Aesthetics as Infrastructure:

A Home Ground Lab Compendium (2023–2025) on Beauty in the Built Environment, Displacement, and Humanitarian Response

Dr. Devora Neumark (Visiting Scholar, Integration and Belonging Hub) with **Mio Loubaresse-Takei** (2025–2026 Center for Gender, Race, and Area Studies Undergraduate Research Fellow), Clark University

Table of Contents

Jawaher Amin receives a newly distributed rainwater barrel in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp in August 2024. This barrel was one of 10 provided to households that previously participated in the first phase of the Cultivating Beauty in Contested Places project.

Photo: Nizar ALayasa, 2024

Introduction

This compendium documents the research, publications, and public presentations produced by Dr. Devora Neumark and Stephanie Acker through Home Ground Lab (HGL), the research and advocacy organisation they co-founded. The theoretical and methodological foundations of HGL's work are rooted in Dr. Neumark's longstanding research-creation practice developed over decades of engagement with questions of displacement, home, and beauty before HGL itself came into being. Stephanie Acker brought complementary expertise in policy, communications, and humanitarian practice, and together they built the lab whose strength lay precisely in that convergence. HGL completed its laboratory phase in January 2026, and both Dr. Neumark and Stephanie Acker are continuing their independent work in this field. The compendium is offered as a record of that collaborative body of work and as a resource for researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and educators working at the intersection of aesthetics, displacement, and humanitarian response. The introduction traces the evolution of the work, its methodological approaches, and the convergence of evidence that makes its central argument compelling. It then addresses the practical implications for a range of professional audiences and the emerging priorities for future research and practice.

The work documented here spans three years of intensive research and public engagement, from November 2023 to November 2025. It comprises five publications, including two peer-reviewed policy briefs, one working paper, and two articles, and eleven presentations and lectures delivered to audiences ranging from U.S. State Department officials and United Nations shelter practitioners to university students, migration scholars, and neuroaesthetics researchers, as well as a three-part webinar series co-hosted with Clark University's Integration and Belonging Hub. The venues include the European University Institute, Clark University, Monash University, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Essex, the Global Shelter Cluster, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, the American Society of Adaptation Professionals, the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative, and the Migration Working Group. Geographically, the case studies and research contexts span Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank, post-flood reconstruction in Sindh, Pakistan, post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, displacement contexts in Colombia, Iraq, Kenya, Afghanistan, Chad, Malawi, Peru, the Maldives, and Indonesia, Kurdish communities in northern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, post-genocide Rwanda, and the experiences of Hungarian, Indigenous North American, and other forcibly displaced communities, as well as Dr. Neumark's foundational participatory research with over 200 forcibly displaced individuals resettled to Montreal, Quebec, Canada. An annex, The Beautiful Resistance, documents a global storytelling series of the same name in which displaced and affected individuals authored their own first-person narratives of beauty, resilience, and creative resistance, including poets from Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi, Pakistani reconstruction practitioners, Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar, Kurdish communities in northern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, a Rwandan genocide survivor, an Indigenous North American scholar, and a Hungarian refugee.

The intellectual foundation of this body of work rests on a deceptively simple observation: that displaced people around the world, across more than 30 countries and six different legal statuses, consistently invest effort in beautifying their living spaces, even in temporary conditions, even knowing they may be evicted, and even under conditions of active conflict or extreme resource constraint. This observation was first documented through Dr. Neumark's doctoral research, "Radical Beauty for Troubled Times: Involuntary Displacement and the (Un) Making of Home," funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which examined the role of home beautification for individuals coming to terms with the traumas of involuntary displacement, and drew centrally on art philosopher Arthur Danto's concept of third-realm beauty. Dr. Neumark's longstanding engagement with Danto's thinking, included the foundational claim from The Abuse of Beauty that "Beauty is an option for art and not a necessary condition. But it is not an option for life." This informed both their own doctoral work and, subsequently, their collaboration with Stephanie Acker. Acker's peer-reviewed article "Beauty and Beautification in Refugees' Lives and Their Implications for Refugee Policy," published in Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees in 2023, synthesised nearly 100 published articles on refugee homemaking and confirmed that this remained a largely unexplored area of scholarship, with Dr. Neumark identified as one of only a handful of researchers working at this intersection at the time. The collaborative work that followed between Dr. Neumark and Stephanie Acker sought to build on and contribute to this emerging area, producing the research, advocacy, and public engagement documented in this compendium.

Displaced communities in the West Bank plant gardens and decorate their homes asserting agency and processing complicated emotions through physical expression. Cultivating Beauty in Contested Places, Phase II, Al-Azza Refugee Camp, West Bank.

Photo: Nizar ALayasa, 2024

The Evolution of the Work

The earliest entries in this compendium focused primarily on establishing the legitimacy of aesthetics as a dimension of humanitarian response, countering the assumption that beauty is a luxury. The November 2023 article in The Conversation, written in direct response to the Israel-Hamas war, made the case through the lens of Gaza: that even amid genocide, people create beauty, and that this impulse is not incidental but biologically wired into us, an assertion of identity, agency, and refusal to be defined solely by displacement. The December 2023 policy brief for the European University Institute's Migration Policy Centre extended this argument into the domain of refugee self-reliance, drawing on four research studies conducted between 2008 and 2023 across more than 30 countries to demonstrate that home beautification practices advance the Global Compact on Refugees' goal of self-reliance across multiple domains simultaneously, and calling on policymakers to recognise refugees as creative agents rather than passive recipients of aid.

From this foundation, the work deepened along two distinct but interrelated lines of inquiry. The first was theoretical and structural: challenging the dominance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in humanitarian policy, a critique Dr. Neumark had first articulated publicly in 2014 in the context of the performance artwork Faire bon ménage, where they wrote that by ignoring the aesthetic dimension of displacement, the traumas associated with the loss of home are more likely to persist and undermine integration into a new living environment. The 2024 working paper and accompanying policy brief, both published through the European University Institute, developed this critique systematically, arguing that Maslow's framework is fundamentally misaligned with refugee shelter contexts in three ways: its linear progression assumes needs are met sequentially, its individualistic focus clashes with collective community dynamics, and its universal framing overlooks culturally specific needs. Most critically, Maslow's original hierarchy entirely excluded aesthetic experience, a gap that, as neuroaesthetics research demonstrates, has measurable consequences for wellbeing, trauma recovery, and resilience. These publications proposed a reimagined framework in which aesthetics, dignity, cultural expression, and belonging are treated not as secondary concerns to be addressed after survival needs are met, but as simultaneous and inseparable dimensions of recovery.

The second line of inquiry was empirical and contextual, grounded in specific communities and specific practices. Collaborative research with Palestinian storyteller Nizar ALayasa, a longtime friend of Dr. Neumark's of more than 20 years, provided the richest single body of evidence in the compendium. When Dr. Neumark asked him what he wanted to research about his community, his answer was immediate: the gardens in the camps. Over two years beginning in 2023, Nizar conducted 30 community dialogues in Dheisheh and Al-Azza refugee camps, each one rooted in that same question of what beauty means to people living under conditions of protracted displacement and political constraint. Residents described how gardening in plastic containers on overcrowded balconies generated peace and stability for entire neighbourhoods, how physical objects carried from pre-1948 villages sustained cultural memory across generations, and how acts of beautification provided agency and a means of processing emotions too complex to put into words. This research informed multiple entries across the compendium and was presented to audiences at the University of Essex, the Refugee Care Conference, the U.S. Department of State, and elsewhere, each time foregrounding Palestinian voices and centring lived experience as the primary source of knowledge.

A significant strand of this work also engages specifically with climate-induced displacement, a context that is both distinct from and deeply intertwined with conflict-driven and protracted displacement. Its roots in Dr. Neumark's practice predate HGL itself: in 2014, they conducted an initial interview with Denise Thornton, founder of the Beacon of Hope initiative in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, which first revealed how early attention to home beautification could be foundational to community recovery after climate disaster. As extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and environmental degradation force growing numbers of people from their homes, the psychological consequences extend beyond physical loss to include solastalgia, the particular grief associated with environmental change and the destruction of place attachment. The 2024 *Ecopsychepedia* article on aesthetics, climate displacement, and mental health, co-authored with Stephanie Acker and Denise Thornton, drew on neuroaesthetics, environmental psychology, and place attachment theory to argue that community-driven beautification offers displaced people concrete pathways to process climate grief, rebuild a sense of home, and restore collective resilience. This strand of the work reflects a broader conviction running through the compendium: that as climate displacement accelerates, humanitarian frameworks must expand to recognise the role of beauty, cultural expression, and environmental belonging as dimensions of recovery that are no less urgent than physical shelter.

By 2024 and 2025, the neurobiological framing of the argument became increasingly central as the work was presented to audiences in clinical and academic settings. Drawing on conversations with psychiatrist Dr. Curt Thompson and on neuroaesthetics research, the presentations explained precisely why acts of beautification reduce amygdala-driven fear responses, support prefrontal cortex functioning necessary for imagining a future, and enable hippocampal memory consolidation, culminating in the October 2025 presentation at Johns Hopkins University's neuroaesthetics programme where the entire argument was reframed as survival infrastructure. Alongside this deepening of the neurological argument, the work broadened its justice framing, explicitly incorporating the language of aesthetic equity and aesthetic justice and recognising that who holds power over how spaces look and feel is not a neutral question but one with profound implications for dignity, self-determination, and the right to participate in cultural life as protected under Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The October 2025 presentation at Clark University's Designing Just Cities course made this argument most explicitly, proposing aesthetic justice as a necessary foundation for designing cities built not only for survival but for flourishing. Philosopher Michael Spicher's observation that the Western devaluation of beauty can be traced directly to the destruction of the two World Wars, producing institutional cultures that systematically dismiss aesthetics as secondary, provides useful historical context for understanding why this argument still needs to be made at all.

Throughout this evolution, the work consistently encountered the same cluster of gaps and challenges in humanitarian practice: the systematic underfunding of community-led beautification initiatives; restrictive shelter modification policies that obstruct what displaced people are already doing; deficit-based narratives in media and fundraising that render displaced communities' creativity invisible; the absence of aesthetic indicators in humanitarian monitoring and evaluation frameworks; and institutional cultures shaped by an uncritical reliance on Maslow's Hierarchy that treat aesthetics as premature, non-essential, or irrelevant to serious humanitarian work. Taken together, these gaps represent the persistent conditions that motivated and continue to animate this body of work.

