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Reconstructing Nahr el-Bared: Design and Activism in Extraordinary Conditions

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Note: This article is based on the author's PhD dissertation: "On Urbanism and Activism in Palestinian Refugee Camps" (KULeuven, 2015). The author was involved in various activist and grass-roots initiatives in Nahr el-Bared during the destruction/reconstruction of the camp, as well as in formulating the urban design of the camp's master plan.

1 On Fateh El-Islam, see, for example, Fida Itani, *Jihadists in Lebanon: From the Forces of Dawn to Fateh El-Islam* [in Arabic] (Beirut: Al-Saqi, 2008); Ismael Sheikh Hassan and Sari Hanafi, "(In)Security and Reconstruction in Post-conflict Nahr Al-Barid Refugee Camp," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 27–48.

2 "Lebanon: Investigate Army Shooting of Palestinian Demonstrators: Government Must Prevent Further Anti-Palestinian Violence," Human Rights Watch, July 3, 2007, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2007/07/03/lebanon-investigate-army-shooting-palestinian-demonstrators> (accessed August 2, 2018).

3 Adam Ramadan, "Spatialising the Refugee Camp," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 1 (2013): 65–77, here 72; Are Knudsen, "(In) Security in a Space of Exception," in *Security and Development*, eds. John-Andrew McNeish and Jon Harald Sande Lie (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 99–112, here 101.

4 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Jef Huysmans, "The Jargon of Exception—On Schmitt, Agamben and the Absence of Political Society," *International Political Sociology* 2, no. 2 (2008): 165–83.

In 2007, Nahr el-Bared was totally destroyed. This Palestinian camp, which housed 30,000 refugees within its 70-year-old urban fabric, was the site of a battle between the Lebanese army and Fateh El-Islam, an Islamist militia that had arrived in Nahr el-Bared just a few months prior to the outbreak of the battle. ¹ Thus, the second-largest Palestinian camp in Lebanon, which was also the most important urban and economic center for the rural region of Akkar in the north of the country, was totally destroyed in a matter of three months. ^{fig.1} However, no public inquiry or investigation was conducted to determine which regional or local actors in Lebanon should bear responsibility for the arrival of Fateh El-Islam in the area. The Nahr el-Bared refugees were blamed for the battle and its consequences, despite their opposition to Fateh El-Islam and support for the Lebanese army during the battle. When a peaceful demonstration by camp residents demanded that the camp not be destroyed in the army's battle against the militia, the Lebanese military opened fire on the demonstrators, killing two refugees and injuring dozens. ² After the battle, the camp remained a no-access military zone, and the camp's urban extensions were looted and burned. Because the army was able to commit such acts with no political or legal consequences, several academics consider the destruction of Nahr el-Bared as the manifestation of a state of exception; ³ that is, a condition in which the rule of law has been suspended. ⁴

Since 2007, many local civil campaigns and social mobilizations have engaged in activities aimed at rebuilding the camp, restarting its economic role, and recovering its social life. Various activist-professionals and, particularly, activist-urbanists have engaged in these initiatives, playing significant roles in developing the refugees' vision for reconstruction. Camp life, however, despite many gains, did not return to prewar normality due to problems in funding the reconstruction and due to new and strict military controls put in place after the war, such as

checkpoints, perimeter fences, and military governance. Today the camp remains only half rebuilt.

Nahr el-Bared is an interesting case for reflecting on the roles, potentials, and limits of design activism in extraordinary conditions such as camps, wars, and civil crises. Both Nahr el-Bared's activists and Lebanese state institutions used architecture and urban design as a tool for envisioning and advocating a new reality in the aftermath of the war. However, writing about the reconstruction is not a straightforward task, as accounts that assess the process are conflicting. On the one hand, given the intensive forms



fig. 1 Aerial view of the destruction of the camp taken during the war in 2007.

of local activism in developing a local vision for the reconstruction, Nahr el-Bared was celebrated as a successful form of participatory urban design.⁵ The network of activist-professionals who designed the camp's new urban fabric succeeded in embodying the priorities of Nahr el-Bared's inhabitants through an intensive participatory and social mobilization process. The project started to gain recognition in various urban planning circles and was selected as one of ten finalist projects for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture.⁶ On the other hand, Nahr el-Bared is a problematic project because state security priorities dominated the reconstruction and postwar reality.⁷ With half the camp still unbuilt and its future increasingly uncertain, one may legitimately ask what there is to celebrate.

