

Nahr el-Bared Refugee Camp before reconstruction © AKAA / Courtesy of architect



## Project Background and Description

This project has been inspired by the unique community engagement and collective action that was formed during the reconstruction of the Nahr-el bared refugee camp (NRC) in 2008. With particular focus on NRC, this project tests the collaborative planning paradigm to explore the potential of grassroots planning initiatives and their contribution to reclamation of justice in the transitional context of refugee settlements in the Middle East. Incorporating the underpinning values of transitional justice in the context of the refugee settlements and in the process of post conflict reconstruction, the project aims to develop a collaborative paradigm that promotes the role of post conflict reconstruction as an issue of justice and, at a practical level, to develop local level and grassroots planning initiatives, which facilitate reclamation of justice and rights by refugee communities.

Transitional justice is part of the effort in building sustainable peace in countries that have survived 'a period of conflict, massive violence, or systematic violation of human rights' (Cobián & Félix Reátegui in De Greiff & Duthie 2009, p.143). Transitional justice mechanisms in post-conflict contexts have often focused on truth-telling, reparation, criminal justice and 'introducing various institutional reforms' (ibid.) This project focuses on urban planning as a site of struggle in transitional justice and explores the contribution of grassroots planning initiatives in fostering institutional reform.

## Planning for Peace: Localising transitional justice in refugee settlements in the Middle East

Azadeh Sobout

Nahr el-Bared is one of the twelve existing camps in Lebanon founded between 1948 and subsequent years, accommodating Palestinian refugees who were expelled from their homeland in 1947. Within the last 60 years the cinder block houses have replaced the initial tented settlements and the high population growth has turned the camp into one of the most densely populated places on earth; however, the urban fabric has experienced an organic growth, not incorporated in the strategic urban planning. The 19-hectare Nahr el-Bared refugee camp with over 27, 000 refugees was mostly destroyed during the three months conflict between the Lebanese Armed Forces and a paramilitary group in 2007. Thousands of families were forced to evacuate their homes and seek temporary refuge at the neighbouring camp, starting their refugee life from scratch.

Following the destruction of the camp and in resistance to the government-led design for reconstruction of the new camp, which was based on military control and surveillance, a refugee grassroots initiative, Nahr-el-Bared Reconstruction Commission – for Civil Action and Studies (NRC), was formed. The grassroots initiative was part of the community's effort in reclaiming voice and justice through reconstruction of the new camp. In 2008, a collaboration was formed by the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) and the local commission through which an eight-phase master plan was developed comprising 5000 houses, 1500 shops and 6 educational complexes.

The unique approach of this joint effort, gained the reconstruction project the 2013 Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Considering that the reconstruction is still on going and the project despite its relative success has received many critics from the local community, the present work aims to evaluate the impact of the reconstruction on localising transitional justice and peace building in the after-math of the conflict. The interrelated framework could serve as a valuable example for UNRWA and other International planning agencies which address local-level planning issues with refugees in their policies.

The collaborative methodology enables the designer to examine whether the social and community mobilization formed in Nahr-el Bared refugee Settlement has led to 'democratisation of the transition process ... and public accountability' during the post-conflict reconstruction (Vinck & Pham, 2008, p. 399). In doing so, the designer will draw on the case study approach using ethnography and narrative inquiry to develop streams of data that will permit her to interpret, analyse and document spatial practices, personal experiences and collective struggles and strategies through which refugees have re configured the new camp.

This project originates from designer's aspiration in bringing together planner, practitioner, and human rights activist 'pieces of the world attached to' her (Malaguzzi, 1994, p.53). My background as an urban planner and my exposure to devastating loss of human settlements, social and physical structures through working with refugees has taught me that planning is an art, 'the art of making impossible possible', (Hamdi, 2004, p.116). Initiated as a PhD research proposal in Transitional Justice Institute in 2013 and affiliated with the American University of Beirut in 2015, designer has already developed the conceptual framework and completed the research design enabling her to contribute to evaluation of the reconstruction project through participatory research with refugee grassroots NGOs and assisting in the UNRWA's conceptual design of phases 6, 7 & 8.

Coupling creativity with knowledge and knowledge with power, this project aims to develop a flexible framework to allow urban planners and other design professionals, such as urban designers and architects to develop active engagement with community 'in the processes of social, economic and physical reconstruction' of the refugee camps (Charlesworth, 2007, p.2).