Photo Top: Blumont Group, 2013-2025

Photo Middle: UN-Habitat Afghanistan, 2025

Photo Bottom: Luxembourg Red Cross, 2025

The Case for Convergence

No single strand of evidence in this compendium would be sufficient on its own. Neuroscience without lived experience risks abstraction: it can explain the mechanisms of aesthetic engagement but cannot convey why a resident in Al-Azza camp tends flowers on an overcrowded balcony, or what it means to a 62-year-old man in Sindh to see traditional patterns painted on the walls of a house he spent his lifetime dreaming of building. Lived experience without neuroscience risks dismissal: it can document the universal human impulse to create beauty but cannot answer the institutional question of why this impulse deserves to be resourced rather than restricted. And both without participatory research risk speaking for communities rather than with them, perpetuating the very deficit-based frameworks the work seeks to dismantle.

What makes the case in this compendium compelling is precisely the convergence of these three streams. When Donald Ruggles explains that non-beautiful spaces activate chronic sympathetic stress responses with measurable physiological consequences, and Minar Thapa Magar shows how over one million families in flood-affected Sindh spontaneously painted traditional ralli textile patterns on their rebuilt homes without any external instruction, and a resident in Dheisheh camp describes how flowers on a balcony give passersby a sense of peace and stability, these three streams of evidence are not saying the same thing in different languages. They are each capturing something the others cannot, and together they produce an argument that is simultaneously biological, cultural, political, and practical. It is Alexis, a participant in Dr. Neumark's doctoral research project Home Beautiful Revisited (2010), whose words have stayed with them for 15 years and whose voice is in many ways the origin of everything that followed, who gives that convergence its fullest meaning from the inside: "As refugees, we lose our sense of beauty, and when that happens, we lose our sense of everything. Of life itself." That statement proved so precise and so complete in its articulation of what is at stake that it recurred throughout HGL's public engagement as a touchstone, capturing in a single voice what the neuroscience, the policy research, and the participatory fieldwork together demonstrate. The result is a case that is harder to dismiss, more difficult to reduce to sentiment, and more directly actionable than any single disciplinary approach could achieve alone.

Methodology and Transferability

HGL developed and refined several methodological innovations over the course of this work that are worth naming explicitly, both because they shaped the compendium's findings and because they offer models that other researchers and organisations might adapt. The first is the research-creation methodology rooted in Dr. Neumark's decades of practice as an interdisciplinary artist-researcher, most fully developed in their doctoral work "Radical Beauty for Troubled Times: Involuntary Displacement and the (Un) Making of Home," which integrates participatory, arts-based inquiry with rigorous scholarship, allowing displaced individuals to contribute to knowledge production through creative and embodied processes rather than only through interviews or surveys. The second is the systematic desk research approach developed by Stephanie Acker, which synthesised nearly 100 published articles on refugee homemaking across displacement contexts, providing an evidence-base broad enough to demonstrate the universality of beautification practices across more than 30 countries and six different legal statuses. The third is the community dialogue methodology developed with Nizar ALayasa, whose 30 conversations in residents' gardens and homes in Dheisheh and Al-Azza camps modelled how to generate deep contextual knowledge through sustained presence and trust rather than extractive data collection. The fourth is the use of pre-recorded multilingual video to centre participant voices in academic and professional settings, as demonstrated by Nizar ALayasa's Arabic-language introduction at the Refugee Care Conference, which positioned him as a co-presenter rather than a research subject despite the constraints of an international conference format.

The three-part webinar series extended HGL's collaborative methodology to its broadest scale, bringing together neuroscientists, architects, philosophers, documentary filmmakers, and field practitioners in ways that modelled the interdisciplinary convergence the work advocates. The series also demonstrated a reframing methodology with direct transferability: Ana Carolina Helena's approach of advancing beauty through the language of sustainable construction and preventive healthcare, and Juan Pablo Franco Jiménez's success in having local governments adopt the Casa Pintada methodology by framing it as violence prevention and public health, both illustrate how aesthetic arguments can be translated into institutional languages that open doors without compromising the underlying commitment to dignity and community agency. Organisations working in displacement contexts can draw on any of these methodological approaches, and the compendium's consistent documentation of sources, named participants, and verified case studies provides a replicable model for evidence generation that other researchers and practitioners can adapt to their own contexts.

The compendium also reflects a consistent methodological commitment that deepened over time: the insistence on centring displaced voices rather than speaking on behalf of displaced communities. This commitment manifested in multiple ways across the entries: in Nizar ALayasa's participatory dialogues and his pre-recorded Arabic video introduction at the Refugee Care Conference; in the naming of individual research participants including Basim, Qadir Bux, Raza Muhammad, Shabeeran Bibi, and Abla Abdel Hamid; in the framing of refugees as knowledge holders, co-presenters, and creative agents rather than research subjects or passive beneficiaries; and in the sustained critique of deficit-based narratives that frame displacement communities solely through trauma and loss. This methodological commitment is itself a form of aesthetic justice: an insistence that the people most affected by the conditions this work describes must be present in the conversation as authors of their own narratives, not objects of others' analysis.

The Beautiful Resistance storytelling series, documented in the annex to this compendium, extended this methodological commitment to its fullest expression. Where the main entries centre displaced voices within the framework of academic and practitioner-facing research, the Beautiful Resistance series invited displaced and affected individuals to author their own narratives entirely, in their own words and from their own vantage points, without the mediating frame of research summary or policy argument. The result is a body of first-person testimony that stands alongside the compendium's scholarly and professional entries as evidence of a different and equally rigorous kind: the knowledge that only lived experience can produce, offered directly and without translation.

Devora Neumark, Performance:
Faire bon ménage.
Amiens, France, 2014

Photo: Michelle Bélanger

Devora Neumark, Performance:
Faire bon ménage.
Basel, Switzerland, 2014

Photo: Renate Buser

Implications for Practice

Each entry in this compendium closes with a set of practitioner implications tailored to the specific audience addressed in that presentation or publication, and readers are encouraged to consult those sections directly for detailed and context-specific guidance. Across the compendium as a whole, however, several implications recur with sufficient consistency and urgency to warrant summary here.

For humanitarian practitioners and shelter coordinators, the core implication is that aesthetics must be treated as infrastructure rather than decoration from the earliest stages of response planning, embedded in needs assessments, programme design documents, shelter standards, and evaluation frameworks. Restrictive policies that prevent residents from modifying, personalising, and beautifying their living spaces should be reviewed and revised, recognising that such restrictions are not neutral but constitute measurable neurological and psychosocial harm. The most powerful reorientation available to practitioners, as Stephanie Acker observed in closing the final webinar session, is to stop asking where the problems are and start asking where the beauty already is, shifting from deficit to presence, and from problem to possibility.

For architects, urban planners, and designers, the implication is that beauty is not optional, but a professional responsibility grounded in the neuroscience of the autonomic nervous system. Design for displacement contexts should prioritise environmental enrichment, cultural expressiveness, adaptability, and community co-creation, drawing on neuroarchitecture research to inform decisions about proportion, natural materials, biophilic elements, and spatial flexibility. Evolutive shelter models that accompany communities through protracted displacement, as demonstrated by the Luxembourg Red Cross prototype in Chad, offer a practical framework for achieving dignity within tight budget constraints.

For policymakers, the implication is that Maslow's Hierarchy must be actively dismantled as the implicit organising framework of humanitarian response and replaced with holistic frameworks that treat aesthetic experience, belonging, cultural expression, and dignity as simultaneous rather than sequential dimensions of recovery. Beauty should be recognised as a human right under Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and embedded accordingly in national shelter guidelines, urban inclusion policies, and international frameworks including the Global Compact on Refugees.

For donors and funders, the implication is that community-led beautification initiatives should be recognised as legitimate and fundable humanitarian interventions, evaluated not only through speed and cost-efficiency but through indicators of social trust, agency, cultural continuity, and psychological recovery. The evidence from Casa Pintada in Colombia, where 95% of participants reported increased trust and solidarity, and from owner-driven reconstruction in Sindh, where over one million families rebuilt culturally expressive homes with modest financial support, demonstrates that the returns on aesthetic investment are both measurable and substantial.

Emerging Directions

Several priorities emerge clearly from the arc of this compendium and point toward where research and practice at the intersection of aesthetics, displacement, and humanitarian response most urgently need to go next.

The first is the urgent need to continue to build a robust quantitative evidence base linking aesthetic design quality to measurable health, resilience, and community cohesion outcomes in displacement contexts specifically. As Ana Carolina Helena observed, current evaluation in humanitarian settings relies primarily on self-reported satisfaction, leaving no robust basis for the institutional case for beauty. Closing this evidence gap, particularly on the mental health dimensions that remain under-researched in humanitarian settings, is one of the most consequential contributions that researchers working at the intersection of neuroaesthetics, architecture, and forced migration could make to the field.

The second is the development of aesthetic justice as a practical governance framework rather than an aspirational concept, translating the principle into concrete policy language, design standards, and institutional accountability mechanisms that give communities genuine power over the aesthetic dimensions of their built environments rather than token consultation.

The third is the expansion of hope-driven, community-led storytelling as a tool for narrative change at scale. The Beautiful Resistance storytelling series demonstrates that storytelling which centres displaced people as agents, teachers, and changemakers generates audiences that connect through recognition rather than pity, which is more likely to shift institutional narratives and generate sustained public and political will. Developing platforms, funding streams, and professional norms that support this kind of storytelling broadly is both a communications priority and a justice imperative.

The fourth is the deeper integration of aesthetic considerations into climate displacement response specifically, as the scale and pace of climate-induced displacement accelerates and the limitations of purely material humanitarian response become increasingly apparent. The intersection of aesthetics, climate justice, and displacement remains an underdeveloped area of both research and practice, and the work in this compendium offers a starting point rather than a conclusion.

The compendium entries that follow are organised chronologically, spanning November 2023 to November 2025, and are grouped into three sections: publications, comprising five peer-reviewed and publicly accessible articles and policy documents; lectures, presentations, and webinars, comprising 11 public presentations and lectures and a three-part webinar series; and an annex, The Beautiful Resistance, comprising a global storytelling series in which displaced and affected individuals authored their own first-person narratives. Each entry in the publications and presentations sections is documented in a standardised format including keywords, a summary of the work and its context, key takeaways, and practitioner implications tailored to the specific audience addressed. Readers are encouraged to move through the entries sequentially to follow the intellectual arc of the work, or to navigate directly to entries most relevant to their professional context using the keywords and audience descriptors provided.

Taken together, the entries in this compendium represent a coherent and evolving argument: that beauty in the built environment is not decorative, not supplementary, and not premature. It is, as the evidence from neuroscience, participatory research, philosophy, and the lived experiences of displaced communities consistently demonstrates, foundational to recovery, dignity, identity, and the capacity to imagine and build a different future. The question this body of work poses to humanitarian practitioners, policymakers, designers, researchers, funders, and educators is not whether beauty in the built environment matters, but whether our institutions are willing to follow the lead of the communities that have known this all along.

