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Contestation of Space

A Photo Essay by Nura Alkhalili

Abstract

This photo essay traces the evolution of a wall located between a newly established “public fitness park” in Ramallah city and a neighboring refugee camp. It seeks to narrate the social and spatial transformation that is taking place between Ramallah, a city in the process of substantial change, and the neighboring refugee camp. The public park reflects a site of social contestation occurring in Ramallah between refugee and non-refugee space.

Keywords: Divided spaces

Introduction

This study was conducted through a series of interviews with actors involved, as well as ethnographic observation and analysis. The investigation began in May 2011 and continued until November 2011. The main emphasis of this photo essay is a hole in the wall. Through its frequent transformation it seems to have become the physical thermometer of the process of negotiation between the main actors. It investigates questions such as, what are the borders between refugee and non-refugee space? What procedures are being used to create this division? Will “unofficial” refugee camps be subjected to discourses of “informality” or “poverty”? What does this space represent for the two main actors, the municipality and the refugee community? Who are the decision makers in such cases?

Ramallah: The “Transforming City”

“A better appreciation of the growing social disparities that have deepened since the 1990s can be gleaned from an examination of the changing relationship between the city and its underclass in the refugee camps.” (Taraki 2008).

In the decades following the Oslo accords and the arrival of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Ramallah changed in both face and personality (Taraki 2008). The city of Ramallah experienced vast urban sprawl and its population doubled. These changes affected not only the physical appearance of the city, as Taraki outlines in her article, but also property laws and zoning regulations, which were altered to allow for the ownership of individual units in apartment buildings and the construction of multi-story buildings.

This has changed the skyline of Ramallah dramatically. Ramallah has become the de facto capital of the Palestinian Territories, hosting local and international, public and private institutions and organizations (Aruri 2010).

The values of Ramallah's inhabitants shifted from a focus on Sumud (resilience and steadfastness), in light of the oppressive Israeli occupation, to producing a globalized cosmopolis (Taraki 2008). The changes in zoning regulations, the rise in land prices, and the availability of housing loans and commercial building schemes had important social dimensions, especially in the deepening of residential segregation and the demarcation of more obvious status differentiation. Such social disparities are becoming more evident between the city and the refugee camps.



Ramallah recent multi-story buildings. Photo by Yazan Khalili.

Yousef Qadura Park

Yousef Qadura Park was inaugurated in July 2011 after two years of construction. It is the first “public fitness park” in Ramallah, a community initiative that has been adopted by the municipality. The location of the park is intriguing: located at the heart of Ramallah city where the land value is often up to seven digits, the park is partly surrounded by new high-rise buildings (some are under construction), while a public secondary school and a refugee camp lie on its eastern side. The process of creating the park was spearheaded by a special committee composed of representatives of the municipality (City Beautification Committee), the architects in charge, the Local Committee (LC) of the Qadura refugee camp, and several community activists.





Location of Yousef Qadura Park, Ramallah's first "public fitness park."

