



# Exhibition as Site of Transgression: An Interview with Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti (DAAR - Decolonizing Architecture Art Research)

Alessandro Paolo Lena

## Keywords:

*DAAR, Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti, Decolonization, Architecture, Exhibition.*

## ABSTRACT:

In light of the thematic dossier presented in the inaugural issue of MMD, this section dedicated to experience and publics features an interview with architects Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, founders of DAAR – Decolonizing Architecture Art Research.

In occasione del dossier tematico sulle mostre d'architettura presentato nel numero inaugurale di MMD, la sezione dedicata alle esperienze e ai pubblici propone un'intervista agli architetti Sandi Hilal e Alessandro Petti, fondatori di DAAR – Decolonizing Architecture Art Research.

## Opening Picture:

Fig. 03: Ente di Decolonizzazione – Borgo Rizza, 2022, Berlin, 12th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, Akademie der Künste, installation view.

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## DAAR – Decolonizing Architecture Art Research

The practice of DAAR – Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti – is situated between architecture, art, pedagogy and politics. Over the last two decades, their artistic research practice has garnered several awards: Golden Lion at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale Di Venezia, the Prince Pierre Foundation Prize for artistic research, the Keith Haring Fellowship in Art and Activism at Bard College, the Loeb Fellowship Harvard University, the Price Claus Prize for Architecture.

In light of the thematic dossier presented in the inaugural issue of MMD, this column dedicated to experience and publics features an interview with architects Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, founders of DAAR – Decolonizing Architecture Art Research.<sup>1</sup>

Their practice encompasses architecture, art, pedagogy, and politics, with a focus on decolonisation in various contexts. In their work, exhibitions function as both sites of display and catalysts for action that expand into other contexts, such as built architectural structures, critical learning environments, and participatory interventions that challenge dominant narratives.

DAAR's latest project, *Ente di Decolonizzazione – Borgo Rizza*,<sup>2</sup> investigates the possibilities for a critical reappropriation and subversion of fascist colonial heritage and its modernist legacy. Borgo Rizza is a village built in 1940 by the Entity of Sicilian Latifundium based on blueprints of colonial architecture built in former Italian colonies such as Eritrea, Somalia, Libya, and Ethiopia. In Borgo Rizza, DAAR collaborated with the local municipality of Carlentini in the Syracuse province in Sicily to reuse the village's fascist architectural heritage, establishing the Difficult Heritage Summer School.<sup>3</sup> The school activated site research, organised public events and group discussions on the reuse possible reuse of the abandoned town in dialogue with local communities. Over the years, DAAR started to discuss with the local municipality how to turn the former Entity of Colonisation of Sicilian Latifundium in Borgo Rizza into an Entity of Decolonisation.

Besides their engagement on-site, Hilal and Petti expanded the discussion through exhibitions held in Naples, Berlin, and Brussels. The activation of the project during these shows involved a “profanation” of the Borgo Rizza façade, which was decomposed and recomposed into several modular seats. Their most recent exhibition at the Architecture Biennale in Venice has granted DAAR the Golden Lion for Best Participant, for their long-standing commitment to deep political engagement with architectural and learning practices of decolonization in Palestine and Europe.

Hilal and Petti's exhibition practice blurs the boundaries between architecture, art, and activism, creating a space for critical dialogue and reflection. In this case, the façade is transformed into a gathering space for decolonial assemblies, where the public is invited to reconsider the social and political legacies of fascist and colonial heritage while collectively imagining new common uses for the installation.

Hilal and Petti's research is deeply rooted in challenging and decolonising spatial narratives and structures in various contexts. In 2012, they established *Campus in Camps*,<sup>4</sup> a programme conducted for several years in Palestine that sought to recognise the camp as a site of history and knowledge production, employing exercises of collective unlearning with local communities and international participants.

DAAR's extensive efforts in Palestine have made a significant contribution to the reassessment of the intangible heritage associated with refugee camps by reusing, misusing, and redirecting UNESCO Wor-



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ld Heritage guidelines and criteria. The project, known as *Refugee Heritage*<sup>5</sup> (2015-2021), enabled DAAR to reconceptualise the notion of the refugee. Tracing, documenting, disclosing, and representing refugee history beyond the narrative of suffering and displacement, Hilal and Petti challenge the prevailing perception of refugees as passive victims and emphasise their agency in political change as well as the transformative potential of the social, political, and spatial expressions produced by the culture of exile.