In Nahr el-Bared's progressive urban design values, community activism tangled with state security priorities. Examples abound of both state oppression and local resistance in remaking the camp. But such entanglements are not necessarily unique to Nahr el-Bared. In fact, they are a prevalent theme in histories of the making of camps and, to some extent, cities.

5 Abdel Nasser Al-Ayyi, "The Politics of Participation in Reconstruction Planning: The Case of Nahr El-Bared Camp" (master's thesis, Beirut Arab University, 2012); Ismae'l Sheikh Hassan, "Reconstructing Oxymorons: The Palestinian Refugee Camp of Nahr El Bared," in *Human Settlements Formulations and (re) Calibrations*, eds. Viviana d'Auria, Bruno De Meulder, and Kelly Shannon (Amsterdam: SUN Architecture, 2010), 134–41.

6 "Reconstruction of Nahr El-Bared Refugee Camp," Aga Khan Development Network, n.d., <http://www.akdn.org/architecture/project/reconstruction-of-nahr-el-bared-refugee-camp> (accessed March 12, 2018).

7 Adam Ramadan, "In the Ruins of Nahr Al-Barid: Understanding the Meaning of the Camp," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 49–62; Ismae'l Sheikh Hassan, "Palestinian Camp—Military Relations in Lebanon: The Case of Nahr al-Bared," in *Civil-Military Relations in Lebanon: Conflict, Cohesion and Confessionalism in a Divided Society*, eds. Are John Knudsen and Tine Gade (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 121–44.

The Formation of Palestinian Camps

Starting with the formation of the first camps after the forced expulsion of over seven hundred thousand Palestinians from Palestine by Zionist militias in 1948, there has been a long tradition of spatial activism in Palestinian camps in the face of various military and political projects aiming to change, erase, control, or remake the camps in new forms. ⁸ With the formation of the state of Israel and the gradual bulldozing of hundreds of villages, the Palestinians were prevented from returning to their homes. However, these ethnic-cleansing ⁹ practices were paralleled by the refugees' acts of regrouping in new village-based neighborhoods that were being formed within the dozens of Palestinian camps that had been established across the borders of Palestine. ¹⁰ The formation of these neighborhoods is the story of the social reconstruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages within new spatial forms.

Although Israel was successful in controlling and colonizing the geography of Palestine, the Zionist project that aimed to erase the history of the Palestinians and that hoped the refugees would melt into other Arab societies did not prevail. The memory of Palestine and the social structure of its villages was alive and integral to camp life. Over the next decades Palestinian refugees would document the history, geography, and spatial layout of their former villages in hundreds of books, maps, and related productions. ¹¹ But the village neighborhoods within the camp would remain the most powerful archive of Palestinian villages. Here village identity, customs, accents, and social practices were not only preserved but developed into new forms as the exile of the Palestinians stretched from days and months into decades.

The formation of Palestinian camps thus marks the birth of a new type of refugee-camp category, one that eventually became known as the "protracted camp." ^{12/fig.2} Despite the urbanization of these camps, their refugee occupants do not acquire civil rights or citizenship. Protracted camps, or camp-cities, are maintained as extraterritorial entities that are subject to distinct political arrangements and extralegal categorizations within nation-states, making them vulnerable to manifestations of states of exception.

fig.2 Map of Palestinian camps across the Middle East.

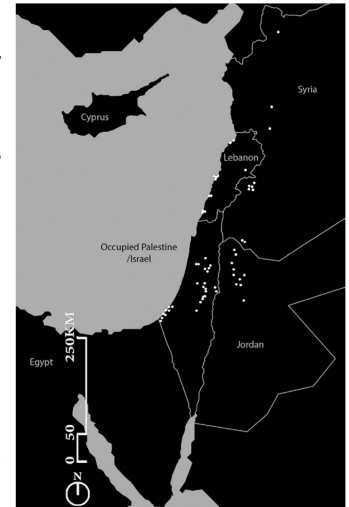
8 Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of "Transfer" in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).

9 Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2007).

10 This refers to the borders of Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel, or what was known as Mandatory Palestine (1920–1948) under the terms of the British Mandate for Palestine.

