

PARTICIPATION



An Architect's Notebook on Refugee Camps

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1

NOTES ON NORMALISATION

The meeting was complete chaos. Everyone was screaming and hardly listening to each other as several topics about the camp were being raised and discussed intensely. The architect knew it would be difficult to bring up the idea of a new design for the school. Just as she was thinking that perhaps this was not the right time to have this discussion, a man looked at her and bluntly asked, “Who are you?”

“I am the architect.”

“Is this a joke? What do you want from us, *Madame* architect?”

She nervously responded, wishing she could escape from the room. “I was sent by UNRWA to work on a new design for the old boys’ school.”

A chorus of voices exclaimed: “What?!”

“What do you mean by ‘design’?” asked one man. “We need the school as soon as

possible, and this design will only make us lose time. We have so many priorities and you are thinking about the design? We certainly live in different worlds!”

The architect stared at the floor. Up to this moment, they had all disagreed on everything. Now, the only consensus was how her presence was unnecessary in this meeting!

Among the overlapping voices, the principal of the girls’ school intervened: “I personally believe that this proposal by the architect should be our priority. I urge you to listen to her. What she is proposing is in fact addressing the heart of all the problems you are talking about. We are all concerned for our children and how they are being raised in Shu’fat camp. The architect is trying to propose some solutions.”

A young man rolled his eyes as he spoke vehemently. “What does it mean to propose a design for a new school in the camp?! And what is its real purpose? We demand from UNRWA and the world our right of return not our right to the beautification of our camp as a way to normalise our presence here.”

The architect asked, “Are you satisfied though with the services provided by UNRWA regarding education?”

Different voices came from every corner of the room, demanding for the right for refugee children to study in dignified and decent learning environments:

“All that remains for us and our children, after the loss of our homes and homelands, is education.”

“Education is the most essential aspect of our life as refugees.”

“It is the only weapon we have.”

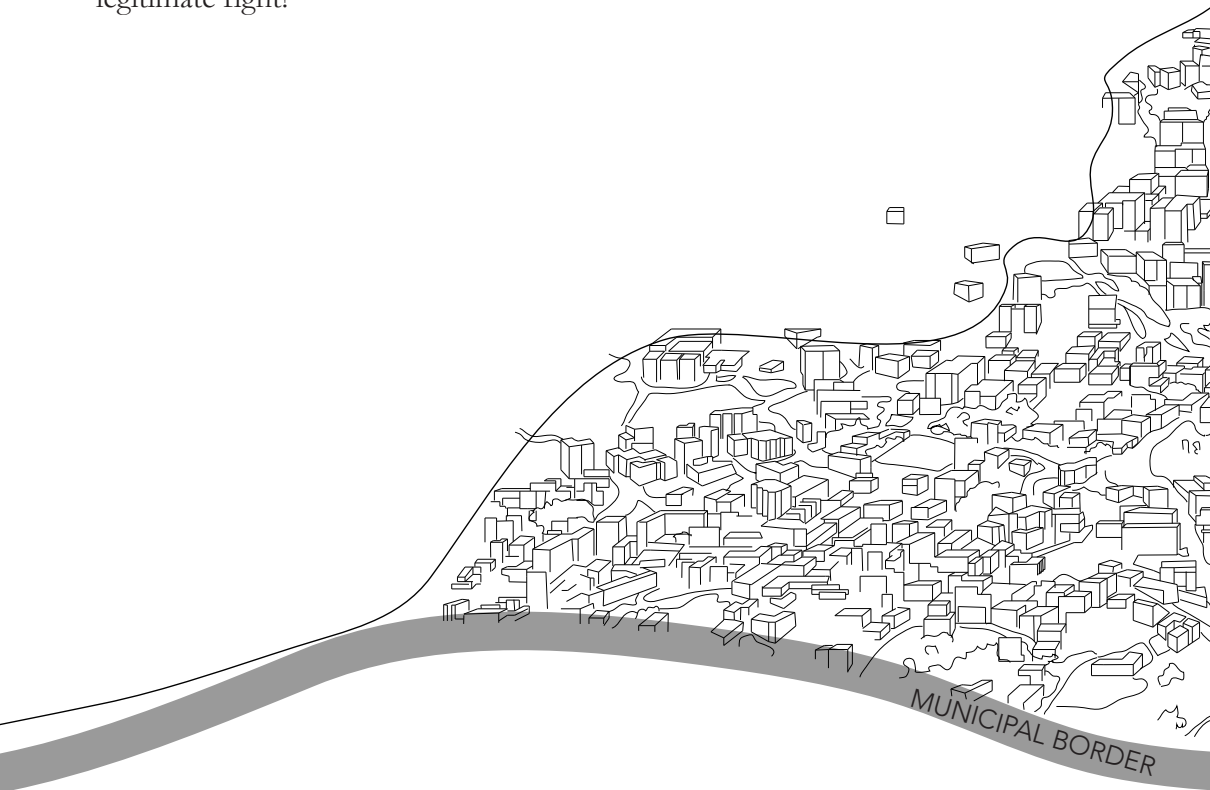
Loud shouting continued but was abruptly silenced by a louder, overpowering voice.

“Even if this sounds like a contradiction, we in Shu’fat refugee camp demand not only for our right of return but also for our right to remain within the borders of Jerusalem city! We want both the right to remain and the right of return. The occupation is trying to expel us from here by all possible means. But we have to resist it. To have a new school that we feel proud of is our right and this should never undermine our right of return. On the contrary, to me, this is the first step towards our return. Our demand for dignity should not contradict our demand for return.”

Another man stood up, appalled by what he was hearing. “Do we need to be proud of our camp rather than fighting for the return to our original homes? I personally want to return to my home. I don’t want you to decorate the camp and make it decent so I stay. I reject this idea!”

The man with the overpowering voice responded, “What about our right to remain in Jerusalem city? To resist being expelled! Can’t you see they attack us so we’ll give up on the camp? I think any good new thing around us, whether big or small, will support our legitimate right!”

JERUSALEM



WEST BANK



SEPERATION WALL

“So you want to build a ‘wonderland’ for our kids inside the refugee camp?”

“What about you? Do you want to continue accepting identical blue-and-white UNRWA schools that they just ‘copy and paste’ all throughout the West Bank? Our kids are not numbers!”

