class to experience modern (or contemporary) life, working class and low-wage workers could not afford such luxury. In al-Jalazun refugee camp, for example, fewer numbers of refugees could buy land in the neighboring villages and towns of Jifna, Dura, and Birzeit, let alone Ramallah. The refugees who purchased land before the death of Arafat managed either to construct the dream home or invest their property in the flourishing real estate market.

During my fieldwork (2009–2011), I encountered refugees who reinvested their capital in real estate in the camp (some with regret) while others fled the camp. For example, F.L.J. told me in January 2011 that he constructed his five-story building to "accommodate his offspring and future business expansion." Al-Fadhi, a painter who

mainly made his money working in the Israeli labor market, purchased the apartment he currently lives in as well as the two apartments below him. In the summer of 2010, he told me that he “leases out the two apartments and lives like a king ... the money [he invested several years ago] won’t purchase a half-dunam in Jifna, let alone the cost of construction.” I.T.H.J., guiding me around his three-story building in December 2011, believed that if he had invested his money in real estate outside the camp when it was possible, he would have “built a palace by now.” A.J.Y.J. told me in summer 2010 that his “two sons [living and working in Ramallah] are currently considering leveling everything and investing in an apartment building for rent in its place.”

The Thesis and Antithesis of the Camp

Refugees, who represent such a disquieting elements of the modern nation-state, also represent the true man of rights as it is the first and only real appearance of rights outside the fiction of the citizen that always covers them all ... this is what makes the figure of the refugee so hard to define politically.¹²

The refugee camp is usually described as a temporary humanitarian space. It is humanitarian in the sense that it reduces suffering and increases the possibility of survival. It is temporary in the sense that it is neither conceived nor designed as a space that people would inhabit indefinitely. This is true for most refugee camps I know of, but not true for Palestinian refugee camps. These camps have been present for over six decades, and they are still expanding, albeit vertically in the absence of horizontal possibilities. The refugees are in their seventh decade of exile and the camps are continuously built and rebuilt: “temporary” does not reflect what is taking place on the ground. As urban spaces characterized by production rather than the consumption of relief goods, “humanitarian” no longer describes the spaces.

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

While the “camp” is theorized as establishing the boundary between *bios* (people with political life) and *zoë* (the bare life), my fieldwork in al-Jalazun refugee camp and other refugee camps shows that Palestinian refugee camps challenges some (if not all) of the assumptions about camps. What I found is that the vulnerable shelters have turned into highly populated, densely built environments. I found that rather than being solely



Figure 2. Early al-Jalazun refugee camp (mid-1950s). Jalazone 3 © UNRWA Archive, Amman.

places for temporary humanitarian relief programs, Palestinian camps have become busy places full of production and reproduction. And rather than being places of expendable bare lives (*zoë*), the camps emerge as highly politicized structures, with populations with *inalienable* co-constituted individual and collective biographies (*bios*).

As I have just argued above, the Palestinian refugee camps have become the antithesis of the camp in a long process of making and unmaking of the camps themselves. However, this “eventual becoming” should not mask the early years of exile, which segregated people into categories of *bios* and *zoë* – citizens with rights and non-citizens with none. The refugees’ lives were reified and have become commensurable with their “living conditions,” exempting them from “normal” citizenry compared to Jewish newcomers, the citizens of the host countries, or the non-refugee Palestinians. The Nakba and early 1950s images of barefoot refugees on the road to exile, of the wretched elderly and children, of early shelters, and of food distribution or schooling, reduced the displaced Palestinians to their bodies and made them humanitarian subjects in the landscape of a merciless conflict. Early images of al-Jalazun refugee camp, obtained from the UNRWA archive in Amman, show al-Jalazun refugee camp indifferent in this regard (see Figure 2).

Totems and Tattoos

As an architect, I thought only wooden boards and iron rods get miraculously turned into doors and windows in camps' workshops. Yet everything that got done in the camp was unpredictably miraculous. Moving into the camp, I managed to find an electrician to fix the satellite, a plumber to install a boiler in the bathroom, aluminum-maker to fix the mosquito mesh, a painter to lime-wash the walls, and somebody to clean the apartment before moving in, all in twenty-four hours. I started to understand what it means to have both production and consumption in the same place, at the same time. It is so efficient and, at the same time, so "un-capitalist."¹³ When everything and everybody is within a ten-minute walk, there is no need to subjugate space to gain time; there is no need for ports or carriers, no need for landlines or highways. Space prevails and becomes the relativizing instrument that orders things and bodies in time.

