

# BUILDING SOLIDARITIES

## Racial Justice in the Built Environment

*Building Solidarities* is a form of mutual pedagogy between the campus and the public, through dialogues on urgent questions about constructed environments, urban life, and ecologies.

*Building Solidarities: Racial Justice in the Built Environment* foregrounds the communities of Minneapolis, Nairobi, and New York, in dialogues between students, activists, artists, and academics.

While building mutual solidarities between our campus and our partners, we aim to extend the political imaginaries, community futures, and solidarities that our partners may build with each other.

As we study racial and environmental complexities and injustices, we remain vigilantly reflexive about the relationship between our campus and our neighbors, in Harlem and elsewhere.

The series is supported by the course "Colonial Practices," taught by Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi. Web/podcasts are hosted by community organizations. To receive a research guide and link to attend, register by emailing the event title and date to [buildingsolidarities@gmail.com](mailto:buildingsolidarities@gmail.com).

### **Institutional Inhabitations**

**4:30-5:30 PM EST, September 23 2020**

**Guests: The GoDown Arts Centre and Navatman**

*On structuring cultural institutions and critical communities of black-brown solidarity in the African and South Asian diasporas of Nairobi and New York. Web/podcast by the GoDown Arts Centre ([www.thegodownartscentre](http://www.thegodownartscentre)) and Navatman ([www.navatman.org](http://www.navatman.org)).*

### **Building Historical Consciousness**

**4:30-5:30 PM EST, October 14 2020**

**Guests: Chris Cornelius, Elsa Hoover, and Nick Estes**

*Indigenous thinking on infrastructure and architecture as sites for historical consciousness and contemporary creative practice in North America. Web/podcast by The Red Nation ([www.therednation](http://www.therednation))*

### **Monumental Landscapes**

**4:30-5:30 PM EST, November 11 2020**

**Guests: Kate Beane, Lydia Muthuma, and Bhakti Shringarpure**

*A consideration of landscapes of monumentality through iconoclasm, replacement, and renaming of built and natural structures in Nairobi and Minneapolis. Web/podcast by Warscapes ([www.warscapes.com](http://www.warscapes.com)).*

### **Environmental Reclamations**

**4:30-5:30 PM EST, December 9 2020**

**Guests: Alishine Osman, Anisa Salat, and Huma Gupta**

*Environmental diasporas and ecological reclamation in the 'Somalias' of Dadaab, Minneapolis, and Mogadishu. Web/podcast by Jadaliyya, "Environment in Context" ([www.jadaliyya.com](http://www.jadaliyya.com) Environment page) and Status podcast ([www.statishour.com](http://www.statishour.com)).*



INSTITUTE FOR COMPARATIVE  
LITERATURE AND SOCIETY  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

# BARNARD

Office of the Provost, Barnard College  
Barnard and Columbia Colleges Department of Architecture

# Environmental Reclamations

*Environmental diasporas and ecological reclamation in the 'Somalias' of Dadaab, Minneapolis, and Mogadishu.*

December 9, 2020

4:30-5:30 PM EST

Guests: Alishine Osman, Anisa Salat, and Huma Gupta, *Jadaliyya*, "Environment in Context"

([www.jadaliyya.com](http://www.jadaliyya.com) Environment page) and Status podcast

([www.statushour.com](http://www.statushour.com))

To our guests:

The focus of this discussion will be "Environmental Reclamations," and we will discuss your experiences with the environmental scarcity and diaspora, and the refugee camps and urban environments that become the landscape of that trajectory. We would like you to reflect upon your own experiences in practice and research, and how these have led you to your work today, and your present actions and reflections on ecological reclamation, whether through your work or other commitments. Our readings in the first half of the course have considered the construction of knowledge and institutions, the partitions of land and the self, building historical consciousness through architecture and infrastructure, and the construction of monuments, their iconoclasm, and/or their restoration in the intellectual or popular consciousness. All of this work has been in the service of a meditation on colonial practices and actions to decolonize institutions, the built environment, and landscapes. We will ask you about your experience with the theory and practice behind environmental reclamation, and ask you to articulate your positions based on your academic and practical experiences. We will talk about the uses of knowledges of the past. We will also reflect on the larger arc of the dialogue series, "Racial Justice in the Built Environment," through our preoccupations with Minneapolis, New York, and Nairobi, threaded through many of the talks in the series, and particularly building upon your and our positions in these three cities. Our goal is not merely to consume information but to build solidarities. In that spirit, we hope that this may be the beginning of a discussion and collaborations between the three of you.

**Alishine Osman** is the Executive Director and a founding member of the Pennsylvania Center for Refugees and Immigrants. Having spent 17 years of his life in the Dadaab Refugee Camp, one of the largest refugee camps in the world, Osman experienced firsthand how tough it is to relocate to the United States. He has led the PCRI to be, among other things, a space where mentors and volunteers help immigrants and refugees learn English and American history to pass the citizenship test. He leads the organization's collaborations with nonprofits, churches, government agencies, health service providers, and educational institutions. Alishine is graduating this semester with an MBA from Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania.

**Anisa Salat** is a Portfolio Manager at Shuraako, a program of One Earth Future Foundation. Shuraako works with underserved small and medium enterprise (SME) markets in the Somali region to develop a more resilient and responsible private sector. Secure Fisheries, a second program at the foundation, also operates in the Somali region with the goal of promoting peaceful and sustainable fisheries as a source of food security, economic security, and community resilience. Prior to joining One Earth Future, Anisa attended Bryn Mawr College (class of 2016) where she earned a bachelor's degree in urban planning with a concentration in community and economic development. Anisa was born in Mogadishu, Somalia. Her family left Somalia after the civil war broke out in 1991 migrating throughout Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, and finally settling in Kenya in 2002. Anisa moved to the United States in 2012 to attend college and she is now based at the One Earth Future headquarters in Broomfield, Colorado.

**Huma Gupta** is an architectural and urban historian. Gupta is a postdoctoral fellow at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University, where she is working on two book projects: "The Architecture of Dispossession" and "Dwelling & the Wealth of Nations." In 2020, she completed her dissertation "Migrant Sarifa Settlements and State-Building in Iraq" at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where she was a fellow in the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture. Gupta has also been a doctoral fellow at the Social Science Research Council and a Humanities Research Fellow at New York University - Abu Dhabi. Her work has appeared in a number of scholarly venues including the International Journal of Islamic Architecture, Thresholds, and the Journal of Contemporary Iraq & the Arab World (forthcoming). As a practitioner, she has worked on community-based monitoring of small infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, municipal administration in Syria, grassroots mobilization around housing justice in Boston, and humanitarian response and housing policies for refugees and internally displaced persons around the world. Lastly, she is the host of the Environment in Context Podcast for Jadaliyya.com and Statushour.com.

This program is supported by the course "Colonial Practices" taught by Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi. **Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi**, [asiddiqi@barnard.edu](mailto:asiddiqi@barnard.edu) Preceptor: **Ada Jiang**, [aj2837@barnard.edu](mailto:aj2837@barnard.edu)

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## Guiding Questions

1. We see in each of your backgrounds an act of ecological reclamation, whether on a local level, an international level, a planetary level, or a historical level. What does ecological reclamation look like? What can be reclaimed through materialities and what can be reclaimed mentally, emotionally, psychologically, and historically?
2. How do you define your relationship with migrant / refugee / diaspora communities in your work? How do you negotiate these relationships?
3. When you are looking for a story in your work, what sources do you trust? Whose accounts do you draw on to locate the histories that are meaningful to you?
4. What materials, evidence, or contexts do you pay attention to? What can your *material* experiences teach us about environmental futures?

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Ursula Le  
Guin

*The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. The rigging of the boats in harbor sparkled with flags. In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved. Some were decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and grey, grave master workmen, quiet, merry women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked. In other streets the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the procession was a dance. Children dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows' crossing flights over the music and the singing. All the processions wound towards the north side of the city, where on the great water-meadow called the Green Fields boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mud-stained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their restive horses before the race. The horses wore no gear at all but a halter without bit. Their manes were braided with streamers of silver, gold, and green. They flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another; they were vastly excited, the horse being the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own. Far off to the north and west the mountains stood up half encircling Omelas on her bay. The air of morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky. There was just enough wind to make the banners that marked the racecourse snap and flutter now and then. In the silence of the broad green meadows one could hear the music winding through the city streets, farther and nearer and ever approaching, a cheerful faint sweetness of the air that from time to time trembled and gathered together and broke out into the great joyous clanging of the bells.

Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas?

They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy. But we do not say the words of cheer much any more. All smiles have become archaic. Given a description

such as this one tends to make certain assumptions. Given a description such as this one tends to look next for the King, mounted on a splendid stallion and surrounded by his noble knights, or perhaps in a golden litter borne by great-muscled slaves. But there was no king. They did not use swords, or keep slaves. They were not barbarians. I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few. As they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb. Yet I repeat that these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us. The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. If it hurts, repeat it. But to praise despair is to condemn delight, to embrace violence is to lose hold of everything else. We have almost lost hold; we can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy. How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naive and happy children--though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle! but I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you. Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. In the middle category, however--that of the unnecessary but undestructive, that of comfort, luxury, exuberance, etc.--they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here, floating light-sources, fuelless power, a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that; it doesn't matter. As you like it. I incline to think that people from towns up and down the coast have been coming in to Omelas during the last days before the Festival on very fast little trains and double-decked trams, and that

the train station of Omelas is actually the handsomest building in town, though plainer than the magnificent Farmers' Market. But even granted trains, I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate. Let us not, however, have temples from which issue beautiful nude priests and priestesses already half in ecstasy and ready to copulate with any man or woman, lover or stranger, who desires union with the deep godhead of the blood, although that was my first idea. But really it would be better not to have any temples in Omelas--at least, not manned temples. Religion yes, clergy no. Surely the beautiful nudes can just wander about, offering themselves like divine soufflés to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh. Let them join the processions. Let tambourines be struck above the copulations, and the glory of desire be proclaimed upon the gongs, and (a not unimportant point) let the offspring of these delightful rituals be beloved and looked after by all. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt. But what else should there be? I thought at first there were not drugs, but that is puritanical. For those who like it, the faint insistent sweetness of *drooz* may perfume the ways of the city, *drooz* which first brings a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then after some hours a dreamy languor, and wonderful visions at last of the very arcana and inmost secrets of the Universe, as well as exciting the pleasure of sex beyond belief; and it is not habit-forming. For more modest tastes I think there ought to be beer. What else, what else belongs in the joyous city? The sense of victory, surely, the celebration of courage. But as we did without clergy, let us do without soldiers. The joy built upon successful slaughter is not the right kind of joy; it will not do; it is fearful and it is trivial. A boundless and generous contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer: this is what swells the hearts of the people of Omelas, and the victory they celebrate is that of life. I really don't think many of them need to take *drooz*.

Most of the procession have reached the Green Fields by now. A marvelous smell of cooking goes forth from the red and blue tents of the provisioners. The faces of small children are amiably sticky; in the benign grey beard of a man a couple of crumbs of rich

pastry are entangled. The youths and girls have mounted their horses and are beginning to group around the starting line of the course. An old woman, small, fat, and laughing, is passing out flowers from a basket, and tall young men wear her flowers in their shining hair. A child of nine or ten sits at the edge of the crowd, alone, playing on a wooden flute. People pause to listen, and they smile, but they do not speak to him, for he never ceases playing and never sees them, his dark eyes wholly rapt in the sweet, thin magic of the tune.

He finishes, and slowly lowers his hands holding the wooden flute.

As if that little private silence were the signal, all at once a trumpet sounds from the pavilion near the starting line: imperious, melancholy, piercing. The horses rear on their slender legs, and some of them neigh in answer. Sober-faced, the young riders stroke the horses' necks and soothe them, whispering, "Quiet, quiet, there my beauty, my hope...." They begin to form in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun.

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits hunched in the corner farthest from the bucket

and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come. The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes--the child has no understanding of time or interval--sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

This is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve, whenever they seem capable of understanding; and most of those who come to see the child are young people, though often enough an adult comes, or comes back, to see the child. No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were

cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed.

The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.

Often the young people go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the child and faced this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years. But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long it would probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes, and its own excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there sniveling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer.

Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible.