11 Rochelle A. Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010). For related literature, see, for example, Ibrahim Yehia El-Shihabi, *Loubieh, A Thorn in the Zionist Project* [in Arabic], 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dar El Shajara, 2008); Yehya Mahmoud Al-Yehya, *Tantoura, A Village Destroyed by Zionist Occupation* [in Arabic] (Damascus: Dar el Shajara, 2004); Mahmoud Yousef Dakwar, *Qaditha, What Remains* [in Arabic] (Tyre: Palestinian Committee for Culture and Tradition, 2001).

12 Different types of protracted camps exist in Algeria (Sahrawi), Tibet, Bangladesh, Kenya, and Pakistan. On the Sahrawi protracted camps formed in 1975 in Tindouf, Algeria, and still existing today, see Randa Farah, "Refugee Camps in the Palestinian and Sahrawi National Liberation Movements: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 38, no. 2 (2009): 76–93.



Mapping as a Tool for Social Mobilization

Given the symbolic nature of Palestinian camps, the destruction of Nahr el-Bared mobilized not only the residents of the camp but a variety of activist networks. Such groups and individuals arrived seeking to give visibility to the cause of Nahr el-Bared and to assist the refugees in their struggle to reclaim their lost camp. Among those seeking to help were local Palestinian activists, Arab and International Palestine solidarity activists, and various activist-professionals, some of whom had experience in other postwar reconstruction projects in Lebanon. These actors collaborated with the large body of local refugee activists who were involved in public issues pertaining to the plight of the camp. A network of networks was in formation, and a new activist platform was in the making.

One of the important activities this platform would conduct was the exercise of mapping. ^{fig.3/fig.4} The objective was to document the location of every building in the camp, complementing that information with a database detailing the area and numbers of floors of individual buildings, as well as their ownership and residents. This would be the first time the dense, organic, urban



fabric of Nahr el-Bared was documented on a map. The mapping exercise took place in Baddawi camp, another Palestinian camp 20 kilometers south of Nahr el-Bared where most of the former residents of Nahr el-Bared sought refuge. The exercise depended on their knowledge, since access to the camp, now a war zone, was not permitted. In this way, even as Nahr el-Bared was being destroyed, a map of the camp was reconstructed from the memory of its displaced residents. However, the act of mapping

fig.3 Mapping of the locations of people and the architectural typology of each home, as produced by NBRC and UNRWA.

involved more than just collecting the information that would be needed for the camp's reconstruction; it was in itself an act of social organization, in which camp residents were mobilized to think about how they wanted to rebuild their camp and what

kind of strategies were needed to ensure their priorities were met. A new entity, the Nahr el-Bared Reconstruction Commission for Civil Action and Studies (NBRC), was created to achieve this objective. NBRC would over time combine two important sources of knowledge within its strategies and members. The first was knowledge of the camp and its community, as well the knowledge of how to create consensus and mobilize residents to struggle for their rights. The second was knowledge in urban planning, urban design, and reconstruction projects. NBRC would prove quite effective in enabling the community to transform its demands for reconstruction into a practical vision. It also empowered the activist-professionals who were developing the local reconstruction vision to contest the state's plan for rebuilding the camp.

Competing Visions

While NBRC was developing its vision in the Baddawi camp, the Lebanese government had commissioned an architectural and engineering consulting company to draw up plans, under the directions of the Lebanese army, for the reconstruction of Nahr

fig. 4 Discussion on the mapping of the locations of people and the architectural typology of each home, as produced by NBRC and UNRWA.



13 NBRC had communicated with various official Lebanese stakeholders in 2007, scheduling meetings and relating community demands for the reconstruction. One of the primary Lebanese stakeholders coordinating the efforts of the reconstruction was the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee.

14 After the formation of NBRC, it requested an official meeting with UNRWA's director in Lebanon, Richard Cook, who later asked Muna Budeiri, the deputy director of UNRWA's Camp Improvement Programme, to follow up on the subject. Subsequent meetings made clear that each party needed the other to effect the reconstruction process, and a formal collaboration agreement was reached.

