SOCIO-SPATIAL-READER:
Exploring the potential of narrative in Jabal Al Natheef informal camp

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the extension of a publication called 'Mapping Jabal Al Natheef'. The publication was the result of an intensive workshop that mapped the tangible and intangible forces of Jabal Al Natheef informal camp. The aim of the paper is to explore the potential narrative as a reading tool in a socio-spatial context. This involves thinking of the refugee camp as an 'urban environment', the dwellers as 'spatial storytellers', and the urban researcher as a creatively trans-disciplinary 'reader'. Our work in this area connects with our broader interest in opening paths for urban anthropological investigation: specifically, the ways in which space is inevitably produced by the patterns of our daily existence. In order to explore such a topic in a manner that would produce findings instrumental for informal settlements and urban upgrading, the chosen methodology is narrative and structured on frameworks of mapping, qualitative and quantitative methodologies and most importantly on the findings of the workshop.

The *'urban environment'* the first sketch of this narrative; highlights the unique nature of the camp as a space of exception, on one hand, socially segregated and marginalized and on the other hand, integrated in its context through the growing presence of refugees, the daily mobility of the inhabitants, and the development of commercial activities that blur its boundaries— making it a part of Amman. This part examines the phenomenon of the organic morphology, which characterizes this settlement, and its fluctuating modes of inclusion and exclusion.

The *'spatial storytellers'* are discussed in parallel to the results of statistical studies performed on the findings from a structured questionnaire, an array of non-structured interviews, photo diaries and informal encounters. A sample of 80 inhabitants is examined through a set of objective instruments for mapping community relationships, housing typologies, patterns of movement and infrastructure of the urban form. Residents have created their own homes, understanding the complex relationship between the socio-spatial dynamic of the camp is the starting point through which we seek to explore 'the production of space' in Lefebvre's terms. This second sketch of the paper aims to highlight Jabal Al Natheef's problems and potentials in the mind frame of not understanding a place devoid of its symbolic, conceived and lived space.

The *'reader'* emerges from a trans-disciplinary approach, an attempt to understand Jabal Al Natheef's pluralism through different lenses. To reveal the numerous

aspects; different disciplines are engaged in a dialogue with the aim of forming a new reading that unfolds the camp as a spatial intersection of society, economy. The aim of this part is to bring together participants as instruments that explore the "urban environment" and the "spatial storytellers" and looking at the potential of narrative - in its various forms – as a communicative tool in a spatial context that physically appears similar but dissimilar from a social perspective. The three 'sketches' portray a multilayered narrative, which chimes with the ethics of recognition, the politics of human right and a built environment not set apart from its symbolic meaning or history.

KEYWORDS: *Refugee, Informal camps, Urban Anthropology, Community Mapping.*

1.INTRODUCTION

The legacy of the turbulent nature of politics in the Middle East can be seen in the continuous scores of refugee camps scattered around the area. Fifty million people are currently defined as 'victims of forced displacement' including three million Palestinians who took refuge between 1940 and 1960 in various Middle-Eastern countries. The emergence of Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan is the result of several factors: the role of the diaspora, and the inappropriate or absence of humanitarian and urban planning action from the post 1948 period. These refugee camps whether formalized or not are mostly marginalized in their host society. By taking the notion of city-camps into the realm of spatial activity, the initially empty spaces where the camps were constructed gradually became the sites of a socio-spatial system that constitutes a 'relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals' (Agier 2002). Most of the refugee camps in Jordan are now part of the urban environment. On one hand, these clusters appear to be socially segregated and marginalized. On the other hand, refugee camps are integrated in their context.

This paper comes as an extension to a publication called 'Mapping Jabal Al Natheef', it builds on findings that mapped the tangible and intangible forces of the camp. The aim of the paper is to present a new reading of the camp as a socio-spatial context and set a model with the overall objective of exploring the potential of narrative as a reading tool in Jabal Al Natheef refugee camp. The model encompasses a set of clear methods that include observation, random time/place sampling, behavioral maps, structured questionnaire that investigate socio-economic backgrounds to form an ethnographic understanding, an array of non-structured interviews, photo diaries that document inhabitants and their use of space, and informal encounters. Ultimately, this paper involves thinking of the refugee camp as an 'urban environment', the dwellers as 'spatial storytellers', and the urban researcher as a creatively trans-disciplinary 'reader'.

2. Jabal Al Natheef Informal Refugee Camp

Michel Foucault's (1977-8) parallel between the processes and significance of space provides an opening through which we aim to examine the relationship between the idea of the space as a 'work in progress' and the concept of history as *meaning*. Jabal Al Natheef informal refugee camp has a similar set of notions regarding the interpenetration of past and present in both the lived experience and historic meaning. The true apprehension of this context involves an act of seeing the camp as a constant activity within the city as opposed to a glitch within its urban fabric. This gives rise to understanding Jabal Al Natheef juxtaposed to the city. Strategically located in one the oldest and most crowded neighbourhood in Amman, it is the home of a debatable 50,000 Palestinian refugees.