At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

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# PERSPECTA 50

# URBAN DIVIDES

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Traversals:

In and Out of the  
Dadaab Refugee Camps



Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi

and

Alishine Hussein Osman

In 1991, in response to a civil war, drought, and famine in Somalia that displaced 1.7 million people, four hundred thousand asylum seekers fled to Kenya by boat from the Mombasa or Kismayo seaports, or on foot through the western border into Kenya's Garissa District.<sup>1</sup> That same year, several boys and young men fleeing Sudan crossed borders to enter the country on the other side, arriving in the Turkana District on foot, many from camps in Ethiopia. In response to these influxes, the Kenyan government requested United Nations assistance and began designating land for refugee encampments.<sup>2</sup>

On Kenya's border with Somalia, The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) set up a reception station and temporary settlement in a town called Liboi. This makeshift camp was reported to have such poor shelter quality that international staff preferred to sleep outdoors.<sup>3</sup> The government of Kenya provided a site to house

these refugees for the longer term, one hundred kilometers from the border, just north of a village on the unpaved highway that connected Nairobi and Mogadishu.<sup>4</sup> The village, called Dadaab, had a population of five thousand and was not yet electrified when the UNHCR set up its field office.<sup>5</sup> Ground clearing and construction of a new camp for thirty thousand inhabitants began in October of 1991.<sup>6</sup> It was called Ifo. That field office and refugee camp underwent a material and morphological transformation as they expanded into a system of three designated settlements sheltering nearly one half million inhabitants by 2011, with two additional camps added later.<sup>7</sup>

Although international refugee law guarantees refugees the right to work and education, the Kenyan state's enforcement of an encampment policy curtailed these rights by restricting refugee movement outside designated settlements.

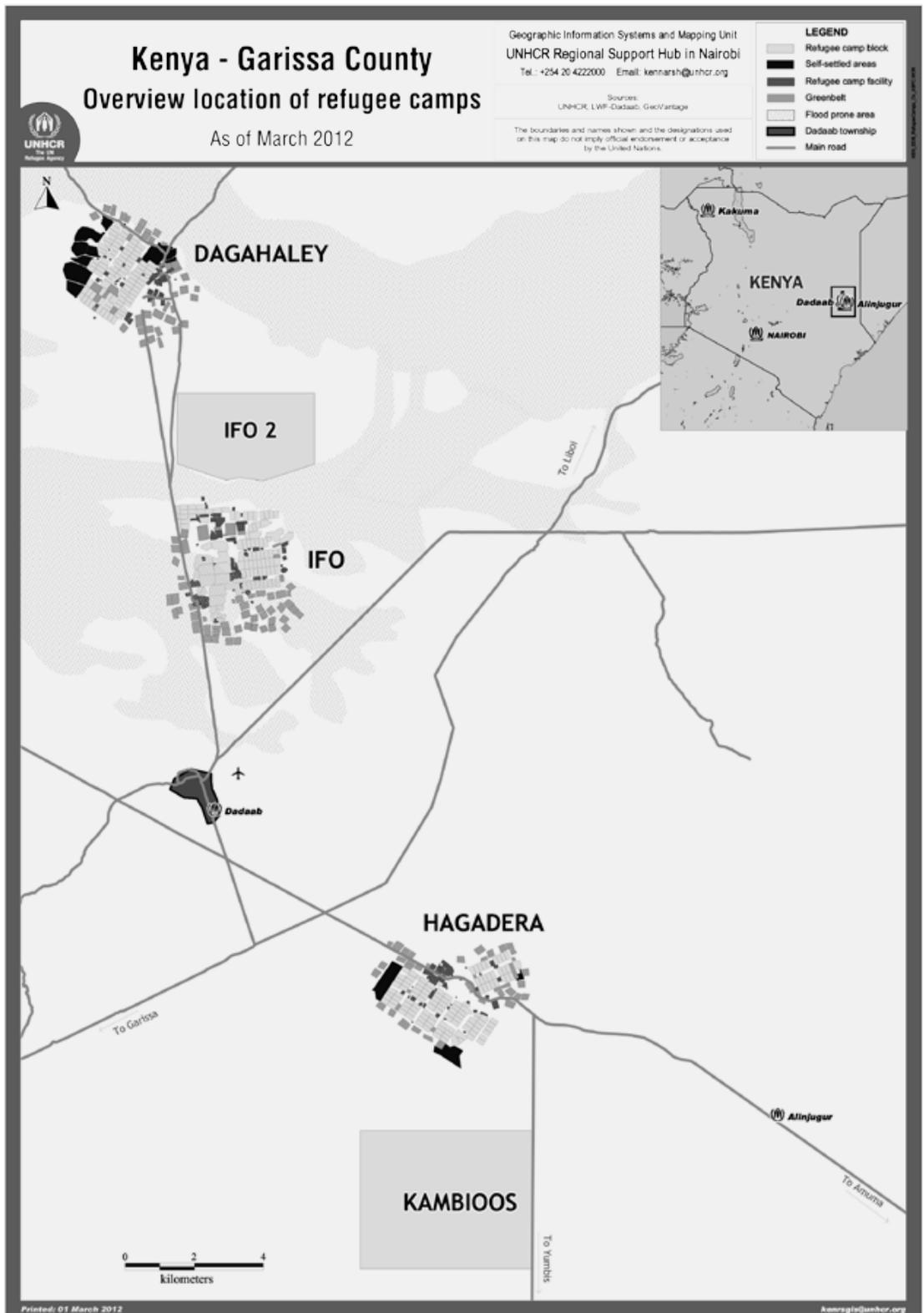


Fig. 1 UNHCR overview map of Dadaab refugee camps, 2012.

This policy has produced a refugee territory divided politically, socially, and economically from the space of the host nation. This territory is comprised of the humanitarian compound adjacent to Dadaab town and an array of refugee settlements (Ifo, Dagaheley, Hagadera, Ifo 2, Kambioos) along highways to the north and south. Although this formation may not constitute a city in legal terms, its robust informal economy, emergent body politic, cosmopolitan sociability, and architecture together mimic the aesthetic and sociocultural complexity of an urban form. This means that the Dadaab complex also lacks the affect of a provisional camp, particularly as no fences or other separating architectures surround any space other than the central humanitarian compound and offices within each refugee settlement. Architecturally, areas of the camps, particularly the markets, share material characteristics with the Kenyan town of Dadaab. Social services in the camps related to health, education, physical planning, recreation, and administration, all implemented by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), mirror those of the state. This condition brings into focus a breach between the normative space of the state and this parallel humanitarian environment. People and things regularly traverse this surveilled and policed breach.

Members of the population, including individuals and families formally registered with the government of Kenya or the UNHCR, unregistered asylum seekers, and economic migrants from within and outside the country cross it for goods, services, and opportunities. Other things cross it as well: for example, the mobile architectures that make up the settlements, from the humanitarian compounds to the traditional dwellings.

The following discussion of life in the refugee complex at Dadaab is part of an exchange between Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi and Alishine Hussein Osman, initiated in 2011. Siddiqi conducted scholarly research in Ifo, Dagaheley, Hagadera, Dadaab, and the central UNHCR compound, visiting in affiliation with the advocacy organization Womens' Refugee Commission. Osman arrived as a child to Ifo, completed primary and secondary education, and later worked for humanitarian agencies in the camp, including the early stages of a Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) shelter initiative, before being resettled in the United States. In the following dialogue, they discuss the divide presented by Dadaab within a larger governed space.

Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi (AIS):

Let's talk about how we each first entered the refugee settlements at Dadaab. It may begin to explain the spatial separation it presents. I am a United States citizen, and as part of my scholarly research, I worked with the Women's Refugee Commission under the aegis of the International Rescue Committee (IRC). I traveled on the UNHCR chartered plane from the Wilson airport in Nairobi to the Dadaab airport, where the IRC driver took us to our base in the humanitarian compound across the highway from Dadaab town.

Alishine Hussein Osman (AHO):

I first arrived in Ifo refugee camp with my family in 1991. After the civil war erupted in Somalia, my family had to flee the country. We arrived at the Kenya-Somalia border, where there were lots of other refugees. We were received by the UNHCR and screened. We entered Kenya by vehicle and were settled at Liboi. Because Liboi was close to Somalia, the UNHCR decided to relocate the refugees to Dadaab a few months later. We were transported by vehicles operated by the UNHCR, and moved to newly established blocks with empty tents, which would become our first home as refugees. That tent in Ifo camp became my home for the next seventeen years. I graduated from high school in 2003, and worked in many jobs there, including in more than one NGO. I left the camp in 2007 for the United States. I got a Bachelor's degree from Pennsylvania State University, and I also became a United States citizen.

It makes me emotional whenever I talk about this, particularly when I compare my seventeen years in Dadaab with my five years here, and think about the time that was lost. I first traveled back in 2009 and met some of my old friends, some of them my classmates in first and second grades. They still live in the refugee camp.

I have visited the camps three times since I moved away, to see my family and friends. During each visit, I was either a citizen or permanent resident of the United States. When traveling to the camp, I usually take the bus from Eastleigh in Nairobi, via Garissa, to the Dadaab camps; the bus station is in the central market in Ifo.<sup>8</sup> Occasionally I take a bus that terminates in Garissa, and catch another one to Dadaab. It is a long trip and sometimes I want to spend a night in Garissa to rest.

AIS:

I have always been curious: when you applied to go to college, who wrote your recommendation letters?

AHO:

Nobody. I went to Harrisburg Area Community College in Pennsylvania, and took the assessment test for English and math. Based on the results, I was placed in classes in the community college, where I spent a couple of years. When I accumulated enough credits, I transferred to Penn State. The university requested a high school transcript, and they accepted the one issued by Ifo Secondary School. I now work in Harrisburg for a nonprofit social service organization.

When I think about where I grew up, I believe the Dadaab settlements are geographically and politically segregated from the rest of the world. Refugees do not have legal rights to move outside of the camp. Now when I travel there, I am aware that there are numerous checkpoints, in both directions. On the way back to Nairobi, there are many more checkpoints than on the way into the camps. The police check your bags, the photos on your phones, your calls. If you hold a foreign passport with a Kenyan visa, the police capture your biometrics. Even if the UNHCR gave identification cards to the refugees, they could not use them to travel to other parts of Kenya. They need to have an identity document that is called *kipande*, or *kitambulisho*.<sup>9</sup>

As time went on, things changed, but initially we lacked means of communication. We didn't have television or telephones. We could not go to Nairobi, or even Garissa. We could not go to Somalia because of the conflict there. We could not go to Ethiopia or other neighboring countries. After nearly seventeen years, I was among a tiny population of refugees offered a resettlement opportunity.

When you live in a refugee camp for twenty-five years, you are not the same as others who have identity, education, and legal rights to move around the country or from one country to another, and so on.

- AIS: *Kipande* divides people inside the camps and outside the camps. It is a material object that makes spaces and borders, and dictates much larger zones. Can you describe it? Is it a piece of paper, or something else? Is it something that could fit in a wallet, like a ration card?
- AHO: It is a document, which looks almost like a driver's license that we have here in the United States. But to acquire one is not a simple process. You have to have at least one parent who is a Kenyan. So, how is a refugee going to get that document? A lot of my immediate family members, born in the refugee camp, cannot get Kenyan citizenship.
- One of the functions of *kipande*, from a refugee's perspective, is that it enables travel around the country. In very limited situations, when a person needs medical attention, the UNHCR issues travel documents. Some students are also issued travel documents so they can go to school for higher education. In 2006, the United Nations started giving an alien card. At the beginning, we refugees thought it would allow us travel privileges, but it did not. *Kipande* was what was required, which was issued to Kenyans only. Kenyans can travel, but the refugees cannot.
- AIS: Can you describe how the government issues it?
- AHO: The Kenyan government and the UNHCR take biometrics—fingerprints and a photo—to capture the vital information of refugees over the age of eighteen. Once they capture that, they put it in a database. Persons in the database may not apply for Kenyan identification. People in the refugee camps in Kenya cannot acquire that identification, and therefore cannot engage in business outside of the camps.
- AIS: If you are born in the refugee camps, what country are you a citizen of?
- AHO: Somalia. Or Ethiopia. Wherever your parents are from.
- AIS: You are recognized as a Somali citizen if you were born to Somali parents in the camps in Kenya?
- AHO: Yes, the Somali government will not decline citizenship rights because of being born in the refugee camps; they acknowledge that the parents are Somalis.
- AIS: So, people born in the camps are not actually stateless. If being born in the camps meant that a person didn't have citizenship of any country at all, that would be one form of social and political separation from the general population, meaning that the population produced inside the camps exists outside national space. But to be born in the camps and to inherit the citizenship of your parents raises other questions. What if one of your parents is an Ethiopian refugee and another is a Somali refugee? It creates a different form of citizenship and social space.
- AHO: Well, let's say a child is born in the refugee camp, and one of the parents is a Kenyan citizen but the other parent is a Somali refugee. Logically, that child should be a Kenyan citizen.
- AIS: If so, the Kenyan law could be seen as generous, in that way.
- AHO: The problem is that this is not really something that can be implemented. If a Kenyan citizen marries someone of another nationality, then the spouse may become a Kenyan citizen through marriage. But

that is just on paper. I know a Somali refugee who has applied for a Kenyan identification card several times, but was denied. The government has her fingerprints and photos; the system record shows that she is a refugee. This woman has one child, and has been married to a Kenyan citizen for over five years, and lives in Kenya with her husband, but she is still a refugee, and was never able to get a Kenyan citizenship.

AIS: On what grounds was she denied?

AHO: It is not really clear on what grounds she was denied. Even though one can apply for citizenship through marriage under Kenyan law, the process typically ends when the authorities find out the applicant is a refugee. Rather than requesting further evidence of proof of relationship, such as a marriage certificate, to determine the eligibility of the claim, the government usually neglects to make the request.