Another man interrupted the heated discussion, addressing the crowd as if he was standing on a platform. “It is important to understand that UNRWA builds schools in refugee camps as a part of their mandate to provide basic services that are to be distributed equally among refugees. These services include, among other things, health, food supplies, and education up to the ninth grade, after which students must attend schools belonging to the host countries. Within this context, these identical ‘copy and paste’ buildings are part of the equal distribution of schools throughout all refugee camps. All camps should get the same service. Thus the same school!”

I would like also to remind you that the white and blue you are making fun of is the United Nations’ colours to protect our kids from potential bombing.”

As he finished, the architect responded. “It is true that there are many efforts being made to ensure equality among the refugees. However, all camps are different from each other. I have visited them all, from north to south, and I can assure you, from my experience, that Arroub camp is different from Dheisheh, and both are different from Fawwar camp, and so is the case for Shu’fat camp.”

The man seemed annoyed: “Listen to me closely. Refugees living in this camp, although it is where I come from, do not deserve anything. Children in Shu’fat camp are troublemakers, they break everything, destroy anything that comes their way. School windows have been fixed and replaced many times, just to be destroyed again... I don’t think that refugees in Shu’fat deserve a better school.”

The architect looked alarmed by these remarks.

“I do not agree with you at all! I believe that a new school with carefully designed spaces, such as classrooms that receive natural light and ventilation and access to green gardens and courtyards, will change the way that students relate to their school. They will finally feel as if they belong to the school and therefore feel the need to take care of it. They spend their entire life in a camp surrounded by walls and difficulty. They deserve that the school where they spend eight hours of their day is an environment that is decent, welcoming, and encouraging. I believe that school buildings are very important to change the relationship between students, teachers, and education.”

Chaos started again and the architect desperately wanted someone to agree with her, or at least to shift the discussion to a more productive and positive angle; she was feeling completely stuck. Suddenly, a woman stood up to speak. The entire room was silent. Her presence and authority instilled a feeling of respect, and it was as if she was about to officially conclude the discussion.

“We have continuously asked UNRWA to give the current girls’ school to the boys and build a new one for the girls where the boys’ school is now, but sadly no one has ever responded to our call. Currently, the girls’ school is located outside the borders of the camp, exposing them to harassment from the Israeli soldiers, while the boys’ school is inside.”

There was silence. The architect looked carefully around her, then towards the girls’ school principal in an attempt to understand what was happening. Could this mean that the design should be for the girls’ school and not the boys? This was not what UNRWA had in mind and she was aware that the funding they had received was for building a new school for the boys. The shift would not be easy.

This time, the woman addressed the architect directly: “If we get approval for interchanging the two schools, we will have the girls’ school next to the women’s centre, where I work. We would like to work closer with the girls’ school and by having them next to us this shall be easier.”

She turned towards the men and continued, “As for the boys’ school. It will be next to the youth program centre that is in the process of finishing a modern football pitch and we will finally be able to give our boys a space where they can play and release all their energy in a healthy way.”

All eyes were now on the architect. She had been sent to the camp by UNRWA with the task of engaging the local community in the design of the school. She now understood that this demand was a test not only of UNRWA’s credibility

within the community but also of hers. If she was unable to change the location of schools, then she would be unable to change anything else.

The architect was clearly being challenged by the local community; however, the possibility of creating a design for the girls' school excited her.

Two months later, the architect returned to Shu'fat to deliver the good news to the principal of the girls' school. She had received approval to interchange the school sites and now they would design a new girls' school together. The principal and the teachers were thrilled to participate in this adventure. They drank coffee and celebrated this new beginning.





2

NOTES ON EDUCATION

It was early spring and the warm sun shone brightly outside. Everyone took to the courtyard, but since there were no seats outside, teachers brought chairs out from the classroom. Meanwhile, the architect observed the students who had just been let out to enjoy a break outside in the courtyard. Their loud voices concentrated in groups as they searched for shaded places to hide from the sun. All students quickly gathered on the edges of the courtyard, leaving the middle space completely empty. As the architect turned around, she noticed the teachers and the principal were settling down on one of the sides.

“This is where we should start!” she said. “How do we design a playground? What is it? Where and how do children play? The playground, as it is today, reminds me of an asphalted street where the girls play while the teachers patrol them. The main challenge here is how students and teachers can feel that the school playground is not like a public space that belongs to no one but rather a familiar, green, colourful place where they can gather and spend quality time together.”

Said, one of the teachers, eagerly leaned forward in her seat. “You mean, like a garden? I don’t have a garden at home; wouldn’t it be nice to have one at school?”

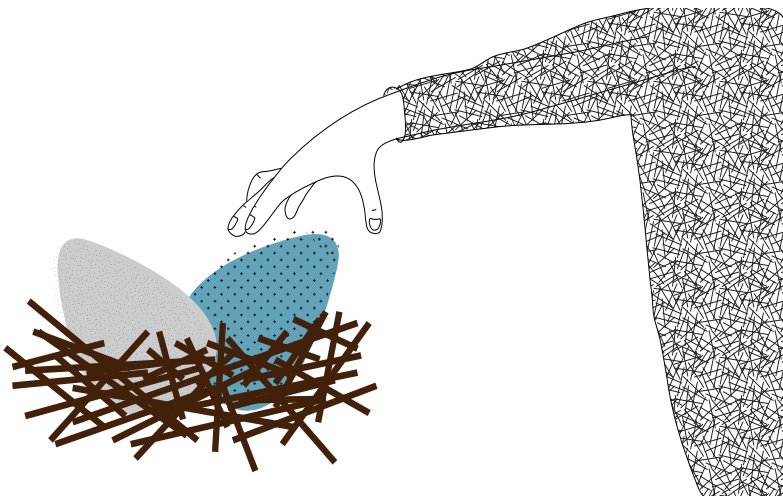
They all smiled as another teacher added, “Imagine having a garden that allows me to interact with my students outside the classroom. This is the most joyful thought I have had in a while.”

The architect laughed and said, “You have reminded me of a story about a garden that Moallem Munir Fasheh once narrated to me. I think it relates to the discussion we are having right now. I love his story and would love to share it with you.”

