Artmongering in Azraq

AZRAQ 6. NOVEMBER 2018
## CONTENTS

### The context and aim
- A quick look back 3

### Overcoming challenges
- How and why 4
- Being culture sensitive 5
- Being site sensitive 6
- Our model of change 7

### Our activities: Emotional release
- Building connection 8
- Outcomes 9

### Our activities: Participatory art
- Enhancing spaces 11
- Developing a new approach 12
- Sustainability 13

### Lessons Learned
- 14

### Appendix
- Trauma release handout 15
- Azraq Mosaics protocol 16
- Links to videos 17
A quick look back

Our first visit to Azraq to work with CARE Jordan and the refugees was in April 2014. We have made 6 visits to the camp so far. Each time we have learned more about this particular, delicate and deeply human context. The juxtaposition of hope with despair, constraint with possibility.

We have increased and strengthened our connections with people in the camp on each visit. Staff, refugees and volunteers alike greeted us with delighted recognition and enthusiastic hugs. It is meaningful to the refugees and staff that we return, that we have an ongoing commitment, not just a flash in the pan visit.

And we were just as happy to see everyone and be back in this unique space. During these 6 visits we have run dozens of workshops, created and co-created many artworks and shared tears and laughter with hundreds of refugees in many different ways. Always within our overall mission of creating moments of joy and connectedness through making art together and being real together.

This time we had two main intentions

- extend the work started in our April 2018 visit to bring visual interest into the space we call Mosaic Park
- continue to work within the Hope Circle format to encourage sharing and connecting with others in the camp and introducing emotional release techniques

Our team

- Patricio Forrester (artist)
- Catherine Shovlin (trainer)
- Hamza Salmi (film maker)
OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

How and why

A feature of our visits to the camp is always adaptability. It is a different environment to the one we are used to in the UK and there are many more constraints. Yet we often find that constraints trigger creativity and in the end the solution is stronger because of the challenges it has overcome.

An illustration of this is the cement for the mosaics. It wasn’t easy to procure the cement, or get it to the camp (it’s heavy stuff!). And then there was the issue of a permit to bring it into the camp as it is a controlled substance and the refugees can’t have free access to it.

We overcame those problems then we were presented with a new one. If the refugees can’t get cement how are they going to continue the work after we leave?

So after some experimentation a new solution was found, mixing clay and sand from the ground and embedding the mosaics. Cheaper and easier to work with too!

This requirement for flexibility, adaptability and resilience has been a feature of all six of our visits to the camp. When asked by our funders and neighbours how we get to be working in a refugee camp, the most honest answer is because we wanted to and we didn’t give up when faced with obstacles. That attitude got us to Azraq in the first place and it got the projects and ideas implemented each time.

As to why? We have built a strong relationship with the camp and the problem it represents over our six visits. We are keen to make a positive difference in the camp, and we are keen to share our stories with people back home. Highlighting the individuals who are living here as a counterpoint to the dramatic statistics presented by the media.
OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Being culture-sensitive

We know that we are not familiar with many aspects of Syrian culture. But we learn more each time we visit. In particular regarding what the women are and are not allowed or feel comfortable to do, as this is the area of greatest difference for us.

We have found ways of addressing this, working with women only groups behind closed doors. For example, the first women only dance party that we organised during Azraq 4. Or the trolley we used in Azraq 3, 4 and 5 to reach the women who couldn’t come to us in the community centre.

We have learned in previous visits that not all women feel free to travel around the camp - in 2014, 60% stayed in their shelter.

So when Catherine researched trauma release techniques for this visit she focused on simple ideas that had already been tested elsewhere and could travel virally between the women.

It doesn’t always work out. We worked with one of the young women on the camp, and hoped that she too would be able to help make one of the mosaics, but she felt her father would be uncomfortable with her working so publicly. Instead she helped with the pilot inside the community centre.

The younger men are more relaxed about working with women.

One of the first refugees to learn the tapping technique - and teach it to her friends.
OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Being site sensitive

Developing the idea of mosaics in public spaces is very aligned to Syrian culture with millennia of experience in this craft.

We like to work with what is already there and not rely on importing a lot of materials or technology. This is partly to keep costs down and also because we want the ideas to be repeatable... we see ourselves as starting the process, getting the ball rolling and stimulating empowered creativity among the refugees. We saw, for example, that since we painted the first shelters (Hope Square, Azraq 1) this has become a much more widespread idea. Versions of our designs have appeared all over the camp.