AIS: Does she live in the camps?

AHO: No, she lives in Garissa.

AIS: Does her child have a Kenyan birth certificate?

AHO: Yes. At age eighteen, he will either register as a refugee, or apply for citizenship through his father. And let me explain the process of applying for identification cards, at least what I remember; things may have changed. First of all, the process doesn't happen every day. The opportunity comes along two to three times a year. There is a clerk from the central government who goes to one part of the city or to one village, with the biometrics equipment. That person waits for the elders to come. Then they gather the local government employees and people from the community. If I were the applicant, I would say: my name is so-and-so, and I am the son of so-and-so. Now, the community would have to say: Oh, we know him! They would have to identify me and verify whether I was the person I said I was. They would have to identify where I was born, and when I was born.

AIS: Is it done in a public place?

AHO: They might do it in a school. And that's just the first part of it. These two or three government representatives collect all the biometric data, and they process it. After processing the application, if they find out that the applicant was once a refugee, it would likely be denied. If not, in about three to four months, the applicant would acquire *kipande*.

Now, the child I was talking about earlier is currently four years old. After he finishes high school, if he doesn't go through the refugee registration process, he should be able to apply for *kipande*, or *kitambulisho*, and would most likely have no problem acquiring it.

AIS: Why would he apply to be a refugee if he could become a citizen?

AHO: Some people make a claim to refugee status to receive different forms of aid from the camps, including food. Some local citizens are able to register as refugees and come twice a month during the aid distributions to collect food, along with what the agencies call "non-food items," like plastic sheeting and other materials. Relatives and friends update them with phone calls or text messages as goods become available.

AIS: At age eighteen, he could go through the process of registering as a refugee or a citizen. In your experience, one is not necessarily more beneficial than the other?

AHO: Not necessarily. But I never applied for *kipande*. Anyway, if I went to the committee, who would recognize me? It is unlikely that someone would apply without a strong case.

AIS: The processes that produce these divisions begin earlier than age eighteen. When did you get a refugee card?

AHO: Age five or six.

AIS: Were you on your parents' card or did you have your own?

AHO: When we first came, we were head-counted. Our names were put in a book, and entered in a computer record later on. We were given a small card, for a family of one to twelve.



**Fig. 2 UNHCR ration card, photo courtesy of Alishine Osman.**

AIS: Were your parents with you?

AHO: Yes, one of my parents was there. There were seven of us at the time, but they punched number six. When we went to the ration distribution center, we were given rations for six.

AIS: But the cards are in categories, and one of the cards is for a family size of one to twelve. Is there a family size category larger than that?

AHO: At the beginning, the maximum family size on the cards was twelve. Some families had two cards: one was punched for twelve and another for the remaining number. Today the ration cards can be punched for up to sixteen.

AIS: I suppose the number of dependents becomes crucial on distribution days, and even one extra ration can reverse a family's fortunes. When I visited the food distribution center in Ifo, I began to realize how it enacted power dynamics through architecture alone, by controlling the material flow of goods. There is a visible threshold that you can see in the photo, between the person receiving aid and the person placed in the position to distribute it. But this architecture



**Fig. 3 Food distribution point, Ifo camp, photo by Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi.**

represents boundaries between these two people and the agencies or donors as well. I remember the World Food Programme officer describing a refugee dispute over who was selected to distribute rations. It puts into play incredible power differences.

The donkey carts lined up outside the distribution point also spoke to the existence of differentiated economic zones in the camp and the possibility of a real socio-economic gradient from the camp interior to the perimeter. Aid recipients in Dadaab generally sell portions of their ration at the market just after distribution days. The donkey carts facilitated the sale of rations by people in the camp to people at the camp exterior. If you live close to the food distribution point, you can transport rations to your domicile without this additional expenditure. If you live outside the camp, you are likely an unregistered asylum-seeker, do not receive rations like a registered refugee, and have to buy food and hire transport to move it from the center. For me, the image of the donkey carts suggested a disaggregation of the informal economy: there are the wholesalers, the delivery people, the cart owners and renters, the local retailers, and the consumers. They each occupy coordinates in space that can be mapped in relation to the distribution center. Here, the design of the camp matters, as does the allocation of plots, especially in terms of the proximity of all points to the aid distribution point.



**Fig. 4**

**Secondary distributors outside food distribution point, Ifo camp, photo by Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi.**



**Fig. 5** Market, Ifo camp, photo by Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi.

AIS:

I was also amazed by the markets; I saw everything being sold, from goat meat and camel's milk, to construction supplies, to bed frames and mattresses, to televisions and cellphones. And the markets in the camps do not look different from the market in Dadaab town. But because of the informal economy, you could exchange hundreds of U.S. dollars in the camps; you couldn't do that in town.



**Fig. 6** Market, Dadaab, photo by Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi.

And the food distribution points and markets were not the only charged spaces. The water distribution points seemed even more volatile. I took this photo at a tap stand that had been fenced off by one of the refugees.



**Fig. 7** Water distribution point, Ifo camp, photo courtesy of Bethany Young.

AHO:

This photo looks like the tap stand where I used to live, in sector A in Ifo camp. Somebody built a fence around it. Twice a month, when we received the food ration, we would sell some flour and give that person a portion of our ration—equivalent to one dollar—to protect the water. It was a mutual agreement; otherwise, people would misuse the water equipment, or even break the tap. Water usually runs from 7:30 A.M. to 11:30 A.M., and again after 2 P.M. This photo was probably taken at around 1 P.M. People bring water cans, and put them in line. They put them in order on a first-come, first-serve basis, and over time, they have worked out a particular order. That's the system, but sometimes people breach the system, and you'll find people fighting over this. Once we had to move from Block B to another block in Ifo because of water scarcity. Some blocks had more water than other blocks. There were no individual pipes or water storage systems for families. So if the water source equipment was broken or the pump was out of fuel then there would be no water for the families until it got fixed. We experienced this several times. This may be one of the biggest differences between life in the camps and in nearby towns like Dadaab or Garissa. The Kenyans have water running in their individual households or a system that reserves water in case of a shortage. That is not the case for the refugees.

AIS:

It's very difficult. In addition to the harshness of this life, the problems are based on certain forms of resource scarcity that Kenyans also feel. At this stage, the situation is also predicated on a politically awkward condition. After twenty-five years, with many refugees intermarried or in the same clan as members of the host community, divisions like these are in many ways *only* political—not social, or anything else.

I want to return to this question of how you were able to move around on a regular basis. Were you able to leave Ifo, other than in extreme circumstances?

AHO:

I could not leave permanently, but I could go to other camps temporarily.

AIS:

What about when you were working for the NRC?

AHO:

Not unless I had a requirement for something official and had to travel for the organization, in which case I had to arrange for travel documents and paperwork. I couldn't just travel. But remember, this is Africa, there's a lot of corruption. If you have money, you can definitely travel.

AIS: As an employee of the NRC, could you go to its office in the UNHCR compound in Dadaab?

AHO: Yes, but not beyond Dadaab.

AIS: Could you go to the central humanitarian compound before you started working for the NRC?

AHO: Yes. Even as a regular refugee you could travel to the UNHCR compound in Dadaab. Beyond Dadaab is where the problem is.

AIS: If you lived in Ifo, how would you get to the other camps, Hagadera or Dagaheley, which are far away by foot? Would you take a vehicle, or would you walk? It's about thirteen kilometers, and took us a little over twenty minutes in a car. Do people take *matatus* [shared minibuses]?<sup>10</sup>

AHO: There are not a lot of people taking *matatus*. You have to wait until enough people are on the *matatu* for it to go, and instead of waiting, people would walk. I would often walk to Dagaheley. I have walked so many times from Ifo to Dadaab to Hagadera.



**Fig. 8** Highway from Dadaab to Ifo, photo by Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi.

AIS: The crossing between camps makes you aware of the great deal of space that a few kilometers can create. The landscape is very harsh, with red dust and scrub as far as you can see, the occasional tree, and those ominous marabou storks looming everywhere! The highways are unpaved. And when you leave a camp, there is no entry or exit; there are no gates. Except in certain places, the boundary is existential: there is simply nowhere to go. Of course, you can see the edges and the density of the built fabric from above. But on the ground, it seems that it would be easy to be on the road, and in areas where the acacia bushes are high, you could miss the camps entirely if you weren't directed to them. As an international visitor, as you know, I traveled in the UN convoys to move between camps. Because of the security issues, these all-terrain vehicles were required to travel together at set times of the day. Every morning, we would leave the UNHCR compound and stop by the police station in Dadaab to pick up our police escort. I wasn't allowed to walk anywhere because the agencies had to assume responsibility for me, and they wouldn't let me do my work unless I remained with a police escort. It felt overblown at the time, but the agencies have been reacting to regular threats against aid workers since the camps were established in 1991. After the kidnapping of the aid workers and the bombings in the camps in 2011, they stopped allowing non-essential personnel or visitors on site.<sup>11</sup> I had never worked in a context like that before, and often felt a combination of shame and anxiety. It put into context how very different my status was from that of the refugees, how my life was protected. I felt the contrast especially when I would watch women set out from the camps alone and unprotected to collect firewood.

AHO:

That's true. The agencies are dealing with security on one level, but for the refugees, the security problem is very different. Walking outside the camps can be very risky. There are bandits. There are hyenas. I have seen a lot of people robbed. Some people would hide their money in their shoes. A lot of women are also raped, especially when collecting firewood for cooking fuel. Either bandits are trying to steal from them, or they are attacked because local people resent the refugees.

AIS:

The lack of safety ties into the problem of work, especially because livelihoods are related to new power dynamics.<sup>12</sup> Through my research, I became very interested in informal work and the economies that structure life in the camps. Even in the safest of conditions, the architecture of the camp complex seems to inscribe certain inequalities; for example, the distance of your dwelling from the food distribution impacts your income, or the distance of a dwelling from a school impacts whether children will be educated. It seemed systemic, in spite of good intentions.

I did a close study of the NRC's shelter initiative, as you know, which is the project you worked on with them, and I looked at the ways in which it tied into a tradition of self-help and development discourses, which had been picked up by architects and planners working with the UNHCR and the NRC. In their pilot initiative in Ifo, the NRC provided materials for one-story mud brick shelters with tin roofs, and asked the beneficiaries to do the construction, so that they would take ownership of the dwellings, and not just trade the shelter materials. Certain refugees did that work and developed skills around it: in masonry building, construction management, and design. I studied one woman's process of designing a shelter to accommodate a



**Fig. 9**

**Norwegian Refugee Council mud brick shelter, photo by Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi.**

stock and sales room for a shop, which enabled her some economic freedom to conduct petty trade, and also put her in a new social role. Your role was different, though. Perhaps it was awkward as well; you were neither an NGO project manager nor an end-user. You were employed by the NRC to organize refugees to receive and participate in this form of aid, as well as to direct construction on site. Your position probably did not come automatically with the respect that a Kenyan or international aid worker would receive.

AHO:

That's right. There is this inequality in refugee employment. But think of the other end of the spectrum. Your photo of a *tuqul* explains it. When refugees come to the camps they usually have nothing,



**Fig. 10** Tuquls surrounded by branches for protection against animals, Ifo camp, Hawa Jube outskirts, photo by Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi.

and cannot get immediate attention from the agencies. They have to find shelter. That's the initial stage that every refugee goes through. Most of us had to build a *tuqul*: a small dwelling made of sticks and pieces of cloth. I lived in one. We had to cut down trees and whatever branches we could find. Agencies give away extra materials, trying to provide shelter and satisfy secondary needs whenever they can. I think they do a great job, but the system has these inequalities built in. As a refugee, I might have a co-worker who is a Kenyan citizen, doing the same job. I might have a high school diploma, and he might not. Even so, he might make five hundred dollars, and I might make one hundred dollars.

AIS:

These jobs for refugees, which the agencies call "incentive" work, evolved because refugees could not legally be employed, and organizations were trying to legitimately hire and pay them, as well as help them build transferable skills. They are positions that would typically be salaried, but instead refugees are paid a small wage; they are often trained and expected to take on responsibility. In addition to perpetuating inequality on a larger level, these jobs create frustration for the workers on both sides. Refugees don't tend to stay in these positions because they can't advance, and NGOs lose trained workers. At the time that the Kenyan government acceded to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, it took exceptions to the right to work, specifically so that the Kenyan citizen's ability to earn would not be diminished by the presence of refugees.<sup>13</sup> It was intended to discourage refugees from making inroads into the labor market and capitalizing on the resources of the state from their position in the camps. A lot of developing countries did this, and the divisions created by the exceptions are in place in legal structures all over the world; they exist in different refugee contexts for different historic reasons.