The principal said in excitement, “Munir Fasheh has worked with us for a long time and has had a major influence on our way of teaching and in our souls! Our school teachers owe him the most beautiful memories.”

The architect pulled out a rectangular book with black-and-white drawings titled *My Story with Words* and began to read aloud:

When I was five years old, my family decided to send me to kindergarten in a school close to home. At that time I was living with my family in “Al Baka’a Al Tehta” in Jerusalem before we were expelled in 1948 and moved to Ramallah. I went to that kindergarten for one day and decided not to return. Intuitively, I felt the difference between the kindergarten and the real garden around our house. The kindergarten was full of words, instructions, and strange sounds. I rebelled against going to it and wanted to stay in a real garden full of natural things, where I could play without restrictions, among trees, with soil, stones, chicken, and cats that make sounds I love, where every morning I searched for eggs which I perforated with a pin and sucked what was inside them raw. I continued doing that until I was in my early twenties. That did not constitute a health risk at that time; science was not advanced enough to corrupt eggs. In the home garden, I was living, playing and learning from objects, colors and other children, while in the kindergarten I felt that everything was fake. I kept promising my father, through my aunt, that I would go to school the next day but didn’t, until my father got tired of my lies. One day he returned home angry, hit me demanding I stop lying and go to school daily. That was the first and last time my father ever beat me. The transition from a real garden to a school kindergarten sums up my whole life experience, even during my doctoral studies: the replacement of what is real and lively, where one learns without being taught, to a formally framed institutional learning where learning was programmed consisting of right and wrong. This has been the path I was forced to follow over the course of my life, and which I rebelled against all my life.

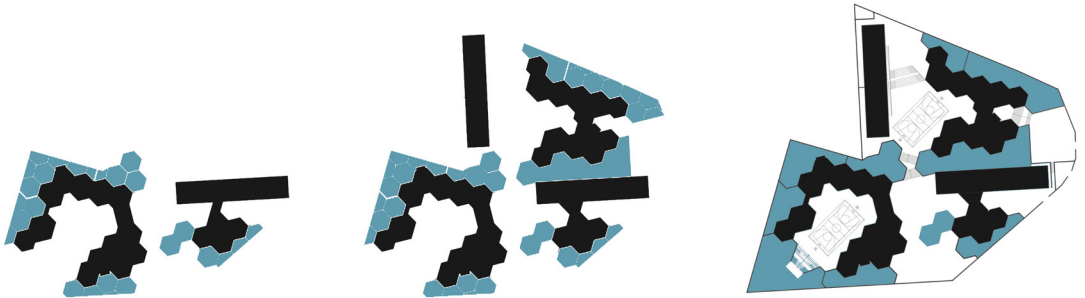




The principal sighed, “This is truly the challenge we are facing. The educational system will not change, including the absurd need to constantly implement exams and evaluate students. However, we can try as individuals to generate small changes to improve the quality of education in our school.”

The architect left the school overwhelmed by the many thoughts and ideas that had been voiced. It was now time for her, together with her architect colleagues, to translate all of these ideas into classrooms, playgrounds, and gardens. Throughout this process, the architect’s role was to bring together UNRWA, the camp community, and the school family in order to find a common ground for the design of the school. The group of architects spent entire nights imagining the new *garden school* and they began designing it with great excitement.

Based on the stories they had heard about the school, the architects felt that this *garden school* should simulate a Palestinian village. The classrooms would resemble a home, a personal space where the students and teachers would feel committed



to its care. The courtyard, instead of being a black-asphalted space similar to a neglected street, would become the garden that everyone in the camp desired.

When she returned to the school some weeks later to share her multiple designs and sketches with the teachers and the principal, she was confronted with different emotions. Some teachers were sceptical, as they did not understand how changing the appearance of the school would solve the fundamental problems of the educational system. Others believed it was a good place to start and an important change to make.

The architect took the drawings and met with the students' parliament, a group of girls elected by the students to represent them.

At first, none of them showed any enthusiasm towards the design. When asked by the architect what they thought, they collectively answered, "It's nice", then remained quiet.

A few minutes passed and the silence began to feel uncomfortable. Finally, Hanneen, one of the students, challengingly asked the architect, “What about the garbage that surrounds the school and covers the streets of the camp? Will it change or stay the way it is?”

“I don’t think that the problem with the garbage will be resolved any time soon. It is a very complicated issue and its solution requires enormous efforts from all stakeholders involved and the community.” Hanneen shook her head, frustrated by the architect’s answer. “Ever since we were elected to represent the students in the parliament, we have challenged the issue of garbage in the camp. We have called camp officials for a meeting, listened to them, and discussed this topic many times between us. We believe that we must do something about it.”

“Aside from that, wouldn’t you like to have a school that you belong to and love?”

Donia stepped in, “What good will that do while we still live in an unhealthy environment where the streets of the camp are filled with rubbish?”

“I can understand your frustration regarding the garbage, but how about changing the reality of the camp step by step? By combining efforts, you and your teachers will be able to create a new image of the camp through education, hopefully inspiring others to also transform the context they live in and challenge the status quo. Don’t you think so?”

Donia squinted her eyes, looking incredulous.

The architect continued, “What I believe, dear Donia, is that by improving the school and making it a place you feel proud of, students, teachers, and families will be able to reflect on how they want to relate and care for the context they are living in, including how to deal with seemingly unsolvable problems, like the garbage. The garbage is a symptom of how people also perceive the streets and what is public. For the camp community, the streets represent the military occupation. How can they be motivated to take care of it? It’s the sense of belonging and the notion of sharing that makes us care for something.”

“But how we can change such reality? It’s frustrating!” exclaimed Hiba.

“Perhaps by creating other realities, such as a school you relate to surrounded by green gardens!” said the architect.

Hala nodded and cheered. “Imagine if the school could become our gathering place where we could enjoy each other’s company and share our experiences.”

“A *Mujawara*, you mean?” asked the architect.

“What is a *Mujawara*?”

“*Mujawara* is something I learned from my friend and teacher Moallem Munir Fasheh. *Mujawara* means the ability to be in a group, to learn things from each other, and to derive our ability and our strength from within us and that which surrounds us. One of the most important characteristics of a *Mujawara*

is the ability to self-generate. It is like a seed in the ground that is capable of generating itself.