*The interview was held on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2023 and conducted by Alessandro Paolo Lena, together with Anna Rossellini.*

**One of your last projects, titled *Ente di Decolonizzazione – Borgo Rizza*, explores the possibility of critical reuse and subversion of fascist colonial architecture. How does the concept of demodernisation contribute to producing**

**knowledge on the legacies of colonialism in Europe and creating counter-hegemonic narratives?**

ALESSANDRO PETTI: To begin with, one must first ask: what does decolonisation mean in Europe today? If in Palestine, for us, it meant a very specific thing, namely a practice of opposition to the colonial regime of Israeli's apartheid, occupation and colonization in Europe this question meant in particular challenging all the mythologies linked to modernisation that still exist today. We should start from the assumption that modernity cannot exist without the colonial trait, as they are two sides of the same coin. Some people see decolonisation as something that has to happen somewhere else in the world – hence not in Europe – or they see decolonisation simply as a historical process that, after all, has somehow ended. Asking how, within the larger movement of decolonisation, practices of demodernisation can be placed involves questioning some of the assump-

**Fig. 01**  
Ente di Decolonizzazione – Borgo Rizza, 2022, Napoli, Mostra d'Oltremare, installation view.



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tions, which in our perspective still survive, associated with the mythology of modernity as a normative element, still capable of establishing the separation between the human and the inhuman, between nature and culture, between public and private. A reasoning by dichotomies that emerges through the project of modernity, that is fundamentally a project of disintegration, separation, zoning and segregation, which unfortunately is still present in our society today. So, for us a project of demodernisation is also a project of desegregation, because if the central project of modernity was precisely to establish categories, to separate the areas of the city, to separate gender, to separate humans from nature, a project of demodernisation is the transgression of these separations.

Another important aspect to consider is that demodernisation does not equate to anti-modernity or to being anti-modernist. We understand that anti-modernism has often been as-

sociated with the idea that we must reject technology or abandon new discoveries. However, in our view, it is not about rejecting the new, but rather abandoning the rhetoric associated to of endless progress. Modernity tricked us into associating itself with everything that was new or that had just been invented, and the term “modern” is commonly used to refer to something that is simply new. Therefore, demodernisation does not mean rejecting technology or infrastructures, but rather questioning the modernist dichotomy according to which you are either modern – and therefore must believe in the dogmas of development, the continuous search for novelty, consumerism, and progress – or you are anti-modern and traditionalist. This is an approach that we must absolutely reject.

In architecture, the interpretation imposed by modernity has been that anything that is not modern is considered history, and history has been classified as well. The nar-

**Fig. 02**  
Ente di Decolonizzazione – Bor-go Rizza, 2022, Napoli, Mostra d’Oltremare, installation view.

rative of a monolithic history has been constructed from the Greeks to the Romans, the Renaissance, the Baroque, and up to the moment of modernity and its rupture. We must question this violent and simplistic view. Our thinking and acting should aim to move beyond the dimension of opposing and of being “anti-something”, and, instead, we should recover a way of being in the midst of things that do not fall within the schemes or paradigms that are still tied to the concept of modernity and that postmodernism has not been able to fully overcome. Postmodernism has done important work as a critique of modernity, but it has failed to offer other ways of being in the world. Fortunately, with the emergence of indigenous movements and the recognition of the colonial legacy, a new chapter has opened in which practices of liberation and emancipation from modernity are also taking place. A project of demodernisation also means liberation from a modernist way of thinking. Being back in Europe and teaching at the university, our focus differs from the work in Palestine, and is primarily concerned with knowledge and decolonising it. In this case, decolonising knowledge means thinking about a project of demodernisation primarily as a practice.

Another key aspect, in fact, is that when we talk about decolonisation and demodernisation, we should always start from the practice. There is no recipe, there is no standard definition, it is not about the new game in town that people can pick up and consume, and then maybe in five years’ time we will talk about something else. For us, this term only makes sense if it can

describe something that is done practices and in a specific context. For example, let’s taken the idea of the white cube so present when we do exhibitions, the idea that we only use the senses that are in our head, our gaze, and all other senses do not exist. This is unfortunately a modernist attitude towards approaching the exhibition. Reasoning about a demodern practice is also theorising through practice; therefore, it is not simply trying to construct a theory that then has to be applied everywhere. Also because a demodernisation project means something in Europe, but in other contexts it means other things. It is therefore important to always localise and try to understand well how these terms can be useful to describe a practice and to what extent we need them, so that they are not an end in themselves.