I am interested in the history behind this, and also what we make of it. There is a whole generation that has now grown up in Dadaab. It is important to start talking differently about this place, in terms of a broader history of colonial, imperial, and post-imperial land use and settlement in Kenya. It is also important to note the ways that Dadaab is and is not ephemeral. Claims are made on it being temporary, but it is more accurate to say that it is forced to *behave* as temporary. Also, after so much time sustaining such a large population



- AIS: These block and sector divisions are standard in UNHCR camps. Can you talk about who would vote? Was it only the head of household, or each family member?
- AHO: Anyone over the age of eighteen. And since I left, a lot of things have changed. In 2011, the refugee camps reached a population of a half million, and there were bomb explosions in the market that changed the security status and the political status of different leaders.
- AIS: Can you describe the election process? Does everyone meet in one place? Does the UNHCR census and block-and-sector partitioning drive the voting?
- AHO: Well, during an election year, there is campaigning in the camps. There is a lot of corruption in the election of the sector leaders; again, they control voting for the chairpersons. There is influence over the process through the distribution of *khat*.<sup>15</sup> The election begins over the course of one day. People line up somewhere inside the block. The person who gets the longest line gets elected. If the lines are equal, they recount them.
- AIS: Who does the counting?
- AHO: Members of the community, with members of the social service agencies involved. For example, CARE, one of the social service agencies, was involved. If the lines are equal—well, the lines are never equal!—but if the two lines are too close in length, they may recount.
- AIS: This is a very physical and spatial process. It also depends on the eyes of whoever is making the decision. In all ways, the human body is used as a measure.
- AHO: It's crazy, actually. There is no ballot, and everyone sees who you voted for.
- AIS: So that is how the block leaders are elected. And later that day, do the block leaders elect a sector leader?
- AHO: Well, the sector leader can be someone already in office. Most of these things are predetermined. We know how many block leaders will run, and how many will run for the sector leader. Remember, the sector leader is not elected by the people; he is chosen by the block leaders. Often, he will buy them *miraa*;<sup>15</sup> he may influence them that way.
- AIS: At what time of day does this all this happen?
- AHO: Most elections don't happen in one day because there is a lack of infrastructure, transportation, and technology, and because of the process and number of agencies and people involved. The elections involve not only the refugees at the sector and block levels, but also local government officials and international agencies and organizations, such as the UNHCR and CARE, who keep the peace. So, block leaders are voted in one day, sector leaders the next. All of them are elected within a week or so.
- AIS: That is a very exciting week! After all of this happens, what are they governing, exactly? I know that the leaders are representing the refugees to the national government and to the UNHCR, but what else are they doing?
- AHO: The refugees have a lot of issues! Say they need bathrooms, and don't have materials. They contact the block leaders, who contact the social service agencies. They are facilitators; that's what they do.
- AIS: What kind of power do they have after they have been elected? Can they affect who gets *kipande* or a travel permit? Do they control the flow of money or goods?

AHO: I don't think they have power in those direct ways. They go to conferences. They go to the agencies and raise issues. They help families with their problems. But as you said, they do attend meetings with the Kenyan government and the UNHCR. And they do represent something bigger than just the day-to-day management of the camps.

AIS: Why would someone want to be elected?

AHO: They are the first people to hear an issue in the community. They are representing many people; there is a sense of pride in that. Also, their election demonstrates clan support.<sup>16</sup> Winning is based on affiliations. A chairperson cannot become a chairperson unless he has the support of all those block leaders.

AIS: And so the social capital translates into the political. I think the emergent body politic and spatial politics are remarkably uncanny, especially because they have emerged in a closed space.<sup>17</sup> I think some of the social spaces in the camps bring this representative, political world into view, particularly now, under the threat of the camps being decommissioned. The documentation of this built environment has become even more important as an element of a disappearing heritage.

AHO: Yes, for example, I took this photo when I went back to the refugee camp in 2009. I saw a lot of people turn out to watch this soccer



**Fig. 12** Spectators at a soccer match, Ifo camp, photo by Alishine Osman.

match! An overwhelming number of people there were under the age of twenty-five, which is interesting, because this younger generation has access to the internet and television, and they are using this media to watch soccer! People would come out wearing jerseys from teams around the world: Arsenal, Brazil... Even though this camp is a contained space, people have access to this information. A crowd like this wouldn't have appeared in 1994. This photo captures a big change in the social life of the camp over twenty years. Cellphones and Facebook have also had a significant influence in the refugee camps, just the same way they have had in developed countries.

AIS:

Ifo cemetery captures another significant aspect of life in the camps, social as well as material. Dadaab has been discussed as approaching something urban, in terms of both social complexity and form. But I believe the cultural space and spatial designation for lives to end ceremoniously speaks most clearly to the ways in which this place is and is not urban, even as it is a home to many people. A burial ground in a refugee camp may not be unique to Ifo, but, in a context where the spatial separation for the living has been so acute, it represents a very different traversal out of the camps. The irony, especially if we think of the possibility of the Dadaab settlements being closed, is that this way out of the camps is actually an anchor within them, and within the state as well.



**Fig. 13**

**Cemetery, Ifo camp, photo by Alishine Osman.**

## NOTES

- 1
- For information on displacement in Somalia, see Ismail I. Ahmed and Reginald Herbold Green, "The Heritage of War and State Collapse in Somalia and Somaliland: Local-Level Effects, External Interventions and Reconstruction," *Third World Quarterly* 20 (1999): 113-127, 121. For information on arrival of refugees in Kenya, see Cindy Horst, *Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 19.
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- Guglielmo Verdirame, "Human Rights and Refugees: The Case of Kenya," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12 (1999): 56-57.
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- 6
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- 7
- This essay focuses on the Dadaab refugee settlements in the Garissa District on the border of Somalia. Kakuma, the other major encampment in Kenya, which is in the Turkana District near the borders of Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Uganda, is also still in operation as of this writing.
- 8
- Garissa is the capital of the district where the camps are located. Eastleigh is a primarily Somali suburb of Nairobi. The central market in Ifo is called "Bosnia," named after a place in the news at the time the market was established.
- 9
- The *kipande* system was used in various British colonies during the late empire to control the movement of people, and perhaps most notoriously as a tool of apartheid in South Africa during much of the twentieth century. In Kenya, the system carried over into the independence period. *Kipande* may be understood as an element of material culture and infrastructure that reproduces forms of division.
- 10
- A *matatu* is a minibus frequently used in East African cities as a shared taxi.
- 11
- Damien Mc Sweeney, "Conflict and Deteriorating Security in Dadaab," *Humanitarian Exchange* 53 (2012): 26-27.
- 12
- My research in the camps included several individual and focus group interviews for the 2012 Womens' Refugee Commission Report, "Preventing Gender-based Violence, Building Livelihoods: Guidance and Tools for Improved Programming." December 2011, [https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/images/zdocs/preventing\\_gbv,\\_building\\_livelihoods\\_12.2011-1.pdf](https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/images/zdocs/preventing_gbv,_building_livelihoods_12.2011-1.pdf).
- 13
- Kenya acceded to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1966.
- 14
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- 15
- Khat*, also known as *miraa*, is a narcotic, often traded informally.
- 16
- Somali society is based upon a familial clan system. From the outset, the UNHCR settled refugees in blocks and sectors according to clan affiliation for protection and security. Whether Somali or not, in practical terms, refugees must receive clan support in order to win elections. For more on Somali society, see I.M. Lewis, *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland: Culture, History, Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1893).
- 17
- "Kenya says go home," *The Economist*, May 14, 2016.

## Mud, Dust, and Marougé: Precarious Construction in a Congolese Refugee Camp

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MARNIE JANE  
THOMSON

## MUD, DUST, AND MAROUGÉ: Precarious Construction in a Congolese Refugee Camp

This photo essay combines text and images to convey how the Congolese who reside in Nyarugusu, a United Nations refugee camp in Tanzania, interact with and interpret camp architecture. To establish the camps as temporary spaces, the Tanzanian government requires that refugees construct their houses with sundried mud brick and thatched roofs so that they can eventually be destroyed without a trace. The red dirt of their homes and the camp environment colours almost every facet of Nyarugusu residents' lives, adding a sense of dirtiness to the camp. The violence built into the camp architecture is not only contained in its eventual destruction, but also in the ways in which it visibly marks the residents' alienation and subordination in Tanzania.

“Please excuse the mess, we are under construction here”, Severin told me.

“Oh, are you expanding your house?” I asked.

“Oh no, it is not that. Every year we have to reconstruct our house. This year it is the roof. But other years, the walls need to be rebuilt as well”, he explained.

“Goodness, every year?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes, every year. Sometimes it is twice a year if both rainy seasons are bad”.

“So it is the rain that destroys the houses?”



Figure 1. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2009).

“Well, yes. But you see, we're not allowed to use any other materials than these [pointing to the grass bundles and bricks surrounding him]. If we were allowed to use other materials, we would not have to rebuild all the time. If we could use corrugated metal roofs, for example. Or even if we could just bake the bricks like they do in the nearby [non-refugee] villages. But we are not allowed to. So our roofs blow away in storms, and our walls melt with the rain”.

“The UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] does not provide you with any materials to build your houses?” I asked.

“They provide us with plastic sheeting for the roofs. And some sticks for the structure. But that is all. And that is only when you first build. We haven't received new plastic sheeting for a while. And many people cannot afford to rebuild their houses. They have to do it themselves rather than hire people to do it. Sometimes their neighbors will help”.

“Why don't they provide you with more or better materials?”

“That's just how it is. That is why every house looks like this. They are all same. You see how our door is nicer? That is because we used leftover materials from the hospital. But the rest is just the same as everywhere else in the camp”.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 2. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2012).

Rows of red mud brick houses with thatched roofs make up the villages of Nyarugusu camp, established in 1996 in the border region of Kigoma in Tanzania, currently home to more than 70,000 refugees primarily from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). As Severin indicated, the Tanzanian government requires refugees to build their own houses with limited supplies provided by the UNHCR and sometimes other organisations such as the IRC and CARE. A conglomeration of organisations manage Nyarugusu camp, each with designated responsibilities, and, collectively, these organisations are known as “camp management” by both their representatives and the camp residents.<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Home Affairs oversees all these organisations and implements the Tanzanian government’s refugee and asylum policies with the UNHCR as their primary counterpart.

Nyarugusu’s current residents have lived through the closure of all Tanzania’s other refugee camps—ten in total—and many were moved from camp to camp during these closures, expected to build a new house in each new location. After camps close, the Tanzanian government then destroys all the refugee houses. The only buildings that remain are those constructed by the camp management, such as hospitals, schools, police stations, communal water taps, washing stations, and communal pit latrines. Impermanence is designed into the refugees’ most intimate spaces. Their homes are constructed with destruction in mind.

If violence is in the eye of the beholder,<sup>3</sup> then multiple forms of violence seem built into the Nyarugusu refugee camp. The constructed environment not only reminds refugees of their temporary subject position, as many have claimed, but also materialises their subordination and alienation in Tanzania. The red dirt colours everything from refugee homes and roads to their clothes and official documents, and renders visible the constructed violence of camp life. In this photo essay, I aim to depict Nyarugusu residents’ interactions with and interpretations of the built environment of the camp through both images and text.<sup>4</sup>

### **Built to Disappear: Visibility and Invisibility in Refugee Camps**

Severin first drew my attention to the camp architecture in July 2009,<sup>5</sup> but I had already read about the destruction of refugee homes through the blog of a recent college graduate from the US who was spending one year (2008–2009) working for a Tanzanian aid agency assisting in the closure of camps. When I emailed her to ask about the reasoning behind this policy, she surmised that it was due at least in part to the possibility of bandits moving into the dwellings and hijacking passing vehicles. Tanzanians associate refugees—particularly Burundians—with banditry and hijacking. Many people I met in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, including those who worked for organisations involved in refugee camp management, warned me about refugee bandits in the camp regions. Government officials echoed this sentiment, but only as a general concern about refugee populations in the region.<sup>6</sup> When I spoke with government officials about refugee homes, they explained that they are built to be easily demolished precisely because refugee camps are meant to be temporary.

Both the Tanzanian government and the UNHCR view refugee camps as temporary spaces, a stop-gap arrangement until a more permanent, or “durable” solution, a term so often used among refugee agencies, may be sought. This, however, was not always the case in Tanzania. After decolonisation, migrants were seen as an economic asset in the atmosphere of President Nyerere’s emphasis on socialism and self-reliance.<sup>7</sup> For example, the Tanzanian government purposely moved the Hutus who fled Burundi in the early 1970s to remote areas in order to develop and exploit these relatively unpopulated regions.<sup>8</sup> These Burundians have lived there since then in what the government calls settlements rather than camps, with almost no aid presence since their initial years. The government places no limitations on their mobility, the construction of their houses, or their right to work, and their children attend Tanzanian schools. “They live just like Tanzanians”, a Tanzanian government official told me in June 2014 when we visited Mishamo settlement, where anthropologist Liisa Malkki conducted her ground-breaking research on national narratives of Burundian Hutu refugees. Now the residents of these three permanent settlements do not just live *like* Tanzanians, but *as* Tanzanians after the government awarded them citizenship in October 2014.