So for the mosaics we worked with the plentiful stones everywhere in the camp, we used limited colour to add vibrancy and artistic scope, and - after a suggestion from UNHCR to find a way to avoid cement, we worked with the refugees to rediscover ancient building techniques using a cement like medium made from mud and sand.

Reusing the soil and stones already found in the space has the additional advantage of reducing the need to buy or transport materials from storage to the worksite each day.

Other site specific considerations include the climate (wind, strong sun, sandstorms), water provision, transport, and the lack of flexibility to eg work an extra hour to get the job finished because of limited permits.

The mosaics invite curiosity and will get damaged - and repaired.
OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Our model of change

We do not pretend to understand everything about the camp and the complex dynamics and procedures. We believe our stance of being slightly apart from the numerous daily challenges faced by organisations like CARE and UNHCR, along with our intermittent time on the camp allow us to bring a freshness and different energy to the situation.

Whenever we approach a project, including our work in the camp, we like to blend our own experience and ideas with the viewpoints, feelings and ideas of the people who will be most affected by our work. In this case the staff, volunteers and refugees on the camp.

So through a mixture of workshops, focus groups and informal conversations we weave together these different strands and propose creative solutions.

This is a subtly different approach to asking everybody and following consensus. We know this is unlikely to generate exciting or innovative creative ideas. Instead we are working with the best of everybody.

Our model of change is based on the following beliefs:

- **inclusivity and openness** - our techniques should be accessible to everyone, and all are encouraged to take part

- **courageous creativity** - not just taking the obvious route, but choosing the more innovative, more challenging one

- **outstanding output** - we hate mediocre! It takes skill to include everyone yet still produce great art.

Some of the Mosaic Crew who helped develop the techniques and designs we used
Artmongers Report: Azraq 6

November 2018

Refugees and staff learning trauma release techniques

Building connection, supporting well being

In this visit Catherine continued her idea of Hope Circles, giving the refugees, especially the women, a chance to acknowledge and express their feelings. A new aspect was the introduction of trauma release techniques developed by capacitar.org and used in refugee, conflict and emergency situations all over the world.

These techniques were used during Azraq 6 with the following groups:

- Staff and volunteers working with CARE (6-8)
- Women from the sewing group (6)
- Other women refugees from the camp in. Villages 2 and 6 (10)
- Primary school age boys (6)
- Secondary school age girls (5)
- Young men from the camp (5)

Interestingly, all groups were equally interested and receptive to all ideas and techniques though Catherine did just t'ai chi with the younger boys, as recommended by Capacitar. She noted that even those boys who wouldn't join in (too shy or unsure) were seen later in the week practicing the moves on their own.
Catherine used a combination of the following techniques according to the group

- EFT (emotional freedom technique or tapping)
- Finger holds
- Breathing exercises
- T’ai chi
- Yoga
- French knitting (repetitive small motor movements have been shown to help with PTSD)

OUTCOMES

We observed the following across all groups:

Initial reactions

- Confusion / uncertainty about what was going to happen (unfamiliar activity)
- Also curiosity and openness to find out
- A desire for clear, unambiguous instruction (the pictorial pocket guide we made helped with this)
- For some (mostly CARE staff) there is a desire to know “is it true?”. To know Where it came from. It helped to have the background evidence to refer to (eg 40 countries including Palestine and Iraq, decades of practice)
- The refugees like to hear that these techniques have been used by other refugees in other countries and people in difficult circumstances especially people they can relate to like other refugees or Arab cultures.
- Some self consciousness (females giggling and looking at each other, males looking around and only half doing it) at first, which wore off quite quickly. The facilitator needs to expect this and breathe through it, remaining calm and self-assured in order to increase the confidence of the participants
Working with the techniques

Once the initial stage was over, we observed these tendencies in most groups:

- All are attentive and quick to learn

- Very little resistance or skepticism from refugees to experimenting with new ideas (note: important for the facilitator to hold the space with clarity and compassion, and attend to their own breathing / state. If they are not comfortable then the participants will find it hard to be)

- Both refugees and staff are open to, and indeed appreciate, the process of acknowledging feelings, especially anger and sadness

- Some of the group experience the remembered emotions we are working with more strongly, there can be anger or tears. The space needs to be held in a clear and strong way so that this can be supported and processed.