Munir made me realise that the most important source of knowledge are the people and the context that surrounds me. My mother, my friends, my neighbourhood are all like books full of stories and wisdom. He insists that the words derive their meaning from life! My life and my interaction with others.”

Hiba was captivated by this idea. “Do you mean that together with our classmates and teachers we could become a *Mujawara* like the one Moallem Munir describes?”

“Hiba, of course you can create a *Mujawara* in your school! The only condition is that you would all want to participate. It would be great to have the new architectural design encouraging the students and the teachers to look at the school as a space of *Mujawara*—not only a place for work and forced education but also a place to practice daily life with all its meanings and to participate in education and learning as an essential flame of life and not an imposed external factor on practices.”

Islam asked, “Can my family be a *Mujawara*?”

“According to Moallem Munir, the best families are precisely those who are able to form a *Mujawara*. He once said to me that he had never seen the occupation more afraid of us than during the time of the First Intifada when we began to depend on our families’ networks to organise our lives, form neighbourhood

committees, and learn from each other. When we recognised ourselves and our neighbourhoods as an important source of knowledge, solidarity and learning, we became a real threat. I understood through him that what I learned during the First Intifada, and still carry with me today, was the experience of being part of this unique *Mujawara* that impacted me as much as those who lived it with me.”

“Can we form a *Mujawara* with you in the new school?”

Donia noticed the excitement of her classmates and cautiously walked towards the architect and asked her: “Who are you?”

The architect was surprised. This was now the second time she had been confronted with this question in Shu’fat camp. Despite the fact that the question was coming from a twelve-year-old girl, she again answered nervously, “I am the architect.”

She felt vulnerable. As the answer came out, she understood how difficult it was to explain what an architect was doing in a refugee camp. Was there any space for architecture in a temporary place like this one? What did she want to accomplish with this? Why did she feel such need to participate in this challenge? As she began to feel consumed by doubt, her thoughts were interrupted by Hiba’s loud voice.

“We know that you are the architect. You have told us that and our principal explained this to us, but we want to know why you care about designing the school? What brings you to our camp?”





3

NOTES ON CHILDHOOD

It was 1987 and together with my neighbours in the town of Beit Sahour, I was building the most wonderful school in Palestine. I had always felt that my neighbourhood was my home. I remembered how as children, we would play on the street while my grandmother Oum Jameel and her neighbour Oum Mohammad watched over us as they sat on the concrete threshold drinking tea with sage.

I was fourteen when the First Intifada broke out. Schools and universities shut down, and a series of curfews were imposed on Palestinian cities, villages, and refugee camps. Curfews would be imposed by the Israeli military occupation as a collective punishment against the Palestinian population to make them stop their daily actions of the Intifada, like stone throwing, strikes, collective land plantation, collective self-organised learning environments, etc. It was their way of resistance for their right of self-determination. Whether it was true or not, I always felt that the neighbourhood community would survive despite the difficult situation we were experiencing. I would participate in the neighbourhood meetings that abounded due to the Intifada. I no longer played in the presence of my grandmother, but became involved with my community, finding solutions for how to organise our daily life.

Everyone in the community insisted that schooling should continue, that all uncultivated land in the neighbourhood must be planted to secure our daily living needs, and that there should be a plan to guard the neighbourhood during the night in case the army came. These were the decisions that I participated in together with the other children.

Within a few days, a school for the neighbourhood was formed. Every member of the community who had a garage or an empty room in their house cleaned and prepared it to become a classroom. Classrooms of different forms and colours were scattered around the neighbourhood. Mothers and fathers were teachers and worked together with groups of children, teaching them what he or she was best at. I studied at the neighbourhood school for a long time and felt my school and the fields around it had become my home. I participated in the planting of fruits and vegetables and patiently waited with everyone for harvest season. The whole community was involved in agriculture and in the collection of our crops. I felt fear around me but also strength, reassuring me that together with my community we would be able to resist settler colonialism and free ourselves by emancipating our minds and determining how we would live our daily lives.

I understood that education was a powerful tool that was considered dangerous by the coloniser. Education was a way of liberating the mind even before we could liberate our bodies, houses, cities, and homeland. Indeed, the emancipation of our minds was something that the occupier could not control or steal from us and prevent us from practicing. Nevertheless, the new neighbourhood school also taught me something else. The traditional form of education I had received



before the creation of the neighbourhood school had not been liberating. I then understood that education could also be a way to enslave people.

In the meantime, while I was engaging in my new life, my uncle returned from England where he had studied architecture. My grandmother's house was too small, so my uncle stayed at my house. He took over my room, forcing me to share a room with my two brothers. However, this did not disturb me at all. In fact, I was happy to have my uncle, the architect, as company. He began taking me together with his architect friends to Al Hakawati Theater in Jerusalem. I wished I was older so I could live the adventurous life of this group of male and female architects. I joined them in their trips around Palestine, from Haifa to Jaffa to Acre, photographing and filming architectural landmarks. They would always tell me that the work of an architect is great because it enables the building of cities and villages, houses, hospitals, and schools.

I thought a lot about my school while accompanying my uncle and his fellow architects. Many questions were wandering in my mind and one day I decided to share my thoughts with my uncle.

“My school is beautiful even though it is made of a collection of garages and rooms in our neighbourhood. I feel I belong to each corner. I have participated in the construction of these spaces and while I am in school, I feel at home surrounded by my family. My mother teaches in the school, I help my small brother in reading; each one of us is contributing with what we are best at. Do you think that an architect can contribute to the construction of a school like our school in the neighbourhood?”

My uncle asked me, “What makes your school unique?”

“I feel it’s my home. I belong to it and love it. I feel free and independent unlike my previous school that has now closed. There, I always felt watched and controlled, in the classroom, the corridor, or at the plaza of the school. I was constantly under surveillance, afraid of being caught doing something I wasn’t supposed to be doing. This fear reminds me of Khalil al-Sakakini’s *Kaṣa ana ya Doniah* in which he describes his memories about his headmistress and the fear she would spread among students and teachers:

I was working as a teacher several years ago at the school of Banat Sahyoun in Jerusalem. And one of the nun’s would always accompany us from the very beginning of the class until the end, making sure I would not teach the pupils something that went against the religious beliefs of the school. She wanted to be able to control the pupils’ behaviour. And whenever the headmistress approached the classroom, the nun would hold her breath in fear and screech “the boss”. The children were frightened of the headmistress and it would always take me a while to get their attention back to the lesson.