Residents discussing the master plan on a walk-in map © AKAA / Courtesy of architect



**1. Cooperate for fair and sustainable development initiatives in active collaboration with disadvantaged people or communities. This process shall follow principles of human solidarity, non-discrimination and will be aimed at promoting their self-sufficiency.**

The present project explores the experience and narratives of refugees who were involved in the reconstruction of the Nahr-el-Bared refugee camp during 2007-2013. By adopting a collaborative approach with refugees as research participants, the project examines how refugees in Nahr-el Bared mobilised against the state-led perception of past violence and the official transition discourse. In doing so, it reflects on the agency of men, women and children, their struggles and strategies to elaborate how their resistance and spatial practices have reconfigured the design and formation of the new camp. In practice, this research will build on the informal collaborative planning initiative which was developed alongside the formal planning practices throughout the reconstruction process. It will do this by inquiring into, and reflecting upon, the individual and collective experiences of refugee men, women and children. Likely, it explores how different forms of power and resistance have impacted on the rationality of planning and reconstruction of the refugee camp. For this purpose, the research will collect systematic information on the reconstruction process through reflective observation, individual interviews, focus group discussions and documentary photography with children and the youth as well as consulting diaries, photographs, municipality documents, newspapers and magazines.

**Planning for Peace: Localising transitional justice in refugee settlements in the Middle East**

Azadeh Sobout

The project recognises the 'need to devise new methods and theoretical approaches in the study of refugees in order to establish greater mutuality' between planner and refugees (Krulfeld in Warner, 1998, p.73). Hence, it develops a collaborative approach to collect systematic information about the activities, characteristics and outcomes of the reconstruction process. By exploring the collective process that defined the formation of the Local Committee for Action in Nahr-el Bared, the project develops a coherent frame for assessment of transitional justice in the settlement.

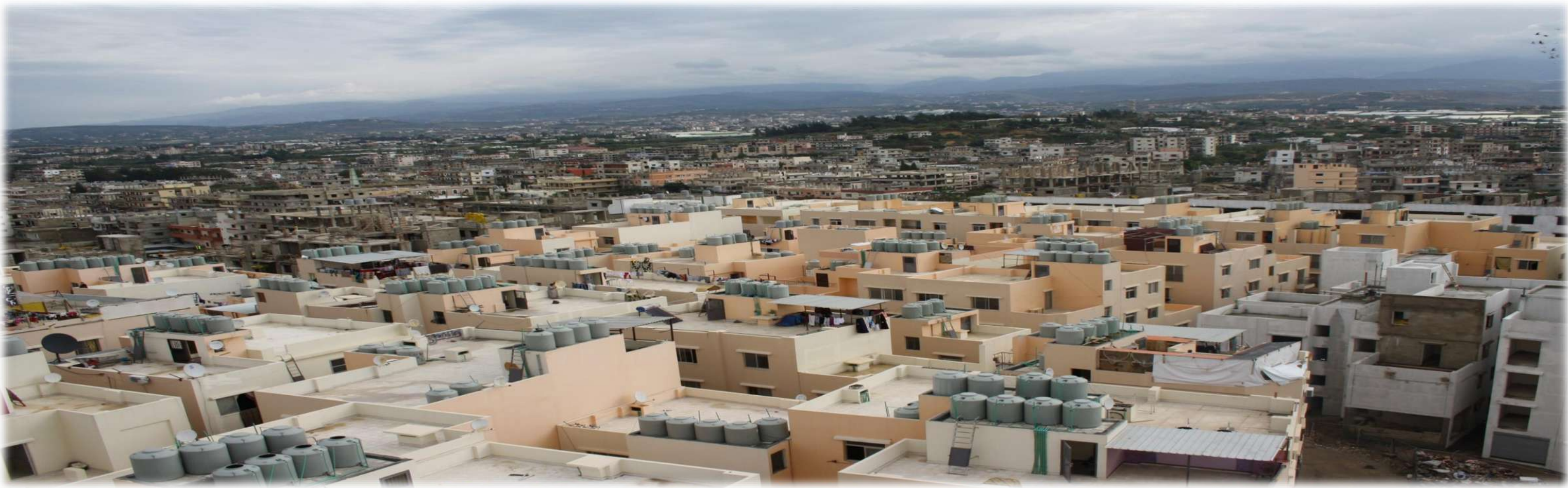
The project acknowledges that protracted encampment and long-term reliance upon humanitarian assistance might have compromised refugees' capacities for autonomous participation and agency. Similarly, protracted refugee situations often undermine people's sense of self-worth and self-confidence. Therefore, and within its limits, the project attempts to set a platform for refugees to exercise their autonomy for self-determination by enhancing their rights to self-representation and active engagement in the construction of data about their lives, and (re)interpreting and reframing the research questions throughout the research, as well as in the interpretation process. Project will not only focus on the power geometries that emerge from the planners' vision, but also the way refugees have appropriated space in response to their confinement in the camp. Accordingly, the project develops a framework to provide a theoretically informed account of the ways in which transition has shaped and transformed Nahr-el Bared conflict as well the geography of the settlement, and finally explores implications of the reconstruction of the settlement based on refugees' claims of justice and rights. In response to this question, the project develops an analytical framework to examine how official planning, policies and practices were challenged in terms of the power relationships and how refugee communities perceived and responded to the official planning discourse.