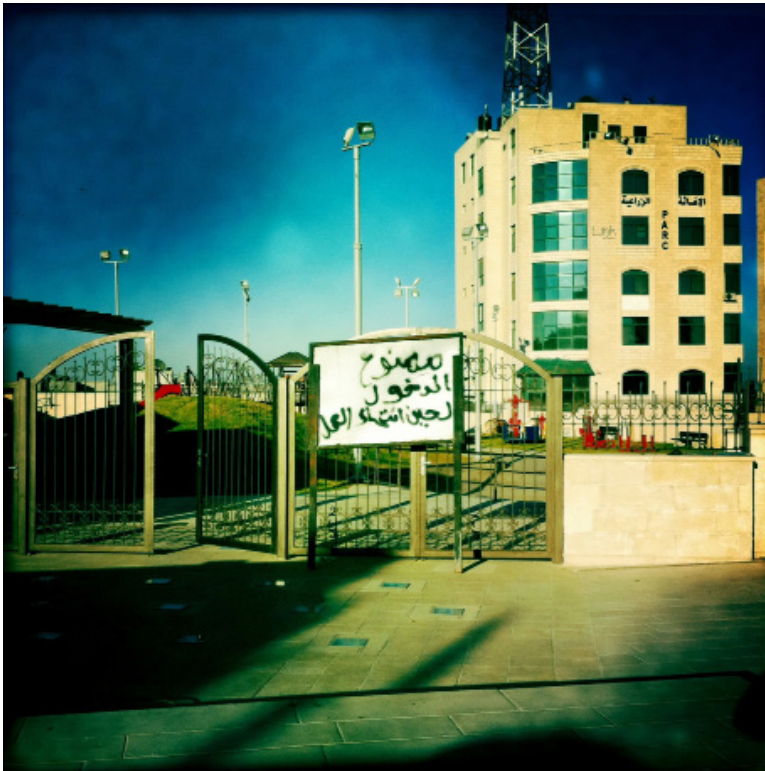


Photo: Entrance from main street: "Not allowed to enter till the work is over."

May 2011

Sometime in May 2011, I was sitting in a café when I heard about the new "skate park." I was curious to see it with my own eyes, so I later visited it. The park was closed as it was still under construction. However, I managed to enter and take a look around. My first thought was: for whom is this park designed? A window in a high wall located at the eastern border of the park caught my eye. As I got closer, I was able to clearly see the refugee camp standing right behind this wall. I asked myself: why was a wall built and a window opened? What is the function of the wall in this situation? And what is the use of this window? None of this seemed clear to me, and so I decided to further investigate this space, focusing particularly on the dynamics of the wall.

Refugee Camps in the Palestinian Territory

Since the Oslo Accords, Israel's new surveillance regime has fragmented the West Bank into three Areas (A, B, and C). Areas A (full civil and security

control by the Palestinian Authority) and B (Palestinian civil control and Israeli security control) make up 41 percent of the West Bank, containing nearly 90 percent of the Palestinian population living in the West Bank. The land area controlled by the Palestinians is fragmented into a multitude of enclaves, and movement between them is restricted. These enclaves are surrounded by Area C, which covers the entire remaining area and is the only contiguous area of the West Bank. Area C is under full control of the Israeli military for both security and civilian affairs related to territory. It is sparsely populated and underutilized (except by Israeli settlements and reserves), and holds the majority of the land (approximately 59 percent).

Alongside these Israeli-enforced territorial divisions, the Palestinian Authority (PA) reinforced the division of the population and territory under its control according to refugee and non-refugee status. Such politics have excluded refugee camps from PA urban laws and policies, keeping them solely under the responsibility of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The PA has therefore enabled the refugee camps to become invisible urban entities on the political level. Contacts between PA official representatives and the camps' Local Committees (LC) are rare. This is represented by the exclusion of the refugee community from voting in municipal elections, thereby rendering the refugee camps "enclosed extraterritorial" urban enclaves that do not really belong to the place—they are simply "emplaced," not "of" the place (Hanafi 2008).

As the Palestinian refugee camps were stripped of their political symbolism, they have been obliged to begin adjusting to new boundaries, territories, economic conditions, and geo-political mappings. Nowadays, they are associated with landscapes of poverty and informality.

Qadura Refugee Camp

Qadura Refugee Camp is located in the Governorate of Ramallah and al-Bireh, right in the center of the city of Ramallah. According to the most recent statistics, the camp has a population of 1,558 inhabitants.

Qadura refugee camp was established in 1948. Unlike other Palestinian refugee camps, it is not recognized as an official UNRWA camp. Thus, it is under the responsibility of the Ramallah Municipality with regards to infrastructural services (sewage networks, solid waste collection, etc.). However, people residing in the camp have full refugee status, thus receiving their education and health services from UNRWA. As a result, Qadura is "actually more akin to an impoverished neighborhood of the town than a camp set apart from the fabric of the city" (Taraki 2008).



View of Qadura Refugee Camp.

June 2011

Sometime in June 2011 the park was still closed. I noticed that the window had disappeared. Feeling perplexed, I asked the first man I saw about it. Murad said: “The municipality has closed it.... We struggled to keep it open but in the end the municipality insisted on closing it and even requested the assistance of policemen to close it.”