Identified as a physical output of a political crisis but still regarded as a slum more than sixty years later. The understanding of history according to French philosopher Henri Bergson is as equivalent to the lived experience of it, as opposed to the abstract mathematical measuring of conventional time –marked out by observing one object moving relative to another, such as in the movement of a hand around the face of a clock. In those terms the real *meaning* of 'space' involves the construction of a historical dimension uniting the endless succession of transient events (Hale 2005). Through the accumulation of the traces of change it is possible to create a sense of continuity in the transformation of Jabal Al Natheef refugee camp into an urban area.

The first event in the construction of the historic meaning can be traced to the 1948 Palestinian exodus or the *Nakba*; the immigrants in Jabal Al Natheef illegally lived in tents and caves in a land owned by the Circassian - Mohammad Amin Habjoka -. In 1955, however, the role of humanitarian action led to the establishment of Al-Wihdat Refugee Camp and an attempt at relocating Jabal Al Natheef squatters under United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) supervision. A large number were relocated but other stayed due to Jabal Al Natheef central location, connectivity and proximity to services. The latter event led to the lease of the land by King Hussein of Jordan, however, it never came under UNRWA control. This issue is the reason why Al-Wihdat camp became a legal Palestinian camp while Jabal Al-Natheef remained without legal status. In 1977, services reached the camp - telephone lines, electricity, and water -. This here articulated the camp in a continual process of growing into a city camp, a means by which refugees build their houses and lived without UNRWA involvement (Arini 2014)
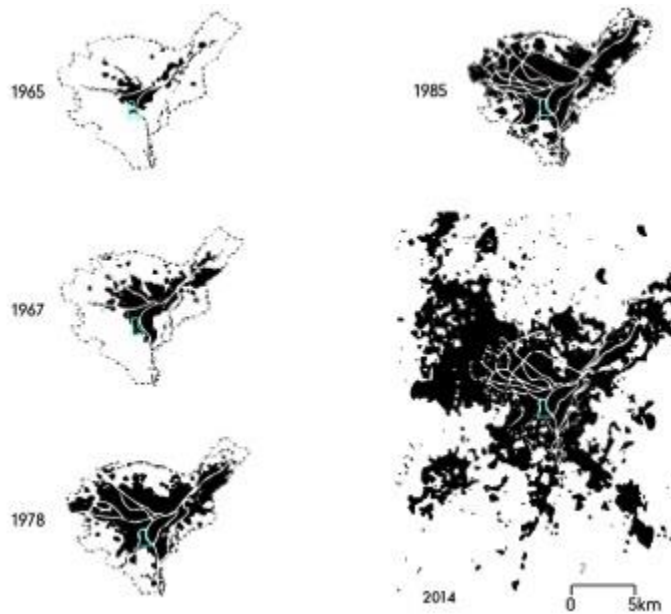
Figure 1: Amman Growth 1965-2014. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

2.1 The 'urban environment'

The **'urban environment'** the first sketch of this narrative; highlights the unique nature of the camp in terms of segregation and integration. Beginning from the former historical context, we will revisit the work of 'Mapping Jabal Al Natheef', and seek to examine the phenomenon of the organic morphology, which characterizes this settlement, and its fluctuating modes of inclusion and exclusion. On one hand, the camp is a space of exception, a by-product of the Palestinian exodus, where refugees are brought together solely due to their "status of victims" (Agamben 2005). This condition of enclave, however, created opportunities for encounters, exchanges and reworkings of identity among all who live there (Agier 2002). Socially segregated and marginalized, necessity is the base on which this state of exception is founded, all levels of societal relations and everyday life permeate the built environment, a multitude of interpersonal and spatial rules combine to produce this urban enclave. One can capture Jabal Al Natheef's hidden dimensions through the following remark based on historical accounts, observation and everyday rituals and how they merge to build a living pattern:

> "'Living together' is a familiar concept for Jabal Al Natheef. If we look at the traditional way of living, they spatially and socially co-live in a community, a network of small clusters of people comprising space for parents, grandparents, younger generations, and neighbours. This reflects in the spatial output of the houses, the community and the camp. The value of housing and the acknowledgment of community are manifested in this socio-spatial structure." (Arini 2014)

The dwellers experience a 'profound sense of belonging', largely attributed to 'ethnic origin, kinship and affinity to the space'. Even more, for the daily life, the dwellers understood the effectiveness of Foucauldian 'micro-powers' as agents of control

expressed throughout all societal levels (Jessop 2006). A closer examination of the characteristics of the residents might yield further meaningful possibilities for their survival in the present situation. By considering the historical development and the societal relations, one can read that the socio-spatial framework in Jabal Al Natheef is dynamic, reinforced by a correlation between asset ownership, urban poverty and societal relations.

The acts of building in the camp embody a self-built language seen in its narrow network of passageways and twisting alleys, and the construction of houses that respond to social ties and ownership laws that employ exception. Over the years, however, housing units have changed owners; they have been sold, bought and rented to other low-income immigrants (Achilli 2015). In this environment where people have retained the power and knowledge to self-construct their own homes, the relationships between social and spatial structure are close-knit. In fact, this resulted in complex geometries and spatial relationships, and in symbolic borders that segregate the dwellers (Arini 2014).

The poetics of Jabal Al Natheef's space lies in its simplicity and the society that produced it; it represents 'a massive effort to ensure a liveable environment' and 'an unplanned product that visually dominates a hill of the city'.

