



a program started by Al Quds University. hosted by the Phoenix Center in Dheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem.

Historical Precedent: the Palestinian refugee camp

Campus in Camps is the first 'university' to exist within a Palestinian refugee camp.

The 1948 Nabka forced more than 3,400 Palestinians to seek refuge. In 1949 the Dheisheh camp was established on 0.31 square kilometers of land leased from the Jordanian government.

Formed as a temporary refuge for Palestinians from 45 villages west of Jerusalem and Hebron, the camp has morphed -spatially, structurally, politically- during its 65 years of existence. Since inception the Dheisheh camp has been host to many nongovernmental actors, initially humanitarian and service providers.

Beyond groups addressing basic human needs, cultural activities permeate the camp, The Social Youth Activity Center, served as the primary youth organization of the camp for many years. It was, however, closed by Israeli military order from 1981 until 1993. In 1994 the Ibdaa Cultural Center was founded, cited as "one of the most successful community organizations in Palestine, playing a vital role in the community's survival and vitalization." These organizations begin to address human needs beyond shelter, food, with cultural and political motivations.

Established in 2012 Campus in Camps situates itself as a NEW typology, distinct from humanitarian aid, predicated on a shift in the camps' status and needs, it operates in the terms of autonomous governance, stemming from the recognition that Palestinian refugee camps have become a relatively independent social and political space, with a cited need "to explore and produce new forms of representation of camps and refugees beyond the static and traditional symbols of passivity and poverty."¹