Image of the wall from inside the park (eastern border), the red dotted rectangle shows the former location of the window that I saw in my last visit in May 2011. (Iron frame was supposed to be placed on the window for protection).

Murad is a refugee living in Qadura camp and his house lies right behind the wall. According to him, he and his family spend most of their time in the park even if it is still under construction.

After some conversation, Murad took me to his backyard behind the wall. He showed me traces of a previous entrance and window to the park and explained what had happened.



Image of the wall from the refugee camp. Dotted yellow line showing the previous height of wall (below) and the newly added one (above), as well red dotted circle showing traces of former entrance, and window (red dotted rectangle) from behind the wall, (window is from Murad's back yard).

The Old Site

According to Murad the site initially had three entrances: the first one from the main street, the second one from the school (this one was left closed on demand of the school) and the third from the camp. The site was used as a soccer field, as soccer is the most popular game in Palestine. It was also used as an open space for the refugee community. Many refugees living behind the site used this space as a way to bring large things in and out of the camp. The previous wall around the site was almost half a meter high.

I continued my talk with Murad, and he told me: “The municipality has raised the height of the wall to almost three meters, even the existing entrance from the camp has been closed. We asked the contractor for a window, at least to have an opening left, so he did it. Then the municipality closed it.”



The previous entrances of the site. Photo by Hiba Ayyoubi.



Images of the site prior to creating the Fitness Park, showing the previous football field and the public school nearby. Photo by Hiba Ayyoubi.

Claimed Ownership

Murad continued: "...this land belongs to us, [the residents of the refugee camp]. We used to protect it and take care of it. Now we have to take a long walk just to enter it, as the entrance is from the main street which is in the opposite direction of the camp." He continued: "A hospital is located on the way to the park, and that is unsafe for our kids as many ambulances pass by in the street."

Resistance vs. Border

Murad continued, “Since they closed the window we have resisted, and we have insisted on having our own accessibility. We managed to have at least this hole in the wall.... It is only a small hole, but at least we have a small opening.”

In response to my puzzlement about what this hole could do and what kind of accessibility it might give them, he showed me how they use this hole.



View of the closed window (hole) from Murad's backyard.

Accessibility Through Borders



From the refugee camp to the public park.



From the public park to the refugee camp.

July 2011

In July 2011, after hearing Murad's story, my curiosity about the dynamic process of wall modification increased. Thus, I decided to interview the officials involved in the creation of the park.

The first interview was held with the landscape architect involved in the design process. The design was delegated by the Ramallah municipality to the Department of Architecture at Birzeit University.

I began by addressing the topic of entrances. The architect said, "Initially, it was agreed that we would create a main entrance from the main street and another side entrance from the refugee camp [on the eastern border], by enhancing the already existing entrance." The architect explained this by showing me the first Site Plan Design. The architect added, "However, after a series of negotiations we agreed to move the side entrance towards the corner of the wall as you see in the final Site Plan Design, after a series of other changes regarding the placement of internal facilities."

So I asked the architect, "How come in practice there is no entrance, although in the design is it very clear?" The architect said, "All I know is that the side entrance was closed by mistake. The contractor in charge of implementation forgot to leave it open." The architect continued, "During the implementation process, several cases of robbery occurred on some equipment to be used in the park. I am not saying the refugee community is to blame, but this prompted the idea of creating a control system on the park and maybe just leaving it with one entrance from the main road."

My next question was, "And what about the reaction of the refugee community, as represented by their Local Committee (LC)?" The architect said, "As far as I know the LC has sought to re-open it, but at the end of the day, the ultimate decision maker is the municipality."



First and final site plans for Yousef Qadura Park.”

Even if there will be a side entrance

The architect continued, “Even though the side entrance was accepted in the final Site Plan Design, the municipality did not request a design for the stairs behind the wall, despite the difference in land levels. The design of the park finished right at the borders of the wall.”



Back Image of the wall from Qadura refugee camp. The red dotted circle indicates where the final side entrance placement was approved.



Red shadow showing violated property by the refugee family behind the wall, according to the municipality.