Figure 2: Panoramic view of Jabal Al Natheef camp from Jabal Amman. (Arini, Mappin Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)
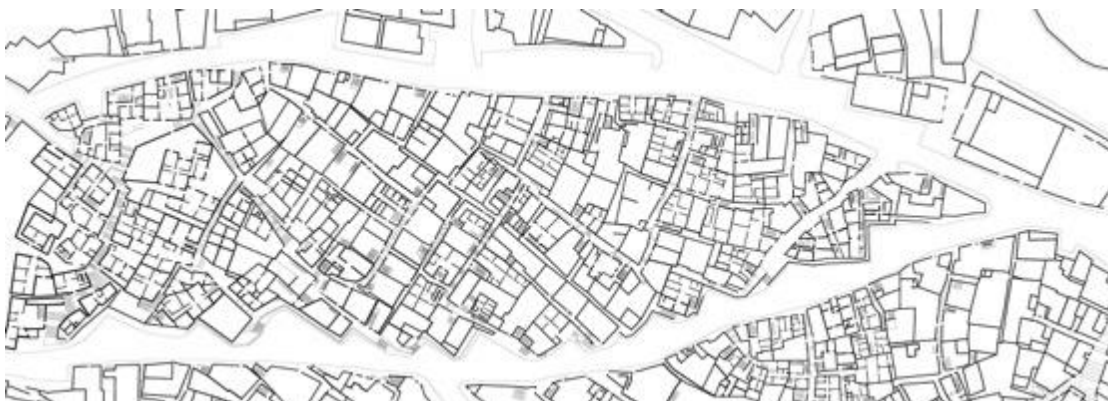

Figure 3: Rossi map, represents the continuous "urban ground floor plan" of the upper camp area, the spatial experiences encountered at ground level, the topographical level changes, delineation of public streets, paths and staircases, along with floor plans of buildings, of public and private interior spaces. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

On the other hand, the continuous influx of refugees and the lack of governmental apparatus sustained the rapid self-planned growth and paved the way for the gradual integration into the urban fabric of the city. When Jabal Al Natheef is juxtaposed to the city, the uninterrupted urban expansion, the development of economic areas and the daily mobility of the inhabitants, foster the integration of the camp into the city -

making it a part of Amman. But when it comes to edges and boundaries within the city, Jabal Al Natheef's boundaries raise questions: to whom does it belong and what constitutes it? The buildings, the streets and the narrow stairs make the boundary that has a mediation role and not have the character of Amman. So does the story that made it:

> *'Refugees have sought to preserve this space by challenging its socio-economic marginality. This created integration as well as separation, more than that; they established a fractured border by pushing the economic life and social interaction to the edges. Yet they kept their 'community life' within the enclave of the camp, ultimately, preserving its political significance and symbolic meaning. In this story, the boundary functions as a third element; it is an interface where the community presents itself as a penetrable* (Certeau 1984). *Spatial continuities and discontinuities are conceptualized in terms of lived experience rather than physical boundaries alone* (Agier 2002). *Mediators like the narrow stairs play as transitions between the dichotomies.'*

2.2 The 'spatial storytellers'

Layered with the traces of previous generations struggles (Hayden 1994), Jabal Al-Natheef is the image of a complex urban social history that is the outcome of its symbolic and spatial symbiotic relation. This symbiotic representation of Jabal Al-Natheefs cultural geography; embedded in its formal setting; cannot be understood devoid of its inhabitant's social practices of navigation (Certeau 1984), which informs its urban landscape. In order to clarify this symbiotic relation, it is important to understand the contextualized processes that played a role in both the *production* and *construction* of space (Low 1996) in Jabal Al-Natheef.

> *… the term social production is useful in defining the historical emergence and political and economic formation of urban space. The term social construction may then be conveniently reserved for the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social processes such as exchange, conflict and control. Thus the social construction of space is the actual transformation of space-through peoples social exchanges, memories, images and daily use of the material setting-into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning* (Low 1996).

To unfold these notions and explore interdependency of urban narratives and spatial practices we utilize the social capital of Jabal Al-Natheef as a tool, a spatial storyteller, guided by their spatial practices to inform the appropriation of their spaces (Certeau 1984). This potential and notion of exploring the spatial analysis of Jabal Al-Natheef with ethnographic tools opens up opportunities to integrate the various localized discourses that the camp underwent with the larger political and economic processes (Low 1996).