**To provide concrete examples of an exhibition, in the *Ente di Decolonizzazione - Borgo Rizza* project, you employ a physical overturning of the façade, transforming it into a meeting place. After its first activation at the Mostra d’Oltremare in Naples, the project has been subsequently presented at Hansa Quarter in west Berlin and at La Loge in Brussels. How do these activations respond to the different sites and communities?**

SANDI HILAL: This project, in some way, relocates us to Europe, and I would like to start by addressing the concept of community because, even among ourselves, we understand that we come from different positions. Our practice is to investigate

the lines that nationalism imposes on us and, therefore, to understand what it means to work in Italy for me and what it means to work in Italy for Alessandro, in a way to recognise and appreciate the richness of our differing approaches. In this sense, the community has changed significantly compared to Palestine. In Palestine, the focus was on building together and living under a colonial regime, while understanding the structures of knowledge production and architecture that can be used to actually deal with such a situation and resist it. If in Palestine the emphasis was on building together, in Europe, on the other hand, we have felt the need to “destroy” together, in a positive sense, that is, to transgress together. How can we transgress such a situation?

When we came back to Europe, on a personal level, I did not want to return. I wondered why I didn't want to return to Europe, what was holding me back. At the root of it is an idea of accepting almost structurally to be inferior. Coming to Europe from a certain national category – being Palestinian in Italy or being Palestinian in Sweden – would therefore involve accepting a modern structure, I must say, that already categorises you within certain discourses. When you transgress these categories or express yourself in your own way, the first thing you hear is: “you are different from them”. But who are “they”? Who am I? I did not want to return to a place that categorises me in this way, as it puts me inside a frame that limits me. Therefore, I could only return if we had a structure that enabled us to transgress these frames. It was the only way back.

Often, when we talk about the *Ente di Decolonizzazione* project, I say that this is a “return project” for us, a reflection on how to return to Europe, especially Italy. But to return to what community? And where, actually? What intellectual community can we return to? And if there is none, is it possible to create it? Our projects sometimes start from very simple and often very personal needs and questions. We cannot return to Italy as equals unless the colonialist idea is destroyed and fertile ground for equality is established. Let us not forget that colonialism arrived in other parts of the world, claiming to civilise others. I, myself, fell for this deception when I came to Italy to study, intending to return to Palestine and bring modern architecture to my community as a means of civilising it. For so many years, I suffered from the idea of being inferior, thinking that my knowledge was worth less. But you accept certain things at certain ages, and then you reach a point of almost privilege – the possibility of having a stable practice – and you ask yourself: what to do with this privilege so that it opens up to others?

In fact, when we went to Sicily, the first question we asked ourselves was: how can we work in Sicily at a time when the seashore of Italy is piled with dead bodies? What does this mean? But then we wondered: who has the task of creating a community, an intellectual soil? And what is our role in all this? I think we, people that hold certain privileges and do not have to deal with simply surviving, we have the responsibility to be the first ones to create this soil and then to say: look, there is this soil; it is fertile; if you want, you could start planting things. Ins-

tead, precisely because we live in a society that is all about separation and classification, the tendency is always to go to the more vulnerable and say I am “including” you in my discourse. We decided to go the other way: why do I expect a person who has other priorities in her life at the moment to solve my problem? we need to take the responsibility to articulate the question by creating space and ground for discussions and actions. So we have realised that the fascist façade in Borgo Riz-

whom we started talking about decoloniality, realising that it is still something very much present in Europe. Or Charles Esche, who came as a museum director to understand what it means to work in a modern museum. Therefore, we also have around us an intellectual community with whom we are in discussion, seeking to understand what it means to transgress a fascist façade. Different points of view – pragmatic, artistic, and life – to understand what it means. Because it is not



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**Fig. 04**  
Ente di Decolonizzazione  
– Borgo Rizza,  
2022, Berlin, 12th  
Berlin Biennale  
for Contemporary Art, Akademie  
der Künste, installation view.

za is a place where it has been clearly specified who can be Italian and who, even with an Italian passport like me, will never be. Opening up such façade like this, putting it on the ground, and encountering other ghosts of fascism and the modern was a way of asking ourselves how we build our community and how we go on from there. Fundamental was also being in conversation with people like Walter Mignolo, with

enough to return, there must be fertile ground to be able to return, not to die, not to suffocate in a soil that has no oxygen.