In the 1990s, the attitude toward asylum seekers in Tanzania changed with the influx of Burundians in 1993, Rwandans in 1994, and Congolese in 1996 and again in 1998. The scale of each of these influxes was unprecedented. During this time, Tanzanian governmental officials accused the international community of impressing upon Tanzania humanitarian obligations at the expense of their national interests and security.<sup>9</sup> The emphasis on self-sufficiency and local settlement was replaced by a focus on repatriating refugees to their home countries, while integration into the Tanzanian political community was replaced by seclusion in refugee camps.<sup>10</sup> Refugees were no longer seen as an asset, but as a burden that Tanzania should only have to endure temporarily, not indefinitely.

People who reside in refugee camps thus occupy liminal positions in a liminal space. To be liminal is to be in the middle of three phases; that is, to already be separated, and not yet reincorporated.<sup>11</sup> Victor Turner theorised that during the liminal period, the subject is not only caught “betwixt and between”, but also becomes structurally invisible to the other members of society.<sup>12</sup> In Tanzania, however, refugees are anything but invisible. For the Tanzanian government, the UNHCR, and their partnering organisations, refugees are a focal point. Furthermore, the construction of the camps in which they are placed produces one designated locus for refugee visibility. The camps also make visible this liminal position with the purposeful construction of destructible homes. Not until camps close do refugees become structurally invisible.

Almost every aid worker I met during my first visit to Nyarugusu camp in 2008 warned me that the camp might not be there when I planned to return the following year. The UNHCR and the Tanzanian government were rapidly closing camps at that time. When I did come back in 2009, I visited the only two other remaining camps at the time: Lugufu, the other camp for Congolese refugees, and Mtabila, the final open camp for Burundian refugees. Both of these camps had large sections that had already been closed.



Figure 3. Mtabila camp. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2009).

The closed sections bore no trace of the tens of thousands of refugees who had lived there. They lay empty, devoid of any evidence of the people for whom the camp was built. This noticeable, physical void struck me then and again when the UNHCR officially handed Mtabila camp back to the Tanzanian government in 2013. During this ceremony, the UNHCR Country Representative gave a speech honouring the camp not just as a place of refuge, but also as a place where weddings and graduations, births and deaths occurred. It was a place where lives were lived. If space itself functioned as a mnemonic artefact that stored narratives, memories, and collective action,<sup>13</sup> then what did this erasure of their built environment mean to the people who had lived there?

The destruction of camp houses does not seem to be an issue of memory for the refugees who have lived in Tanzanian camps. Not once has a refugee complained to me about lack of place to memorialise their lives in the camps. While many residents have lived in the camps for the better part of two decades, they do not view Nyarugusu as a permanent residence. But their reasoning differs from the official UNHCR policy; refugees view the camp as the grounds for the difficult life (*maisha magumu* in Swahili). They want to leave the camp so that their children can receive a better education, so that they can work and earn a living wage, so that they can have freedom of movement, so that they will no longer be labelled refugees. After Severin and his family were resettled in the US, he told me, “the best

thing about living here is not the hot water or the electricity, it is no longer being treated as a refugee in Tanzania". Nyarugusu residents desire to be free of the subordination built into the refugee camp.

### An Undesirable Place for Unwanted People

For Nyarugusu residents, camp closure and the destruction that accompanies it does not act as a devastating erasure of their camp memories. It is a reminder that "Tanzania does not want us here", as camp residents have repeated to me time and time again. Refugees know that they are considered a burden. The UNHCR employs the language of "burden sharing" to urge their partnering organisations as well as other governments to lessen the strain on countries that host refugee populations. UNHCR also establishes medical clinics and schools in the surrounding communities, developing an infrastructure that is built to last beyond the lifespan of refugee camps. Tanzanians view such permanent structures as advantageous, as a sign of development, whereas they tend to view refugees as a hindrance to such development. One example was Lugufu camp's gravity water system, which aid representatives told me had been studied by scholars from around the world. My time in Lugufu, while it was still open, was primarily dedicated to touring the water facilities at the insistence of my hosts from the Tanzanian Red Cross Society, the organisation in charge of water and sanitation there. Before Lugufu closed in 2009, the speculation among the aid organisations was that the government wanted to close it so that they could utilise its gravity water system.



Figure 4. Lugufu camp. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2009).

The irony for many expatriate aid representatives was that since Lugufu has been closed, the water system has not been used. “It is too expensive for the Tanzanian government to operate, it requires a great deal of electricity”, an expatriate UNHCR representative told me. Refugees knew about the water system as well, but for them, the system itself did not signal development as it did for the aid workers. The refugees use communal taps and washing bins regardless of the intricacies of the system that delivers the water. Whether they live in Nyarugusu or Lugufu, they visit the taps and carry the water back to their homes for their daily use. As one former Lugufu resident told me, “Like other services offered to refugees, the water system also had its weaknesses and problems, including taps being far away from refugee homes, insufficient supply of both water and taps triggering long queues and forcing women to seek water so early in the morning, sexual violence—water guards allowing easy access to water to women who accept to have sex with them”. Lugufu’s water system was not the same source of pride for camp residents as it was for aid workers and government officials.

Beginning in August 2009, 24,000 Congolese refugees were moved from Lugufu to Nyarugusu over the course of a one-month period. This process started the day after I left the camp that year. Refugees contacted me about a cholera outbreak during this time, but other than that, I did not hear much about the move until I visited Nyarugusu again in 2010. Severin took me to the newest section of the camp, which had been expanded to accommodate the former Lugufu residents. When I asked about the move, they complained that they still had not received enough plastic sheeting for the roofing of their houses.



Figure 5. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2008).

The plastic sheeting provided by the UNHCR lies underneath the thatched roofs to prevent water from seeping into homes. Severin and a man from Lugufu explained that the plastic sheeting also insulates their houses from the cold nights during the dusty season. Holes often appear in the sheets, in need of patching. Not having enough sheeting to cover the entire house results in much less protection from the elements.

Furthermore, the former Lugufu residents in this section were far away from almost all the social services in the camp. The second camp hospital had not yet been finished, even though it had been scheduled to open the previous year. It took them at least half an hour to walk to the second distribution centre. But by far, the most common complaints were about the conditions of Nyarugusu camp. The soil in Lugufu was white, not red. It did not colour everything the way the mud and dust of Nyarugusu did. The white soil also did not carry *funza*, or chiggers, the fleas that burrow their way into toes and sometimes even fingers. *Funza* live in Nyarugusu's dust, kicked up as people walk, finding their way to exposed skin. They continue to plague people during the rainy seasons because they then hide in refugee homes. Some people have been afflicted by *funza* so many times that their feet have been permanently scarred and, in the worst cases, deformed. "No one would want to live here. That's why they put us here. Because it is a terrible environment, and they want us to leave", a recent transplant from Lugufu said.

### Coloured by Dirt

Congolese call the red dirt of Nyarugusu camp *marougé*. The prefix *ma-* comes from the Swahili word for mud, *matope*, combined with the French word for red, pronounced with a Swahili accent.<sup>14</sup> In the dry season, this dust coats even the highest leaves on the trees.



Figure 6. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2013).

In the rainy season, mud clumps onto shoes, gluing them to the earth, and each subsequent step requires more and more effort. *Marougé* stains clothes, shoes, and official documents. It colours almost everything in the camp. Nyarugusu residents often talk about its ubiquity. They lament how it destroys all their possessions. They sympathise when they see the red-tinged pages of my field notebooks. People point out the *marougé* that has made its way onto others' clothing. Sometimes, it is used to guess how far they walked in the camp. Other times, it is used to tease people, to exclaim that their ensemble would look nice if they had not already sullied it.

There is no escaping *marougé* in Nyarugusu. Mud bricks that have only been baked in the sun, rather than in a kiln, are less sturdy and more susceptible to the elements. In houses built with sundried bricks, it becomes impossible to wash the dirt away.



Figure 7. Nyarugusu camp. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2012).



Figure 8. Makere. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2008).

Refugees contend that if they were only able to fire the bricks as they do in the nearby villages, the extent to which *marougé* infiltrates their life would be greatly reduced. Makere is the nearest village and the place where all of the aid organisations that work in the camp have their compounds. The exception is the UNHCR, which is located in Kasulu, the nearest town, a one-hour drive from Nyarugusu. Much of the earth in Makere and Kasulu is red as well, but the kiln-baked bricks that make up the permanent structures in these places do not melt with the rains. In the dry season, people can simply sweep the dust outside. But in the camp, the houses themselves are mud and dust.



Figure 9. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2012).

For the residents of Nyarugusu camp, *marougé* symbolises something they are trying to transcend. When I facilitated a penpal program between an English teacher in the camp and a primary school teacher in Denver, Colorado, I took pictures of the students in the camp, which I would later deliver to their American penpals. I had already given them pictures of their American penpals. As we prepared for picture day, the English teacher continuously stressed to the students that they needed to bathe and come to class clean. He would hold up pictures of the American students and comment on how clean they were. Similarly, when I would plan to visit friends in the camp, they would be sure to bathe their children right before I arrived. If I showed up unexpectedly, children were often warned not to touch or climb on me until they had been cleansed of any *marougé* they had accumulated while playing.



Figure 10. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2010).

Residents of Nyarugusu were aware that refugee was a dirty word.<sup>15</sup> While the label refugee affords residents access to food rations and services provided in the camp, it also strips them of their history, politics, and dignity. Moreover, a camp purposely constructed out of mud bricks adds a material dimension to the figurative dirtiness of refugee status. *Marougé* and everything it stains red remind the Congolese of their marginalisation.

### Futures Unplanned

In 2009, the government of Tanzania stopped accepting refugees on a *prima facie* basis, meaning they stopped awarding immediate refugee status to everyone who sought asylum in Tanzania. Now upon entering the country, persons seeking asylum must register with the Tanzanian Ministry of Home Affairs and wait to be interviewed by the National Eligibility Committee (NEC) to determine whether or not they will be awarded official UN-sanctioned refugee status. One of the most tangible effects of this policy has been that asylum seekers are no longer given a plot, plastic sheeting, and support beams to build their own house. Rather, they are all housed together in the Departure Center near the camp's entrance.



Figure 11. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2008).

The Departure Center was constructed to be the transit centre in the camp for those who had decided to repatriate. During my first visit to Nyarugusu camp in 2008, for example, there was a convoy of 216 people who repatriated to the DRC. The night before their convoy embarked, all returnees were required to sleep in the Departure Center, within open-air buildings, which each contained two rows of wooden beds. When I returned the following year, there were almost one thousand asylum seekers living in these buildings, and since then, the government officials in the camp have not allowed me back inside the Departure Center. People effect privacy, I am told, by partitioning the rooms with bedsheets. Some have waited years to be interviewed by the NEC. In 2011, the NEC delivered the decision for the first round of applicants, those who arrived in 2009: only 12 out of hundreds were awarded refugee status. The rest were to be deported. The majority of the deportees absconded on the day of the convoy and many of them now live illegally and surreptitiously in the camp.

Nyarugusu residents lead precarious lives dependent on chance, and their pasts, presents, and futures are defined by insecurity.<sup>16</sup> Uprooted and displaced by war; by circumstances beyond their control, refugees then find themselves in the temporary space of the camp. Many want to flee to Kenya, where they have heard camp life is not as demeaning and refugee status is awarded upon

arrival (on a *prima facie* basis). Most have not been able to save enough money to make the journey. Others wait for peace in Congo so that they may repatriate safely one day. Still others wait with hopes of qualifying for official UNHCR resettlement so that they can move and start over in a third country such as the US, Canada, or Australia. None of these anticipated futures is guaranteed, and one of the only certainties of camp life seems to be the indefinite work of waiting.<sup>17</sup> Nyarugusu residents wait for something less precarious, something more secure.

In 2011, the Tanzanian government demolished the markets and all business structures in Nyarugusu camp. Government representatives have given me various reasons for doing this. They say that it is the law, that refugees are getting rich in the camp and thus will not repatriate, and that illicit businesses have been proliferating, such as selling and showing pornography. The razing occurred in the midst of preparing Mtabila camp for closure, to which Nyarugusu residents paid close attention in anticipation of what their future might hold once Nyarugusu was to become the only camp to remain open. And they saw the levelling of the markets as another clear sign that the Tanzanian government wants them gone.



Figure 12. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2014).

What had been a big bustling market filled with bars, restaurants, and wooden stalls selling produce, houseware, and clothes was reduced to a twice-weekly produce market where people sit on the ground to sell their fruits and vegetables.

While the work of waiting may last indefinitely, Nyarugusu residents mark time not as a durational social process, but as a regime of events or ruptures.<sup>18</sup> War in Congo interrupted their lives as citizens there and, in the camp, the interruptions continue. Market destruction, hospital openings, mass deportations, verification exercises, and food ration shortages have punctuated and changed the course of their daily lives. Residents ultimately wait for events that are more disruptive and momentous—peace and stability in Congo, qualifying for resettlement in a third country, or camp closure. They preoccupy themselves with these eventual ruptures for they are the ones that will extradite them from the spatial violence of camp life.