2.2.1 Social Setting and its localized urban narratives

Jabal Al-Natheef's residents generally descend from rural Palestinian communities with agriculture related knowledge and skills, the inhabitants main concern was to provide their families with shelter and food, education for a long time was not a priority. This trend, which continues nowadays, led them to work primarily as unskilled labors.
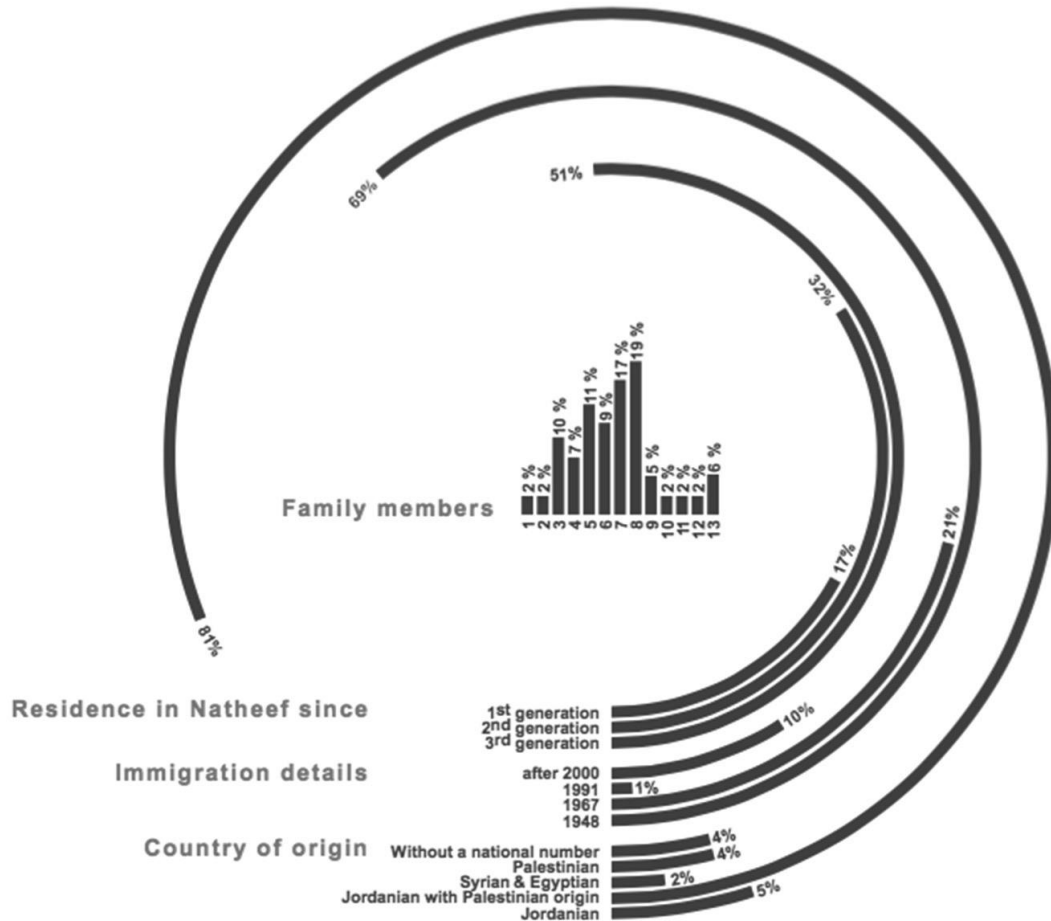

Figure 4: Statistical Survey on immigration details in Jabal Al Natheef. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)
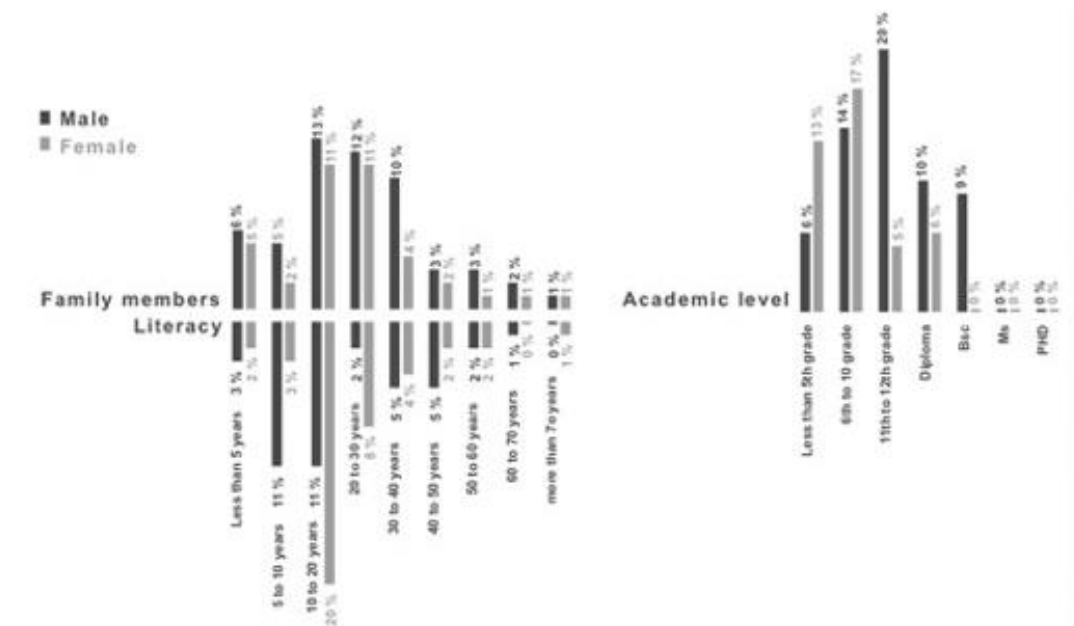
Figure 5: Statistical Survey on education levels in Jabal Al Natheef. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

Ahmad is one of them; he is a retired father and husband who has been living in the camp since 1967. He left school in the 4th grade and later worked as a craftsman to provide for his family of eight. Now his son is the main source of income, he works as a car mechanic. Ahmad explains his view on the new streets established by the municipality stating the area used to be safer, quieter and inhabitant were closer to each other.