A.P.: The question also relates to how we approached the device of exhibitions. To distance ourselves from the idea of the white cube, the exhibition must be understood not only as space of representation.



In our practice, exhibitions, are a pretext to start asking questions and create new spaces of inhabitation. The exhibition has always been an important space because it allowed us to keep our practice experimental. The exhibition for us has always been the place where we first clarify to ourselves the mechanisms we are interested in and then create experiences, or think of the exhibition more specifically as a place of production itself. This is exactly what happens for example when an exhibition gets activated; we often have clashed with the device of the modernist exhibition because we wanted the objects on display in the exhibition to be touched, to be profane, to be reused. This is fundamental for us, but it drives the museum crazy. The museum is practically the opposite. For the museum, you have to make an object; you cannot touch it; you have to put it there and just watch it.

The device of the modern exhibition is space for sacred space. Instead, for us, linked to the exhibition, there was always the idea of transgression, emancipation and of action. the exhibition for us is always in tension with the outside; the experience we always try to achieve in the exhibition points to the outside and escapes the idea of having an object that functions only as an aesthetic object. Exhibitions have been one of the constants throughout the last twenty years for us and have always allowed us to develop projects and share them, but we have never just submitted to the idea of an exhibition that then reduced what we do to an object to be contemplated. On the contrary, the exhibition was always a bit of a starting point for a process, an

invitation. In this specific case, in the project of the *Ente di Decolonizzazione*, the exhibition is based on the idea of almost physically taking that façade, of reproducing it, in a mechanism of reappropriation that can only take place in the exhibition. The process that we do there in Borgo Rizza with the municipality is a process of reappropriation and reuse, but in the exhibition, that project becomes even more radical and evident. Why? Because overturning the building, sitting on it, profaning it, breaking the façade itself to recompose it in a completely different way with completely different narratives is exactly what we want and what we cannot do on the site yet. So, the exhibition is perhaps the most radical and purest form of an idea, which then helps to go back and clarify it on the site. The architecture is interesting; it is on the site, it is on a 1:1 scale, but it is also full of compromises. The exhibition is paradoxically a space where you can radicalise some of these ideas.

Activating a project in exhibitions also makes it possible to invite people, as in Brussels, for example, where we invited a group working on the decolonisation of public spaces. These are spaces where we ourselves have learnt new things, where we do not present ourselves with a dogmatic attitude to just tell our story. We can tell the story of the *Ente di Decolonizzazione* in Sicily, but when the exhibition goes to other places, it enters into dialogue with other situations. In Brussels, precisely, the presence of a group dealing with decolonisation spaces attracted schools, activist groups, etc. Not only did we ourselves use the exhibition to meet other people,

but the museum itself was also invited to physically use the spaces, not only as a place of production, but as a meeting place as well. Otherwise, the exhibition would simply be a moment where you have an opening, have a drink and then say: “why are we doing this? Just for us?”.

S.H.: To continue along these lines, when we met in Borgo Rizza and thought that it could be a place to start research, we went to meet the mayor and deputy mayor. After just twenty minutes, they had already given us the building of the Entity of Colonisation and said “Yes, let’s do it”. Since Alessandro is a university professor, we thought it best to start by involving universities – Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm [where Alessandro Petti teaches] and the University of Basel with Emilio Distretti – to create a pedagogical project. However, we also wanted to maintain a critical approach to Borgo Rizza and integrate it progressively. We could not scare everyone by introducing “decolonial” and “demodern” terms too quickly, as they would have wondered what we were doing. After being entrusted with Borgo Rizza, we worked together with the mayor, the deputy mayor, the municipal administration and the people of the Carlentini community. The deputy mayor, a visionary young man, followed us to all the exhibitions, during which we understood together what was best to do and how to best communicate with each other. Although we didn’t have the right words to describe what is done in Borgo Rizza – we didn’t understand what it is, where we can go, how –, participating in