The very same day that Severin first took me to his house and explained how they must constantly rebuild it, he also took me to visit an artist in the camp. He wanted to show me how the artist broke up the monotony of *marougé* by painting his house in bold bright colours. We found the artist painting a mud flap for a tyre, which he had found near the main road in the camp.



Figure 13. Photograph: Marnie Jane Thomson (2009).

The words he painted in Swahili translate to “Life is a very difficult puzzle. Today you have attained, tomorrow you have lost”. This represents the sense of time in the camp. Life is measured by gains and losses. And it is unpredictable, liable to change in an instant.

Severin once told me that the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, visited the camp. “What are your five year goals? Ten year goals?” he asked the refugees. Severin recounted that he thought this an unfair question to ask refugees. “The thing about being a refugee . . . is that you cannot plan your own future. It is out of your control”, he told me. At the time, he did not know his family would qualify for resettlement in the US. He worried the camp would close and they would be forced to repatriate or flee elsewhere.

Nyarugusu residents spend their lives in a liminal space, one that will be cleared of any trace of their existence in the indeterminate future. They occupy an undesirable space, knowing that they are unwanted even there, in the camp. *Marougé* colours almost every aspect of their lives, reminding them of the dirtiness of refugee status. And mud and dust mark the seasons, as they wait for futures beyond their control. All of these realities are moulded into the sundried bricks of their houses. And they will disappear with the dissolution of Nyarugusu camp. But when and how?

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### Notes

1. Severin highlighted the door as special, but the other unusual item at his residence was the satellite dish. He bought it in Kasulu, the nearest town, and used it to tune into world news on his television. He powered his television by manipulating a car battery.
2. The MHA and UNHCR head camp management. The other organisations involved include IOM (International Organization for Migration), WFP (World Food Programme), IRC (International Rescue Committee), ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency), NOLA (National Organization for Legal Assistance), TRCS (Tanzania Red Cross Society), CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere), TWESA (Tanzanian Water and Environmental Sanitation), Radio Kwizera, African Initiative for Development and Relief, WLAC (Women Legal Aid Center), the Tanzanian police force, and the Sungusungu (Congolese security). Aid organisations and their responsibilities are subject to change depending on arrangements made with the UNHCR and MHA.
3. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1969.

4. None of the photos included were taken with this essay in mind. Rather, I took them to capture moments I hoped to remember later, for personal or academic reasons, often both. During my ethnographic research, I almost always kept a camera with me. In Nyarugusu camp, people often asked me to take their pictures, which I would later print and give to them. Many also suggested pictures that I should take for the purposes of my research, and when it occurred to me, I would click such photos as well. I often thought of these photos as supplemental, for example I might show some during a presentation to provide context visually. In this piece, however, I give the photos and text equal weight and treat them as mutually reinforcing.
5. Severin and I met during my first visit to Nyarugusu camp in 2008. His guidance has been crucial to shaping my research. He and his family have become dear friends of mine, and they now live in the US after having been resettled in 2013.
6. As a cultural anthropologist, my main research methodologies are participant observation and interviews. I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork with Congolese refugees, government representatives from Tanzania and the DRC, and aid representatives who work in camps, field offices, country, regional, and global headquarters. In refugee camps, my research usually entailed participating in daily life, meeting with camp residents in their homes or other mutually comfortable places, and informally interviewing aid workers and government officials in their offices. In aid and government offices outside of the camps, interviews tended to be shorter and more formal due in large part to scheduling constraints.
7. Saskia Van Hoyweghen, "Mobility, Territoriality and Sovereignty in Post-Colonial Tanzania", *New Issues in Refugee Research Working Paper* no. 49, 1–27.
8. Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
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# ENVIRONMENT IN CONTEXT / (/EN/PROGRAMS/DETAILS/30) CEMENT, WAR AND TOXICITY: THE MATERIALITIES OF DISPLACEMENT IN IRAQ

## Environment in Context

### Cement, War and Toxicity: The Materialities of Displacement in Iraq

Jun 01, 2020 - Issue 7.1

Hosted by [Huma Gupta \(/en/Hosts/Profile/2090\)](/en/Hosts/Profile/2090)

Co-editors of *Jadaliyya's* Environment Page (<https://www.jadaliyya.com/Category/204>), Huma Gupta and Gabi Kirk, discussed with Kali Rubaii how ecologies of war have produced multiple waves of displacement and have intimately shaped the lives of displaced Iraqis through the materiality of cement.

## HOSTS



Huma Gupta  
(</en/Hosts/Profile/2090>)

Photo by Bilal Izaddin

## LISTEN

### Cement, War and Toxicity: The Materialities of Displacement in Iraq

56:51

## Introduction:

News agencies and international organizations often talk about displacement in abstract, statistical terms. For instance, in Iraq, there are currently more than one and a half-million internally displaced people. However, today we will discuss how ecologies of war have produced multiple waves of displacement and have intimately shaped the lives of displaced Iraqis through the materiality of cement. In the early twentieth century, British occupying forces and the subsequent mandatory government popularized the use of Portland cement. The

developmental projects of the Monarchic, Republican and Ba'athist regimes further promoted the production and use of cement, which is an integral component of concrete in infrastructure projects, like dams, prisons, and mass housing. More recently, after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority built thousands of t-walls and blast proof wall segments in the name of security. Though, in cities like Baghdad, they often functioned as sectarian borders. Thus, the global concrete industry represented by corporations like the LaFarge Group and local cement factories play an important role in the securitization of space. But these are the more familiar stories of the lives and after-lives of modern building materials in major cities across Iraq. We are speaking today with Dr. Kali Rubaii, who will take us to the “cement valley” in Bazian, which is 30 kilometers away from Sulaymaniyah in Kurdistan in order to defamiliarize us from the ways in which we think about cement.

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## Guests

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## DECOLONIZING KNOWLEDGE

In 1987, in an attempt to suppress the *intifada* (the Palestinian civil protests against its military occupation) the Israeli government banned people from gathering together and closed all schools and universities. As a reaction, Palestinian civil society grew through the organization of an underground network of schools and universities in private houses, garages and shops. Universities were no longer confined within walls or campuses, and teachers and students began using different learning environments in cities and villages.

These gatherings and assemblies reinforced the social and cultural life of Palestinian communities. Learning was not limited to the hours spent sitting in classrooms; mathematics, science, literature and geography were subjects that could be imparted amongst friends, family members and neighbors.

In order to resist the long periods of curfews imposed by the Israeli army, these self-organized spaces for learning included self-sufficiency activities such as growing fruits and vegetables and raising animals. Theoretical knowledge was combined with one that emerges from action and experimentation. Learning became a crucial tool for gaining freedom and autonomy. People discovered that they could share knowledge and be in charge of what and how to study.

The classical structure, in which 'expert teachers' transmit knowledge and students are mere recipients to be filled with information, was substituted by a blurred distinction between the two. A group dynamic opened this new learning environment to issues of social justice, inequality and democracy. The First Intifada was, in fact, a non-violent movement that not only aimed at changing the system of colonial occupation but also at creating new spaces for social change. For example, youth and women now had the opportunity to challenge traditional and patriarchal sectors of Palestinian society. Within these processes, education was perceived as an essential tool for liberation and emancipation. The knowledge produced within the group structure was no longer distant and alienating, but rather grounded in the present political struggle for justice and equality.

At the beginning of the 1990s, this open and community-based system of learning was not considered

When Palestinian education services and public gatherings were forbidden by Israel during the first *intifada*, networks of knowledge production flourished in the quotidian spaces of daily life. While quickly abandoned in the state, these learning processes fostered a radically non-hierarchical relation between knowledge-bearer and -receiver. With *Campus in Camps*, Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal sought to revitalize such forms of knowledge production in refugee camps, in turn not only revolutionizing the Palestinian system of higher education, but also the politics of refugee subjectivity.

by the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA). The national Palestinian educational curriculum continued along the basis of the Jordanian national system, ignoring these challenging and rich experiences.

However, most leaders of this underground network went on to become key figures in the Palestinian non-governmental sector. For many, the state-building process of the last years became centralized, bureaucratized and, in some cases, authoritarian. The non-governmental sector is the space where experimental practices in health, environment, human rights and education have continued developing.

In Palestine, most NGOs today, much like the PA, are internationally funded. Although donors are operating in support of the local population, they are in fact not accountable to the people, but instead often pursue the cultural and political agendas of the donor states. **Philanthropy has thus become one of the main vehicles for Western intervention in the politics and culture of Palestine.**

Bearing these dangers in mind, the network of NGOs still seems to be an important tool for developing different policies. In particular, non-governmental spaces are able to react more efficiently to the needs of marginalized sectors of society that are not represented by state policies. A new type of common space has thus emerged through NGO culture, one that has not yet been adequately understood and theorized.

### Critical learning environments

In 2011, after three years of teaching at al-Quds Bard University, a liberal arts college based in Abu Dis, I co-founded *Campus in Camps*, the "first university in a refugee camp." I was convinced that the university can play a decisive role in creating a space for critical and grounded knowledge production connected to greater transformations and the democratization of society. In particular, I became convinced that 'moving' the campus to more marginalized geographical areas and sectors of society could create a truly engaged and committed university. The university campus and the refugee camp are both 'extraterritorial islands', of different sorts of course: one utopian and one dystopian. Both are removed from the

rest of the city. Campus in Camps aimed to transgress the borders between the 'island of knowledge' and the island of 'social marginalization'. In conversation with al-Quds Bard students from refugee camps, I realized that their narrations, ideas and discourses were able to flourish in a protected space, such as the university, but needed to be grounded in context and connected with the community. Reciprocally, by moving to camps, the university was able to open its doors to other forms of knowledge, to an experimental and communal learning process able to combine critical reflection with action.

#### The origin of the program

Campus in Camps originated from a collectively cumulative thought that aimed to bring together theory and action, contextually-situated learning and project-based interventions in refugee camps. The desire for such a program matured in an ongoing dialogue started in 2007 between the UNRWA Camp Improvement Program, directed by Sandi Hilal, and the Refugee Camp Communities of the Southern West Bank. From this discussion emerged an urgency from the communities to explore and produce new forms of representation of camps and refugees beyond the static and traditional symbols of passivity and poverty. In three years of teaching at the al-Quds Bard University, and based on my previous research and experiences with DAAR, a studio and art residency based in Beit Sahour, I became convinced that the camp is the right place for the campus: a truly engaged and committed university.

#### Participants

The program, begun in January 2012, engages young participants in a two-year program that deals with new forms of visual and cultural representations of refugee camps after more than sixty-five years of displacement. The aim is to provide young motivated Palestinian refugees who are interested in engaging their community with the intellectual space and necessary infrastructure to facilitate these debates, to translate them into practical community-driven projects and incarnate representational practices to make them visible in the camps. The group of participants in the program was formed during a long three-month process of interviews, consultations with the community and public announcements in newspapers and mosques. There was not a real selection: instead a series of meetings allowed both us and the applicants to understand if we shared a mutual interest in embarking on such an experimental project. However, one thing the participants have in common is their engagement with the community. Most of them had volunteered in organizations or been involved in community-based projects.

#### The first year

The first year of Campus in Camps was mostly focused on establishing a common language and a common approach among the participants. This was achieved through education cycles, seminars, lectures and the publication of a *Collective Dictionary*. The first months of the program were dedicated to a process that we called 'unlearning', healing from pre-packaged alienating knowledge, knowledge that pretends to be universal and applicable in different cultural condition without taking into consideration the receiver. Participants had to heal from the knowledge and vocabulary acquired from the professionalized NGO system. For example **they decided**

**not to use the words help and development since these express a colonial mentality.** In this phase, Munir Fasheh, an innovator of forms of learning and knowledge production who is currently working with various groups in the Arab world to transform stories and storytelling into learning practices, was an amazing source of inspiration. We involved professors from al-Quds Bard University and guests from outside for lectures and seminars. Based on these first encounters, the participants, together with the project team, discussed the opportunity to involve guests in a cycle, which was usually structured as bi-weekly meetings for a minimum of one month.

The decision to involve the invited guest was based on the relevance of the subject in relation to the interest of the group. For this reason, the structure of Campus in Camps is constantly being reshaped to accommodate the interests and subjects born from the interactions between the participants and the social context at large.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the first year, over a dozen seminars and/or lectures were held in addition to these cycles that gave participants further exposure to experts in a variety of fields. These areas of interest included citizenship, refugee studies, humanitarianism, gender, mapping, and research methodologies. Many of these events were open to the public and were the mechanism to connect with members of the camp community as well as traditional university students.<sup>2</sup>

The first year culminated in an open public presentation over two days in which more than one hundred people from the local community participated.<sup>3</sup> During the event, the *Collective Dictionary* was also presented as a series of publications containing definitions of concepts considered fundamental for the understanding of the contemporary condition of Palestinian refugee camps. Written reflections on personal experiences, interviews, excursions and photographic investigations constitute the starting point for the formulation of more structured thoughts and serve to explore each term. Multiple participants developed each publication, **suggesting a new form of collective learning and knowledge production.**

#### The second year

During the second year, more emphasis was placed on the kind of knowledge that emerges from action. Gatherings, walks, events and urban actions were meant to engage more directly with the camp condition. What is at stake in these interventions is the possibility for the participants to realize projects in the camps without either normalizing their exceptional condition nor blending into the surrounding cities. After over sixty-five years of exile, the camp is no longer made up of tents. The prolonged and exceptional temporality of this site has paradoxically created the condition for its transformation: from a pure humanitarian space to an active political space, it has become an embodiment and an expression of the right of return. 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.