Figure 6: Photograph of Ahmad. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

The working pattern of Ahmad and other inhabitants of the Jabal is distinctive to the camp and highlighted by gender appropriated jobs; men in construction, taxi driving, street vending and tailoring, women in hairdressing, secretarial work, nursing, sewing and embroidery. With abrupt changes due to economic pressures of the past years which made women work.
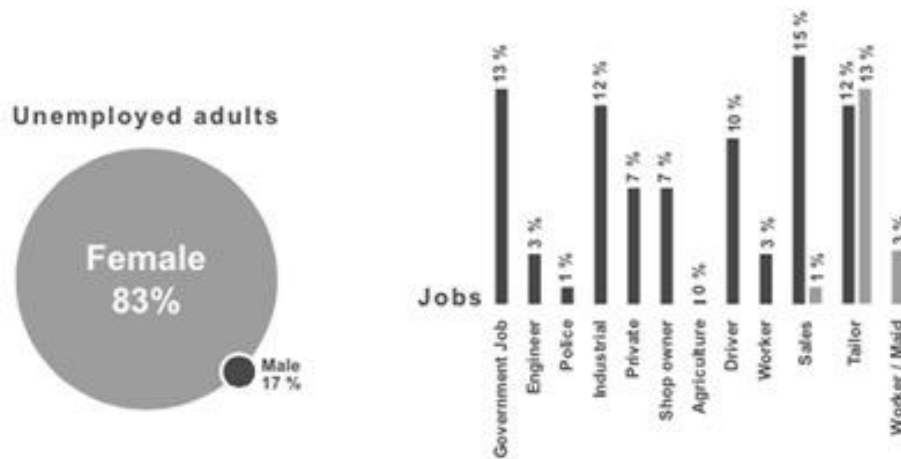

Figure 7: Statistical Survey on unemployment levels in Jabal Al Natheef. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

Um Abed is one of many who clearly voice their dislike towards the area and wishes to relocate because of the trash. She explains that the municipality regularly empties the trash bins located on main streets, but they do not clean the alleys. Her daughter left school because her husband and father in law felt that the neighborhood is not safe for young girls. As for herself, she does not leave her home except to visit her brother who lives at top end of their staircase or sister who lives at bottom end of staircase.

Figure 8: Photograph of Um Abed's daughter and Map of interviewee house. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

Generally Jabal Al Natheef's residents suffer from urban poverty, which prevents many from relocation. This resulted in an environment where people have retained the power and knowledge to build their own houses forming complex geometries and relationships between spaces shared for access, and a variety of social hierarchies in public spaces.

Figure 9: Statistical Survey on income levels details in Jabal Al Natheef. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

The neighborhood's landscape is manifested in the alleyways, stairways, private courtyards, rooftops spaces, spatial and social narratives showcase the different patterns of inhabitation and social negotiation of Jabal Al Natheef residents. Due to the small size of apartments and interior spaces, inhabitants intelligently make use of rooftop space, often in an unorthodox manner. The privacy offered by rooftops,

accessibility to open space and the relative degree of safety that they provide, recommends these areas as shared spaces for women to socialize, and for children to play.

Figure 10: Photograph of the rooftops of Jabal Al Natheef. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)
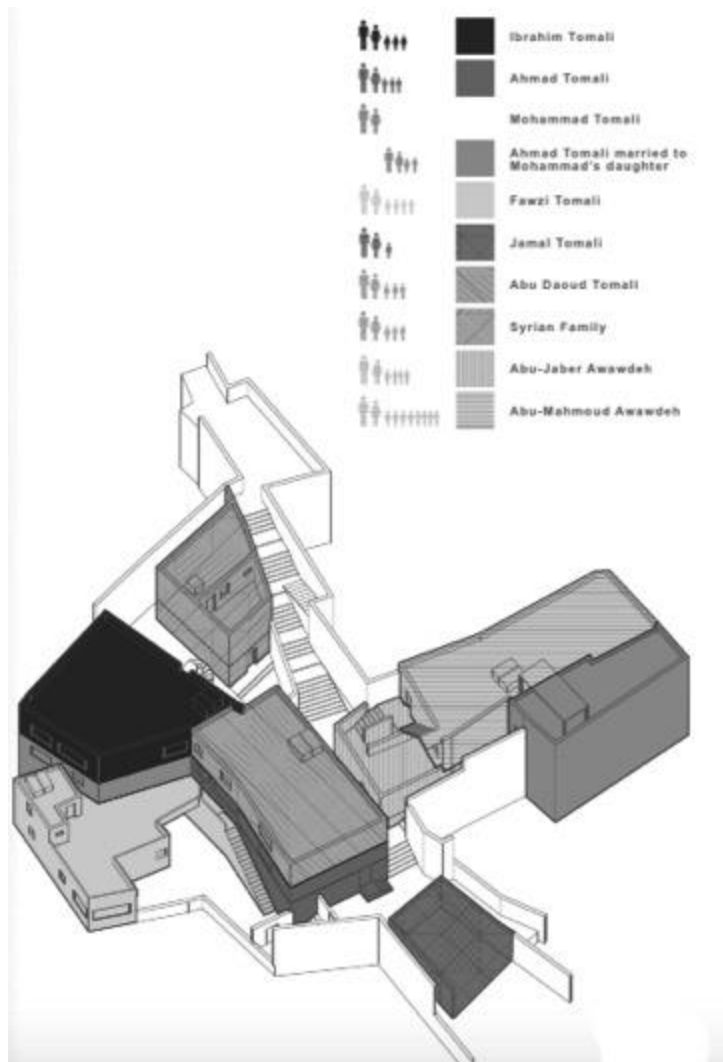
Figure 11: Illustration of the rooftops of Jabal Al Natheef, Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014