One of the most interesting concepts of Marx's critique of political economy is the "commodity fetishism,"¹⁴ when relations of production and reproduction are masked by a monetary regime. Commodity fetishism is further amplified through the separation of production and purchasing by space and time.¹⁵ Nobody knows the carpenter who shaped the timber into the dark blue 1960s armchairs, nobody knows the plumber who would pick up the phone and drop by to fix the boiler, or the man who would put the lime-wash on the apartment walls. All are anonymous bodies in the life of an anonymous market. This description fits very well the life of Ramallah in the time I pursued my research – specifically 2007–2011. *Alo* (hello) gas, *alo* chicken, *alo* electrician, *alo* wedding, *alo* events, *alo* grocery, *alo* maintenance, and *alo shisha/argileh* (hubble-bubble). All have become the symptoms of the *delivered* contemporary life, coupled with unquestioned belief in the individual, "the human *jinni*." Social relations and interactions are masked, and new life rhythms (Thursday night parties, for example) and new relations (such as the FC Barcelona fans) emerge.¹⁶

The refugees also believed in the "human" and yet this *jinni* got a name, a lineage, a nickname, and a space of origin that differentiate *him* from others. I ask somebody, he asks others, somebody will show up, and a new interaction would emerge from which friendship, social expressions, and experiences are not missing in the "world of deliverables." The people who showed up to fix the place where I stayed were not anonymous. H.M.D.J. al-Yafawi (from Jaffa) was the painter. Al-Nabali (from Bayt Nabala) was the name of the camp's hardware store where we picked up materials and equipment. Sa'id al-Haditha (from al-Haditha) was the satellite repairman who recently refurbished the façade of his small shop overlooking the camp's plaza with the flashy sign, "Sa'id al-Haditha for Electronics."

Little by little, I have come to see the "spatialization of bodies" as both an active anchoring of "bare lives" in a space-time relation, and as a differentiation machine in the current space (the camp) when the space-time itself, being highly condensed and "somehow" homogeneous (in terms of materials and living conditions), is incapable of differentiating.¹⁷ Yafawi, Nabali and al-Haditha are time/story/biography relations in the absence of the spaces of origin themselves. These space-associative names, which I

will refer to as *toponymy of bodies*,¹⁸ are tokens that function and signify beyond their spaces of origin. This is not peculiar to the refugees, but it is in the diaspora that it gets amplified.¹⁹

Toponymy of bodies would seem a trivial detail in the crowded space of the camp. However, from what I observed, it gains different meanings in and beyond the camp creating subjects. M.H.J.E. al-Yasini is a refugee in his mid-twenties and lives in Jericho. My little-over-six-foot frame appears petite compared to M.H.J.E.'s seven feet, which proved helpful for him as a goalkeeper and as a bartender. He accompanied me to interview his grandmother, who witnessed firsthand the massacre of Dayr Yasin in 1948. M.H.J.E. is not content with the relation between refugees and non-refugees that is *spatially* expressed: “we are still treated as *ghurbiyya* [strangers]; they [the Jericho residents] call us Yasiniyya [from Dayr Yasin].”²⁰ M.H.J.E. appears to be neither satisfied with being a “stranger” nor a “refugee,” though he and his grandmother are remarkably “proud Yasiniyya,” which implies both. M.H.J.E. made me think that the trauma of the forced alienation of the refugees from their original habitats “fuels the desire to maintain a memory of what was lost”²¹ and at the same time creates the despised refugee/non-refugee dichotomy beyond the borders of the camp.

I say beyond the camp, because hailing, addressing, calling, or yelling at somebody with the nickname based on his village of origin (such as Nabali, Liddawi, Sutari, ‘Innabi, Yafawi, Dawa’imeh, and so on), implies neither discrimination nor profiling. Rather, it has become part of the embodied *parole* of everyday life, which slowly found its way onto official documents (identity cards and passports, for example) or associations, street naming, business names, and shop signs.