el-Bared. The firm's brief was to ensure the security control of the camp's rebuilt fabric, and thus its proposal was based on a grid with wide streets and free-standing buildings. Apartments were all of one standard size and did not take into consideration the previous home sizes of the refugees. Most problematic, no one from Nahr el-Bared was consulted on how reconstruction should take place. At this stage NBRC was not included in the official planning of the reconstruction.¹³ But after NBRC formed a partnership with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)—which was created in 1950¹⁴—they were allowed (through UNRWA) access to the official reconstruction negotiations. The UNRWA-NBRC partnership was strategic in many ways. UNRWA was given access to NBRC's databases and maps, and it committed to upholding the community's priorities for reconstruction and to engage jointly with NBRC on the reconstruction negotiations with the state. In turn, NBRC's broad volunteer network was complemented by the significant staff and resources of the UN agency. The UNRWA team

was led by its camp improvement staff, which included architects and planners who had broad experience with reconstruction projects in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as urban improvement projects for camps in Syria and Jordan. ¹⁵ Together, UNRWA and NBRC would form a joint planning and design unit to develop the detailed design plans for the reconstruction.

The Lebanese state's vision was not accepted by the NBRC-UNRWA coalition, which prepared to present an alternative set of plans for rebuilding the camp. The first priority of the Nahr el-Bared refugees was to preserve the camp's neighborhoods and their 1,697 buildings in their original locations. They demanded that the extended-family building typology be maintained. This building type, which had developed as new family generations built their homes as second and third floors above their parents' ground floor, was the predominant building typology in all Palestinian camps, and it played important political, social, and economic roles in the formation of the urban life of the camps. Given the marginalization of Palestinian camps, the extended-family building allowed families to share resources and provided social and economic support for extended family networks. Families were able to expand their homes vertically and thus multiply the built area of their limited land plot. This was important for young families who could not afford to rent or buy houses outside the camp. The typology also allowed families to generate extra income by transforming parts of the ground floor into

¹⁵ Philipp Misselwitz, "Rehabilitating Camp Cities: Community Driven Planning for Urbanised Refugee Camps" (PhD diss., University of Stuttgart, 2009).



various businesses. Flat roofs served as private open spaces for the family, an important resource in a camp that suffered from high densities and a lack of open space. Most important, the extended-family building was the basic unit of the village neighborhood social structure. Studying this building typology reveals the intricate overlapping of livelihood, social relations, and political identity in the physical form of the camp.

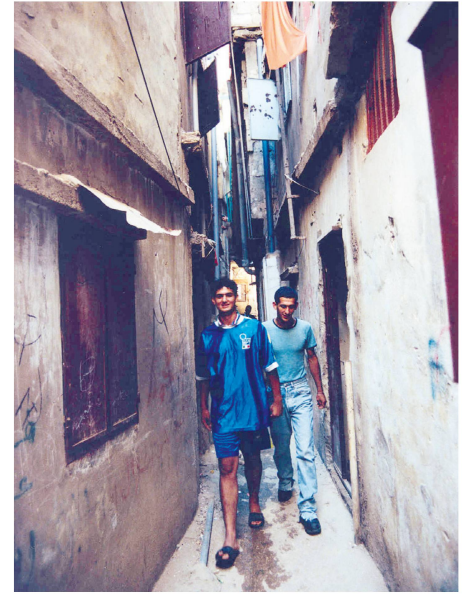
fig. 5 Aerial image of Nahr el-Bared camp before the camp's destruction.

tions, and political identity in the physical form of the camp.

The community principles for reconstruction, which were produced by NBRC, also mentioned the need for improving the physical form of the camp. One of the points was to increase the sizes of homes and plots for families who were cramped in

fig. 6 Alley at Nahr el-Bared.

problematically small apartments. Standards for minimum plot and apartment sizes were established, as was a formula that deducted areas from larger homes to be redistributed to smaller ones. Through such principles and strategies, notions of social justice were introduced into the design process. Another important demand was the need to increase open space in the camp. There was only a 12 percent open space within a total camp area which was fit within a 400 × 450-meter area. Most of this open space took the form of the camp's 1-to-1.5-meter-wide alleys. Given that all buildings were built against one another, thus sharing sides and backs (most of which lacked windows), the front elevations facing the alleys were the only source of ventilation and light for most of the camp's 1,697 buildings. fig. 5/fig. 6 However, one of the most challenging limitations imposed by the Lebanese prime minister was that the area of the camp could not be increased. More problematic still, the Lebanese army refused, for security reasons, to recreate the historic fabric of the camp. Negotiations on the design appeared to be at a stalemate, and the displaced of Nahr el-Bared worried that the Lebanese state was not serious about rebuilding their camp.