Whenever there is an opportunity, rooftops spaces connect to other rooftops, and, due to topography, sometimes even to ground floor spaces. An example of such a connection was a roof terrace opening onto a ground floor kitchen, which is owned by different families. We observed that this close proximity fosters closer relationship among the neighbors. Hence, the links between these spaces provide essential ways through which the community is able to sustain social relationships. These social spaces were created through the development of more residential units that were added to accommodate the growing number of families. Original courtyards and rooftops were built on, which created other outdoor spaces with layouts based on relationships with their neighbors.

Figure 12: Photograph of the courtyards in Jabal Al Natheef. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

External staircases are also tailored envelopes for social practices as play areas for children due to lack of safe playgrounds and open spaces in the neighborhood whereas the internal staircases act as spaces of women's social interaction which is characterized by total visual privacy.

Figure 13: Photograph of the stairways of Jabal Al Natheef. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

While the above accounts give an understanding of the "*constructed spaces*" of Jabal Al Natheef which can be seen in the gendered spaces, the dwellers interpretations of safety, the emergence of new typologies of social spaces and places of exchange,

other inhabitants went back in time and gave a narrative of the historical context of the camp, its *"space production"* and its timely transformation.

Originally from Khalil, Palestine, when Nimeh first migrated to Jabal Al Natheef, it was an empty land. At that time, she lived for three years in a tent. Along with her husband she then built a room using corrugated sheets. They later moved into a flat across the street and when things got better they moved into their current home, which is a converted bakery that belonged to her cousin. They initially lived in one floor, but added a second one at a later stage. Unlike other neighbors with children, they paid for builders to do the work. Since Nimeh rarely left home, she spends her day on the rooftop and the small entrance/ balcony facing the street.

Figure 14: Photograph of Hajjeh Nimeh. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

Abu Mohammad, another resident, joins Nimeh in her story and recalls Jabal Al Natheef as farmlands: fig trees, vines and wheat fields and a handful of caves. This, he says, is what the area was like when the refugees came in 1948. Lots of families took shelter in the caves, and then started setting up tents. The ones that had money built a "barakeyyeh" (a temporary structure made out of metal sheets and wood), the materials used for the barrakeyyeh were sold for eight Dinars; they would build it and rent it for half a Dinar. The ones who couldn't afford it set up a tent, later on; they started marking the land around their tent using rocks claiming it as theirs.

2.3 The 'reader'

The **'reader'** emerges from an attempt to understand Jabal Al Natheef's pluralism through different lenses and form a new reading that unfolds the camp as a spatial intersection of society, economy. The idea of creating a non-linear narrative is a needed exploration to foster dialogue and reflection among disciplines. In this sketch we build upon this notion, Jabal Al Natheef is a multi-layered urban setting with a network of diverse systems, which cannot be revealed but through the plurality of knowledge though effective transdisciplinarity. This explorational model was based on an organizational framework and managed through a set of clear methods with the overall objective of mapping Jabal Al Natheef refugee camp. These included observation, random time/place sampling, behavioral maps, structured questionnaire,

an array of non-structured interviews, photo diaries and informal encounters which were narrated in the first two sketches of the "urban environment" and "Spatial storytellers". The synthesis of these methodologies manifests itself in the narratives of the trans-disciplinary readers of the workshop.

> *"We can perceive Jabal Al Natheef refugee camp with our five senses. The situation here is special it is a self-constructed one. This specificity allowed for the production of spaces that are flexible to the changing needs of their users. In the photographs of the camp, we can perceive extremely differentiated spaces, niches, and corners, resulting in a complex structure. Materiality is one element of space, but how you understand your space is another way. So when it comes to the conceived space, Jabal Al Natheef is a product of social rules that govern its spaces; people have their own rules on the constituents of their societal relationships, what defines shared and inbetween spaces. One should also not forget the long history of communal production and how people produced this lived space through their everyday experiences."* (Arini 2014)