Publications

A Palestinian girl celebrates in front of a house destroyed by Israeli shelling during the 2014 Israel-Hamas war. Mideast Gaza Eid Al-Fitr Celebration, Gaza, Palestine.

Photo: Majdi Fathi, 2015

In the Face of Death, Destruction, and Displacement, Beauty Plays a Vital Role in Gaza, *The Conversation*

Stephanie Acker and Dr. Devora Neumark • November 22, 2023

AESTHETICS BEAUTY RESILIENCE GAZA PALESTINE POLITICAL RESISTANCE IDENTITY INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA NEUROSCIENCE

SUMMARY

Amid the extreme deprivation, infrastructure destruction, and mass displacement of the Israel-Hamas war, people in Gaza continue to create beauty, reflecting an innate human impulse that neuroscience confirms is biologically wired into us. Drawing on research with displaced communities worldwide, the article argued that beauty is not a luxury but a fundamental human need, one that allows displaced people to exert agency, preserve identity, and counter the way being labelled a refugee causes one's other identities to be overshadowed or disappear entirely. Even before the current war, Palestinians living under occupation actively cultivated beauty through murals, gardens, and communal rituals, as acts of resistance and assertions of belonging. Dr. Neumark's research with over 200 displaced individuals demonstrated that these acts of beautification heal intergenerational trauma and, through Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory," bridge past and present to support ongoing healing and identity preservation.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Amid extreme deprivation, infrastructure destruction, and mass displacement in Gaza - and in the middle of what many are calling genocide - people continue to create beauty, from birthday celebrations to neighbourhood murals to gardens tended in crowded quarters. This reflects an innate human impulse: beauty has been a hallmark of every civilization, and neuroscience confirms our brains are biologically wired to seek it out.
- Beauty is not a luxury that waits for safety. As art philosopher Arthur Danto wrote, beauty may be optional for art, but it is not an option for life. One Guinean refugee from Dr. Neumark's PhD research-creation captured this precisely: "As refugees, we lose our sense of beauty, and when that happens, we lose our sense of everything. Of life itself."
- Even before the current war, Palestinians living under occupation and in refugee camps actively cultivated beauty through murals, mosaics, painted facades, gardens, and communal rituals, as both a form of resistance and an assertion of life and belonging.
- "Simple acts" of beautification allow displaced people to exert agency and preserve identity when nearly everything else has been stripped away. Dr. Neumark's research with over 200 displaced individuals found these acts heal intergenerational trauma, and when children can imagine previous homes through shared stories and images (what scholar Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemories"), present-day beautification bridges past and present, supporting healing and continuity of identity.
- Being labelled a refugee often causes a person's other identities to be overshadowed or disappear entirely. Acts of beautification, from how a space is arranged to the objects chosen to fill it, allow displaced individuals to reassert the fullness of their identity and resist the reduction of their personhood to their displacement status.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Core humanitarian response:** The persistence of beauty-making in the most extreme conditions, including active war in Gaza, challenges the assumption that aesthetics belong at the top of a hierarchy of needs. Practitioners should treat the capacity to create and experience beauty as a core rather than supplementary dimension of humanitarian response.
- **Psychosocial interventions:** Community storytelling, garden projects, and other aesthetically oriented initiatives should be recognised as legitimate psychosocial interventions, not add-ons, particularly in protracted displacement contexts where identity and agency are chronically under threat.
- **Enabling conditions:** Humanitarian programs should actively protect and enable the conditions for beautification, including access to materials, permission to personalise spaces, and support for community-led aesthetic practices.
- **Resistance and resilience:** Beauty-making in displacement contexts should be understood as an act of resistance and resilience, not merely coping. Practitioners working in politically charged contexts like Gaza should recognise and respect the political dimensions of aesthetic expression, including murals, gardens, and communal rituals, as assertions of identity, dignity, and the right to a future.
- **Counter-narratives:** Practitioners and organisations should actively work to counter dehumanising narratives by documenting and amplifying the creativity, beauty, and cultural richness of displaced communities. The dominant media framing of displacement through images of destruction alone obscures the full humanity of those affected and shapes how resources and responses are prioritised.

Women were trained to take part in the maintenance of tents at Jeddah camp in Iraq. Women putting a decorative tarp on a tent, Jeddah, Iraq.

Photo: Sami Abdulla, 2019

Beauty in the Built Environment and Refugee Self-Reliance Policy Brief

Stephanie Acker and Dr. Devora Neumark • December 2023
(Policy Brief No. 2023/19). European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Migration Policy Centre.

AESTHETICS BEAUTY BUILT ENVIRONMENT GLOBAL COMPACT ON REFUGEES REFUGEE SELF-RELIANCE RESILIENCE AGENCY INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA THIRD-REALM BEAUTY

SUMMARY

This policy brief demonstrated that purposeful home beautification practices among refugees, ranging from physical modifications to daily rituals, enhance individual and community wellbeing while advancing the Global Compact on Refugees' goal of self-reliance. Drawing on four research studies conducted between 2008 and 2023 across more than 30 countries, the brief showed how beautification allows refugees to exert agency, integrate past and present experiences, and heal from intergenerational trauma. At the community level, beautification fosters hope, builds social bonds, and exhibits resistance and resilience. The brief challenged conventional self-reliance frameworks, arguing that beauty in the built environment is not a luxury but a necessary condition for life, and called on policymakers to recognise refugees as creative agents actively contributing to their communities rather than passive recipients of aid.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Refugees worldwide, across more than 30 countries and six different legal statuses, consistently invest significant effort in beautifying their living spaces through painting walls, hanging pictures, burning incense, creating gardens, and engaging in daily rituals, even in temporary accommodations and despite knowing they may be evicted.
- Beautification allows refugees to exert agency when control is otherwise limited. "Simple acts" like rearranging a home or intentionally placing an object enable refugees to infuse spaces with their own identity and resist the way being labelled a refugee causes other identities to be overshadowed or disappear entirely.
- Home beautification serves as a bridge between past and present, providing tangible ways to remember previous homes, honour the loss of home, and recreate a sense of home in the present. Dr. Neumark's research with over 200 displaced individuals found that when children participate in beautification alongside family and can imagine past homes through shared stories, these acts become transformative, healing intergenerational trauma and preserving identity.
- At the community level, beautification fosters hope by providing a visual representation of a brighter future, builds social bonds through culturally specific rituals of hospitality and celebration, and serves as a form of resistance and resilience that fortifies communities against the challenges of displacement.
- Beautification is both a foundation for and catalyst of refugee self-reliance across multiple domains of the Self-Reliance Index, including housing, education, health, employment, safety, and social connections. However, existing self-reliance frameworks (at the time of publication) fail to capture this dimension, and the language of refugee policy must shift to recognise refugees as "creative agents" and "change-makers" rather than passive beneficiaries of aid.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Global Compact implementation:** States and humanitarian actors implementing the Global Compact on Refugees should integrate beautification into self-reliance programming under Objective 2, recognising that aesthetic agency directly supports refugees' capacity to meet their needs sustainably and with dignity.
- **Measurement and accountability:** Self-reliance measurement frameworks, including the Self-Reliance Index, should expand beyond the current 12 domains to include beautification as a validated indicator. Researchers should systematically test beautification's measurable impact across domains including housing quality, children's educational outcomes, mental health, employment resilience, and social capital.
- **Shelter and camp policy reform:** Shelter standards, camp management protocols, and settlement design guidelines should mandate provisions for personalisation and aesthetic expression. Policies restricting modifications to living spaces should be reviewed and revised to enable participatory design processes that empower refugees as co-creators of their built environment.
- **Decolonising self-reliance frameworks:** Policymakers should acknowledge and address the Western bias in current self-reliance definitions by expanding the concept beyond economic independence to encompass social, emotional, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions that reflect diverse cultural values and practices of homemaking and community resilience.
- **Narrative and definitional change:** Refugee policy language at all levels (international conventions, national frameworks, programme design, monitoring and evaluation) must shift from framing refugees as "burdens on host countries" and "passive recipients of aid" to recognising them as "creative agents" and "change-makers" who actively contribute to community wellbeing and development.

A collaborative project between refugees in Azraq Refugee Camp in Jordan and the MIT Future Heritage Lab reimagined what refugee shelter could look like, incorporating historical and cultural aesthetics and design. Interior of reimagined shelter, Azraq, Jordan.

Photo: Dino Rowan, 2021

Rethinking Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: The Role of Aesthetics in Refugee Shelter Working Paper

Dr. Devora Neumark and Stephanie Acker • May 2024 (Working Paper 2024/16)
European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Migration Policy Centre

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS · AESTHETICS · BUILT ENVIRONMENT · REFUGEE SHELTER · THIRD-REALM BEAUTY · MENTAL HEALTH · WELLBEING · DIGNITY · COMMUNITY RESILIENCE · NEUROAESTHETICS

SUMMARY

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has profoundly influenced humanitarian shelter responses to forced migration, yet this working paper demonstrated that its linear progression, individual focus, and universal application are fundamentally misaligned with refugee shelter contexts. Most critically, Maslow's widely used framework completely overlooks aesthetics as a dimension of wellbeing. Drawing on mixed-methods research including Dr. Neumark's participatory studies with over 200 displaced individuals, desk research across 30+ countries, and community dialogues in Palestinian refugee camps, this paper argued that beauty in the built environment is not a luxury but a necessary condition for life. Aesthetics support mental health, enable cultural identity expression, facilitate intergenerational trauma healing, and strengthen community resilience. The paper examined successful case studies from Yugoslavia, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine, addressed implementation challenges including resource constraints and political resistance, and concluded with policy considerations for integrating aesthetics into shelter design through community-based approaches, advocacy and communication, funding and planning mechanisms, and professional training and evaluation systems.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, while foundational in humanitarian response, is poorly suited to refugee shelter contexts due to its linear progression assumption (needs must be met sequentially), individual rather than collective focus, universal rather than culturally adaptive approach, and complete exclusion of aesthetics from the original framework.
- Neuroaesthetics research demonstrates that design with deliberate intention to incorporate beauty is imperative to human psychological wellbeing, with positive effects on learning, social behaviour, and emotional wellness. The built environment directly shapes mood, cognitive functioning, behaviour, and mental health of shelter occupants.
- Evidence from over 30 countries shows refugees with varied legal statuses consistently invest concerted effort in beautifying living spaces through painting walls, hanging pictures, creating gardens, and daily rituals like burning incense and serving tea in decorative porcelain, transforming temporary accommodations into personalised semblances of home even in the harshest conditions.
- Beautification serves three critical individual-level functions: exerting agency when control is otherwise stripped away, integrating past homes with present realities through tangible bridges of memory and hope, and healing trauma. Dr. Neumark's research with over 200 displaced individuals found that when children participate in beautification alongside family and can imagine past homes through shared stories, these acts heal intergenerational trauma and preserve identity.
- At the community level, beautification fosters hope by providing visual representation of a brighter future, builds social capital through culturally specific rituals of hospitality and celebration, and serves as a form of resistance and resilience that fortifies communities against displacement challenges, contributing to all dimensions of community resilience including psychological wellbeing, social capital, family bonds, economic recovery, physical environment, and governance.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Community-based co-design:** Shelter design must be based on local priorities and build on local capacities through mechanisms that actively engage residents, including community design committees, participatory workshops, mapping and visualisation tools, and capacity-building programmes that position refugees as active participants rather than passive recipients.
- **Long-term and evolving shelter approaches:** Refugee shelters should be designed as long-term, evolving environments rather than short-term emergency solutions, recognising that displacement is often protracted (averaging 17 years in camps) and requires spaces that support dignity, cultural expression, and everyday life beyond mere survival.
- **Policy and planning standards:** Shelter standards, camp management protocols, and settlement design guidelines should mandate provisions for personalisation and aesthetic expression. Policies restricting modifications to living spaces should be reviewed and revised to enable participatory design processes that empower refugees as co-creators of their built environment.
- **Livelihoods integration:** Aesthetic interventions, such as the Jeddah Camp example where residents were trained and hired to beautify shelters, can serve as pathways to livelihoods and empowerment through skills training, job creation, and community-led art and design initiatives, simultaneously improving shelter quality and economic opportunity.
- **Training and measurement:** Professional training for architects, urban planners, and humanitarian workers should integrate aesthetics beyond conventional "basic needs" understanding. Monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems should measure dignity, cultural expression, mental wellbeing, and spatial satisfaction alongside physical safety, with dedicated research to validate beautification as a measurable indicator of refugee self-reliance.