Designing a New Urban Fabric

The UNRWA-NBRC design team developed a mechanism that allowed for improved natural lighting and ventilation of the camp's urban fabric. It involved decreasing the size of footprints of buildings and adding the deducted area as upper floors. A formula was developed and negotiated with the camp committees, and the open space in the camp was increased from 12 percent to 35 percent. The locations of the camp's buildings, urban blocks, and paths were kept the same. Urban blocks were joined together, and the newly gained open space was redistributed across the camp through two strategies. The first was to widen the alleys that circumscribed the new blocks so they became streets that were 4.5 to 6 meters wide. This constituted the more formal, commercial, and public networks of the rebuilt camp. The second strategy for redistributing open space was by complementing the alleys that ran through the middle of the larger combined blocks with pockets of semipublic space. This maintained the human scale of the alleys, an integral part of the

camp's urban fabric, while simultaneously adapting that space to allow better ventilation and lighting possibilities within the depths of the urban block. This secondary network also created the more intimate and family-oriented spaces that were more suitable for female gatherings and children's play.

In presenting the project to the Lebanese government and military, UNRWA-NBRC shifted strategy. They presented the combined urban blocks as stand-alone buildings that could be controlled from the perimeter streets. The dense urban tissue that was ingrained in the block as well as the network of alleys was



rendered invisible in their representation of the community-designed project. Thus, instead of trying again to convince the military of the value of the community principles and of the types of urban tissue that were most suitable for urban life in the camp, they illustrated how the camp, if rebuilt according to the proposed plans, would be controllable by the military. In this way a consensus was reached, and the official reconstruction project was launched. UNRWA-NBRC would lead

fig.7 The two representations of the Nahr el-Bared reconstruction, with blocks represented as abstract envelopes (bottom) versus urban blocks that contain multiple buildings, clusters, alleys, and pockets within their interior (top).

a detailed participatory process, working with the building owners to design the individual structures and working with residents to design the urban blocks and neighborhoods. Construction started by 2009, and a new urban fabric was being formed that reconstituted the camp's social structure but immersed it in a new spatial form.

The Limits of Design

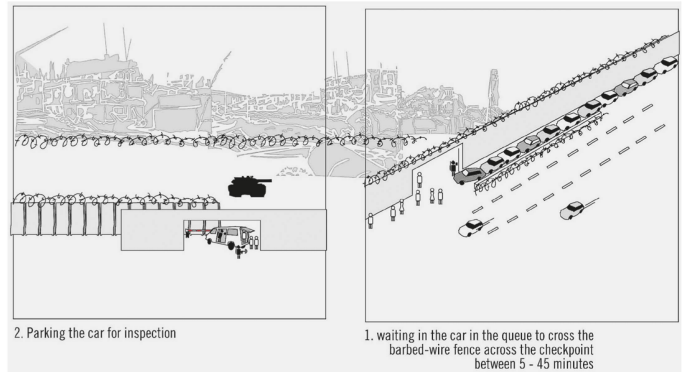
However, agreement on the design of the camp did not help negotiations between the refugees and the state concerning the governance of postwar Nahr el-Bared. "Security" was the highest priority for Lebanese officials, and Nahr el-Bared's civilian life continued to be controlled by the Lebanese military.

One of the methods by which the camp's space was controlled was a rigid reconstruction process that was dependent on international funding, primarily from Western states and Gulf countries. Money was funneled to UNRWA, which hired the contractors who would rebuild the camp's new urban blocks. However, as international funds for reconstructing Nahr el-Bared decreased because of the escalating wars, armed conflicts, and refugee crises that have dominated the Middle East in recent years (e.g., Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya), the pace of reconstructing

16 The military's presence inside the Palestinian camp was a new reality, one that had not existed before the war in Nahr el-Bared or in other Palestinian camps in Lebanon since 1969. Postwar Nahr el-Bared thus represented a new precedent for how Palestinian camps would be governed and what roles the state and Lebanese military would play within them.

figs. 8 a–b Graphics developed by Lebanese and Palestinian activists exposing the security restrictions around Nahr el-Bared. These measures contrast strongly with the architecture of the rebuilt camp.