This can be seen in the following figures that maps the behavioural patterns of movement of individuals and groups layered with of the sound of conversations taking place in a major staircase within the camp.
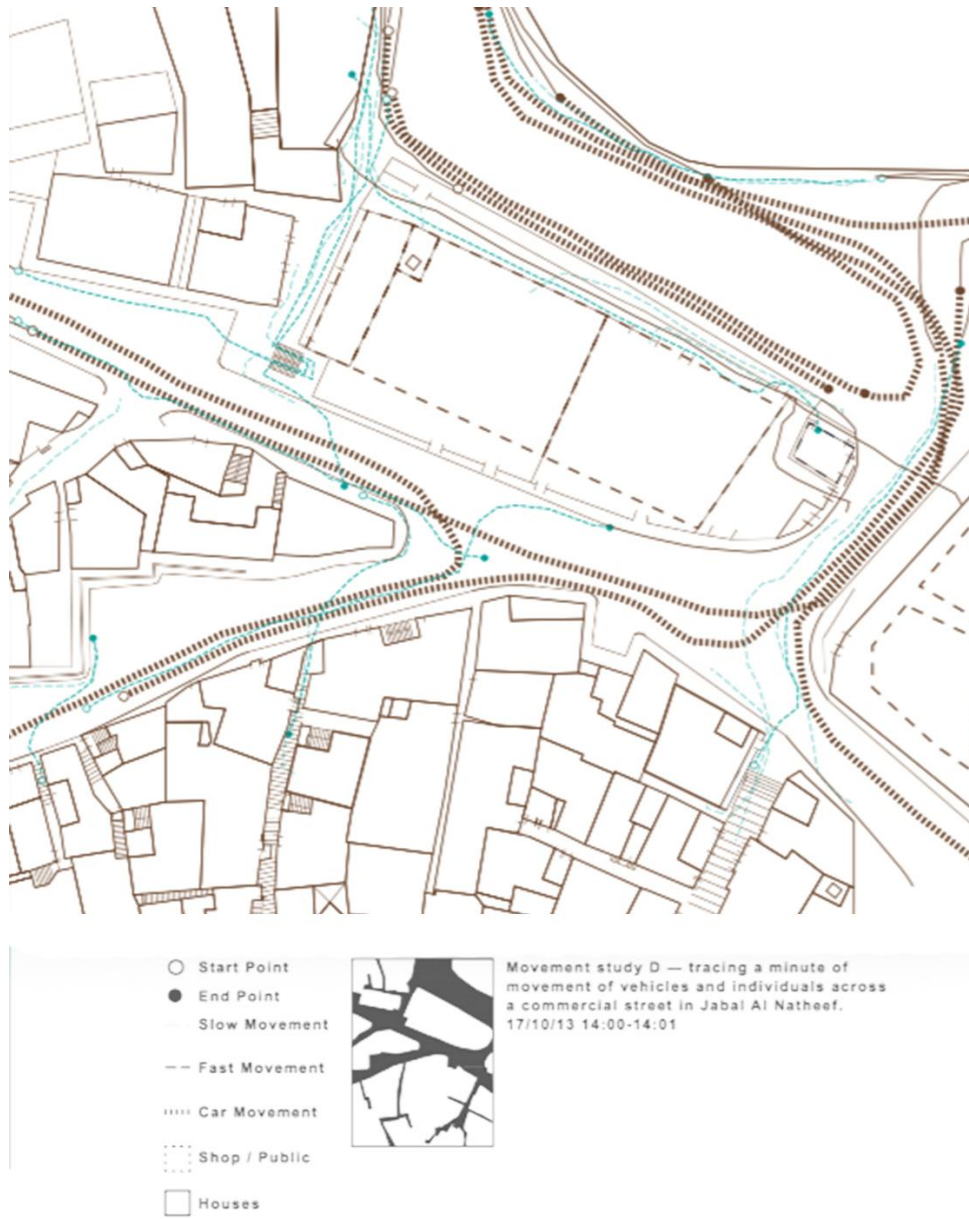
Figure 15: *Behavioural map of groups and individuals in Jabal Al Natheef informal camp staircase .*
(Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)
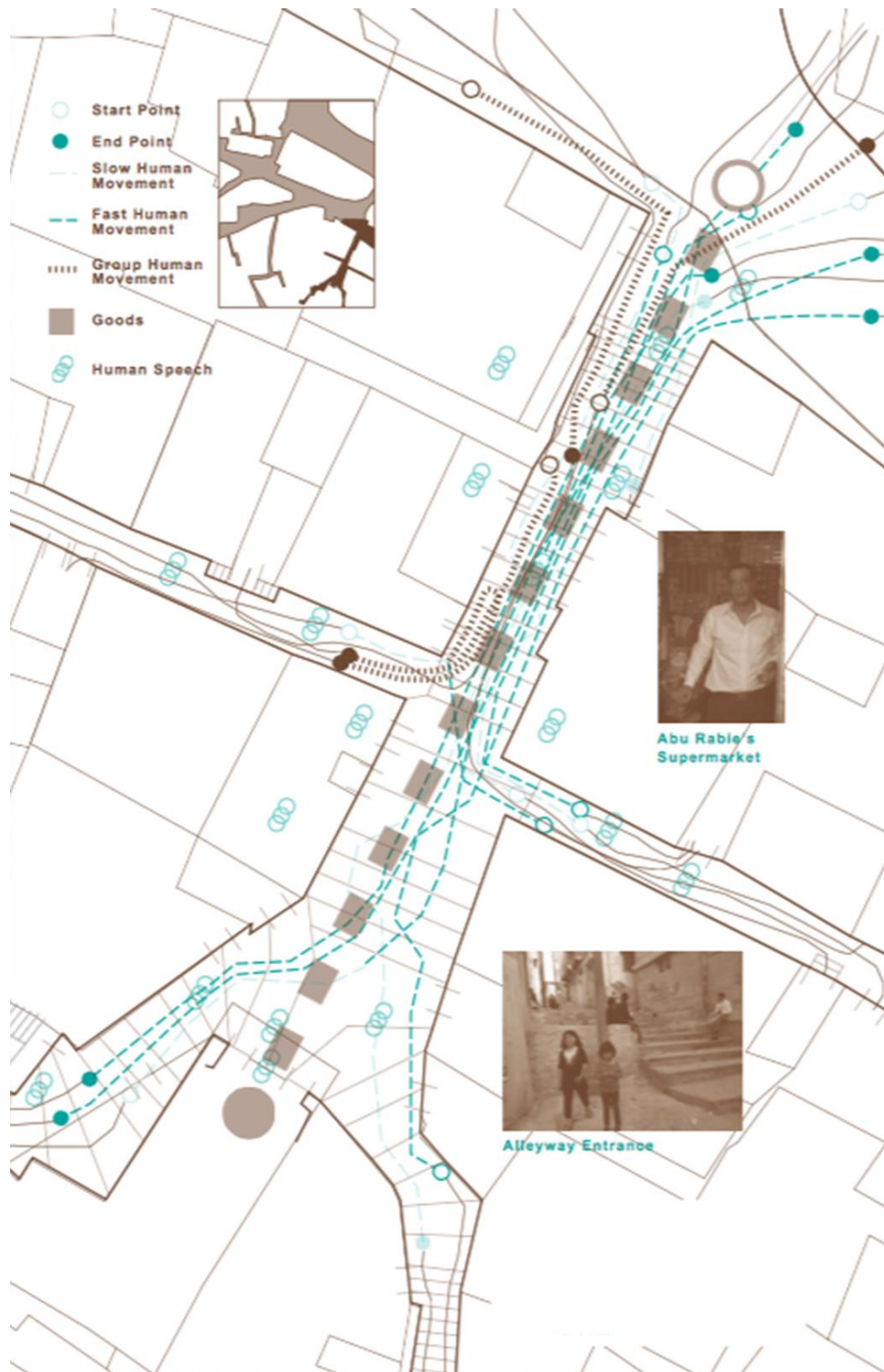
Figure 16: *Behavioural map of groups and individuals in Jabal Al Natheef informal camp staircase .*
(Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