Interestingly, these names function as a differentiation machine, attributing qualities and characteristics to a person by extending to him the qualities and attributes of those from the same village of origin. This happens even if one was born – like many refugees – far away from the village of origin, and has been living under the same conditions as the others! For example, one may hear people talk of “a stubborn Dawa’imeh Bedouin”; “a shifty Liddawi businessman”; “a charming Haditha”; advising one to “pick a wife from Lydda, but never allow your sister to marry a Liddawi,” and so on. In a way, the names of the villages of origin (spaces), conveying attributes and qualities of their descendants, are embodied like tattooed totems that get sharper with the passage of time.

Making and Un-making the Camp

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

I was not particularly worried about my kitchen window view, though, because the

builders had just put the framework for the ground floor slab. I was pretty sure that it would take them at least three months to block my window, by which time I would be long gone to school in Irvine, with its different time zone and different views. From my window, I observed A.S.J., grey-bearded in his mid-sixties, the contractor and skilled builder who distributed the work among five other workers and monitored the process. The owner, F.L.J., the shopkeeper of a medium-size “supermarket” on the other side of the meter-wide alley leading to “our courtyard,” watched his building rising. His teenage sons carried materials over to the builders and occasionally fetched tea and coffee for the workers. In two months, A.S.J. and his workers blocked what had been a brilliant sculpture made by the sun.

It takes more than engineering capabilities, construction management, and financial coordination of resources to be able to implement such a project. Normally, Portland cement concrete requires four weeks to cure and to acquire most of its strength, in order to be able to bear the loads of the floors above. A.S.J. was not waiting this long. He supported the fragile concrete—by means of scaffolding—while constructing the upper floor to come. In doing so, he managed to overcome the fundamentals of physics to conquer space and time.²² Because I thought that this was a matter of complex engineering, I asked the owner from my window, “Who is your engineer?” F.L.J. nodded toward A.S.J., “*lim ‘alim* [the master]: he is everything, the engineer, the contractor, and the builder.” A.S.J., calm and smiling, added, “I have been doing this for generations. I worked with engineers. I know how to construct and carry out more complicated projects than this.”²³

More surprising than the innovative engineering and A.S.J.’s acceleration of time, was the question: “Why is F.L.J. constructing this five-story apartment building in the camp?”

F.L.J., born after the Nakba, is a self-made refugee whose family originated from Lydda. Their shop was one of the few small shops in the camp that originated in the early years of exile. “Our business was paying well because there was virtually no competition,” he says. “Life has changed a lot since then, and the business is no longer rewarding.” Moreover, “the refugees no longer *have their hearts on each other* [care about each other], no *suhbeh* [friendship]. No respect for the elders. I don’t have authority over my kids. This generation is making me mad; I cannot understand them.”²⁴ F.L.J. told me that he was putting up four apartments for his children and stores on the ground floor. The four apartments are identical in plan and each will consist of two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, and a bathroom; they are each a total of one hundred square meters (a little over one thousand square feet).

From my fieldwork observations, F.L.J.’s apartment building represents a new mode of spatial practices in al-Jalazun and other refugee camps of the West Bank. *First*, though there are buildings in the camp that are as high as F.L.J.’s, this is the first building to be constructed in one shot, unlike the other multi-story buildings of the camp, which were normally constructed in successive phases. *Second*, this building has identical plans for all floors, a mass production, unlike other buildings, which have different floor plans responding to the family needs at a certain moment in time. *Third*,

it will be the first building equipped with an elevator (despite electricity shortages in the camp). *Fourth*, the building contains luxury materials, such as aluminum frames, ceramic tiles, and granite copings for the stairs. (The granite steps extending beyond the stairwell, however, is common theme. The threshold has traditionally been, and continues to be, an important space to show luxury in Palestine's architecture.) *Fifth*, F.L.J. intends to lease the building's apartments until his children get married, events not on the immediate horizon, judging from their high-school appearance. Earlier buildings in the camp, by contrast, were usually constructed to host an already-established family and its business.²⁵

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

I term these spatial practices as sophisticated micro-spatial processes because they are locally and historically contextualized, technically complicated, socially invested with meanings and symbols, and lengthily negotiated within, and take into consideration, a broad web of relations. These processes combine the poetics and the politics of a Palestinian home in the diaspora with dense rational calculations. I need to be clear that these processes have been triggered by different rationales and can neither be lumped together nor reduced to a homogenous model. Every structure stands on its own as a distinctive case study within an intense collective landscape of spatial practices and social relations. This is what makes the spatial practices in the camp different from the "individual" and "individuating" projects outside the camp. If *ad hoc* refers to the unplanned or spontaneous responses to immediate problems, the spatial practices I observed in the camps are *ad hoc* in essence but loaded with symbolism and signification that make them complex wholes. This complexity is not only expressed in rhetoric and poetics but also in the materiality of these processes. By looking into the expressive and material complexity, it is possible to understand the relation between the material and the immaterial, and reveal hidden codes of subjectivity.