Nahr el-Bared slowed almost to a halt. Today the primary reason given for the stalled rebuilding of the camp is lack of funding. But this hides the important fact that the reconstruction framework prevents refugees from rebuilding their homes by themselves. The long-standing tradition of Palestinians reconstructing their own camps attests to the effectiveness of refugee-led processes for swiftly rebuilding camps with meager resources and without having to wait for large-scale international funding. For this reason, the marketing of Nahr el-Bared's reconstruction as an interesting model of participatory planning is misleading, since participation was limited only to the architectural design of the camp. Contrasting that were top-down processes dictating the practical aspects of how the camp would be built, governed, and transformed from an open economic center in northern Lebanon into an isolated high-security enclave.

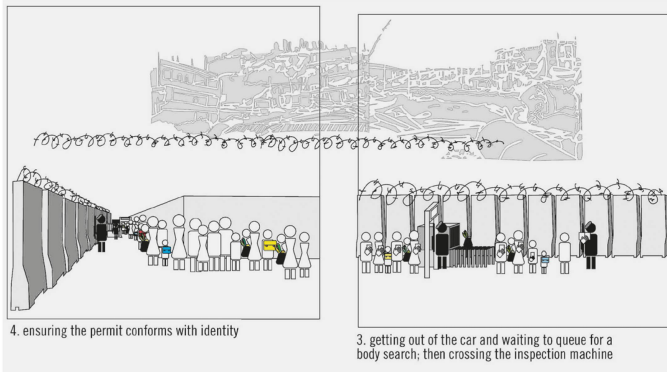


After reconstruction had commenced, Palestinian political factions started to see NBRC as a threat to their legitimacy as the refugees' sole representatives. Such sentiments increased when NBRC started to lobby on issues that were more political, such as addressing the Lebanese military control of the post-war camp or advocating for reform of the undemocratic mechanisms by which the Palestinian political parties governed the camp. Consequently, the political factions started to infiltrate NBRC's open decision-making committees. This compromised its autonomy and eventually created structural splits within its bodies, leading by 2010 to the final dissolution of the fractured organization. A few months later, the Palestinian political parties would create a "new" body with the same name and charged with facilitating the participatory design processes between the camp residents and UNRWA. The new NBRC had a strictly technical mandate and was to be staffed by employees who were funded by UNRWA. NBRC's role as a grass-roots activist platform had ended.

However, new platforms for activism started to emerge that were openly critical of the factions, the Lebanese military, and UNRWA's management of the reconstruction project. One example is the 2011 uprising that followed the Lebanese military's killing of a young boy in the camp as soldiers tried to disperse a crowd of protestors. ¹⁷ Camp youth started throwing rocks at

¹⁷ "Palestinians Killed at Lebanon Refugee Camps," *Al Jazeera*, June 18, 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/06/2012618175048595517.html> (accessed March 13, 2018).

the soldiers, and the military was forced to retreat to the borders of the camp for the first time since the end of the war in 2007. The Palestinian protestors also attacked their Palestinian factional leaders with sticks when they attempted to join the protest, blaming them for their failure to improve conditions in Nahr el-Bared



after the war. More Palestinian refugees were shot in the following days, and an open strike was called. The protestors did not want to be personally involved in negotiations with the Lebanese military, and the Palestin-

ian factions volunteered to play this role. The factions requested that a joint committee be set up between the protestors and the factions to coordinate the strike. The strike eventually succeeded in winning some concessions from the military, such as canceling the entry permit system.¹⁸ However, the security perimeter and checkpoints remained in place. As the months passed, the young protestors camping in the streets grew weary, the factions started pressuring them to dismantle their strike, and they eventually yielded.

¹⁸ The entry permit system entailed that no person — whether camp resident or visitor — could enter the camp, or its surroundings, without having an entry permit. Entry permits were documents that were issued by the military. Applicants had to apply for an entry permit, which were constantly renewed.