- This is a new experience for them - it is a bit of a surprise for most participants that the exercises actually make them feel different. Feeling their emotions arise in them and then flow out. They value this and want more.

- They accept and enjoy the exercises. Nobody refused to participate

- Participants demonstrate a desire to repeat the exercises on a regular basis “can we do this every week?” and to teach others eg one man came to Catherine to say “my friend wants to learn what you taught me yesterday. He has too much bad things inside him”. The friend was hovering in the background. Of course she taught the friend too.

- The pocket hand-out is a good support and increases sustainability of the approach as they can practice later. It also increases viral replication as they request extra copies to teach others (especially the women who want to teach their friends and children)

- We observed the value of a shared reference afterwards, a shorthand that they could understand with each other, demonstrating tapping or finger holds to each other and laughing in other situations around the camp.

- They realized for themselves when they might use this, especially the finger holding which can be done quite discreetly while eg being frustrated with their children, arguing with their husband or lying awake at 3am worrying. (None of these states exclusive to refugees of course, this is useful for all of us!)
Our activities on the camp

2. PARTICIPATORY ART TO ENHANCE THE CAMP

Enhancing space, working together, building self respect

In this visit Patricio continued the idea of Mosaic Park, observing what worked from Azraq 5 when it was initiated, and what needed to change.

We know from Azraq 5 that:

- the tracks made by the refugees across the large open space between the villages is the only aspect of their presence that is visible from Google earth. The rest of the camp has been created in a top down way but these tracks are their own mark on the landscape
- the walk from any of the villages to the supermarket is featureless, long and dusty
- the lines painted in April 2018 did not last more than a few months in the harsh climatic conditions of the camp - a more permanent solution is necessary if the work is to have a lasting impact
- a sustainable process is needed so that the refugees can continue with the project after our visit
- any artworks made in the camp invite curiosity - this increases their value in the camp and decreases their life expectancy. The more physically resilient we could make the art, the better.

One of the Azraq Mosaics showing its relationship with the supermarket in the distance

Artmongers Report: Azraq 6  November 2018  artmongers.org
**Developing a new approach together**

**First steps**

Before arriving on camp we agreed that mosaics would be a better option than paint. They have a cultural link to Syria, they are enduring and they can express many different ideas. The process of creating the mosaics could involve a wide range of people - different groups could create designs eg children, refugees with disabilities, refugees in Village 5, musicians, tailors etc - and others could choose to participate with simple activities like collecting stones or the more skilled work of constructing the mosaics. It also had the advantage of low inputs - only paint and cement.

Our first thought was to embed the painted stones in cement and the first pilot mosaic was made in the community centre using this technique. This worked fine but had the following disadvantages:

- cement is difficult to work with - it must be mixed exactly right and there is a time pressure to finish the work before it sets
- it is an unpleasant substance requiring gloves, goggles and masks - all of which compromise the sustainability of the project and the health and safety of those working on it
- it is heavy, costly and not available in the camp
- it is a controlled substance so requires additional manpower to supervise its use

Considering all of these points, UNHCR's request that we look for an alternative is very sensible.
Developing a new approach together

Developed solution

The day after our meeting with UNHCR Patricio worked with the refugee group (a combination of artists, builders and a floor maker) to find a different system. The new technique - digging out a shallow disc to contain the mosaic and re-using the removed earth to make mud worked all in the second pilot and was then adopted for the rest of the mosaics. Six such mosaics were created during Azraq 6 and more are planned.

A sustainable approach

The process now requires only

- paint (for 40% of the stones)
- water
- basic tools
- some technical know-how

This is enough to create a mosaic in the field. We calculate that the total cost (refugee volunteer cost, food, paint and occasional tool replacement) is **150JOD and six hours per mosaic**.

We created a written protocol in English and Arabic (see Appendix) and this was left with the trained up team.