These sophisticated micro-spatial processes are not limited to al-Jalazun refugee camp, where I carried out my fieldwork. Rather, what appears to be a new trend in al-Jalazun camp landscape has also been taking place in Shatila, Nahr al-Barid, and to a lesser extent in 'Ayn al-Hilwa (all in Lebanon), and Balata, Dahaysha, Qalandiya, and Shu'fat of the West Bank. These different refugee camps show on the one hand that there are a variety of urban processes taking place (and at different times). On the other hand, these processes reveal a whole set of different subjectivities, agencies, and creativity of the refugees in dealing with their space *as* a resource. Space becomes not only a resource that helps refugees live the absurd, but also the medium for creative configurations that lend themselves to steadfastness against forgetfulness, as I will show in the following sections.



Figure 3. Abu Basil al-Nabali supermarket, summer 2011. © 2012 Khaldun Bshara.

Rule and Exception

When I told A.J.N.J. that the new Abu Basil al-Nabali supermarket (inaugurated in 2010) seems to be the first construction inside al-Jalazun’s official boundaries with local stone claddings – other than the UNRWA clinic, the premises of the Popular Committee, and the two relatively new mosques – he corrected me instantly, telling me, “No, there is a house, which was built with local stone, a long time ago behind the camp gas station, across the street from the UNRWA offices.”²⁶

A.J.N.J.’s prompt answer evokes an

authoritative knowledge about what constitutes the *rule* and what constitutes the *exception* in the camp’s spatial processes. A.J.N.J. knows that the norm has been constructing reinforced concrete structures clad with rendered concrete hollow-block walls. Being able to identify the only structure that was built a long time ago, against all odds, in stone, is an indication that the refugees’ spatial processes are part of everyday discourse and that their materiality circulates and gets discussed. For now, I suggest that the sophisticated micro-spatial processes take place at the intersection between norm and exception, crossing material boundaries to express modernity and creating niches for consumerism.

The air-conditioned Nabali supermarket is, by far, the largest grocery store in the camp. The supermarket’s main façade is made out from regularly cut stone courses, similar to those used in towns and villages in the West Bank. Across the street from the old mosque, the façade consists of three large openings. The upper floor has large windows that follow the alignment of the ground floor doors. A narrow (one meter deep) balcony runs along the façade. The first floor windows have no access to the balcony. The staircase was constructed at the back of the building rather than the front façade, as is usual, in order to maximize the display space of the supermarket. Behind glass, two of the openings showcase beauty care and hygiene products, while the third is the only entry and exit to the supermarket, furnished with black expensive granite steps. A flashy sign decorates the long façade of the supermarket. Inside, the store echoes the supermarkets in the surrounding towns. The checkout desk has a cash register and a surveillance monitor for the owner or the cashier to watch the clients wandering between the new white shelves, loaded with goods (see Figure 3). According to my key informant and builder K.A.H.J., “this is one of the few buildings in the refugee camp that were built ‘*ala al-usul*’²⁷ ... the building has sound foundations and a stone façade.”²⁸

K.A.H.J. knows what it takes to build something ‘*ala al-usul*. This is not easy in the camp because the builders have to deal with owners’ tight budgets, even if this comes at the expense of the quality. Sometimes the contractor halts in the middle of

the project because the owner's resources are depleted. The contractor returns to the site once the owner builds up his financial means anew. The contractor, usually, manages the site and dictates the building's form to the owner, especially if the latter is not familiar with the construction industry.

Making Jindas

In the physical space of the refugee camp, memory is reproduced and reshaped in material forms. Here I refer to practices I noted during my fieldwork such as the process of making and maintaining houses, neighborhoods, memorials, and arrangements of private and public spaces. Analytically, I bring in the question of *time* "to restore to practice its practical truth,"²⁹ and approach the refugee camp as a "social space" entangled in webs of "dialectical relationships."³⁰ This includes my emphasis on the obvious but overlooked fact that purportedly temporary shelters have become permanent homes. In the material practices this shift entails the examination of how temporary places become productive ones where memory and identity are (re)produced and altered in a number of ways. To see the socio-economic-political complexity of the building processes on the grounds of the camp, I bring up a particular project, which was planned and carried out during my study: namely, the Nakhleh clan's quasi-public project known as Jindas.