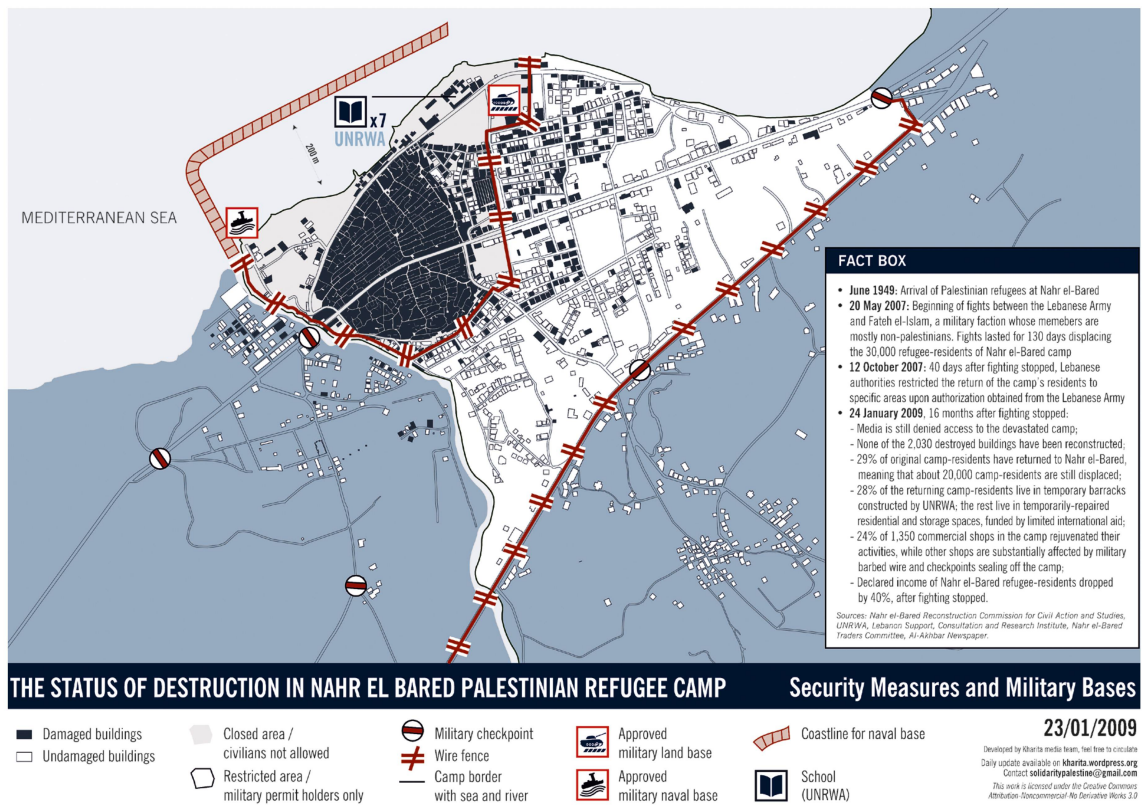
Entanglements

On the one hand, the design of the rebuilt camp succeeded in addressing many of the refugees' priorities for protecting their built assets and social practices and in communicating the political meaning of the camp as a space of Palestinian identity and activism. On the other hand, complex laws, systems, and power dynamics remain in place that maintain the camp as a space of exclusion and marginalization. These include policies of the Lebanese state and army that strip Palestinian refugees of various civil rights, such as the right to own property¹⁹ and the right to work in various professions. In addition, the policies demonstrate that the Lebanese state views the Palestinians and their camps primarily through the lens of security.²⁰ The traditional Palestinian political parties in Lebanon have proved incapable of addressing both the historic and contemporary struggles of the Palestinian refugees, at times even playing negative roles, as when they appropriate and fragment the new forms of activism that emerge in the camps. Meanwhile, the origins of the Palestinian refugees' plight remain in place due to Israel's colonization of Palestine and ongoing efforts to prevent Palestinian refugees from returning to their lands.

¹⁹ Nizar Saghie and Rana Saghie, *Legal Assessment of Housing, Land and Property Ownership, Rights and Property Law Related to Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon* (Oslo: Norwegian Refugee Council, October 2008), <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/legal-assessment-of-housing-land-and-property-ownership-rights-transfers-and-property-law-related-to-palestinian-refugees-in-lebanon.pdf> (accessed August 2, 2018).

²⁰ Sheikh Hassan and Hanafi, "(In)Security and Reconstruction" (see note 1).

fig.9 Map developed by Lebanese and Palestinian activists exposing the security restrictions around Nahr el-Bared. These measures contrast strongly with the architecture of the rebuilt camp.



While the reconstruction of Nahr el-Bared demonstrates the important roles design professionals can play in empowering local activist struggles, it also shows the limits of design in addressing the structural inequalities and injustices that are the day-to-day reality in places such as the Palestinian camps. Such conditions will inevitably push designers who are genuinely interested in addressing inequality into forms of activism that are more political and radical.