Sakakini’s story also reminds me of what happened to my classmates and me during the first weeks of the Intifada uprising, before the schools were shut down by the Israeli military regime. I still remember my engagement in the first school strike. Like the rest of the schools in the West Bank, we had endorsed the request for united Palestinian political leadership. Our plan was to go to our school and announce a general strike. I remember that morning when we refused to enter our classes and we all sat down on the floor, one next to the other, in our wide and



long school corridor. A few minutes later, everyone around me was whispering “She’s arrived, she’s arrived”. The school headmistress was short and had fat legs. We were all terrified of her. My heart began to beat fast and I could feel the heartbeats of the other students around me.

She stood there among us and said loudly, “Everyone go to their classrooms immediately. I don’t want to see anyone in the corridor.”

I was terrified. I looked around and saw that everyone had remained seated. A few seconds passed and no one made a move. I felt very scared but strong; confused and at the same time very determined. Yet, it all happened in a blink of an eye. I heard her shouting again, ordering us to move, but as she got angrier, I felt stronger and more determined to stay and to not enter the classroom. I remember saying to myself, “Don’t worry, she does not carry a gun like the Israeli soldiers,” and if the kids who confront the soldiers with stones don’t fear their guns, why should I fear the voice of the headmistress?

That was my first encounter with authority. I then realised that authority has different forms and motives, different agendas. It was then that I understood that I do not want to learn because my headmistress or my teachers or my family want me to learn. I don’t want to learn because I am afraid. I want to learn because I enjoy it.”

My uncle, who had been listening attentively, wondered aloud, “But the neighbourhood school can never be a permanent solution.”

“Why not? Don’t you understand? In the neighbourhood school, I learn because I want to, not because I am obliged to. I like to feel that the school belongs to me. We all share this respect for this space. This is the school I dream about. I ask you again, do you think that an architect can create this type of school?”

My uncle, bewildered, leaned back in his chair for a minute as he stared at my pleading eyes while he searched for an answer to this difficult question.

“Not alone, my dear. Any school consists of several aspects. A fundamental aspect is the teacher and the students, then the curriculum and certainly the place in which they study and teach. Let me ask you a question. Do you think that if a family lived in a beautiful spacious house, a house they all loved and enjoyed every corner of, that this would have any effect on the relationship between the family members?”

“Of course,” I answered. “I am very fond of my home. I feel safe and enjoy every corner of it and I think the whole family enjoys sharing time together inside it.”

My uncle continued: “This is what an architect can do for a school. The relationship between the teacher and the student depends very much on the different spaces that exist in the school, from the classroom to the courtyard as well as the gardens. Therefore, the role of space in education is as important as the role of the teacher or the students or the curriculum.”

Shaima had been listening attentively as the architect narrated her story. “I wish I had lived through the First Intifada. When I hear stories about this time, I imagine you had a perfect life.”

“I think we only remember what we want to remember and in the way we want to remember it,” the architect replied.

“Your story made me feel like you were the hero of your neighbourhood.”

The architect shook her head. “I don’t think that I was the hero of the neighbourhood... but I did feel I had a role in deciding what was happening around me and I felt special that my voice was heard even though I was a little girl.”

“Is that why you remember it only as a beautiful time?”

“I have asked myself this question several times: why do I insist on remembering only what was beautiful from that period when in fact this time was perhaps the hardest in my life? While I was telling you this story, I considered several times about telling you how cruel it was, how we had long periods of curfews or how many of my friends were killed during the First Intifada, of the moments of horror that my family and I endured. But my memories refuse to do so and when my community was forced to come together and organise our lives, we also chose only to include the positive side. Together, we were the strongest neighbourhood that we had ever been. Like Munir Fasheh and Sakakini, we too found through this experience the joy of learning from those who surrounded us and from our own experiences.”





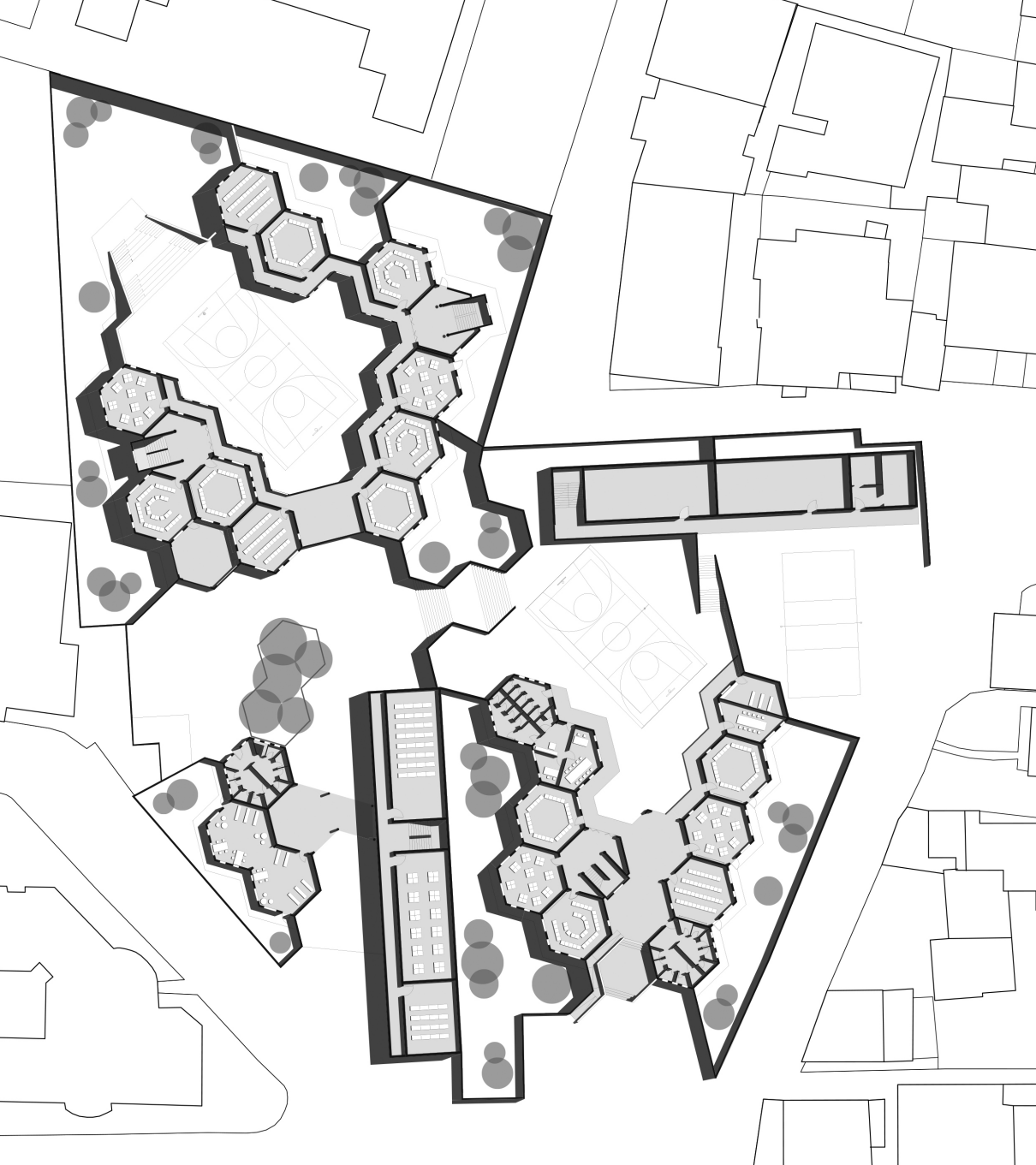
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NOTES ON ARCHITECTURE