Jindas is the name of a multipurpose hall. It is the first event hall of such scale in the camp. There are other two large halls in the camp. The first hall is the public youth club hall affiliated with the Popular Committee of the PLO and built soon after the Oslo accords (1993). The other is a private hall, outside the camp's official boundaries, associated with a café and garden at the entrance of the camp, opened in 2008. By 2010, Jindas hall had become quite popular and was booked for weddings for the whole summer, especially Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. I was perplexed with the name, which means "run over by a *jinni*." It struck me as a strange name for a multipurpose hall, which hosted primarily, though not exclusively, happy events. When I enquired about it,



Figure 4. Jindas hall and the inauguration plaque, summer 2011. © 2012 Khalidun Bshara.

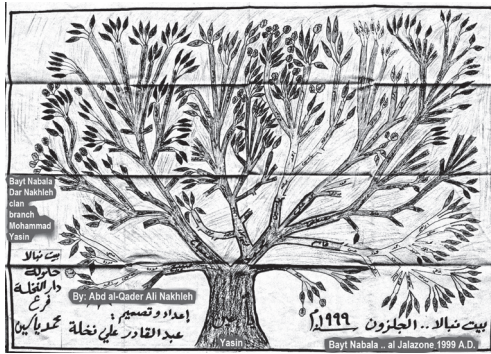


Figure 5. Genealogy of the Yasin family, Nakhleh clan, by ‘Abd al-Qader ‘Ali Nakhleh, al-Jalazun, 1999.

the refugees told me that Jindas is a fertile grazing area of Bayt Nabala bordering the nowadays Ben-Gurion airport.

The hall is located exactly at the edge of the camp, albeit outside the camp’s official area, local limestone was used to construct the 1,200 square meter, two story building on a one-dunam plot, at a cost of several hundred thousands of U.S. dollars. A.J.N.J., one of the Jindas hall committee members behind the idea, tells me that the Nakhleh clan, one of the four main clans who made up Bayt Nabala village, is the owner and the initiator of the project. Realizing that the clan was getting bigger, they decided that they needed a convention center larger than the small one they had. They presented the idea to all Bayt Nabala clans and the other three clans (Safi, Zayd, and Sharaka), satisfied with the facilities that they had, declined to join in the project. So the Nakhleh clan alone took on the project.

Making the common, making the private: The Nakhleh clan commenced with the project on their own, forming a committee to implement the project. The committee taxed every adult male approximately 25 U.S. dollars annually, exempting university students, the unemployed, and “social cases” (those who couldn’t afford it). If Carl Schmitt suggests that “sovereign is he who decides upon the exception,”³¹ then the Nakhleh committee, in a sense, practiced sovereignty in a zone that is practically in limbo between different and contradictory sovereigns. By exempting “social cases,” Nakhleh committee unconsciously adopted UNRWA’s SHC category. In a way, the Nakhleh committee replicated the humanitarian models of UNRWA that most refugees condemned. This shows that structures, social and institutional, influence each other and contribute to a common understanding of what constitutes “normal.” Exempting the SHC from paying shares in the construction of the communal space is one example in which institutional and social systems justify their power.

The committee also decided that only Nakhleh builders, contractors, technicians, workshops, and suppliers would carry out the project, to ensure that the clan would benefit most from the process. Also, they decided that, after its completion, only Nakhleh would run the business. M.N.J., who is the deejay of the hall, as well as the founder and owner of the popular Café Hadi, told me that they are planning to paint the Nakhleh clan’s family tree on the wall at the end of the hall’s center aisle. According to A.J.Y.J, this genealogy was jointly constructed by refugees in al-Jalazun and checked against information supplied by Bayt Nabala elders in Jordan (see Figure 5). M.N.J. believes that “they first need to update the tree, made more than ten years ago in Jordan, to include the younger generation.”³²