In Zaatari Refugee Camp, artists volunteered to paint shelters around the camp. A mural in Zaatari Refugee Camp, Zaatari, Jordan.

Photo: Joel Artista, 2017

Reimagining Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: The Role of Aesthetics in Shelter and Settlement Response Policy Brief

Dr. Devora Neumark and Stephanie Acker • June 2024
(Policy Brief No. 2024/13). European University Institute,
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Migration Policy Centre.

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS · AESTHETICS · BUILT ENVIRONMENT · REFUGEE SHELTER · SHELTER AND SETTLEMENTS ASSISTANCE · FORCED MIGRATION · NEUROAESTHETICS · WELLBEING · DIGNITY · CULTURAL IDENTITY · COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

SUMMARY

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has significantly influenced development and humanitarian frameworks, leading to the categorisation of needs as "basic" or "essential" while dismissing others as non-essential. This framework's application in refugee shelter and settlement projects is misaligned with forced migration realities and critically overlooks aesthetics as a crucial component of wellbeing. Drawing on mixed-methods research including Dr. Neumark's research-creation with individuals experiencing forced displacement, desk research examining shelter beautification across displacement contexts, and community-driven dialogues with residents in Palestinian refugee camps, this policy brief demonstrated that aesthetics in the built environment are imperative for human wellbeing. Neuroaesthetics research and forced migration studies reveal that refugee-driven aesthetics support mental health, enable cultural identity expression, strengthen community resilience, uphold human rights, and contribute to economic recovery. The brief provided practical steps for humanitarian actors, donors, policymakers, shelter coordinators, and community leaders to incorporate aesthetics into shelter and settlement assistance, addressing common challenges including resource constraints, cultural sensitivity, and political resistance.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Shelter and settlements assistance, recognised as the "foundation of humanitarian response," currently operates under Maslow's framework that categorizes shelter as a "basic need," inadvertently reinforcing the notion that any basic shelter will suffice. This has resulted in most shelters being bare, anonymous, and standardized, failing to meet the full spectrum of human needs for recovery and resilience in displacement contexts.
- Neuroscientific evidence confirms that aesthetics in the built environment are not supplementary to wellbeing but rather imperative for it, directly influencing occupants' mood, cognitive functioning, behaviour, and mental health. Design with deliberate intention to incorporate beauty has positive effects on learning, social behaviour, and emotional wellness, making aesthetics a necessary component of shelter provision rather than an optional enhancement.
- Across diverse displacement contexts globally, refugees demonstrate remarkable consistency in beautifying their living spaces despite severe resource constraints and restrictive policies, transforming spaces into places through gardens, painted murals, decorative textiles, and cultural symbols. This universal practice reveals aesthetics as a fundamental human drive that persists regardless of legal status, camp type, or geographic location.
- Integrating aesthetics into shelter and settlements yields measurable returns across six key domains: individual wellbeing and mental health, cultural identity preservation and self-expression, community resilience and social cohesion, human rights fulfilment, economic recovery through local employment, and long-term self-reliance that reduces dependency on humanitarian assistance.
- Practical integration of aesthetics into shelter and settlements response requires coordinated action across five strategic areas: establishing aesthetics as a core objective in shelter strategy and planning, identifying context-specific entry points for aesthetic interventions, advocating aesthetic impact to donors and incorporating it in funding mechanisms and tenders, building staff capacity through specialized training on aesthetics and trauma-informed design, and developing monitoring and evaluation systems that measure dignity, cultural expression, and spatial satisfaction alongside traditional shelter metrics.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Establishing aesthetics in shelter strategy and planning:** Shelter and settlements coordinators should add aesthetics as an explicit objective in response strategies, ensuring its inclusion from initial planning stages. Designated task forces comprising artists, designers, cultural historians, and community representatives can lead aesthetic integration efforts. Different response types offer unique entry points: emergency responses can include aesthetics in supply chain planning through personalised supply kits; transitional shelter programs can incorporate aesthetic standards in design specifications; self-recovery initiatives can focus on supporting and amplifying residents' existing beautification efforts.
- **Funding mechanisms and donor engagement:** Donors and funders should incorporate aesthetic considerations into Terms of Reference and grant requirements, providing financial incentives or awards for projects that successfully integrate community-driven design. Aesthetics should be explicitly included in formal funding requests and used strategically to seek in-kind donations, leverage volunteers, and target new corporate partners whose missions align with art, creativity, and design values (such as public relations firms, art institutes and foundations, home goods suppliers, and interior design and architecture firms). Communication strategies should highlight the economic returns of aesthetic investment, including reduced long-term dependency on social services and increased self-reliance.
- **Policy reform and operational guidelines:** The Global Shelter Cluster and implementing partners should create and advocate for policies that afford residents maximum autonomy to personalise, decorate, modify, and improve their personal and shared spaces. This includes removing restrictive policies that prohibit painting, gardening, repurposing materials, or modifying initial designs. Shelter standards, camp management protocols, and settlement design guidelines should mandate provisions for aesthetic expression and cultural representation rather than treating beautification as unauthorized modification.
- **Capacity building and professional training:** Training programs for architects, urban planners, humanitarian workers, and social service providers should integrate modules on aesthetics in the built environment, neuroaesthetics research, trauma-informed design principles, and participatory design methodologies. Cross-disciplinary training initiatives bringing together professionals from different fields (architects, psychologists, cultural specialists) can foster holistic approaches to shelter design that recognise aesthetics as integral to recovery and wellbeing.
- **Monitoring, evaluation, and evidence generation:** Monitoring, evaluation, assessment, and learning (MEAL) systems should develop and track indicators measuring aesthetic integration, dignity, cultural expression, mental wellbeing, and spatial satisfaction alongside traditional metrics of physical safety and structural adequacy. Research should be commissioned to assess the impact of aesthetic interventions on recovery trajectories, self-reliance outcomes, and long-term dependency rates. Successful case studies should be documented and disseminated through conferences, webinars, and knowledge-sharing platforms to build the evidence base and inspire replication.

The Maldives Floating City aims to adapt to rising sea-levels through low-rise floating homes that incorporate vibrant designs inspired by local culture. Maldives Floating City, Maldives.

Photo: Waterstudio/Dutch Docklands Maldives, 2022

Aesthetics, Climate Displacement, and Mental Health, *Ecopsychepedia*

Dr. Devora Neumark, Stephanie Acker, and Denise Thornton • October 28, 2024

AESTHETICS BEAUTY BUILT ENVIRONMENT CLIMATE DISPLACEMENT CLIMATE-INDUCED DISPLACEMENT MENTAL HEALTH COMMUNITY RESILIENCE NEUROAESTHETICS SOLASTALGIA TRAUMA RECOVERY PLACE ATTACHMENT