The architect had left her work in UNRWA four months before the completion of the new school. One day as she was reading the *Al-Quds* newspaper, she suddenly stumbled upon an article covering the inauguration of the Shu'fat Basic Girls School. She ran to the nearest store, bought all the newspapers and compared them with each other, searching for all the news related to the school. She finally opened her computer and searched the UNRWA website to learn more.

Although the architect was sorry she had not been invited to the inauguration, she understood that it was simply a bureaucratic issue. Outsider “architect” figures were never invited to facilities openings.

She paused and giggled, remembering how she had never been really invited to design a new school in the first place. After pushing and insisting, she had convinced the UNRWA senior management to let her design a different school for the camp and they had reluctantly allowed her to do so. What mattered now was that the school had been built. Somehow, it felt like a victory to see how



UNRWA was proudly inaugurating this new wonderful school. Maybe, after all, she had managed to convince them of the importance of uniquely designed schools for camps, of how architecture and design can go beyond merely providing shelter and indoor spaces and how it can play a decisive role in the way humans interact with each other.

She was thrilled to find that a few newspapers had quoted Miss Jihad, the school headmistress. She must have read the words a hundred times over:

For her part, the headmistress of the Shu'fat elementary school, Jihad Allan, said that this school provides great infrastructure for education especially in terms of design that facilitates an active learning environment inside the school. The school's contemporary design allows us to move freely from one part to another and to experiment learning in small groups inside the classrooms. In addition it provides a garden for each classroom, the courtyard and the special connection points that permits smooth mobility and diverse activity."

She added "the presence of a garden has an impact on the psyche of the students as it encourages them to study and come to school. The 25 classrooms, labs, multipurpose rooms and outdoor areas provide plenty of space for the students We now have the ability to receive a larger number of students in the future. The first new school will consist of students from the 6th grade until the 10th grade, and the second new school will be from the 1st grade until the 5th grade, which is opening 24-08-2014.

She pointed out that the new school gives the students a greater motivation for education as well as promoting a sense of belonging that encourages students to look after it."

The architect stared at the pictures of the new school, the students, the headmistress, and the teachers. She missed them and remembered her promise that she would return and create a *Mujawara* with the students.

The next day, she returned to the school. The headmistress was excited to see her, and greeted her with coffee. The headmistress was eager to share her experiences of the new school with the architect and impatiently insisted that she had to see the school for herself, dragging her into a classroom that seemed chosen on purpose. The architect could not believe what she was seeing. Children were sitting on the floor cutting coloured numbers, engaging in the best math class she had ever seen. This was truly the best math *Mujawara* she had witnessed.

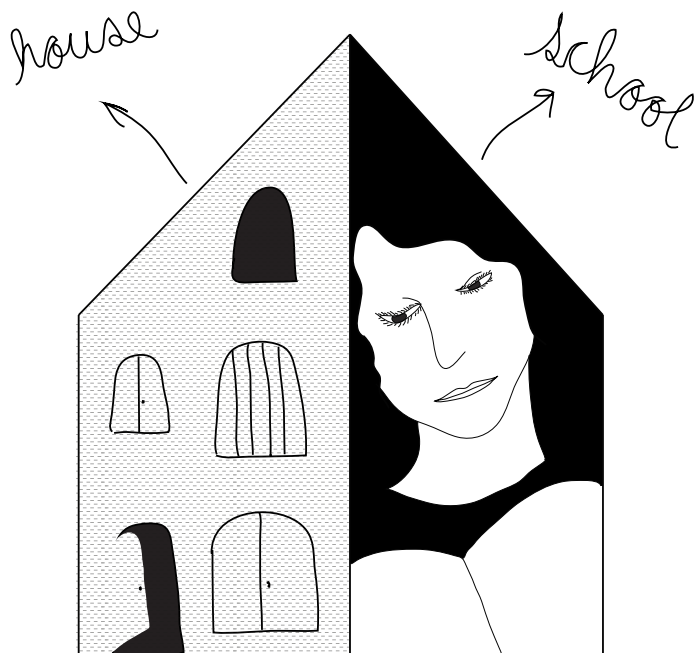
“How are the other teachers coping with the new school?” the architect asked.

“Well, you know, there isn’t any new project that convinces all people. Some of the teachers are very excited about the new school, others are not so happy.”

“Well, I have only seen the positive aspects; I would also like to see what doesn’t work.”

The headmistress was amused. “Are you ready to hear criticism and complains then?”