During interviews, focus group discussions and visual workshops, designer collects different forms of narratives to understand the symbols, ideals and characters through which refugee men, women and children link their individual experience to the reconstruction experience. Personalised testimonies will create discursive spaces for community to reflect and collaborate and will help refugee men, women and children to construct and compose their experiences. Project's collaborative approach in collecting stories provides a space for refugees to negotiate the meaning of their experiences and contribute in analysis of their relationships with the reconstruction.

The project recognises the diversity within refugee community. While the research benefits from structures of formal organisations such as UNRWA, Ajial and Najdeh in documenting experiences of the community, it also attempts to reach informal circle of people who equally consider themselves as 'community' (Moran & Temple, 2006, p. 13). In other words, while design will benefit from the knowledge of the community leaders and NGO workers, it investigates informal links through snowball sampling, to ensure that those with no social network and formal representative are not excluded from participation in the research.

The project acknowledges that despite constituting a significant number of the population in the refugee settlement, little attention has been paid to children's socio-spatial experience and their coping mechanisms. Within this perspective, the project designs a collaborative visual framework to engage children and young people as co-researcher.

Empowerment of the marginalised and excluded groups such as refugees is a product of the interaction of their agency with the socio-political structure in which the agency is exercised. Within this recognition, the project develops a framework which expands refugees' rights and capabilities in participation, negotiation and (re) claiming accountability from planning institutions that impact on their lives. The collaborative design framework would enhance refugee's empowerment, 'autonomy, self-direction, self-confidence and self-worth' by expanding their 'freedom of choice and action' in shaping their life (Narayan, 2005, p.3-4). Similarly, it enhances the capacity of the refugee grassroots initiatives in identification and implementation of strategies which challenge the official planning discourses.



## 2. Support participatory, democratic, multicultural and interdisciplinary processes and approaches in strengthening community solidarity as a factor of rural and urban social development.

The common assumption in the planning strategies about the temporary character of refugee communities has ignored the impact of urbanity on the development of these settlements and has ignored refugees as the agency of urban lived experience. The majority of the urban strategies, not only are blind to development and political dynamics of the refugee camps, but they also ignore the power relations that have been translated into the space. Similarly, despite the active role of architects and planners in designing and implementing the camps, there has been limited scholarly research on the local planning structures and conflict transformation practices based on refugee experience.

The project aims at overcoming the marginalisation and exclusion of refugee communities by developing a collaborative planning paradigm in which issues of power, community structures, justice, collective identity and solidarity are examined. The framework will not only expand refugee's ability in making strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them' (Kabeer in Narayan, 2005, p.23) but also can improve access to basic urban services, local governance and access to justice. The project aims to widen the understanding of justice in the field of planning, particularly in the critical time of transition. Seeing reconstruction as an issue of justice, the project develops a framework which addresses the strong links between transitional justice, urban planning and peace. Based on this perspective, this project incorporates an interdisciplinary approach to transitional justice in order to provide agency, depth and longevity to the adopted processes.