Dheisheh refugee camp 1952

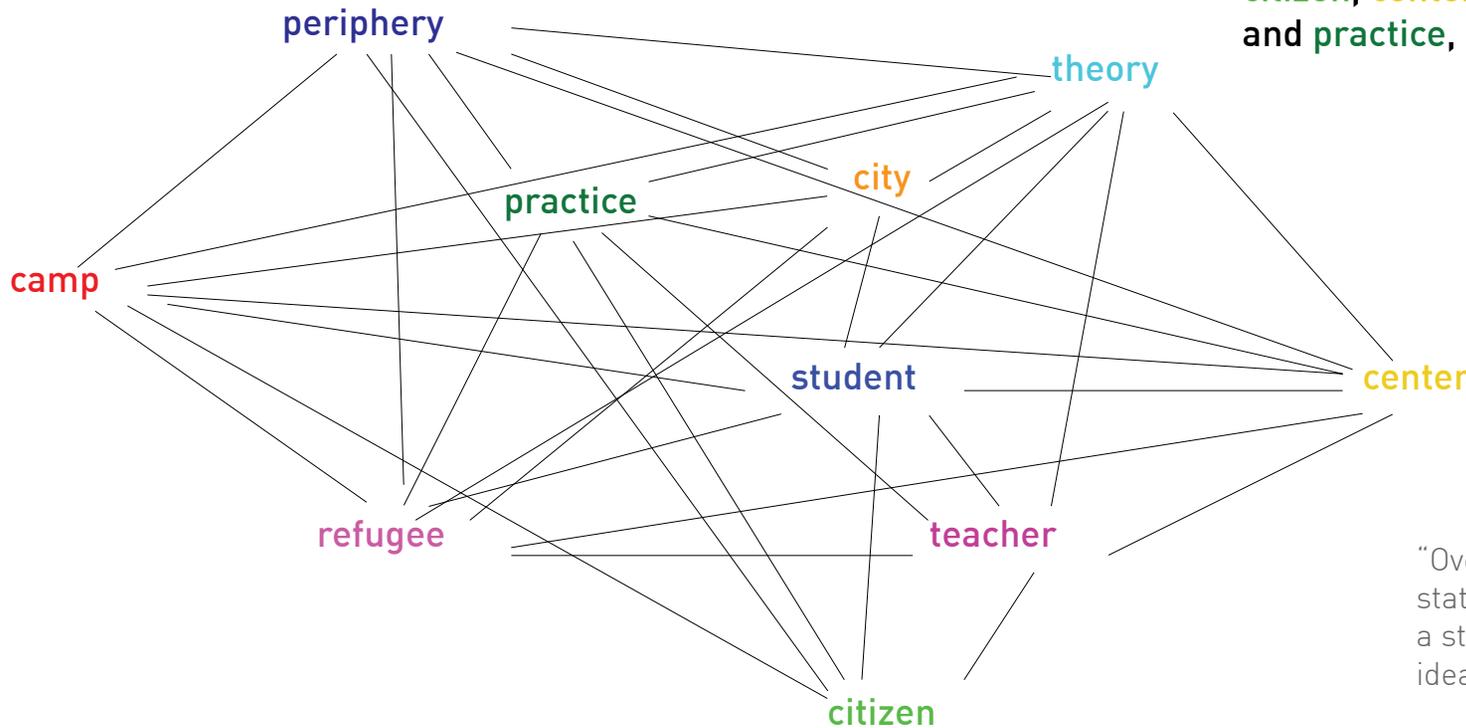
-Dheisheh archive

The program re-positions the voice and capacity of the refugee, a move to change the historical position of the refugee and her capacity to act moving beyond a passive recipient of aid to an "active political subject."¹

Cultural Background: transgressing without eliminating

Campus in Camps aims at transgressing, without eliminating, the **distinction** between **camp** and **city**, **refugee** and **citizen**, **center** and **periphery**, **theory** and **practice**, **teacher** and **student**.

Alessandro Petti
Campus in Camps director



“Over time, **camp** came to refer to a state of containment and separation, a stark contrast to the cosmopolitan ideal of the city.” -Tureli

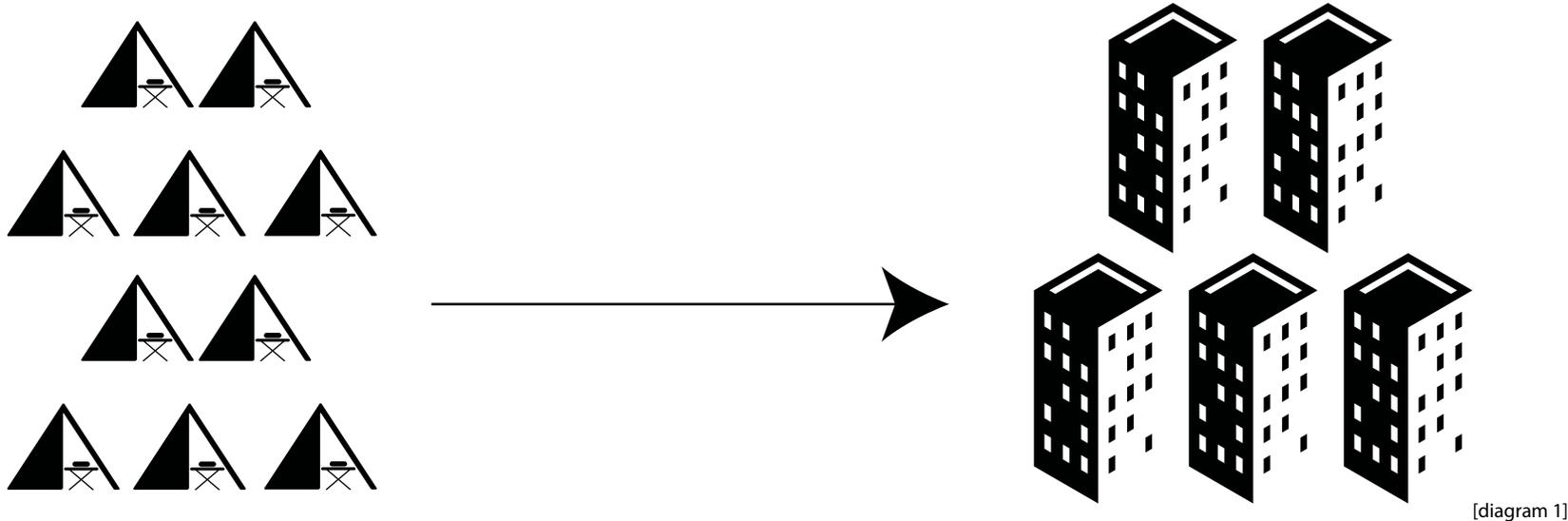
Campus in Camps explicitly seeks to blur this historical boundary, among others.