“You are very kind to warn me. Sure, I am ready. I’ll certainly learn more by hearing criticisms than by hearing compliments.”



The architect entered the teachers' room where everyone seemed to know who she was. She wanted their opinion on the new school and how it had changed the way they taught and how the children learned.

"There is no doubt that this wonderful design is creating a break in our routine. The problem is that it is still embedded within a strict traditional education system that is immutable. For example, the gardens are great but the doors shouldn't open because then the students will go out... we are still in an old system..." one teacher said.

"With the new design of the hexagonal class, we went from having four walls to now having six. The board is no longer in the middle as it used to be. Plus although the light in the classroom is great, the six walls disperse the sound... my voice is no longer central," another teacher added,

"Ingenious architecture also needs ingenious ideas about education," another joined in.

"Sport class is a nuisance... when the girls go out in the courtyard, it distracts the other classes."

"Yes, we should build a sports hall!" a teacher suggested.

"And we have to walk too much between classes... it's tiring."

“We stopped being able to properly organise the chairs in the classroom... Many times I don’t know where to stand... I get lost between the students and their chairs spread all over the place.”

“But the problem is not only the new classrooms or the old ones. The girls have to go through an Israeli checkpoint every day where soldiers search them. They have learned how to oppose anyone with authority. So when the teacher has authority, they oppose her... I feel that they are punishing us because we are nice to them. When we try to discipline the class, they cause trouble on purpose. Anything that is related to discipline has become a big problem for us and we no longer know how to deal with it as teachers.”

“But changes come gradually,” a teacher objected. “Step by step, not all at once. Change comes from gradually changing our habits in the way we use the school ... the ball is in our court now.”

“I wish to create a healthy educational atmosphere, where I feel that I am a teacher not a police officer.”

“I wish to feel home when I am at school, but I feel drowned in rules and regulations.”

“We should not forget that at least 10 percent of our students suffer from difficult family circumstances, an addict father, conflict between parents, or violence towards children.”

For a moment, a positive voice interrupted, “Despite all the problems you have all mentioned, I think the gardens will bring us much joy... if we can manage to plant them, the school will turn into heaven.”

“We need flowers and plants that cover the walls—that way, we can overcome the issue of the garbage smell coming from outside the school.”

However, once the issue of the garbage was mentioned, another heated discussion broke out. In the end, everyone agreed there was not enough time to discuss this issue. They had to focus on their obligations at the school and at home, where, after a long day of teaching, more work awaited them.

The architect thanked the teachers for their time and wished them a good day. She stepped onto the courtyard, still trying to digest all the feedback she had received from the teachers, when she heard and saw Donia shouting and running towards her with Hanneen and Shahid. She was very happy to see them. “I came back as promised,” she said. Hanneen called the rest of the girls who surrounded the architect. They were very happy to have her back.

“I want to hear your news... and your thoughts on the new school.”

Hanneen jumped in. “I miss my old school so much.”

The architect did not expect such a response or perhaps she hoped to hear the opposite. “Why do you miss your old school?”

“I lived inside it for many years. I got used to it. I miss my life back then and my memories.”

Donia frowned at Hanneen and turned to the architect. “I like this new school more than the old one because I like the way it looks. Also, we now take our classes in many places—in the lab, in the technology room, and even in the courtyard and sometimes on the stairs—while in the old school, we would only take classes in the classroom and would only go to the courtyard during sport class and break time... What I love about this school is that it makes me feel free.”

Islam added, “Yes, and when you move from one classroom to another, you feel as if you are going on a trip. We now like the school more because it makes us feel in a place of entertainment and not in a school.... It looks like a honeycomb and we are the bees that produce the honey.”

“We are jealous of the younger students because this is our last year before leaving the school,” Hiba grumbled.





5

NOTES ON NARRATION

They arrived at a large fig tree, with a mat under it where a grandfather was sitting. Everyone shook hands and greeted the old man. Soon after, he began telling a story—one that he must have narrated a million times before, but as the concentrated eyes of his audience focused their attention on him, not even distracted by the chirping birds, he told it with such enthusiasm that it was as if he was telling it for the first time:

During the war in 1948, I was a little child. I remember when my father packed us in an automobile, gave my mother money and promised to follow us and meet us in the Gaza strip. He asked her to take care of us and promised that he wouldn't take long. Two-and-a-half years passed while we waited for my father. Finally, he was able to send us a letter through the Red Cross telling us to come back to our bayyara in Jaffa. Contrary to what we expected, we found our bayyara and the trees in good shape. When we asked our father about what had happened and why he had not met us in Gaza, he told us the following story...

The entire Arab population who remained in Jaffa after the war were gathered and placed in the ghetto on street number four. They surrounded them with barbed wire, closed any access to the seashore, and prevented them from getting out. But my father managed to escape the ghetto. At first, he hid inside the well of the bayyara. He used to tell us, "I am not crazy to leave my land and become a beggar. Death will come to us all, anytime and anywhere." They came many times to take him to the ghetto but they failed. He insisted on remaining on his land. Finally, they sent three men to get rid of him but he managed to take them down and brought them back at gunpoint to the police station. He told us that they tried to kill him several times until the police officer in charge was finally convinced: "The man wants to live in peace in his land. He could have killed the three men instead of bringing them here. He wishes to hurt no one."

So one day, the officer said to my father: "Abu Said, I give you permission to remain on your land and you can have ten people to work with you." That is when my father managed to bring us back. Unfortunately, his brother remained in Gaza and could not return. I lived and grew up in the bayyara together with my siblings. It was full of trees and had two houses for us to live in. As the family grew, the houses multiplied and the number of trees reduced. I remember when I was a child I would struggle to walk and run in the bayyara because of the amount of trees. Today, my grandsons can't walk in the bayyara for the density of the houses. The state never granted us permission to build houses; however, we have built them nevertheless. We feel very blessed that our big family, the largest one in Jaffa, has managed to remain and protect our bayyara. It has not been easy. It has meant thirty years of trouble with the government and the Israeli court. My father refused to sell the land and most importantly refused to divide it between us. He has insisted that we do not divide it since there is a risk that one of us will, in a moment of weakness, sell the land to the Israeli state.