Figure 17: Jabal Al Natheef perceived space. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

By taking the notion of the narrative into the realm of poetry, for this poet, and other poets that see space through the eyes of literature.

> *"One way of circumnavigating the multiplicity of narratives, some of which may seek to cancel each other out by describing for instance a worse experience, or a heightened sense of victimhood, is to adopt the idea of 'disparate multiple narratives'. To 'speak life narrative'; one is presented with a chance to sense the difficulties of displacement and find ways towards replacing feelings of insecurity with a notion that the temporary space has become a place of engagement with life's processes. This is seen through the efforts that the inhabitants have made with regard to the environment. Life in the camp, however, is problematic because of the strong presence of drug and alcohol abuse among the youth. On a brighter note, other observations among the youth are around the games of hide and seek as played in the camp. The narrow intricate pathways and up-and-down nature of the stairs, platforms, are ideal for games which rest on the idea that just around any corner may be the 'finder' —or, in imagination— 'the enemy'. The players may at any stage be 'found out' or they may succeed in remaining hidden or lost for more time, which in this game is a successful outcome. These games directly emerge from the set of experiences which some of the older residents mention. Hopes and anxieties and the ideas of displacing and replacing seem particularly captured by the particularities of hide and seek in Jabal Al Natheef."* (Arini 2014)

Figure 18: The games of hide and seek. (Arini, Mapping Jabal Al Natheef, 2014)

With reference to the anthropological idea of self-representation and by overlapping with community work and taking it to to the residents, this community worker uncovers how people interpret their world:

> "One day I walked into our regular youth session, a safe space for open dialogue and debate. In this meeting, a bunch of architects and urbanists are meeting with some 70 of our youths. The atmosphere is tense, professionals and the community youth are akin to opposing teams.
> One architect, asks, "How do you define the identity of Jabal Al Natheef?"
> The youth feel provoked. "Who the hell are you to ask? And why do you want our answers?"
> The architects persist; gradually the divides begin to shift.
> Some of the youth begin to define their space in Jabal Al Natheef. "It's like a big tribe... a big family." A few add that "it's like any other place; it has the problems of any other place."
> The architects ask more questions: "What do you mean? How so?"
> Taboos quickly work their way into the discussion: "Drugs, pills, substance abuse, school drop outs... poverty..."
> One young rebel architect comments: "I don't see anything different in this area. We get harassed in west Amman. We work very hard to earn a living and study. Life is tough everywhere."
> Some reply: "We have to be part of a gang to walk at night... we have alcoholics and drug addicts and all types of criminals on our streets."
> A girl says, "I can't even walk down the streets without eyes stripping me and words thrown at me..."

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As the conversation evolves "the stranger" is framed: someone who comes from another place, someone who is asking questions about our place and us. Someone who lives by a different code of conduct and ethics... The discussion ends and we all leap into action. But acting needs dialogue, monologue and choruses to structure a journey of meaning and action. The shared experience between architects, urbanists and the inhabitants of the camp can become the precursor for an initiative that brings together the community and the professional to engage in mutual learning and to mobilize for change."
(Arini 2014)

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