“For decades, the **effects of the political discourse around the right of return**, such as the rise of a resolute imperative to stagnate living circumstances in refugee camps in order to reaffirm the temporariness of the camps, **forced many refugees to live in terrible conditions**.”

In recent years the refugee camp have been transformed **from a marginalized urban area to a center of social and political life**. More notable is that such radical transformations have not normalized the political condition of being exiled.” - Petti defining the change in course of Palestinian camp political position.

motives and ambitions: camp improvement program

"From 1948-49 to the present day, official political discourse has sought to prohibit any development in, or formalization of, the refugee camps. The fear was that any transformation of the camps would bring about an integration of the refugee community with the local environment and thus the political motivation for the right to return would be lost."



The camp improvement program directly deals with the living conditions of Palestinian refugees living in camps. Of the 4.7 million Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA, roughly one-third (1.3 million) live in 58 recognized refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Over the years, the camps transformed from temporary 'tent-cities' into hyper-congested masses of multi-storey buildings. The UNRWA does not administer the camps, it still has an interest in improving the conditions of the Palestine refugees living in them. **A new program was launched in 2006 which focuses on improving the camps' physical and social environment through a participatory, community-driven planning approach, rather than relief.**

"Living in dignity yet maintaining their status as refugees." - Sandi Halal

"[...]the world looks at refugees as the poor people, without shelter and without food to eat" - Sandi Halal

'It is impossible to talk about development without referring to concepts such as poverty, production, the notion of the state, or equality' **Campus in Camps moves beyond the discourse of development, both as a camp transitioning from tent to structure in order to improve quality of life without sacrificing the notion of 'the right to return,' but also beyond an environment structured in need of relief. Such self-definition reinforces the political position of refugee as 'in exile,' not 'underdeveloped.'**

representation: beyond victim, passivity, + poverty

Campus in Camps explores and produces **new forms of representation** of camps and refugees beyond the static and traditional symbols of **victimization, passivity** and **poverty**.

Sandi Hilal
UNRWA Camp Improvement Programme

A basic representational move by Campus in Camps is seen in the design of its webpage in comparison to other actors in the Dheisheh camp as well as others working with Palestinian refugees:



Ibdaa Cultural Center website

The layout, font, use of color -overall design- of the website read of that of a past era, as well as potentially a situating it within the context of a certain variety of 'community and need based organizations.'



Campus in Camps website

The clean contemporary design of the website, situates Campus in Camps in different 'camp' of discourse, though housed in the same building as the Ibdaa Cultural Center. It becomes clear the producers of the site material have control over their tools + discourse.

tools: the Collective Dictionary

refugee as knowledge producer

terms of self-definition:

citizenship

common (1+2)

knowledge

ownership

participation

relation

responsibility

sustainability

vision

well-being



The Collective Dictionary serves as a means for refugees to define their position on their own terms. Created by youth participants of the 2 year program, extensive definitions of the terms are published to be considered fundamental for the understanding of the contemporary condition of Palestinian refugees.

The language of the term definition is in English + Arabic with first person reflections, interviews, excursions and photographic investigations constituting the starting point for the explication of more structured thoughts.

The definition of terms can be understood in relation to Foucault's notion 'to be governed differently.' The refugees establish the terms on which they are to be governed, in words and images. Additionally writing in English establishes an international audience, defining the ambitions of reach.

Definition of terms is also understood an act of resistance:

"At Campus in Camps, we discuss everything. We no longer accept concepts that have already been defined. We reject the idea of a universal concept that works everywhere. We even started avoiding saying or using any word that has not been built upon our experiences and stories lightly."

-Ahmad Al-Lahham

the Collective Dictionary: the creation of a new common



— Qussay Abu Aker

Via analysis in the Collective Dictionary, participants analyze -as a form of critique- built structure of the camp as it relates to political positioning, blurring traditional notions of city-camp, access and development.

For instance the term **common** is redefined in relation to the bridge connecting Doha City to Dheisheh camps is analyzed, re-articulating its position as a political structure.

From exceptional to periphery to center to common.

“At one point, the use of the bridge was limited to movement from Doha to Dheisheh. However, currently it is also vice versa, as Dheisheh children attend schools in Doha. My perception of this is that despite the political exceptionality of the camp, Doha city is a natural expansion of the refugee camps, regulated and organized by the forum of the camp (political parties, popular committees and respected figures) with the knowledge that Doha is not within the camp boundaries but rather private land under the municipality’s responsibility.