exhibitions and the cultural dimension gave courage to the municipality. They understand that they are not alone, and that other institutions like the Museo della Civiltà and Madre Museum are interested in working with us, in inviting us to exhibitions, in collecting our works. When you want to engage in a discussion where words do not yet exist and must be slowly constructed, the exhibition becomes a fundamental space – not only for us, but for all the community members involved in this project – to comprehend our intentions and actions. For us, the exhibition has always played the role of a place for transgression and disobedience, a space where you can do things without hurting yourself or others. This is because of the nature of art and exhibition spaces, where the autonomy of artists has been a fundamental issue for centuries. How do you use this autonomy to transgress in a way that helps you understand how you can change from within? The political language is slowly developing along with this exhibition, which is essential for us. It means understanding how these two things feed off each other.

**Regarding the dimension of transgression, which is a prominent aspect of your work, I would like to ask you about the elements within your exhibitions that have effectively embodied this transgression. In other words, how does this transgression manifest itself? Additionally, earlier in the conversation, you mentioned two possibilities of the exhibition: one that is more urban, and another that is connected to a system (apparently, as it transgresses the**

system). In these two moments, what distinguishes the participation of those involved?

A.P.: On the one hand, we mentioned the idea of transgression as an act of desegregation. On the other hand, an additional important element that is tied to this, also as a practice, is the concept of profanation. If we

the exhibition when we ask people to sit down, touch and eat and drink on art objects and engage in conversation. Transgression manifests itself at many different levels, from the experiences of exhibition visitors to the politically more relevant transgression of not accepting the lingering fascist narrative that unfortunately still exists in



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consider the example of the Borgo Rizza façade, a fascist façade built as propaganda, the idea here was overturn it and reuse it. In this sense, transgressions are exactly in these actions – that is, not respecting the sacredness of this heritage. Transgression as act of profanation aims to reuse things for different purposes they were design for. This forms the fundamental basis of transgression, as it involves rethinking the common use of things. It occurs on the site in Borgo Rizza, with the façade itself, but it also takes place in

Italy. This possibly constitutes our real transgression, and politically, it is the most important one we seek to achieve. However, it must also manifest through many other small practices. For instance, if we consider the modernist separation of public and private, in Borgo Rizza, transgression occurred when we asked people to donate their old furniture, that they no longer used. When we conducted the Summer School, we placed the furniture in the square, specifically in the public square designed for gatherings, parades, and a variety of other func-

**Fig. 05**  
Ente di Decolonizzazione – Borgo Rizza, 2022, Berlin, 12th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, Akademie der Künste, installation view.

Alessandro Paolo Lena

tions, using it as a domestic setting. People rediscovered their personal connections to the objects and regained possession of them: a lady finding her sofa, a boy recognising his grandmother's furniture, and so on. This notion of transgression and the domestic element became fundamental because, even though we were in a public square, it felt like a "private" space as people shared their memories of the place and the origins of the furniture itself as well. This is an example of another act of transgression. Furthermore, transgression also defies the traditional perception of a school environment. By bringing my students to this unconventional setting, they engaged in discussions on these matters, stepping beyond the boundaries of a typical school experience. Transgression, therefore, manifests itself as a practical approach operating on different levels. Through such experiences and observations, individuals can be inspired to understand how they can claim their own right to transgress.

S.H.: A central aspect lies in comprehending how the exhibition facilitates our act of transgression. We came to realise that we didn't want to be encompassed within a predetermined narrative frame, meaning we didn't want our discourse to be "included". The pervasive tendency to assert, "we include you", prompts us to question the nature of such inclusion because, in the end, you include me in a narrative to which I do not belong. Thus, the exhibition allows us to assert our own frame: we establish the frame, invite people and assume the role of hosts in facilitating discussions,

rather than being guests within a preexisting structure in which we are included. This represents a transgression of the concept of inclusion. For too long, I had accepted the idea of being included, only to realise that it led me to lose my own voice rather than find it. Instead, we strive to create as many imaginable frames as possible and stand on the threshold, rather than always being included. We have come to understand that for DAAR, a return to Europe can only occur if we begin constructing our own framework and engaging with people. They can come to us, or we can go to them, but the threshold remains, serving as a space for negotiation. I negotiate with the mayor and deputy mayor not solely within the context of Italian political discussions, but also within the framework I establish through the exhibition. These are the discussions and ideas we put forward. They understand us, and we understand them, which allows us to meet at the threshold. To me, that is the true act of transgression.