Numbers:

- 15 children in focus groups to develop designs
- 6 women in focus groups to develop designs,
- 10 men mosaic making
- 10 adolescents learning film-making skills
Lessons learned

HARVESTING OUR EXPERIENCES

Emotional release techniques

- It helps to start with a tried and tested approach (using the Capacitor materials), especially as the founder was able to send Catherine the information in Arabic.
- The trainer should be familiar enough with the material to deliver it with calm assurance - if they are self conscious then so will the learners be.
- A handout was useful to help spread the ideas.
- It would have been great to train all of the CARE staff since these techniques are also useful for vicarious trauma absorbed by aid workers. Unfortunately there wasn’t a team meeting, though a few staff members did learn as Catherine was teaching the refugees.

OPTION: make a short YouTube video demonstrating the techniques.

Azraq Mosaics

- Good to use traditional techniques and refugee know-how to minimize the cost and inputs for the mosaics eg mud not cement.
- Durability was improved by embedding flat stones on their sides rather than laying them flat on top of the mud. This technique also allowed for more fluidity and expressiveness in the designs because of the flowing lines of the edges of the stones.
- Training a stable team was more successful than using random refugee volunteers.
- Each mosaic improved the process and the outcome.
- Sustainability has been supported by skill sharing and the protocol, however it will require some support from CARE / UNHCR for the project to continue.
Appendix

1. EMOTIONAL RELEASE POCKET GUIDE (PRINT 4 TO AN A4 SHEET THEN FOLD)

capacitar.org
## Azraq Mosaics - Concept

**PURPOSE:**
To enhance the experience of walking on the paths to the supermarket

**FORMAT:**
- mosaic circles on open ground
- Using natural stone and blue (painted) stones
- Simple designs that will bring joy, refreshment, hope
- Each mosaic circle will have an orbit around it to increase its impact and protect it both visually and practically

**LOCATION**
- A place that will not flood
- A place with enough rocks nearby
- A place where people pass on foot
- Away from Village 5
- Somewhere they will not get damaged too much

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## Azraq Mosaics - Creative Process

1. Select a group of people to work with who understand each other eg teenage girls. About 5 or 6 people.
2. Explain Azraq Mosaics and what we want to achieve (see above)
3. Explain the requirements for the design:
   - Simple shapes
   - Dark blue, light blue and natural stone colour only
   - Around 40% blue stones
   - What would people love to see?
4. Stimulate generation of lots of ideas. Accept all ideas as possible. Can be a word or a drawing
5. Choose 2 or 3 ideas to develop further eg a fish, a bicycle, love
6. Ask everybody to draw their own version, their idea of this thing (fish, bicycle, love)
7. Choose the most appropriate image for this situation
8. The artists then redraw and enhance the original image
9. Meet with building crew to plan production.

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## Azraq Mosaics - Production

1. Mark out the circle and the orbit on the chosen spot on the ground using string and a stick or pick
2. Collect stones and paint 40% of the stones blue, leave the rest natural
3. Collect soil for the mud and mix with water
4. Dig out a hole 10 cms deep in the middle circle where the mosaic will go
5. Dig a channel around the outer circle where the orbit will go (10 cms deep and 15 cms wide)
6. Make the orbit
7. Make the edge of the mosaic circle
8. Put in structural lines to outline some of design and set height levels
10. Fill in small gaps at end with small stones

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## Appendix

### 2. AZRAQ MOSAICS PROTOCOL
Appendix : Videos

OUR ONE MINUTE REPORTAGES FROM THE CAMP

- **Day One**: Hamza films from the back seat as we head out to the camp, - Catherine and Patricio developing and explaining our ideas
- **Day Two**: The team bringing fresh energy and new ideas into the camp (and the local hardware shop!)
- **Day Three**: A thoughtful day learning t’ai chi together, and how best to make mosaics
- **Day Four**: Catherine intrigues the boys while Patricio has a breakthrough on the cement front
- **Day Five**: Catherine explains a little of how she feels about working on the camp
- **Day Six**: azraq is Arabic for blue.
- **Day Seven**: All the world’s a stage… and this world stands out beautifully against the endless metres and kilometres of beige in the camp and environs
- **Day Eight**: it’s never easy to capture the work we do with women but here is a sneak peek into the workshop where they created two of the mosaic designs (hearts and wool).
- **Day Nine**: after doing several mosaics the team have learnt the best way to make it work. Including this adjustment of using the stones on their side instead of flat, for a more robust mosaic.
- **Day Ten** A key success factor for us is what happens after we leave. Her you see the mosaic team (artists and builders) planning their future work.
- **If you want to contribute to this project you can buy a mosaic here**