The Ramallah Municipality

The Director of the Ramallah Municipality kindly agreed to an interview, and one of my main questions concerned the accessibility to the park from the side of the refugee camp. He replied, saying, "This park has been created to serve marginalized social groups, and this is clear as it is located next to a refugee camp. If we intended to prevent the refugee community from using this space, we would have simply chosen other land."

He continued, "The side entrance was cancelled at the implementation phase on request of some members of the Qadura LC. It is essential to keep in mind that the LC has always been part of the design process of the park. Furthermore, it is preferable for public parks to have only one main entrance for control reasons. The window has been totally closed as it was opened illegally against the will of the municipality. The woman living behind the wall asked the contractor to open a window while constructing the wall. The family living behind the wall was using this opening in violation of property ownership of the municipality."

Where did the idea of this: 'Fitness Park' come from?

By that point in July, I realized it would be helpful to talk to the person behind the idea of this fitness park. The project was initiated by a long-time educator in a school for privileged members of the Ramallah community. Her main concern was about children and their mothers, and the need for recreational spaces. She said, "Kids are suffering from inappropriate body coordination, flat feet, and clumsy movements due to the lack of open spaces. Ramallah is growing fast; there is an increase in buildings with little consideration for open green spaces."

The endeavor began in 2009 when the educator suggested the idea of a marathon to raise funds for projects concerning children. The Ramallah Municipality welcomed the idea and supported the goal of creating green spaces for the public.

The architect of the project had previously said, "In order to identify the spaces needed, a survey was conducted among some of the students of the school where the educator teaches, and the main outcomes were that the respondents wanted skating space and a basketball field. On another level, the educator insisted on having outdoor fitness machines for mothers who come with their children. Another thing that was essential was a wooden pavilion that would function as a space for mothers to create a committee among themselves to take care of the park, tell stories to the kids, and observe them."



Yousef Qadura "Public Fitness Park," fully realized.



Empty skateboard field.



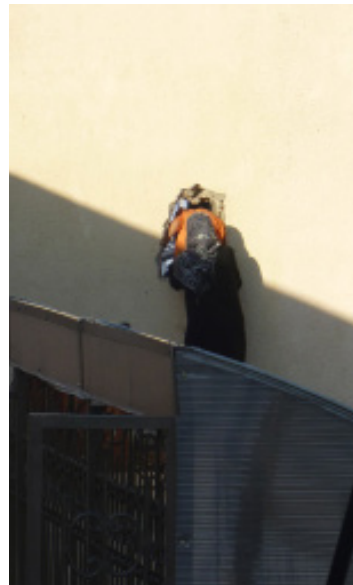
Soccer in the basketball field.



Kids are using those outdoor fitness machines as games. Mothers mostly come and sit, hardly anyone uses outdoor fitness machines.



Wooden Pavilion is often empty.



The hole in the wall is a point of accessibility for the refugee community.

More resistance, more challenge?

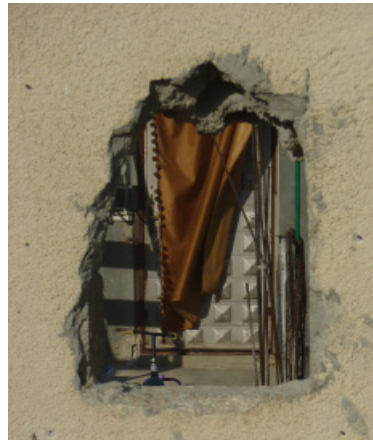
In October 2011, I returned to the park to check what had happened to the hole, and this was what I found.



October 2011



June 2011



August 2011

To be continued...

In November 2011, I returned to the park by chance, and from far away the hole seemed gone... as I came closer, I could see that a new tree had recently been planted in front of the hole.



Acknowledgement

Many thanks to those who gave me some of their time and their stories, thus contributing to this narrative.

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A previous version of this article incorrectly captioned several photographs and placed them out of order. The BPJ apologizes to Ms. Alkhalili and to its readers for any confusion this error may have caused.

Nura Alkhalili is a Palestinian architect and an urban planner who completed her studies at Politecnico di Milano, Italy. Currently, she is an independent researcher based in Ramallah, Palestine focusing on socio-urban dilemmas, mainly issues related to borders, inclusion and exclusion, and urban identities.