SUMMARY

Climate-related disasters and displacement profoundly impact mental health, often leading to post-traumatic stress disorder and solastalgia: deep emotional distress caused by environmental change and loss of place. While community-based climate initiatives have addressed various impacts, the role of aesthetics in creating a sense of home and supporting post-disaster recovery has been largely overlooked. This article, co-authored with Denise Thornton, founder of the Beacon of Hope initiative in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans whose collaboration with Dr. Neumark beginning in 2014 first revealed how early attention to home beautification can be foundational to climate disaster recovery, drew on neuroaesthetics, environmental psychology, and place attachment theory to demonstrate that beauty in the built environment is vital for supporting mental health and resilience in climate-displaced communities. Dr. Neumark's participatory research established that intentional acts of beautification provide tangible ways for people to express complex emotions, cope with uncertainty, grieve loss, and actively make home while building community resilience. Case studies from post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, Palestinian refugee camps, the Maldives, and Indonesia illustrated how community-driven beautification helps people recover from climate trauma and transform shelters into meaningful homes. Recognising beauty as a core component of climate response requires moving beyond victimhood narratives and rethinking what constitutes foundational human needs in crisis contexts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Climate-related displacement causes profound mental health impacts including post-traumatic stress disorder and solastalgia (deep emotional distress from environmental change and loss of place), yet climate adaptation and disaster recovery responses have largely overlooked the role of aesthetics in creating a sense of home and supporting psychological recovery from climate trauma.
- Neuroaesthetics research and environmental psychology demonstrate that beauty in the built environment directly supports climate-displaced populations' mental health by improving learning, emotional regulation, social behaviour, fostering a sense of coherence and security after environmental disruption, and helping temporary shelters "feel like home," which is vital for wellbeing in the face of climate-induced loss.
- Post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans demonstrates that focusing on aesthetics in early stages of climate disaster recovery, through simple acts like landscaping, restoring shutters, and repainting homes, signals hope, attracts residents back, inspires collective rebuilding efforts, and empowers communities to "reclaim their lives" after climate catastrophe.
- Climate-displaced communities worldwide, from Palestinian refugee camps facing water scarcity and rising temperatures to the Maldives designing floating cities for sea-level rise to Indonesian tsunami survivors building earthquake-resistant homes, consistently engage in beautification practices that transform shelters into culturally meaningful spaces, demonstrating that aesthetics are a universal response to climate displacement regardless of resource constraints.
- Aesthetic interventions in climate displacement contexts address multiple layers of mental health impact: alleviating solastalgia through place-making, processing climate grief through creative expression, countering PTSD symptoms by establishing safety and beauty, rebuilding identity fractured by environmental loss, and fostering post-traumatic growth through community-driven transformation of the built environment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Mental health and trauma-informed climate response:** Climate adaptation practitioners, disaster recovery specialists, and mental health professionals should recognise aesthetics as an evidence-based intervention for addressing solastalgia, post-traumatic stress, and grief associated with climate displacement. Beauty in the built environment should be integrated into climate adaptation strategies, disaster recovery protocols, and post-displacement mental health programming as a core therapeutic tool rather than a decorative afterthought.
- **Community-driven and culturally grounded design:** Climate response organizations should prioritize participatory design processes that engage climate-displaced communities in beautifying their environments according to their own cultural values and aesthetic preferences. This includes partnering with local leaders, artists, and artisans; using locally available and culturally relevant materials; and ensuring that climate-resilient housing designs (such as floating cities, tsunami-resistant homes, or climate-adapted shelters) incorporate cultural symbolism, traditional patterns, and community-identified beauty rather than imposing external standards.
- **Early-stage integration in climate disaster recovery:** Disaster recovery planners and humanitarian responders should integrate aesthetic considerations from the earliest stages of climate disaster response, following the Beacon of Hope model where immediate attention to beautification through landscaping, painting, and restoration signaled hope and catalyzed community return and collective rebuilding. Climate recovery strategies should allocate resources for beautification alongside structural repairs, recognizing aesthetics as necessary for psychological recovery and community mobilization.
- **Addressing equity and power dynamics:** Climate justice advocates and practitioners must recognise that power dynamics, privilege, and resource access shape who can participate in beautification and whose aesthetic preferences are valued in climate-displaced communities. Climate response interventions should address inequities in resource distribution, ensure representation of marginalized groups in design decisions, and use trauma-informed, culturally relevant approaches that are accessible regardless of available resources.
- **Capacity building for climate-resilient aesthetic design:** Training programs for climate adaptation professionals, architects, urban planners, and disaster recovery workers should integrate modules on neuroaesthetics, environmental psychology, place attachment theory, trauma-informed design, and participatory design methodologies specific to climate displacement contexts. Cross-sectoral collaboration between climate scientists, mental health professionals, designers, and community organisers can foster holistic approaches that recognise aesthetics as integral to climate resilience and recovery.

Dheisheh Camp home interior, West Bank.

Photo: Nizar ALayasa, 2024

Presentations

Grassroots organization Beacon of Hope brought neighbors together to rebuild following mass destruction by Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Photo: Beacon of Hope, 2009

Beauty in the Built Environment & Community Resilience: Clark Visiting Scholars Study Group

Dr. Devora Neumark and Stephanie Acker
Clark University, Integration and Belonging Hub • March 21, 2024

BEAUTY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT | THIRD-REALM BEAUTY | COMMUNITY RESILIENCE | CLIMATE DISPLACEMENT | BEACON OF HOPE | POST-DISASTER RECOVERY | HURRICANE KATRINA

SUMMARY

This study group session with visiting scholars at Clark University's Integration and Belonging Hub explored how to use the post-Hurricane Katrina Beacon of Hope case study to identify and demonstrate implications for a policy brief on community resilience. Dr. Neumark and Stephanie Acker presented research on the role of home beautification in promoting community resilience in climate displacement contexts, drawing on Dr. Neumark's 2014 interview with Denise Thornton (Beacon of Hope founder) and a follow-up July 2023 conversation with Denise Thornton, Dr. Neumark, and Stephanie Acker. The presentation demonstrated how Beacon of Hope's grassroots initiative developed neighbourhoods through mapping conditions, educating residents, and empowering local leaders, with immediate attention to home beautification proving "key to everything." Simple acts of landscaping, planting flowers, restoring shutters, and painting exterior walls helped residents recapture what was lost, signaled hope for rebuilding, attracted people back to neighbourhoods marked for destruction, and fostered community unity. Visiting scholars provided feedback emphasizing the importance of power dynamics and equity in community resilience, the need to pre-empt challenges related to post-disaster capitalism and neo-liberal planning, centring community and grassroots voices in all decision-making phases, and addressing the continuum from short-term shelter to permanent rehoming.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Community resilience in climate displacement contexts is multidimensional, relying on five key components: social capital (bonds, networks, and trust), supportive physical environment (beauty, functionality, dignity), economic recovery (livelihoods, resources, financial stability), psychosocial wellbeing (mental health support, coping mechanisms, emotional recovery), and inclusive decision-making, governance, and communication.

Beacon of Hope's post-Hurricane Katrina success demonstrates that immediate attention to home beautification can be foundational for disaster recovery. Founder Denise Thornton stated this "was key to everything," with simple acts like landscaping, planting flowers, restoring shutters, and painting exterior walls serving multiple critical functions: signaling hope for rebuilding, helping residents recapture what was lost, attracting people back to neighbourhoods marked for government destruction, and fostering community unity that inspired collective planning for return.

The visiting scholars emphasized that community resilience policy must address power, equity, and grassroots leadership. Effective policy briefs should explicitly address how power dynamics impact resource allocation in post-disaster contexts, pre-empt challenges related to post-disaster capitalism and neo-liberal beautification, centre community and grassroots voices in all decision-making phases, and address the full continuum from temporary shelter to permanent rehoming including both individual and communal spaces.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **The study group explored community resilience as an interconnected system rather than a hierarchy of needs**, examining how Beacon of Hope's beautification approach simultaneously strengthened five interdependent components: social capital (neighbourhood bonds and trust), physical environment (dignity and visual coherence), economic recovery (local resources and stability), psychosocial wellbeing (emotional healing and hope), and inclusive governance (community-led decision-making). This framework challenges linear disaster recovery models that treat aesthetic considerations as secondary to material needs.
- **Beacon of Hope's post-Hurricane Katrina success demonstrates that immediate attention to home beautification can be foundational for disaster recovery.** Founder Denise Thornton stated this "was key to everything," with simple acts like landscaping, planting flowers, restoring shutters, and painting exterior walls serving multiple critical functions: signaling hope for rebuilding, helping residents recapture what was lost, attracting people back to neighbourhoods marked for government destruction, and fostering community unity that inspired collective planning for return.
- **Visiting scholars emphasized that community resilience policy must address power, equity, and grassroots leadership.** Effective policy briefs should explicitly address how power dynamics impact resource allocation in post-disaster contexts, pre-empt challenges related to post-disaster capitalism and neo-liberal beautification, centre community and grassroots voices in all decision-making phases, and address the full continuum from temporary shelter to permanent rehoming including both individual and communal spaces.

Flooding in Sindh Province. Residents carry belongings across their flooded neighbourhoods, Sindh Province, Pakistan.

Photo: Fareed Khan/Associated Press, 2022

Beauty in the Built Environment: Enhancing Community Resilience in the Context of Climate Migration

Dr. Devora Neumark and Stephanie Acker
American Society of Adaptation Professionals • March 27, 2024

HOME BEAUTIFICATION | CLIMATE MIGRATION | COMMUNITY RESILIENCE | THIRD REALM BEAUTY | AESTHETIC EQUITY

SUMMARY

Beauty in the built environment and everyday acts of home beautification play a critical role in strengthening individual and community resilience in contexts of climate displacement. Dr. Neumark's initial interview with Denise Thornton in 2014 and the subsequent conversation in July 2023, which included Denise Thornton, Dr. Neumark, and Stephanie Acker, highlighted how an early focus on beautification efforts through "simple acts" of landscaping the front yard, planting the same flowers as were there prior to the hurricane, restoring shutters, and applying new paint on the exterior of the house "set an example for the entire community and was instrumental in attracting people back to the neighbourhood." Collaborative research with Nizar ALayasa in Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank has shown how residents have planted gardens that provide relief from the impacts of global warming. Interviews with residents highlighted how acts of beautification including planting gardens helped support several processes necessary for healing: 1) personal agency to cope with a lack of control, 2) the use of the physical to express complexity, and 3) remembering and honouring one's past home and creating home anew. Drawing on these case studies, this lecture emphasised the importance of aesthetics in building community resilience, promoting recovery, cultural continuity, and human dignity in the face of loss, while highlighting the need to address power and privilege to ensure aesthetic equity in displacement and recovery contexts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Increasing cases of extreme weather events and other climate change not only destroy physical infrastructures but also disrupt social, cultural, and political landscapes, exacerbating pre-existing problems and deepening existing inequities.

Analysis of research on refugee homemaking provides evidence from around the world of refugees modifying their surroundings to create beauty even in temporary conditions. This research illustrates how deliberate attempts to make something beautiful, what art philosopher Arthur Danto termed "Third Realm Beauty", can play a vital role in displacement and recovery processes, with the potential to contribute to broader objectives of sustainable recovery, individual and community empowerment, and the protection of human rights amidst the challenges of climate-induced displacement.

In post-Katrina New Orleans, Dr. Neumark's interviews with Beacon of Hope founder Denise Thornton in 2014 and in July 2023, the latter of which also included Stephanie Acker, showed how including home beautification early on in relief initiatives through "simple acts" such as landscaping the front yard, planting the same flowers as were there prior to the hurricane, restoring shutters, and applying new paint on the exterior of the house helped signal that "there is hope here. We can rebuild." Focusing on aesthetics not only inspired hope and decisions to return to the neighbourhood but also came with mental health benefits, where physical acts of home beautification helped ease the disorientation caused by the loss of home.

Collaborative research with Nizar ALayasa in Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank demonstrates how gardens function as sites of climate adaptation, cultural memory, and psychosocial refuge despite overcrowding and water scarcity. Acts of beautification are a way to exercise personal agency in a context of limited control over everyday life and serve as a physical outlet to express complex emotions. Caring for gardens also allowed participants to connect with memories of their occupied villages, providing them with a means to honour the loss of their homes while creating home anew.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Beauty in early response initiatives:** Humanitarian response actors should integrate aesthetics early on in recovery processes and support low-cost, community-led beautification initiatives, such as gardens, public gathering spaces, and home personalisation, as part of psychosocial programming.
- **Prioritise aesthetics as integral to recovery and climate resilience:** Architects and designers should integrate aesthetics, greenery, colour, and opportunities for personalisation into emergency housing, transitional shelters, and permanent reconstruction, recognising beauty as a fundamental human need rather than a luxury.
- **Integrate beauty into cross-sectoral resilience frameworks:** Policy makers should embed aesthetics and community participation into climate adaptation and refugee policy frameworks, recognising that aesthetics contribute not only to emotional wellbeing but also to social capital, family stability, improved governance, and even economic recovery.
- **Design for agency and participation:** Climate disaster response and refugee support organizations should centre community voices, supporting local decision-making and governance through community-based processes that promote local ownership and agency. Power and privilege need to be addressed in resilience planning to ensure beautification and recovery efforts are aesthetically equitable and inclusive.
- **Enabling conditions:** Urban planners and local governments should create enabling conditions (micro-grants, access to materials, water access for gardens) that allow residents to actively shape and beautify their environments, recognising that access to beauty is a fundamental human need and a matter of aesthetic equity.