Today, the land is shared between all members of the family. No one can sell it without the approval of all of us. Being a group and sticking together has given us power to resist. We have built without permission, they have demolished some of the houses, and threatened to destroy others, but we are all ready to stay and protect the bayyara.

Like my father has defended the bayyara before us, so we will continue to defend it today and so will our children in the future. Although the bayyara is not as it used to be in the past, full of green trees, it has kept its essence and therefore we continue to call it bayyara, as it still remains the place that shelters and brings us and our history together.”

When the grandfather finished his story, everyone was silent, contemplating the bayyara and imagining the old man resisting and protecting this space for his family and the future generations to come. They felt that through the story, they had travelled through time and could now feel the importance of this space. Rema finally broke the silence and turned to the grandfather: “Do you remember when we were children, we would always play under the trees? I don’t remember ever wearing shoes... and do you remember how on Saturday mornings, I would go from house to house, having a little bit of breakfast with everyone? Those were the good days when the houses were still open to each other—best days, best family, and best memories.”

The grandfather looked at everyone with a sigh and explained: “Back in the day, there were no walls between the houses. We built those walls because we were forced to, not because we wanted privacy between houses. They were built in order to prevent the Israeli soldiers from roaming freely between our houses. Many times,

the soldiers would surprise us and come inside the *bayyara* without prior notice and search house by house. The walls prevent them from moving freely and give us the opportunity to warn each other about their presence and come together to prevent them from entering before they invade the *bayyara* and do what they like”.

Yasmeen arrived as the grandfather was talking. The grandfather raised his hand and said: “You arrived just in time to join us for breakfast.”

Unlike Rema who was raised inside the *bayyara*, Yasmeen lives outside the *bayyara*. Yasmeen waved at everyone and sat down to have breakfast.

The architect felt that she should explain to the grandfather why she and the girls from the Shu’fat school were there. She felt that there was a connection between the camp, the school, and the *bayyara* and wanted to hear everyone’s thoughts.

“As you know, we have decided to visit you because we are about to plant a fruit tree garden at the Shu’fat Basic Girls School. While discussing how this garden should look with the girls, we spoke about the *bayyara* and we found out that most of these young girls did not know what it was and had never visited one. We began inquiring about a Palestinian *bayyara* we could visit and my friend Mohamed from Jaffa told me about you.

Hanneen had been touched by the old man’s words. “After listening to your story, I feel very sorry I haven’t heard of the *bayyara* before. Today I feel I have learned things from you that no geography or history book could ever teach me.”

“Darling, I can’t read or write. School is good, my dear... I wish I could have had the opportunity to go to school.”

“It’s not too late!” Hanneen replied. “Come back to school and teach us... I wish you could be my history teacher!”

The grandfather smiled.

Rema brought her chair closer. “When I was a child, although my grandfather and the family were with me, I was not able to see or hear or understand or learn from them; I didn’t even recognise them as a source of knowledge... I attended the Israeli school where I learned the history of Zionism. I remember I was always singing Zionist songs and watching Israeli television. I read and write Hebrew fluently, and I wanted to be one of them. I hated the Arabs because I thought they were against the Zionist project that calls for democracy and freedom. I thought Arabs were losers and decided that my future was supporting Israel and not those who oppose it. I continued to feel one of them and I was welcomed by them until my thoughts and opinions started to contradict theirs. When I started to see my grandfather as a history teacher, they began to consider me as no longer one of them.”

Yasmeen spoke: “Although I have never lived in the *bayyara* like Rema, and though my childhood was spent outside of it, my mother insisted that she would be my teacher. She taught me many things that the school could not teach me. I was raised in a kindergarten ran by an Israeli woman who taught me about Israeli

traditions and feasts. Later, I went on to study at the Israeli school, but I have never felt that I am a Zionist. My mother used to stress the complexity of our identity to us and emphasised how we should use our minds and make decisions based on our own beliefs. I don't remember much about my childhood in the *bayyara*. I remember that I would visit uncle Nabeel in his home where he had several animals. After I turned thirteen, I would visit less and less, but my father would spend his entire day in the *bayyara*. He could not establish a life outside of it. It was the most important thing to him."

Rema looked at Yasmeen. "The *bayyara* is a bubble that protects us from settlements and without it, we would be lost. It protects us from drug dealers, crimes and criminals ... the *bayyara* is the most valuable thing we have."

Yasmeen nodded. "I returned to the *bayyara* after I grew up at a time when I had already formed my character and was capable of resisting social pressures. The *bayyara* became my school, and my grandfather and my family are my inspiration."

Hanneen identified with what these women were sharing. "I have a very similar view of the camp where I feel safe. Although we are subject to danger every day, the camp still gives me a lot of hope and determination."

Shahid chuckled and turned to Hanneen, "I wish to live in a *bayyara* and wake up between trees instead of stinking garbage though."

Islam sided with Hanneen, "The *bayyara* is the story of our camp."

Hiba smiled. “Through the construction of our own *bayyara*, we can determine our story, one that is not controlled by anyone. Even if they control our bodies, our land, and our ability to move, they will never control our minds and our ability to write our own story and to plant our own *bayyara*.”

As they were concluding what had been a great day together in the *bayyara*, Reema inexplicably asked the girls to help her uproot an orange tree from the garden of her house. Nobody understood why she was uprooting the tree now in front of everyone or how they could help her. When she finally had the tree in her hands, she approached Hanneen and gave it to her, saying, “I hope this tree will be the beginning of a connection between the school *bayyara* and the Jaffa *bayyara*. I hope next time I come to Shu’fat, I will be able to sit under this orange tree and learn with you girls.”

Back on the bus, the girls looked at the orange tree, imagining how they would plant the tree in their school and soon they would be able to invite Reema to their own *bayyara*.







Aknowledgements

The design for the girls school in Shu'fat Refugee Camp was conceived by Alessandro Petti, Livia Minoja and myself, inspired by a need to approach relief architecture not only as a mere technical problem but as an agent of change.

From the beginning, Alessandro Petti insisted in the importance of building this project in a place like Shu'fat Refugee Camp and generously donated his time, enthusiasm and imagination to making this come true. We were all fortunate to count with Alessandro's vision and his ability to translate and shape this participatory process into architecture. I still remember the first time we went to visit the finished school, he looked at me and said: "It is exactly how I imagined it."

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