By in-depth exploration of the collaboration formed between planners and the camp population under the framework of the Nahr-el Bared Committee for Location Action, the project links refugee's social capital and community assets to the 'structural change' in the planning system (Narayan, 2005, p.11). Similarly, it examines the contribution of the grassroots initiative in enhanced agency of the refugees as active partners in the process of 'space making' and reconstruction (Sanyal, R. 2010, p.885). This approach identifies emerging networks, social and knowledge resources which were formed around the official planning systems and practices during the reconstruction of the Nahr-el-bared refugee camp. The collaborative methodology will enable the designer to explore if the formed grassroots initiative has transformed the pre-conflict political and administrative ways of planning by providing space for 'doing things differently', and whether the refugee initiative succeeded to widen the crack into a real potential for transitional justice (Healy, 2006, p.270).

The underpinning collaborative principle of this project provides the intellectual, social and political capital for creation of the institutional capacity in the planning procedure. The framework provides a platform for diverse ideas to be developed and shared through collaborative consensus-building and as a result facilitates coordination through construction of meaning and capacity building with refugees. This comes from the realization that the act of planning is embedded in its context of social relations, and has the potential to challenge and transform these relations. By building on the collaborative processes which were adopted during the reconstruction, the project develops mechanisms to institutionalise collaborative strategies and 'increase their effectiveness by incorporating the other three elements of the empowerment framework – access to information, social accountability, and local organizational capacity' (Narayan, 2005, p.13).

Planning for Peace: Localising transitional justice in refugee settlements  
in the Middle East

Azadeh Sobout

### 3. Defend, promote and enable access to adequate and dignified habitat for all as a 'fundamental human right'.

The current legal and humanitarian regime has transformed refugees into 'hordes of placeless individuals' who are denied citizenship due to their political exclusion and therefore deprived from social integration and civic rights (Agier, 2011, p.148). Reconceptualising refugee camps from 'space(s) of victimisation towards an emancipated space' where refugees enjoy civil rights and dignity, the current project advocates for a collaborative approach which could contribute to planning and governance across the dispersed camps in the Middle East (Misselwitz & Hanafi, 2009, p.360).

According to De Greiff, transitional justice measures provide recognition to survivors of human rights violations, they enhance civic trust, and contribute to the process of democratic transitions. In line with this perspective, this project builds on the potential of collaborative planning in the enhancement of transitional justice as it advances 'participation' of previously excluded communities and facilitates their 'social integration' (Duthie, 2009, p.23). The project aims to develop a collaborative model which has the potential to facilitate the process of integration and reintegration of refugees into the wider society, and as therefore can address the past human rights abuses and contribute to durable peace by designing a 'shared-power' (Healey, 2006, p. 8). This shared power provides an institutional capacity to enhance human agency, social capital and the human rights which have previously been undermined as a result of systematic injustice.

The project builds on the 'rights to the city' as a powerful approach to provide a theoretically informed account on the ways in which planning has shaped and transformed space in the experience of refugees living in Nahr-el Bared. It elaborates alternative models of spatial organisation in which refugees relied on their social networks and other informal capacities in order to create their space and maintain their services. The framework will contribute to existing knowledge and awareness of spatial practices of confinement and resistance; it also highlights the creative agencies shaped in response. Similarly, this framework provides as a practical basis for grassroots justice struggles in communities experiencing transition.

With particular focus on the experience of the Nahr-el Bared refugee camp, considering its spatial, socio-economic and political exclusion, the collaborative planning as a process of integration not only can turn refugees into active agents but also empowers them by 'including their voices and restoring their ability to reclaim their rights' (Duthie, 2012, p.48). It also serves as a valuable source to restructure power relations among different stakeholders. Building on this conception, the project will demonstrate how the grassroots refugee initiative formed during the post-conflict reconstruction of the settlement have challenged the territorial, procedural and socio-economic dimension of planning policies and how this has challenged the authorities on the community's conception of justice and rights.

The project bases its foundation on the fact that 'the struggle for rights ... is part of the process of producing space' (Mitchell, 2003, p. 29). Hence, it focuses on the relationship between transitional justice and spatial transformation; the role of refugee communities as a focus of transitional justice; and the fact that 'reclamation of public space is not only for societal order and control, but rather for the struggle for justice' (Mitchell, 2003, p.222). The right to the city in this context revolves around the production of urban space and justice is understood as predicated upon the struggle in (re)claiming the public space. Drawing on the memory, resistance and the everyday spatial practices of refugees in the rebuilding of the camp, the project enhances this argument beyond the sphere of politics or urban planning, framing the refugees' claim to the city instead as a matter of justice and rights.



A fisherman House roof  
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View of a courtyard  
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