Residents of Dheisheh and Al Azza refugee camps planted gardens and decorated their homes, grounding themselves in the present and expressing themselves through acts of beautification. Garden of Musa Al-ayasa in Dheisheh Refugee Camp, West Bank.

Photo: Nizar ALayasa, 2023

How Aesthetics and Beauty in the Built Environment Enhance the Well-Being, Dignity, and Resilience of People in Humanitarian Crises

Stephanie Acker and Dr. Devora Neumark
Global Shelter Cluster • June 14, 2024

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS | BUILT ENVIRONMENT | BEAUTY AND BEAUTIFICATION | AESTHETICS | REFUGEES | WELLBEING | DIGNITY | RESILIENCE | THIRD REALM BEAUTY | POSTMEMORY | NEUROAESTHETICS | COMMUNITY DIALOGUES | SHELTER AND SETTLEMENTS | PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS

SUMMARY

This presentation examined the role of beauty and aesthetics in the built environment for Palestinian refugees living in protracted displacement in the Dheisheh and Al Azza refugee camps in the West Bank. Drawing on three methodological strands, including Dr. Neumark's research-creation study involving participatory, arts-based conversations with first, second, and third generation forcibly displaced individuals resettled to Canada, a desk research review of nearly 100 published articles on refugee homemaking and shelter beautification across displacement contexts led by Stephanie Acker, and 30 community dialogues conducted by Nizar ALayasa with residents in their gardens and homes in the two camps, the presentation applied a trauma-informed framework and insights from neuroaesthetics research, including conversations with US psychiatrist Dr. Curt Thompson, who specialises in neurobiology. Findings demonstrate that acts of beautification, including gardening, embroidery, and painting, ground individuals in the present moment to reduce anxiety and enable the imagination of a different future, restore personal agency and support the shift from "what has been done to me" to "what I can do" as described by philosopher Susan Brison, and provide a physical medium through which to sense and express complex emotions that cannot yet be put into words. Beautification also connects generations through postmemory, a concept developed by Marianne Hirsch, allowing families to honour past homes while remaking home in displacement. Drawing on Arthur Danto's assertion that beauty is not an option for life but a necessary condition for it, the presentation argued that aesthetics in the built environment are vital to dignity, identity, and post-traumatic growth, and warrant greater attention in humanitarian practice and policy.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

As articulated by Alexis, a participant in Dr. Neumark's research-creation project *Home Beautiful Revisited* (2010), "as refugees, we lose our sense of beauty, and when that happens, we lose our sense of everything. Of life itself." Through acts of home beautification, the pain of the loss of home is intricately absorbed by, and into, the aesthetic experience, making aesthetics in the built environment vital to dignity, identity, and recovery, and not dismissible as merely decorative or superficial.

Drawing on insights from neuroaesthetics research and conversations with psychiatrist Dr. Curt Thompson, who specialises in neurobiology, the presentation demonstrates that acts of beautification ground individuals in the present moment, reducing anxiety about the past and enabling the imagination of a different future. Whether tending a garden, caring for a family heirloom, or surrounding oneself with colour and flowers, these acts create a tangible sense of relaxation, stability, and hope that has measurable benefits for trauma recovery and psychosocial wellbeing.

Building on psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun's framework of post-traumatic growth, acts of beautification restore personal agency in contexts of profound powerlessness by enabling a narrative shift from "what has been done to me" to "what I can do." Even simple acts, such as using scissors, a watering can, or basic woodworking tools to infuse a space with one's own identity and taste, serve as a therapeutic medium through which displaced individuals can sense and express complex emotions that cannot yet be put into words.

Beautification sustains intergenerational resilience through postmemory, a concept developed by Marianne Hirsch to describe how subsequent generations inherit and carry the collective and cultural trauma of those who experienced displacement before them. When families beautify their current homes with soil, trees, or objects carried from their villages of origin, these acts help younger generations connect with their cultural roots and identities while transforming inherited loss into creative expression, continuity, and renewed belonging.

At the community level, beautification promotes resilience, builds social capital, fosters belonging, and serves as a collective expression of cultural identity and hope. As articulated by participants in the Dheisheh and Al Azza refugee camps, caring for and beautifying one's home and shared spaces is also an active assertion of the right of refugees to live in a clean, beautiful environment, affirming that aesthetics in the built environment are not a luxury but a fundamental human right warranting greater attention in humanitarian practice and policy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Recognise beautification as a trauma-informed coping mechanism:** Humanitarian and refugee-support practitioners should recognise beautification practices as trauma-informed coping mechanisms rooted in neuroaesthetics, integrating opportunities for aesthetic expression into psychosocial programming. Drawing on Dr. Curt Thompson's insights, practitioners should understand that grounding individuals in the present moment through acts of beautification is not incidental but a neurobiologically supported pathway to reducing anxiety, building hope, and supporting trauma recovery.
- **Design enabling environments based on neurobiological evidence:** Shelter and camp management actors should understand that restricting residents' ability to garden, paint, decorate, and personalise their living spaces is not a neutral policy decision but one with measurable neurobiological consequences. Policies governing shelter modification should be evaluated against evidence from neuroaesthetics showing that aesthetic self-expression directly supports emotional regulation, reduces chronic stress responses, and enhances psychosocial wellbeing.
- **Integrate aesthetics as a therapeutic tool for post-traumatic growth:** Mental health and protection professionals should incorporate aesthetic and hands-on practices, such as gardening, craftwork, embroidery, and spatial personalisation, into therapeutic and community wellbeing initiatives. Drawing on Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun's framework of post-traumatic growth, practitioners should recognise that these acts support a critical narrative shift from "what has been done to me" to "what I can do," enabling displaced individuals to reclaim agency and identity beyond the refugee label.
- **Embed aesthetics within intergenerational programming:** Practitioners working with displaced families should recognise the role of beautification in sustaining intergenerational resilience through postmemory, as described by Marianne Hirsch. Programming that supports families in beautifying their homes and shared spaces, particularly through acts that connect present homes to places of origin, can help younger generations build cultural identity, process inherited trauma, and develop positive coping mechanisms.
- **Adopt a strengths-based lens across all displacement programming:** All practitioners working in displacement contexts should actively counter narratives that frame refugees solely through trauma and loss, recognising instead that beautification practices are evidence of creativity, agency, and cultural continuity. Organisations should audit their programming and communications for deficit-based framing and replace it with approaches that foreground refugees as resourceful cultural agents whose aesthetic practices are a source of resilience, identity, and post-traumatic growth.

Home Beautification and Hope: Stories from Palestinian Refugees in the West Bank

Dr. Devora Neumark, Stephanie Acker and Nizar ALayasa • Refugee Care Conference • Centre for Trauma, Asylum, and Refugees (CTAR) - University of Essex • June 19, 2024

HOME BEAUTIFICATION · THIRD-REALM BEAUTY · AESTHETICS · BUILT ENVIRONMENT · DHEISHEH · AL-AZZA · DIGNITY · NEUROAESTHETICS · POSTMEMORY · TRAUMA-INFORMED · PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING · AGENCY · COMMUNITY · RESILIENCE · PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH · PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS

Dheisheh Camp home interior, West Bank.

Photo: Nizar ALayasa, 2024

SUMMARY

This presentation at the Refugee Care Conference explored how home beautification supports psychosocial wellbeing, resilience, and hope among Palestinian refugees in protracted displacement in the West Bank. Drawing on Dr. Neumark's research-creation with forcibly displaced individuals, desk research examining beautification across displacement contexts, and 30 community-driven dialogues led by Palestinian storyteller Nizar ALayasa in Dheisheh and Al-Azza refugee camps, the presentation centred Palestinian voices and experiences. Nizar pre-recorded a video introduction in Arabic with English subtitles, modelling how to centre lived experience and create accessible presentation formats that honour participants' voices and agency despite language barriers. Using a trauma-informed framework and neuroaesthetics research by Dr. Curt Thompson, findings demonstrated that beautification practices including gardening, embroidery, and spatial personalisation help residents occupy themselves positively, create peace and stability, exercise agency, and process complex emotions that cannot be put into words. Residents shared how they brought soil and trees from pre-1948 homes, using physical objects to sustain "postmemory" across generations, honour past homes while remaking home in displacement, and express their rights to a decent environment. The presentation argued that aesthetics in the built environment are not superficial but, as Arthur Danto asserts, a necessary condition for life itself.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Centring Palestinian voices through participatory methodology is vital to dignity-centred refugee research and practice. Nizar ALayasa, a Palestinian storyteller and trusted community member, led 30 dialogues in residents' gardens and homes in Dheisheh and Al-Azza camps, and pre-recorded a video introduction in Arabic with English subtitles for the conference presentation. This approach modelled how to honour lived experience, create accessible presentation formats despite language barriers, and position refugees as knowledge holders and co-presenters rather than research subjects.

Beautification practices ground displaced individuals in the present moment, reducing anxiety and enabling hope for the future. Palestinian residents described how caring for flowers "occupies us positively," creates "a sense of peace and stability," and provides "mental peace" and "relaxation." Dr. Curt Thompson's neuroaesthetics research explains that beautification activities prevent anxiety about the past by keeping individuals present, and the more time spent free from anxiety, the more one can imagine a different future.

Simple acts of beautification provide agency and therapeutic processing when control has been stripped away. Using basic tools like scissors, watering cans, and coloured leaves, residents create beauty and infuse spaces with their own identity and taste. Professor Susan Brison's trauma theory suggests that these acts shift focus from "what has been done to me" to "what I have done and can do," supporting post-traumatic growth. Hand embroidery, gardening, and spatial personalisation allow residents to process complex emotions and stress that cannot be put into words.

Physical objects from pre-1948 homes sustain intergenerational resilience through "postmemory." Residents shared how their parents brought soil and prickly pear trees from evacuated villages, keeping memories alive across generations who never lived in the original homes. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory explains how second and third generation trauma survivors absorb memories from parents and grandparents. Children who participate in beautification efforts show increased coping mechanisms and wellbeing, and connecting past homes with present beautification practices supports healing, preserves identity, and enables younger generations to remake home while honouring collective history.