Toponymy: The Nakhleh clan also discussed the name of the new hall. Many wanted to name the hall after the Nakhleh clan itself, which, after all, had paid to build the hall. Others preferred Bayt Nabala, emphasizing their village of origin. Some suggested naming the hall after the only building of Bayt Nabala still standing, its school. After much discussion and debate, elders proposed *Jindas* and all agreed. This was a pragmatic and calculated solution. In this way, the committee avoided possible accusations of being clan-oriented. They also avoided assuming sole representation for Bayt Nabala, or giving the credit to the village as a whole when other families did not contribute to the project. *Jindas*, therefore, is situated – like its geographical location in the camp, or its location at the edge of the Ben-Gurion airport – at the intersection of common and private, between the movable and the immovable. It speaks differently to different descendants of refugees from Bayt Nabala. It does not represent the whole, but can stand in for it for members of the Nakhleh clan. Since only elders experienced the “real” *Jindas*, for younger generations, the new *Jindas* serves as an imaginary space that oscillates between the two worlds of village of origin and the camp.

On the inauguration plaque, the Nakhleh managed to include many elements: the name of the association (Nakhleh), the village of origin (Bayt Nabala), the name of the hall (*Jindas*), and the date of its foundation (2008). And though it consciously incorporates a palm tree as an icon symbolizing the family name (in Arabic, *Nakhleh* is a date palm), they also incorporated, perhaps unconsciously, the two olive branches from the UNRWA’s logo. This shows that the practices on the camp (the *parole*) do not totally escape the grammar put forward by UNRWA.

Since the inauguration of the first phase of the hall, it has been generating huge profits. The committee is currently preoccupied with furnishing the first floor. The committee is also planning to purchase the bordering dunam to create a parking lot to serve the hall. I also learned that other clans are exploring the possibility of replicating the idea.

Jindas emphasizes spatial practices as a mode of knowledge production, or space making as a mode of knowledge making. The other Bayt Nabala clans did not see the profit of *Jindas* until it was functioning. This is parallel to the inability to see the collective benefit of empowering younger, educated, and trustworthy generations to bring about change. In a sense, the spatial practices open up a socio-political space for questioning social structures that were taken for granted and furnished with the appearance of being unchangeable.

Conclusion

In this article I showed that what I termed sophisticated micro-spatial practices are historically and politically situated within the Palestinian real estate industry, driven by high demand and political conditions created in the post-Oslo era. I also showed that materiality and symbolism are intermingled, with representations of a longing for the missing self (the village and home of origin) intersecting with reminders of these created

through material practices. Palestinians refugees have been keen to recreate the common while creating the private, in terms of both material and immaterial constructions. Stone as local/endogenous/precious construction material and naming as the process of investing meaning to components of everyday life are fields of signification. In addition, the material representation in the spatial practices appears to have an embedded message of modernity.

What is intriguing in these sophisticated micro-spatial processes is that the refugees sometimes consider a practice to be normal/acceptable at the edge of the camp, but abnormal/unacceptable within the grounds of the camp. In doing so, they establish the exception within the norm, and vice versa. The construction in local limestone is one example. The constructing of non-functional verandas is another. Before the introduction of stone into the camp, there was humongous resistance among the refugees to accept the same building norms practiced outside the camp. This shows that refugees' spatial practices are negotiated and shaped by multitude of considerations including the insistence on the temporary character of the camp that says much about the refugees' memory, a memory that rejects oblivion.

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Endnotes

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- 1 David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).
- 2 It is common to hear somebody saying, "I need my space," referring to a certain bubble within his workplace, his home, and his room. This implies that the word space is also an intimate category.
- 3 This is especially the case in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and applies to a certain extent to the camps in Jordan.

- 4 *Langue* (French, meaning "language") and *parole* (meaning "speaking") are linguistic terms distinguished by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. *Langue* encompasses the abstract, systematic rules and conventions of a signifying system; it is independent of, and pre-exists, individual users. *Langue* involves the principles of language, without which no meaningful utterance, "parole", would be possible. *Parole* refers to the concrete instances of the use of *langue*. This is the individual, personal phenomenon of language as a series of speech acts made by a linguistic subject (De Saussure 1986:9-10,15). De Saussure, F. (1986 [1972]) *Course in General Linguistics* (3rd ed.). (R. Harris, Trans.). Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langue_and_parole, electronic source accessed September 2014.
- 5 See: "A Socio-Economic Analysis of Special Hardship Case Families in the Five Fields of UNRWA Operations," 31 October 2006, accessed 18 July 2014, unispal.un.org/unispal.nsf/9a798adb322aff38525617b006d88d7/f99