Our work intends to broaden the investigation on how spaces for communal learning are constituted and how knowledge can be grounded in action and emerge



Credit: Sara Anna/Campus in Camps

The Concrete Tent is a gathering space for communal learning. It hosts cultural activities, a working area and an open space for social meetings. The urgency and idea of such a space has emerged in discussion with the participants of Campus in Camps who saw a possibility to materialize, to give architectural form to narrations and representations of camps and refugees beyond the idea of poverty, marginalization and victimization.



When we think about refugee camps, one of the most common images that comes to our mind is an aggregation of tents. However, after more than sixty years since their establishment, Palestinian refugee camps are constituted today by a completely different materiality. Tents were first reinforced and readapted with vertical walls, later substituted with shelters, and subsequently new houses made of concrete have been built, making camps dense and solid urban spaces. The Concrete Tent deals with the paradox of a permanent temporariness. The result is a hybrid between a tent and a concrete house, temporariness and permanency, soft and hard, movement and stillness. Importantly, the Concrete Tent does not offer a solution. Rather, it embraces the contradiction of an architectural form emerged from a life in exile.



The project tries to inhabit the paradox of how to preserve the very idea of the tent as symbolic and historical value. Because of the degradability of the material of the tents, these structures simply do not exist any more. And so, the re-creation of a tent made of concrete today is an attempt to preserve the cultural and symbolic importance of this archetype for the narration of the Nakba, but at the same time engage the present political condition of exile.



Claiming that life in exile is historically meaningful is a way to recognize refugees as subjects of history, as makers of history and not simply victims of it. Claiming the camp as a heritage site is a way to avoid the trap of being stuck either in the commemoration of the past or in a projection into an abstract messianic future that is constantly postponed and presented as salvation. This perspective instead offers the possibility for the camp to be a historical political subject of the present, and to see the achievements of the present not as an impediment to the right of return, but on the contrary, as a step towards it. Claiming history in the camp is a way to start recognizing the camp's present condition and actually articulate the right of return. It is crucial that this radical transformation has not normalized the political condition of being exiled. The prolonged exceptional temporality of refugee camps has paradoxically opened a new horizon of political and social configurations, a counter-site for emerging political practices and a new form of urbanism.

as a group effort, rather than solely from external sources. What kind of structures or institutions are required for the accommodation of interests and subjects born from the interaction between participants, groups of teachers, and the broader social context? How can the attention of educational institutions move from the production of knowledge – based on information and skills – to processes of learning – based on shifts in perception, critical approaches, visions and governing principles?

Campus in Camps does not follow or propose itself as a model but rather as public space in formation. *Al jame3ah* translates to English as ‘the university’ but its literal meaning is ‘a place for assembly’. I would like to think of Campus in Camps as part of a long path that had stations in the early twentieth century schools of Khalil Al-Sakakini, where grades and punishments were abolished and walks and music were considered a form of knowledge, or to the informal and clandestine learning environment established during the First Intifada in which people were learning from each other and in context.

The aim of our research is to contribute to the way universities understand themselves, aiming to overcome conventional structures and to create critical learning and egalitarian environments able to influence educational institutions, while seeking a manner of critical intervention for the constitution and strengthening of civic spaces in contemporary realities.

- 1 Cycles were offered by Sandi Hilal, Tareq Hamman, Vivien Sansour, Ayman Khalifah and Linda Quiquix, amongst others. Fellows from al-Quds Bard University offered a series of intensive English workshops and classes not only for participants but also young students in the camps. Parallel to the cycles, a series of public lectures and seminars was organized that were open to all students from al-Quds University and other universities in Bethlehem. Daniel McKenzie in particular overviewed all the different and mutating needs of the group. Fellows from al-Quds Bard University also offered during the summer of 2012 English classes for young students in the camps. For the summer of 2013, Linda Quiquix led a two months summer seminar in which students from al-Quds Bard University, Campus in Camps participants and interested young people from the camps learned about the Zapatista movement. Parallel to the cycles, Campus in Camps organized a series of public lectures and seminars open to all students from al-Quds University and other universities in Bethlehem.
- 2 Among our guests: Beatrice Catanzaro, Basel Abbas, Ruanne Abou-Rhame, Wilfried Graf, Tariq Dana, Felicity D. Scott, Mohammed Jabali, Moukhtar Kocache, Hanan Toukan, Shadi Chaleshtoori, Jeffrey Champlin, Manuel Herz, C.K. Raju, Fernando Rampérez, Emilio Dabed, Samer Abdelnour.
- 3 In this occasion a sort of informal academic committee has been established: Sari Hanafi, Michael Buroway, Gudrun Kramer, Sandi Hilal, Muhammed Jabali, Munir Fasheh, Tariq Dana, Aaron Cezar, Thomas Keenan, Shuruq Harb, Umar Al-Ghubari, Khaldun Bshara, Jawad Al Mahal, Ayman Kalifah.

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# Decolonizing Architecture



**The watchtower in Oush Grab.**  
Photo: Francesco Mattuzzi, 2008

Our studio, in the town of Beit Sahour, is located near the edge of the desert. From the roof terrace, looking southwest one sees the still ungentrified Old Town with its competing church spires, minarets, commercial billboards for shampoos and mobile phones, and political graffiti for various Palestinian communist parties. Looking north, the hill of Abu Ghneim, once covered by a forest, has been transformed into Har Homa, the nearest of the hilltop colonies separating Jerusalem from Bethlehem. Invisible, in the valley behind the hill, is the separation wall being built by Israel since 2003. Looking east, one can see the sharp line-of-water divide; beyond that, the fields abruptly stop and the uninterrupted monochrome of the desert begins. It is a relief not to have to look at any colony in this direction, but the desert has its dangers too. Here is where the military lurks in training and fire zones, and it is from here that it storms our towns in full armor.

One unusually cold early morning in April 2006, the people of Beit Sahour witnessed, as some of us did, the evacuation of the military outpost of Oush Grab (in English, the “crow’s nest”). The army withdrawal seemed to have been the last act in an ongoing struggle of local and international activists against the oppressive presence of the base. Some years previously, on a legendary day, protesters broke into the military base and called for its immediate removal. The soldiers, taken completely by surprise, did nothing but watch. Though the base remained, by 2006 continued strong opposition to its presence by the local community and the concurrent re-organization of military geography had pushed the army to abandon it. The morning after the evacuation the base was overrun with people from around Bethlehem. Relief gave way to cathartic release. Using iron bars, young people smashed windows, walls, and doors. Others tried to salvage and take away whatever they could—doors, electric plugs, furniture, even the steel reinforcement bars in the water tower that stood at the middle of the outpost, leading to its partial collapse. The commotion was incredible, but nobody got hurt.



**Oush Grab: days after the evacuation.**

Photo: IMEMC—International Middle East Media Center, 2006



**Oush Grab.**

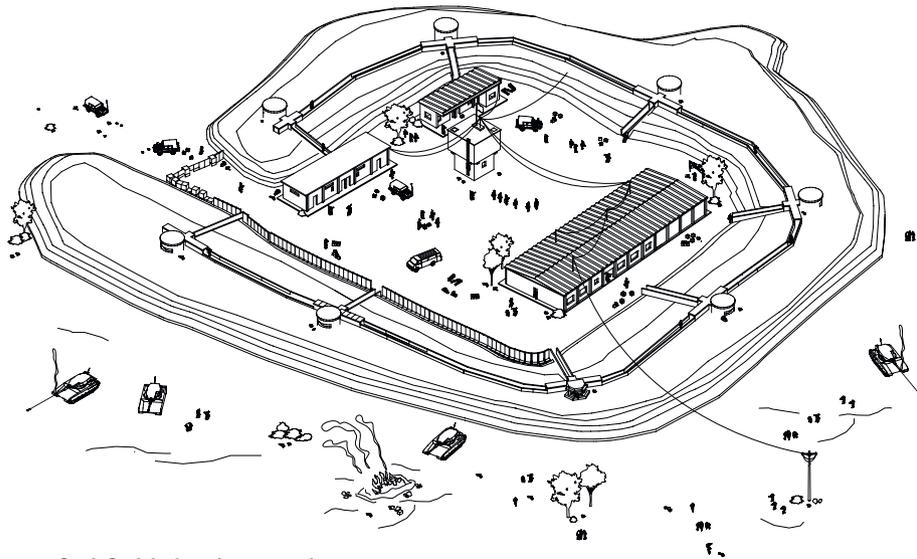
Francesco Mattuzzi, 2008



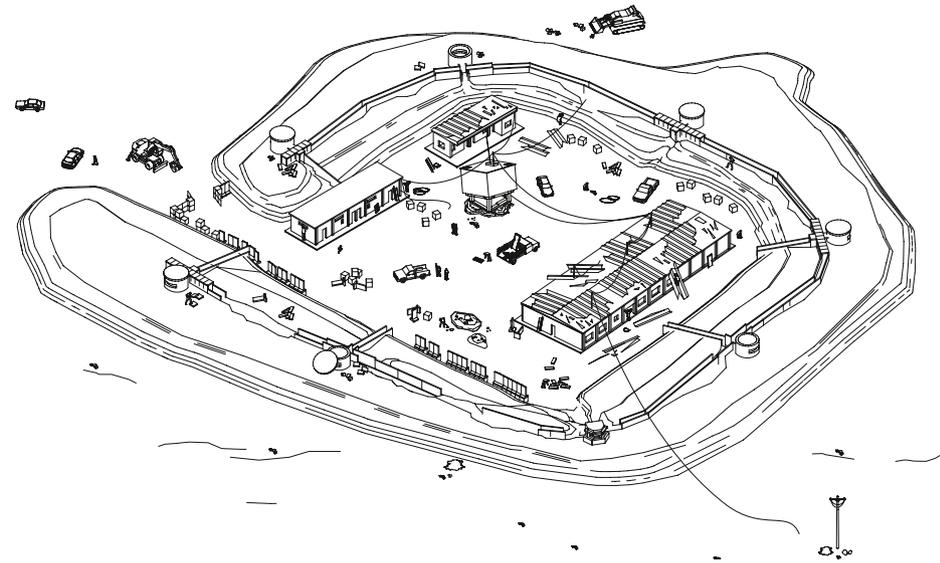
**Oush Grab location at the entrance of Beit Sahour.**

Google map

This was the end of the long life of the site as a military outpost. The distinct topography of the hill—and its location at the edge of a town and the start of the desert—had made it suitable for this role. Before it was an Israeli military outpost, it was manned by the Jordan Legion and previously by British troops during the 1936–39 Arab Revolt. Some people suggested that Oush Grab was an Ottoman outpost before that—though we found no maps to verify this—and even that it was also used by a Roman legion. But besides some canals and scattered archaeological remains consistent with a Byzantine-era farm, we found no proof of this either. During the time of the Second Intifada the sound of gunfire was constantly heard as soldiers practiced shooting, sometimes on the residential buildings surrounding the base. Floodlit during the night, with searchlights constantly scanning the area around it, the base seemed to have been caught in an endless artificial day.



Oush Grab before the evacuation.  
DAAR



Oush Grab after the evacuation.  
DAAR

The evacuation of the outpost was surely only a tactical move, a reorganization of the military matrix of control. We celebrated it for what it was—this location is the only direction in which Bethlehem, otherwise enclosed from the northwest by the wall and from the southwest by the bypass road N60, could expand.

No one was under any illusion that this might have been the first stage of decolonization. Still, “something” had taken place—a military base had been evacuated and people had access to it. This moment of evacuation—“nothing” in the grand scheme of things—captured our imagination as it had defied the logic of impossibility and the seemingly hard geography that is prevalent in occupied Palestine, on both sides of the Green Line.



-  palestinian built fabric
-  israeli settlements
-  the wall

**Oush Grab.** The site of Oush Grab is important for the eastwards expansion of Bethlehem and transport links with the surrounding areas. The Bethlehem region is strangled from the north-west by the wall, and from the south-west by the bypass road N. 60. The only available direction for the city to grow is eastwards via

Oush Grab. According to an agreement between the local municipality and Arafat, if ever evacuated (as it was), the military base of Oush Grab would be used for civilian purposes rather than as a Palestinian base. Oush Grab is at present one of the only open public spaces in the Bethlehem area.