Home beautification is an expression of human rights and dignity, not superficial decoration. As resident Asmaa Izghari stated, "organizing and caring for the house is an expression of our rights as refugees inside the camps to have a decent environment... From my point of view, there is nothing more." Beautification practices uphold cultural identity, build community resilience and social capital, and assert the right to live with dignity and aesthetic pleasure even in protracted displacement. The message "there is nothing more" emphasizes that creating beauty is foundational, not frivolous.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Position refugees as expert advisors in policy development:** Policymakers and humanitarian organisations should engage displaced individuals as expert advisors and co-designers of refugee response policies, not merely as beneficiaries or consultation subjects. Policy development processes should prioritise lived experience by compensating refugees for their expertise, creating accessible participation formats (such as video presentations in participants' own languages), and ensuring that those most affected by policies have decision-making power in their design.
- **Centre lived experience in research, advocacy, and conference spaces:** Researchers, practitioners, and conference organisers should create accessible presentation formats that honour linguistic diversity and agency, such as pre-recorded videos in participants' own languages with subtitles. This approach, modelled by Nizar ALayasa's Arabic video introduction, positions refugees as knowledge holders and co-presenters rather than research subjects, ensuring their voices and perspectives shape how their experiences are understood and shared.
- **Integrate beautification into trauma-informed psychosocial support:** Mental health and protection professionals should incorporate hands-on aesthetic practices such as gardening, embroidery, and spatial personalisation into therapeutic programming. These activities ground individuals in the present moment, reduce anxiety about past trauma, provide agency when control has been stripped away, and allow processing of complex emotions that cannot be put into words.
- **Support intergenerational healing through postmemory practices:** Community wellbeing programs should recognise how beautification connects generations through postmemory, allowing families to honour past homes while remaking home in displacement. Practitioners should support children's participation in beautification efforts, facilitate intergenerational storytelling through physical objects and spatial practices, and understand that preserving identity across generations strengthens resilience and healing.
- **Remove restrictions that prevent personalisation and self-expression:** Camp management and shelter actors should eliminate policies that restrict residents from gardening, painting, decorating, and modifying their living spaces. Recognising that home beautification expresses the right to a decent environment and that creating beauty is foundational to dignity, practitioners should actively enable rather than constrain residents' efforts to infuse spaces with their own identity, taste, and cultural practices.

Individuals displaced by an earthquake in Peru put effort into modifying their temporary homes by adding bright colours and decorative elements. Temporary shelters, Peru.

Photos: Elizabeth Wagemann, 2017

Beauty and Beautification in Refugees' Lives and Their Implication for Refugee Policy

Stephanie Acker • Monash Summer School • July 3, 2024

BEAUTY BEAUTIFICATION AESTHETICS BUILT ENVIRONMENT THIRD-REALM BEAUTY REFUGEE POLICY MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS ESSENTIAL NEEDS NON-ESSENTIAL NEEDS BASIC NEEDS HOLISTIC WELLBEING NEUROAESTHETICS DURABLE SOLUTIONS

SUMMARY

Note: This presentation was delivered by Stephanie Acker as a solo presenter at Monash Summer School. Limited documentation of the actual event is available; this summary is based on presentation slides without access to a script or recording.

The implicit reliance on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs within refugee policy categorises beauty and aesthetics as "non-essential" secondary needs, failing to reflect refugees' lived realities. This teaching presentation challenged participants to examine the distinction between "essential" and "non-essential" needs through interactive exercises, asking what "so-called non-essential" objects they would take if forcibly displaced and how refugee stories would change if beauty were assumed essential. Drawing from mixed-methods research including desk research, Dr. Devora Neumark's research-creation, and community-driven dialogues led by Nizar ALayasa in West Bank refugee camps the presentation demonstrated that refugees worldwide consistently beautify and personalise their homes even in protracted displacement. Evidence from neuroaesthetics and refugee contexts showed that beautification reduces anxiety, fosters hope, provides agency, and strengthens social capital and cultural identity. The presentation called for transformation in humanitarian language and policy frameworks to recognise beauty as foundational rather than peripheral, urging a shift from measuring durable solutions exclusively towards evaluating holistic wellbeing, with refugees positioned as central drivers of policy decisions shaping their everyday lives.

Interactive exercises challenge assumptions about "essential" versus "non-essential" needs by asking participants to identify the one "so-called non-essential" object they would take if forcibly displaced and to reconsider refugee stories through the lens that beauty in the built environment is essential. These exercises reveal how deeply categorisations of needs as "basic" or "luxury" shape humanitarian responses, raising the critical question: who decided that beauty is non-essential?

With refugee numbers continuing to grow globally (37.6 million refugees, doubled in a decade) and durable solutions found for only 2-3% of refugees annually, integrating beauty into humanitarian response has significant potential to support physical and mental wellbeing and strengthen community resilience in contexts of protracted displacement.

Mixed-methods research indicates that acts of beautification help ground refugees in the present moment, reducing anxiety about the past and enabling them to imagine different futures. Beautification serves as a way to exert agency in situations where there is limited control over everyday life, helping refugees process their current situations and encouraging hope and reimagination of possibilities.

Beautification initiatives generate community-level benefits including promoting community resilience, building social capital through collective gardening and mural projects, upholding cultural identity and human rights, and creating spaces where residents express their right to a decent environment and pass values of home care to future generations.

Refugee policy needs fundamental transformation to integrate beauty as a central component of humanitarian efforts, position refugees as central drivers of policy solutions rather than passive beneficiaries, and shift focus from exclusively measuring durable solutions (return, resettlement, local integration) towards measuring holistic wellbeing including psychosocial health, agency, environmental satisfaction, and cultural expression.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Reframe categorisations of needs beyond Maslow's hierarchy:** Policymakers should reject the assumption that aesthetics, beauty, and personalisation are luxuries that can be deferred until after basic survival needs are met. Policy frameworks should recognise the role of beauty in the built environment in fostering safety, dignity, and psychosocial stability as integral to wellbeing rather than peripheral to it, moving beyond implicit reliance on Maslow's outdated hierarchy.
- **Transform refugee policy language and narrative frameworks:** Humanitarian agencies, donors, and implementing partners should transform the language used in refugee response frameworks by eliminating distinctions that frame aesthetics as "non-essential" while deconstructing victim narratives and framing refugees as creative and innovative agents who actively beautify and personalise their environments even in protracted displacement.
- **Position refugees as central decision-makers in design processes:** Camp managers, shelter coordinators, and designers should position refugees as central drivers of decision-making, ensuring that residents have the autonomy and materials to modify and co-create their living environments. Participatory design processes should not be symbolic consultations but structured mechanisms that transfer meaningful aesthetic control to displaced communities.
- **Fund and support community-led beautification initiatives:** Humanitarian actors should intentionally fund and support community-led beautification initiatives, including gardening, mural projects, craft practices, and shared public space improvements, as resilience-building interventions that reduce anxiety, restore agency, and strengthen social capital, rather than treating such efforts as informal or unauthorised activities.
- **Integrate holistic wellbeing indicators in success metrics:** Policymakers and evaluators should shift success metrics away from an exclusive focus on durable solutions (return, resettlement, local integration) and instead incorporate holistic wellbeing indicators including psychosocial health, sense of agency, environmental satisfaction, community cohesion, and cultural expression that better reflect the lived realities of protracted displacement affecting 97-98% of refugees annually.

Casa Pintada participant / community member uses paint roller to add colourful designs on his house front.

Photo: Blumont Group, 2022

Hope, Home, and Beauty in the Built Environment: Why Aesthetics Matter in Displacement Contexts

Stephanie Acker and Dr. Devora Neumark • Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), U.S. Department of State • Virtual Brown Bag • August 22, 2024

HOPE HOME BEAUTY BUILT ENVIRONMENT AESTHETICS THIRD-REALM BEAUTY BEAUTIFICATION MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS POSTMEMORY TRAUMA AGENCY MENTAL HEALTH HUMAN RIGHTS SOCIAL CAPITAL INTEGRATION CASA PINTADA

SUMMARY

This presentation to the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Virtual Brown Bag series drew from mixed-methods research including Dr. Devora Neumark's participatory arts-based research with forcibly displaced individuals in Canada, Stephanie Acker's desk research examining beautification across nearly 100 published articles on displacement contexts, and community-led dialogues by Nizar ALayasa in West Bank refugee camps. The presentation demonstrated that intentional acts of beautification in the built environment matter profoundly for displaced individuals and communities, supporting wellbeing at both individual and community levels. Acts of beautification create pathways for refugees to process trauma through physical expression, reclaim a sense of control and agency, ground themselves in the present to imagine new futures, and connect generations through postmemory by honouring past homes while remaking home in displacement. Community-level benefits include promoting cohesion and resilience through collective projects such as Casa Pintada in Colombia, which strengthened both bonding and bridging social capital while facilitating integration between displaced and host communities. The presentation challenged the implicit reliance on Maslow's Hierarchy in humanitarian policy, arguing that needs are not linear and that aesthetics intersect with psychosocial wellbeing, protection, shelter, and integration. It concluded with practical, low-cost steps for practitioners to embed beauty into humanitarian response in participatory, localised, and dignity-centred ways.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Beautification allows displaced individuals to process trauma and express complex emotions beyond words through physical expression. Displaced Palestinians in Al-Azza camp use gardening to beautify their surroundings and modify their spaces, creating acts of agency that restore dignity and a sense of control in contexts defined by constraint. Using simple tools like scissors and watering cans, residents ground themselves in the present moment, preventing anxiety about the past and enabling them to imagine different futures.

Intentional modification and decoration of home and space play a critical role in fostering intergenerational wellbeing and resilience. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory explains how collective and cultural trauma is inherited across generations, yet beautification practices can impact this cycle positively by transmitting coping mechanisms and sharing stories of home before displacement. Physical objects like soil and trees from pre-1948 Palestinian villages sustain connections across generations, promoting healing and preserving identity.

Beautification strengthens bonding and bridging social capital, fostering community resilience and integration. Collaborative efforts across different communities, as illustrated in the Casa Pintada project in Colombia, increased neighbourhood interactions and included displaced individuals in host communities. Aesthetics offer cross-sectoral benefits spanning psychosocial wellbeing, livelihoods, protection, and integration while upholding rights to cultural expression and participation in public life.

The marginalisation of aesthetics in humanitarian response stems partly from uncritical reliance on Maslow's Hierarchy, which ranks beauty as non-essential despite evidence that wellbeing is non-linear and relational rather than hierarchical. Common concerns about cost, cultural relativism, or signalling permanence can be mitigated through participatory, localised approaches that recognise many beautification efforts are already low-cost and community driven.