- 69e32dbfcd0f8525736f004c4a54?OpenDocument&Highlight=0,shc.
- 6 Adel Yahya, *Qissat Mukhayyam al Jalazone [The Story of a camp: al Jalazone]*. (Ramallah: Pace, 2006), 16.
 - 7 Though the employment within the government within my informants was as low as 5 percent, the PA employs over 150,000 bureaucrats, civil servants, police, and security personnel, who provide living for over one million heads (almost 25 percent of the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank).
 - 8 Interviews with I.Q.A. and M.A.A. in Ayda refugee camp, September 2009.
 - 9 Such as the metallic arches (arch de triumph) which decorate the camps' entrances.
 - 10 Raja Khalidi, "After the Arab Spring in Palestine: Contesting the Neoliberal Narrative of Palestinian National Liberation," *Jadaliyya*, 23 March 2012, accessed 21 May 2012, www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4789/after-the-arab-spring-in-palestine_contesting-the-.
 - 11 *Ramallah Syndrome* is the name of a 2009 public art intervention by Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti, and Yazid Anani. The artists argue, "Ramallah Syndrome is the side effect of the new spatial and social order that emerged after the collapse of the Oslo 'peace process.' It is manifested in a kind of 'hallucination of normality,' the fantasy of a co-existence of occupation and freedom. It is as if the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state – in effect, indefinitely postponed – will be achieved through pure illusion. The consequence of this perpetual persistence of a colonial regime has not been sufficiently discussed. The colonial legacy is a vital link in national identity, and it must be resolved. Ramallah Syndrome is ultimately about the critique and potentiality associated with forms of resistance and subjugation in a colonial context." Online at ramallahsyndrome.blogspot.com/. Accessed 21 May 2012.
 - 12 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998), 131.
 - 13 David Harvey argues that the system of production which capital established was founded on the physical separation between the place of work and the place of residence and the division of time into "working" and "living" time in two distinct spaces. Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital*, 73, 173.
 - 14 Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 163.
 - 15 Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital*, 18.
 - 16 What is happening in nowadays Palestine urban centers is a process that Harvey captures minutely in "The Urban Experience." In such a process kinship ties were undermined, new networks of social contacts forged such as cafés, clubs and virtual groups, and new communities created that often managed to lock themselves up in protected spaces behind symbols and signs that emphasize the special qualities of their place (Harvey 1989:183).
 - 17 When space could be represented as abstract, objective, homogeneous, and universal in its qualities. Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital*, 177.
 - 18 Toponymy is the scientific study of place names (toponyms), their origins, meanings, use and typology. The word "toponymy" is derived from the Greek words *tópos* (τόπος = place) and *ónoma* (ὄνομα = name).
 - 19 Al-Sinjilawi for Construction Materials, or al-Surdawi for Jewelry, or al-Tubbasi Pharmacy, all retail shops in Ramallah, are but a few examples that associate the names of people with their spaces of origin (all from West Bank and non-refugees) when they function from, or open business in, other town or village.
 - 20 Interview with M.H.J.E. al-Yasini, in Jericho, August 2010
 - 21 Rochelle Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011), 23.
 - 22 Technologically speaking, "accelerated curing" is possible. These techniques are especially useful in the prefabrication industry, wherein high early age strength enables the removal of the formwork.
 - 23 Informal conversation with F.L.J. and A.S.J. in al-Jalazun refugee camp, Summer 2009.
 - 24 Interview with F.L.J. in al-Jalazun refugee camp, January 2011.
 - 25 Interview with F.L.J. in al-Jalazun refugee camp, January 2011.
 - 26 Informal interview with A.J.N.J. in al-Jalazun refugee camp, Winter 2011.
 - 27 *Usul* (Arabic plural of *asl*) means origins or authentic. In this context it means following the basics of construction technologies that are practically verified and acknowledged.
 - 28 Interview with K.A.H.J. in al-Jalazun, Spring 2011.
 - 29 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Cambridge University press, 1977 [1972]), 8.
 - 30 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991 [1974]), 70.
 - 31 Vinh-Kim Nguyen, *The Republic of Therapy, Triage and Sovereignty in West Africa's Time of Aids* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2010), 176.
 - 32 Interview with M.N.J. in al-Jalazun refugee camp, Winter 2011.