With that in mind, in my belief, the camp has shifted from its status of political exceptionality to become the **common**. Thus, the establishment of the bridge prompted many people, whether refugees or nonrefugees, to strengthen their relationship with the camp because of its strong political and social role in the Palestinian arena.”

- Isshaq Al Barbary
participant

activating campus in camps initiatives



The programmatic initiatives of Campus in Camps are the result of a collective effort made by the participants along with other community members, with community left undefined, it can be stipulated that it exists as those living as Palestinian refugees either within the bounds of the camp or spilling out into neighboring areas.

Reflecting and observing past understandings articulated over the period of twelve months - knowledge emerges as a critical understanding of the social and political context. A group of concepts which are crucial for the interpretation of the contemporary condition of the Palestinian refugee camps used what they call a "Collective Dictionary", the conceptual framework where initiatives and their meanings are defined.

In the second year of the program, emphasis was placed on the knowledge acquired from actions. Some of these actions included; gatherings, walks, events, and urban actions which were meant to play a major role with the camp condition.

The initiatives bear the names of this urbanity of exile: the garden, the pathways, the municipality, the suburb, the pool, the stadium, the square, the unbuilt and the bridge. **The very existence of these common places within refugee camps suggests new spatial and social formations beyond the idea of the camp as a site of marginalization, poverty and political subjugation.**

motives and ambitions: the creation of a new common re-definition of boundaries

We meet here to discuss what **refugees** should do with their **potential**.

Qussay Abu Aker
participant

What is at stake in these interventions is the possibility for the participants to realize projects in the camps **without normalizing their exceptional conditions** and **without blending them into the surrounding cities**.

Partha Chaterjee defines a refugee as a demographic category of governmentality. Often used as the ground on which to define claims. Campus in Camps is clear to maintain the condition of 'in exile' and 'refugee' as to not preclude rights denied by the state. While blurring the notion of commons, city, periphery, and camp, it is crucial for the refugees to retain certain status in the international community.



“The terrible situations in which Palestinian refugees were forced to live was used by the Palestinian political leadership to pressure Israel and the international community in terms of the urgency of the refugees’ right to return.”
-Petti

the refugee camp: as functional city (a critique of the city)

a state of suspension. a place of critique.



Dheisheh refugee camp 2012

-Brave New Alps

A “camp condition” can be defined as a space unincorporated from surrounding legal, social and political order. As Petti states, “it represents a sort of third area, a place in suspension, where an increasing number of individuals excluded from the polis are shut away.”

“The permanent temporarily of refugee camps have produced spatio-political configurations that call into question the very idea of 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, its very continued existence -65 years of temporality- is an act of critique, “establishing a counter-site for emerging political practices and a new form of urbanism.”

“Every single banal act, from building a roof to opening a new street, becomes a political statement concerning the right of return. Nothing in the camp can be considered without political implications.”
-Petti

Critique is a way of creating an opportunity for a future. A way of creating change. By situating **every banal act** as political, Campus in Camps opens a opportunity for critique, an opportunity for a new vision of the present and thus of a future. Without critique there is no opportunity for real change. A new discourse regarding the situation of the Palestinian refugee opens a space for other truths, dialogues not yet engaged.

“We are just beginning to understand how the camp form has problematized the very idea of a city as a functional political community and democratic space. If a citizen’s political identity is played out in the public space of the city, what is found in the camp is its inverse: here, a citizen is stripped of his or her political rights. in this sense, the camp represents a sort of anti-city, a constitutive void of a political order.”
-Petti

the refugee camp: a non-state actor



Doha, 1970.



Doha, 2010

maps by Liesbeth Hautekiet

The camp as an exceptional space could also be seen as a counter-site for emerging political practices and a new form of urbanism. Camp as site of discipline and control and camp as site of struggle and inventive practices. Until the Israeli army's withdrawal in 1995, the camp was surrounded by a high barbed-wire fence that sealed all but one of the fourteen camp entrances. The Israeli army controlled this single entrance with a revolving gate. **Re-drawing the map of the city and considering its relation to others is a step toward establishing the residents as active political agents.**

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