In Arabic, in fact, the word "transgression" has multiple origins. One of its origins is the concept of "you must and you can", which signifies the ability to bypass or transgress because it is necessary and important to do so. It grants the right to transgress in order to move forward, effect change, or overcome difficult situations. We are intrigued by the potential of exhibitions to facilitate transgression because we have the capacity to transgress. How can we create a space for transgression that allows DAAR to come to a place like Italy and take on the role of hosting a discourse, rather than being hosted within one? This question remains essential to us, as without

it, a return is unthinkable. For example, during my time teaching in Abu Dhabi, I encountered an Italian politician who saw me in a prestigious position and remarked: “why don’t you come back?”. He was concerned with the brain drain issue; thus, he proceeded to discuss various economic incentives to encourage the return of those who had left. In response, I asked him: “but where do we return to?”. That is, what intellectual community can we return to? If we desire to come back, how can we establish an intellectual and political community that we can return to? This is particularly pertinent in the art world, where exhibitions serve as spaces for creating these frames, producing new narratives and challenging the old ones, enabling transformative experiences. I believe that exhibitions have offered us the opportunity to transgress because we can do so. This is the real contribution of exhibitions in our case – they play a pivotal role.

**Your research also challenges the idea of heritage as part of the identity narration of nation-states by investigating the ways in which such heritage is mobilised to connect sites located in different territories. In *Refugee Heritage*, in particular, you are working within the framework of an international organisation, UNESCO: what is your relationship with international institutions?**

A.P.: *Refugee Heritage* is a very broad chapter, that encompasses a wide range of topics. It is important to begin by exploring its origins and understanding why the provocative

idea of designating the refugee camp Dheisheh as World Heritage gained significance. After many years of working within these camps, the fundamental questions that arose were centred on understanding the multi-layered history spanning several decades, from the initial establishment of the camps in the late 1940s up to the present day.

It is a history that, unfortunately, remains largely unrecognised and consistently denied. Nation-states, of course, deny the existence of these camps as they represent spaces of exception, that can exist only outside national territorial space. However, even those working in the camps within the realm of humanitarian assistance fail to recognise them. The narrative surrounding these camps has predominantly focused on suffering, reducing their story only to that of victims. Moreover, within the community itself, the self-narrative has often been limited to that of victimisation.

In our perspective, it is important to acknowledge that while we do not seek to diminish the tragic origins of the camp, nor do we intend to romanticise its existence – recognising the very fact that camps should not exist in the first place – over time, living outside the confines of the nation-state, the camp has produced and fostered intriguing social and political structures as well. In our quest to envision a life beyond the nation-state, the camp serves as a valuable learning ground. By observing the developments that have taken place within these camps, our objective has been to understand how to best dignify these experiences and creations.

Hence, the provocative question

arose: “why not nominate the refugee camp to the UNESCO World Heritage List precisely due to its tragic history?”. We proposed designating it as a world heritage site to acknowledge its historical significance. However, initial discussions with UNESCO often reduced the camp to a folkloric notion—a place where one goes to recover lost things that obviously no longer exist, remnants of a bygone era in the 1940s. In reality, what intrigued us the most was what we referred to as *Refugee Heritage* – the heritage of exile that emerged from the late 1940s until the present day – which represents an unrecognised history. This history is one of resistance, a testament to the possibility of building social structures that transcend conventional notions of public and private spheres. As you can see, our projects are inherently interconnected. *Refugee Heritage* served as the foundation from which we subsequently embarked on the work of Difficult Heritage in Sicily with the *Ente di Decolonizzazione*. Our efforts in Palestine aimed to engage in a broader debate, challenging the prevailing narrative that assesses the camp solely as a place of suffering or a humanitarian space, and the refugees solely as victims of state persecution or of the absence of a state. Instead, we sought to subvert this narrative, not solely out of preference, but because we recognised the presence of subjectivity within the camp and the existence of complex political and social structures.