## Access and Re-appropriation

People experienced the first moment of access to the military outpost differently. For some, it was a moment of spontaneous transgression. Entering the watchtowers overlooking Beit Sahour, we had the feeling we had accessed the control room in a panopticon prison, sharing for an instant the perspective of the oppressor. Inside the tower, we discovered graffiti (of the kind more commonly found in toilets) written by a soldier musing about the beauty of the sunrise and the atmosphere of the city in the early morning. The access to the military base provided a new point of observation over the city itself. Its evacuation offered local people the opportunity to see their own city from this direction for the first time. For many, it was a strange feeling, similar to that of looking at a recording of oneself and discovering unknown aspects.

Occupying such spaces brought back past experiences. Sandi recalled the time of the First Intifada, when people in Beit Sahour refused to pay taxes to the colonial authorities (a revolt known as the White Intifada): “One night, the army entered my house and confiscated furniture, the television, phones, and, among other things, my precious little radio transmitter. Oush Grab at that time was used as a prison but also as a storage for confiscated goods. [...] Entering the base twenty years later, I thought I might find my beloved radio.”

Having access to the evacuated military base we experienced the most radical condition of architecture—the very moment that power has been unplugged: the old uses are gone, and new uses not yet defined.

Later we heard Palestinian government officials and some NGO people advocating the view that to avoid further “vandalism” in such situations, all evacuated spaces must be defended by a Palestinian police force. If such a thing exists at all, it should certainly seek to protect Palestinians from daily abuse and not impose order where disorder is called for. It would be a mistake to lose such precious moments in spite (and perhaps because) of their indeterminate consequences.



The view from the watchtower in Oush Grab.

Photo: Francesco Mattuzzi, 2008

Only after such initial encounters can collective thinking about the future of this place begin. In 2007, we started to organize “tours” of Oush Grab, planting olive trees and using the watchtowers for bird-watching. This series of events encouraged the Beit Sahour municipality to continue the transformation of the site into a public park with places for picnics, playgrounds for children, a restaurant, a bar, and an open garden for events. Oush Grab is at present the only open public space in the Bethlehem area.

There is another point that must be made before we continue. Our collaboration is grounded in a joint sense of political commitment, friendship, and intellectual curiosity. It is obvious that our backgrounds are different and our identities complex and multiple—even with only the three of us in one room “there was already quite a crowd” (and there are always peers, colleagues, and friends around). We do not think of ourselves as representing anyone, least of all other people that have the same passports as ours. We are fully aware of, and experience everyday the system of separations and control that have been built around us. We don’t pretend that they do not exist, but we also don’t allow them to limit our imagination. If one day you happen to travel together with us through this bizarre country, you might see how there is, by definition, always one of us with the wrong document in the car when crossing checkpoints. This country is designed for the purpose of separating us.

## Beit Sahour

We owe much to this magical town. It makes our fantasies easier. For one thing it is not Ramallah—whose syndrome is the exciting and debilitating “hallucination of normality”<sup>2</sup>—and it’s not even the ecumenical Bethlehem, which draws vast amounts of world attention. Southeast of Bethlehem, it is the last stop before the desert. The town was left alone to develop a special chapter in the history of the Palestinian struggle. Its recent history—which spans our lives—is intertwined with the ideal

of borderless solidarity and a secular, democratic, inclusive, non-armed struggle. Since the first years of the First Intifada—with the hardening of identities it brought about—Beit Sahour was the place of a popular resistance, the White Intifada, a campaign of non-armed civil disobedience. The violent repression of the White Intifada also led to the organization of the collective cultivation of empty plots within the town—urban agriculture as a form of resistance. Back in those days, the term “joint” was used to describe the kind of struggle being waged. Beit Sahour was one of the few places where internationals, Palestinians, and Israeli Jews would struggle together against the occupation and colonialism.<sup>3</sup> Today the term “common” is perhaps the more apt to describe the struggle because it does not assume that preexisting, distinct identities are coming together. We need common platforms for a common struggle against a system of inequality and control. These might also become the common political platforms of the future. We will come back to this, particularly in the last chapter. As such, Beit Sahour has also become an inspiration, a place of radical pedagogical experiments. Indeed, during the First Intifada, when schools were closed by a military order, self-organized neighborhood committees established a network of alternative education study groups within homes and car garages, where the reading list included Ghassan Kanafani, Mao, Hanna Mina, Sahar Khalifeh, Trotsky, Naji al-Ali, Karl Marx, and Emile Habibi.

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> <http://ramallahsyndrome.blogspot.de/>.

<sup>3</sup> For example, such struggles took place under the aegis of the the International Solidarity Movement, which was founded in 2001, just a few hundred meters from our studio; the Alternative Information Center (AIC), a non-governmental organization established in 1984 by members of the Revolutionary Communist League (previously Matzpen); the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command; and continue today, through Badil, a community-based organization for the defense and promotion of the rights of Palestinian refugees.

## Decolonization

If one insists, as we do, on colonization as the frame of reference for understanding the political reality in Palestine, one should naturally accept that decolonization is necessary. What we have thus far proposed in Palestine could also pose a challenge on a larger scale. We think that decolonization might be the appropriate term for challenging the frame—generally limited to the confines of the borders set up by colonial powers—according to which the series of revolts which took place in the wider region unfolded. The general conceptual question nonetheless remains: what is decolonization today?

Revisiting the term required maintaining a distance from two dominant frames: “revolution” and “solution.” Whereas the former depends on a definitive moment, the latter is bound by a fixed end state, and neither designates a long-term process of transformation. The current political language that utilizes the term “solution” in relation to the Palestinian conflict and its respective borders is similarly aimed at a fixed reality. “Decolonization,” however, is not bound as a concept, nor is it bound in space or in time: it is an ongoing practice of deactivation and reorientation understood both in its presence and its endlessness. In the context of Palestine, it is not bound within the 1967 occupied territories. Decolonization, in our understanding, seeks to unleash a process of open-ended transformation toward visions of equality and justice. The return of refugees, which we interpret as entailing the right to move and settle within the complete borders of Israel-Palestine, as chapter one will make clear, is a fundamental stage in decolonization.

Over the past few years, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben has been generous in engaging us in conversations about how the concept of “profanation” would be a productive way of thinking through the process of decolonization. In his famous eponymous book on the subject, Agamben proposed “profanation” as the strategy of “restoring things to their common use.” The domain of the sacred, according to him, has

not disappeared with secularization but has rather been reproduced in modern political formations. In his book, Agamben points out that “to profane does not simply mean to abolish or cancel separations, but to learn to make new uses of them.”<sup>4</sup> Might decolonization then be the counter-apparatus to restore to common use what the colonial order has separated and divided? Decolonization as an act of profanation is playful, child-like, and a necessary contrast against actions disposed towards the diverse manifestations of the contemporary sacred—from the militarized security institutions of “Israeli liberal democracy” to the rabbinical theodicy of some of its colonists, from the militant Islamism of Hamas to the quasi-secular authoritarian rule of Fatah in the West Bank.

## Destruction

Whatever trajectory the conflict over Palestine takes, the possibility of the further partial—or complete—evacuation of Israeli colonies and military bases must be considered. Zones of Palestine that have been or will be liberated from direct Israeli presence have provided a crucial laboratory for studying the multiple ways in which we could imagine the reuse, re-inhabitation, or recycling of Israel’s colonial architecture. The handing over of colonial buildings and infrastructure is always a dilemma for the user, for it is torn between two contradictory desires: destruction and reuse. The popular impulse for destruction seeks to spatially articulate “liberation” from an architecture understood as a political straitjacket, an instrument of domination and control. If architecture is a weapon in a military arsenal that implements the power relations of colonialist ideologies, then architecture must burn. Frantz Fanon, pondering the possible corruption of governments after decolonization, warned during the Algerian liberation struggle, that if not destroyed, the physical and territorial reorganization of the colonial world may once again “mark out the lines on which a colonized society

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

will be organized.” For Fanon, decolonization is always a violent event. “To destroy the colonial world means nothing less than demolishing the colonist’s city, burying it deep within the earth or banishing it from the territory.”<sup>5</sup>

The impulse of destruction seeks to turn time backward. It seeks to reverse development to its virgin nature, a tabula rasa on which a set of new beginnings might be articulated. However, time and its processes of transformation can never be simply reversed: rather than the desired Romantic ruralization of developed areas, destruction generates desolation and environmental damage that may last for decades. In 2005, Israel evacuated the Gaza settlements and destroyed three thousand homes, creating not the promised tabula rasa for a new beginning, but rather a million and a half tons of toxic rubble that poisoned the ground and the water.

### Reuse

The other impulse, to reuse, seeks to impose political continuity and order under a new system of control. It is thus not surprising that post-colonial governments have tended to reuse the infrastructure set up by colonial regimes for their own emergent practical needs of administration. The evacuated infrastructure and built structures were often also seen as the legacy of “modernization” and as an economic and organizational resource. Throughout the histories of decolonization, the possibility of reusing existing structures in the very same ways they were used under colonial regimes has proven too tempting to resist. Such repossession tends to reproduce colonial power relations in space: colonial villas are inhabited by new financial elites and palaces by political ones, while the evacuated military and police installations of colonial armies, as well as their prisons, are reused by the governments that replaced them, recreating similar spatial hierarchies.

In this sense, past processes of decolonization have never truly done away with the power of colonial domination. The reuse of Israeli colonial architecture could establish a sense of continuity rather than rupture and change. That is, reusing the evacuated structures of Israel’s domination in the same way as the occupiers did—the settlements as Palestinian suburbs and the military bases for Palestinian security needs—would mean reproducing their inherent alienation and violence: the settlement’s system of fences and surveillance technologies would inevitably enable their seamless transformation into gated communities for the Palestinian elite.

### Subversion

There is, however, a third option: a subversion of the originally intended use, repurposing it for other ends. We know that evacuated colonial architecture doesn’t necessarily reproduce the functions for which it was designed. There are examples of other uses, both planned and spontaneous, that have invaded the built environment of evacuated colonial architecture, subverted its programs, and liberated its potential. Even the most horrifying structures of domination can yield themselves to new forms of life. Looking at the fractured remains of a plantation house, the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott pondered the decay of an institution once powerful, and wondered about “the rot that remains when the men are gone,”<sup>6</sup> but he also opened ways to negotiate, inhabit, and thus transform the colonial structures that have generated deep deformations of space and geography. Colonial remnants and ruins are not only the dead matter of past power, but could be thought of as material for re-appropriations and strategic activation within the politics of the present. The question is how people might live with and in ruins, or, as we put it in chapter three, “within the house of the enemy.”

<sup>5</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> Derek Walcott, “Ruins of a Gretat House” in *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1987).

There are examples of other planned and spontaneous uses. Some examples relate to the most horrific of histories. At least two former World War II concentration camps have been the location of major re-adaptation. The prisoner-of-war camp Fossoli in Carpi, northern Italy, was used as a concentration camp for Jews who were imprisoned there before their deportation to the death camps in Eastern Europe. Two years after the end of the war the priest Zeno Saltini opened an orphanage there, which was in operation until 1952. The walls and barbed wire were pulled down, and the barracks were transformed into living quarters, a school, workshops. Trees, gardens, and vegetables were planted. The camp watchtower was transformed into a church.

Another interesting case in which a camp was transformed was that of Staro Sajmište in Belgrade. Built as a fairground in 1936 it had a series of national pavilions built around a central tower. The area had fallen into Nazi hands at the start of World War II. The visual order of the exhibition suited the new logic of surveillance and control. After the war, the site was occupied by artists and Roma people. The circular layout of the camp has thus been interpreted in radically different fashions three times: as a display mechanism, a site of incarceration and murder, and then a site of renewed communal life. Now the residents of Staro Sajmište (those who inhabited and, to a certain extent, protected the site) are under the threat of eviction as the Belgrade municipality seeks to build another form of exhibition—this time commemorating the Shoah.

Within the context of decolonization, one might look to Gandhi's principle of non-violent non-cooperation. His principle had an important architectural dimension. He suggested reusing structures saturated with violence after the violence could be "removed." In Delhi, after the Viceroy's House was evacuated, Gandhi wanted to turn it into a hospital. But Nehru insisted on turning the building into the President's Palace, thereby reproducing colonial hierarchies.

Al-Muqata in Ramallah is an interesting example of the potential and the trap of reusing colonial and military structures. The military compound was built by the British military as part of the larger campaign to suppress the Arab Revolt of 1936–39. From 1948 to 1967, it was used as a military base and prison by the Jordan Legion and for the same purposes by the Israeli army after 1967. Its history as a site of incarceration was, however, interrupted for a few months when the buildings were evacuated as part of the Oslo peace process. In this period of uncertainty, it was visited by thousands. People that had been arrested or tortured had the opportunity to share with friends and relatives the very site of psychological trauma. The architecture of the site had become a tool for narration. Nothing was really planned. Instead, these spontaneous visits transformed ex-prisoners into the guides of a non-museum of horror. However, this period did not last for long. After a while the Palestinian Authority took over and transformed the site into a presidential compound and a prison. Ironically, it was here that Yassir Arafat was held prisoner in a single room during the last months of his life, as if the old function of a prison could not be exorcized.