Our intention was to narrate a space that is fundamentally different, from which we can draw valuable insights. For instance, a pivotal aspect for us was understanding how we live in the modernist dichotomy

of public and private spheres. In the camp, these categories practically do not exist. The houses that refugees build cannot be legally owned as private property. There is no such thing as private property in the camp, and even the roads do not fall under the purview of public ownership, as there is no municipal authority. Hence, we needed to mobilise alternative categories and carve out a space that exists between the realms of public and private, aiming to understand other forms of life within the camp.

One can understand that in the present, the constitution of a public space becomes unattainable when, simultaneously, we construct its dark side, which is precisely that of the camp where people are unjustly deprived of their rights. The narrative of the project, culminating in the idea of nominating it as a World Heritage site, aimed to reclaim a history that encompasses not only suffering but also tremendous inspiration, particularly with regard to the right to return. Even after seventy years, this right still exists thanks to the efforts of those who resisted annihilation, as seen in other places as well. Thus, our objective is to ascribe the appropriate value to this type of narrative, which continues to inspire people worldwide, shedding light on the meaning of return and its potential implications, particularly from a perspective that extends beyond the notion of return to a nation-state.

Therefore, it was a narrative that challenged not only the dominant narrative but also the prevailing narrative within the Palestinian community itself. Even there, it was not easy to grasp that the notion



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of return is not simply about going back to one's original village, but rather about articulating and enacting multiple "returns", in the plural, acknowledging that the concept of return can take on various forms. From a political standpoint, what intrigued us the most was how "returns" extend beyond a physical place. It prompted us to reconsider the idea of the nation-state and put it back into play, challenging the notion that being a refugee is a condition that can be cured. Instead, our political focus centred on questioning whether we can effect change within the nation-state, considering the very fracture where the nation-state no longer works and an alternative political space emerges, one that allows people to have a sense of belonging to more than one place. Unfortunately, the nation-state confines individuals to the notion of exclusive affiliation to only one entity, whereas the history of migration and the condition of being refugee indicate a sense of

belonging to multiple places simultaneously as a result of being exiled. This leads to the question: is it possible to envision a political space that is rooted in this very need people have? In the best scenario of inclusion, one's diversity must be shed in order to assimilate into the new society where they reside, conforming to predetermined norms. The focus of the *Refugee Heritage* project, instead, was to explore whether there exists a political space that can articulate the notion of return as a dynamic movement through places beyond the nation-state.

S.H.: You can understand why, when we began thinking about the *Ente di Decolonizzazione*, the question was: where do we return to? Return is not just a political matter. The right of return remains a fundamental right for the Palestinian cause, but it is also a right within this abstract movement. What does it truly mean to return? Where do

**Fig. 06**  
Ente di Decolonizzazione – Borgo Rizza, 2023, Brussels, La Loge, installation view.

we return to? How can one accomplish this return? *Refugee Heritage* was then presented in two key exhibitions: one in Abu Dhabi and another at the Van Abbemuseum. The underlying idea was this: if you live in a condition of permanent temporariness, if your life is characterised by temporariness rather than stability, if you have several homes rather than just one place that you call home, what kind of heritage can you claim? Where is your audience? How can you have an audience that goes beyond those who simply include you? The challenge lies in not having to diminish who you are and suppress your potential, as you are more than just one thing and you do not need to constantly prove your worth to everyone in terms of your behaviour. The whole discourse surrounding immigration, upon reflection, revolves around a particular notion: if individuals come to a new place, they have to learn how to behave. Inclusion often comes with a set of rules and regulations that force you to live in a certain way. Consequently, individuals are defined and confined by external expectations: “you are this because I tell you to be this way”.

The first exhibition was held in Abu Dhabi, where 90% of the population consists of immigrants, while the remaining 10% are locals. We are talking about an absolute majority, an incredibly vast reality of migration, with all these individuals being temporary residents. Currently, UNESCO does not acknowledge the right of these people, who are scattered across the globe, to have a heritage or a public space that represents them. They are not granted the right to claim belonging to more than one place; instead, they must

choose. Making such a choice is very difficult as it forces you to simply be included.

In my opinion, the real public space is a space composed of so many of these narratives that the real encounter does not occur within someone’s individual public space but rather at the intersection of these spaces, at the threshold between these public spaces, so that we can truly all be ourselves. It is not a space where one must take care of and include others, but a space of constant inclusion, where one day I include others, and the next day I am included. I can be both a guest and a host, both including and being included. It is the right of every human being to constantly hold power and be embraced by a power. However, what has modernity done? Modernity has imposed a way of being, declaring it the only way of being, where everybody has to look and assimilate. If one is modern, they are deemed progressive, while those who do not conform are labelled as backward, traditional, and excluded from the contemporary world. This notion is utterly atrocious, as it restricts the possibilities in today’s world. If you think about it, it serves as a means to maintain a certain power and to continue exploiting the world, the planet, and the people.

**Your architectural practice is often related to the creation of learning environments, and you are engaged with university teaching. What are the overlaps between your teaching activity and your architectural/artistic research?**



A.P.: The relationship between research and teaching is an ideal ecology for us, as they mutually enrich and inform one another, creating a fundamental exchange. Learning environments, in particular, are deeply influenced by the questions arising from research. One example of this is the *Ente di Decolonizzazione*, which consists of parallel trajectories. On the one hand, the initial phase of the investigation involved visiting villages in Sicily, culminating in our engagement with the municipality of Carlentini. This provided the foundation for the subsequent year, when we took students to the university, establishing a school known as Difficult Heritage. On the other hand, the more experimental and, at times, solitary nature of research is transformed into a more convivial experience through teaching. Both phases are essential, much like the act of breathing: inhalation and exhalation. Without this movement, proper breathing becomes compromised. The connection between research and teaching allows for the sharing of research questions and experiences, creating a space to explore them together, be it for a moment or an entire year. For instance, in next year's upcoming course, we will delve into the concept of the rural commons, which originated in Palestine with the notion of *Al Masha*. We also discussed this idea during our fieldwork, contemplating how to reopen the possibilities between the private and the public spheres. At times, the course presents wonderful opportunities on an institutional level, such as when we brought the university, as an institution, to Carlentini. We created a space of teaching – a learning envi-

ronment that extends beyond the idea of making an exhibition, where you have to create a specific product. Teaching is beautiful because it emphasises the process and the idea of learning within that process, regardless of the course's specific contents. This relationship between research and teaching has been integral to our path, accompanying us throughout, whether we were organising campuses in Palestine or continuing with the Tree School, as we are doing at the moment.

S.H.: Transgressing, learning, and unlearning are integral parts of our practice. If one desires to transgress, the only way to do so is by embracing learning and unlearning as essential components of the practice itself. Otherwise, understanding becomes impossible. If I were to acknowledge one thing we have become good at over the years, it is the ability to always unlearn. When we were working in the camps in Palestine, we had to unlearn many concepts instilled in us by a traditional university education that prioritised modern architecture. We came to realise that we cannot incorporate everything we observe into our existing knowledge. First, we must unlearn, and then we can learn anew. This cycle of unlearning and learning is a constant process for us. When we deal with students or activate our projects, it becomes an intrinsic part of the practice; we simply open it up to others. It is something we engage in every day, and there are moments when we do it collectively with others, whether they are students or individuals participating in the activation of our projects.

**Endnotes**

1 <https://www.decolonizing.ps/site/about/>

2 <https://www.decolonizing.ps/site/ente-di-decolonizzazione-borgo-rizza/>. Hilal and Petti strike out the name Rizza to negate its commemoration, but at the same time they do not want to erase the meaning of what stood for.

3 <https://www.decolonizing.ps/site/difficult-heritage-borgo-rizza/> and E. Distretti, A. Petti (2021). “Architectural Demodernization as Critical Pedagogy: Pathways for Undoing Colonial Fascist Architectural Legacies in Sicily.” In *Architectural Dissonances*, edited by Corina Oprea, Alessandro Petti, Marie-Louise Richards, Tatiana Pinto, Roberta Burchardt, L’Internationale online.

[https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising\\_practices/208\\_architectural\\_demodernization\\_as\\_critical\\_pedagogy\\_pathways\\_for\\_undoing\\_colonial\\_fascist\\_architectural\\_legacies\\_in\\_sicily/](https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising_practices/208_architectural_demodernization_as_critical_pedagogy_pathways_for_undoing_colonial_fascist_architectural_legacies_in_sicily/)

4 [www.campusincamps.ps](http://www.campusincamps.ps)

5 “Refugee Heritage” by DAAR – HILAL S., PETTI A., photographic dossier Luca Capuano Art and Theory Publishing 2021.