Advancing aesthetics in humanitarian practice requires documenting existing community-led initiatives like recycling programs in Kakuma refugee camp, revising policies to allow personalisation of shelters, integrating beautification into operational checklists as standard practice, and engaging artists, designers, and local actors. This demonstrates that beauty is not a luxury add-on but a scalable, dignity-centred component of humanitarian response necessary for hope, home, and human flourishing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Reframe aesthetics as psychosocial and protection infrastructure:** Humanitarian actors should recognise beautification as integral to mental health, dignity, and post-traumatic growth rather than a secondary or decorative concern. Providing resources and opportunities for displaced individuals to garden, paint, and personalise shelter functions as therapeutic outlets that foster agency, reduce anxiety, and support trauma processing through physical expression beyond words.
- **Support intergenerational healing through homemaking practices:** Programs should intentionally create space for families to modify and personalise living environments in ways that honour past homes and cultural memory. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, enabling shared aesthetic practices can strengthen identity continuity and resilience across generations, allowing children to connect with pre-displacement homes while building new lives in the present.
- **Leverage beautification to build social capital and integration:** Shelter and settlement interventions should incorporate collective aesthetic projects modelled on initiatives like Casa Pintada in Colombia, which strengthened both bonding social capital within displaced communities and bridging social capital between displaced and host populations. Beautification can operate cross-sectorally, reinforcing livelihoods, protection, integration, and community cohesion simultaneously.
- **Shift policy and funding frameworks to allow personalisation:** Policymakers and donors should critically examine how implicit reliance on Maslow's Hierarchy deprioritises aesthetics and restricts shelter modification. Allowing personalisation, including aesthetic upgrades as eligible costs, and embedding "decorate and personalise" into operational checklists can institutionalise dignity without requiring major new funding streams, recognising that many beautification efforts are already low-cost and community driven.
- **Create enabling environments for community-led beautification:** Practitioners should identify, document, and resource beautification efforts already led by displaced communities, such as recycling initiatives transforming plastic waste into decorative flowers in Kakuma refugee camp or community gardens in Palestinian camps. Providing small grants, access to materials, technical guidance, or regulatory flexibility can amplify existing creativity while reinforcing displaced individuals as agents, innovators, and cultural contributors rather than passive beneficiaries.

Current humanitarian frameworks prioritize functionality, often at the expense of aesthetic elements that support mental health, cultural identity, and resilience. Standard T-Shelters at Al Azraq Refugee Camp, Jordan.

Photo:
MIT Future Heritage Lab, 2021

Rethinking Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: The Role of Aesthetics in Shelter and Settlement Response

Dr. Devora Neumark and Stephanie Acker
Migration Working Group • November 19, 2024

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS · AESTHETICS · BUILT ENVIRONMENT · THIRD-REALM BEAUTY · BEAUTIFICATION · REFUGEE · SHELTER · NEUROAESTHETICS · MENTAL HEALTH · CULTURAL IDENTITY · COMMUNITY RESILIENCE · HUMAN RIGHTS · TRAUMA · POSTMEMORY · SUSAN BRISON · MARIANNE HIRSCH

SUMMARY

This presentation to the Migration Working Group discussed Dr. Devora Neumark and Stephanie Acker's working paper "Rethinking Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: The Role of Aesthetics in Refugee Shelter and Settlements Response," integrating recent findings from neuroscience including work by psychiatrists Dr. Curt Thompson and Dr. Monica Luci that were not included in the original publication. The presentation examined how Maslow's categorisation of "basic needs" has led humanitarian shelter projects to prioritise functionality and cost at the expense of elements that nurture mental health, cultural identity, and community resilience, resulting in bare, anonymous, standardised shelters. Drawing on mixed-methods research including Dr. Neumark's research-creation, Stephanie Acker's desk research analysing nearly 100 published articles, and community-driven dialogues in West Bank refugee camps, the presentation critiqued three key shortcomings of Maslow's framework: its static linear nature fails to reflect fluid prolonged displacement realities (average 17-year camp stays), its individualistic focus clashes with collective refugee community dynamics, and its universal framing overlooks culturally specific needs. Case studies from displaced communities in the West Bank, Peru, Colombia, and Iraq demonstrated that beautification improves mental health by grounding individuals in the present moment and reducing anticipatory anxiety, supports cultural identity and self-expression through intentional space modification, and fosters community resilience through collective initiatives like Casa Pintada and the Jeddah Camp Cash-for-Work program. Ultimately, the presentation called for aesthetics to be recognised as a fundamental human right aligned with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Humanitarian shelter design, influenced by Maslow's framework, prioritises cost and functionality over dignity and identity, resulting in what scholars call "bare shelter": anonymous and standardised structures. Tom Scott-Smith documents an architect proclaiming that refugee response requires "a shelter that meets basic needs; a shelter that is adaptable and easy to transport; a shelter that, above all, is inexpensive; it's not rocket science." This reductionist approach creates a fundamental contradiction: shelters designed as temporary emergency solutions become long-term homes averaging 17 years, yet their static, one-size-fits-all design cannot accommodate the evolving collective and culturally specific needs that emerge over protracted displacement.

Neuroscientific studies on neuroaesthetics show that environments incorporating beauty through elements like colour or cultural symbols can alleviate stress, improve mood, and foster a sense of belonging. Engaging in physical tasks like planting flowers or arranging a home helps ground individuals in the present moment, reducing anticipatory anxiety and offering reprieve from fear about the future or ruminations on the past. Palestinian refugees in Al-Azza camp describe how caring for flowers "occupies us positively" and creates "peace and stability." This matters because people envision the future based on their past and present; prolonged anxiety or dwelling on unsafe memories limits the ability to imagine improvement, which is key to recovery in displacement.

Physical objects carried from lost homes serve as tangible bridges across generations, enabling what Marianne Hirsch terms postmemory: the transmission of cultural trauma and identity to those who never experienced the original displacement. Abla Abdel Hamid's mother brought soil from Beit Jibrin in 1948; Abla now plants roses in that soil and tends a prickly pear tree from the village, stating "I cannot do without it; it remains in my memory every day." Families in Peru transformed temporary post-earthquake shelters with "bright colours, designed fences, decorative elements, and familiar materials" despite knowing they faced eviction, showing these homes were "more than mere shelters" even in acknowledged temporariness.

The Cash-for-Work tent rehabilitation programme in Jeddah Camp, Iraq, demonstrates how aesthetic interventions can simultaneously address multiple humanitarian objectives. Tunnel tents built in 2016 received no maintenance until a 2019 programme engaged primarily female heads of households through focus groups to learn tent repair, improving both perception of safety and aesthetics while empowering women, creating jobs, and teaching new skills. As researchers observed, "one would assume that in conditions of conflict and crisis, art is secondary. What we witnessed at the camp is that creative expression is as necessary as any other primary commodity," directly challenging Maslow's hierarchy by proving aesthetics functions as fundamental infrastructure rather than optional enhancement.

Framing aesthetics as a fundamental human right, protected under Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (right to participate in cultural life), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the Global Compact on Refugees, shifts shelter design from survival minimums to dignity-centred environments emphasising cultural participation, self-determination, and identity preservation. This rights-based approach counters common objections about resource scarcity, cultural relativism, or signalling permanence by recognising that many beautification efforts are already low-cost, community-driven, and culturally specific. The question is not whether aesthetics should be included, but whether humanitarian actors will support refugees' existing efforts to create beauty or continue restricting personalisation through policies that prioritise standardisation over agency.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Integrate aesthetics into humanitarian shelter programming from the outset:** Humanitarian shelter actors and camp coordinators should recognise aesthetics as integral to mental health, agency, and resilience rather than treating beautification as secondary to "basic needs." Small investments in personalisation, gardening, colour, and spatial flexibility can ground individuals in the present moment, reduce anticipatory anxiety, and support trauma recovery by shifting focus from "what has been done to me" to "what I can do" (Brison).
- **Design shelters that are adaptable and culturally flexible:** Architects and urban planners should move beyond purely standardised shelter models to create structures that allow residents to modify, decorate, and personalise their spaces in ways that reflect cultural practices and collective living patterns. Recognising that refugees live in supposedly "temporary" shelters for an average of 17 years, shelter design must accommodate evolving needs over protracted displacement rather than prioritising only cost and transportability.
- **Facilitate collective beautification initiatives that build social cohesion:** Refugee response NGOs and community-based organisations should support community-led projects such as Casa Pintada in Colombia or the Jeddah Camp Cash-for-Work tent rehabilitation programme in Iraq, which demonstrate how aesthetic collaboration simultaneously addresses multiple objectives including safety improvements, skills development, income generation, empowerment of marginalised groups like female-headed households, and strengthening of social capital and informal support networks.
- **Revise funding and evaluation frameworks to include dignity and cultural expression:** Policymakers and donors should expand evaluation criteria beyond survival metrics to include psychosocial and identity-based outcomes such as cultural participation, self-determination, and sense of belonging. Recognise aesthetics, dignity, and cultural expression as legitimate components of wellbeing rather than "non-essential" luxuries, countering objections about resource scarcity by noting that many beautification efforts are already low-cost and community driven.
- **Adopt a rights-based approach that frames aesthetics as fundamental:** International agencies and host governments should recognise aesthetics as integral to dignity and resilience under Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the Global Compact on Refugees. Supporting residents' ability to personalise and beautify spaces enhances agency and long-term stability rather than fostering dependency, reframing shelter policy from minimal survival towards environments that sustain identity, cultural memory, and wellbeing.

Casa Pintada used rehabilitation projects to build trust among neighbors helping to bridge divides between host communities and refugees. Painted staircase, Colombia.

Photo: Blumont Group, 2022

The Healing Power of Home Beautification in Displacement

Dr. Devora Neumark and Stephanie Acker
University of Essex, MA in Refugee Care • November 20, 2024

HOME BEAUTIFICATION · BEAUTIFICATION · AESTHETICS · BUILT ENVIRONMENT · THIRD-REALM BEAUTY · ADVERSITY-ACTIVATED DEVELOPMENT · AAD · PSYCHOSOCIAL MEANINGS OF HOME · POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH · COPING MECHANISMS · AGENCY · RESILIENCE · TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE · IDENTITY · BELONGING

SUMMARY

This interactive seminar at the University of Essex explored the healing power of home beautification in contexts of forced displacement, arguing that aesthetics in the built environment play a vital role in restoring identity, dignity, and belonging. Drawing on the framework of Adversity-Activated Development (AAD) introduced by Professor Dr. Monica Luci in a previous session, psychosocial theory, and lived experiences across multiple displacement settings, the presentation reframed beautification as a catalyst for post-traumatic growth rather than superficial luxury. The seminar included group activities where participants reflected on the emotional and symbolic significance of home, examined case studies demonstrating how aesthetic engagement fosters innovation in coping (Bilal's container gardening), reclaims agency (Wagemann's observations of personalised shelters in Peru), shifts perspectives (Labiba's collective flower care), and strengthens social connection (Casa Pintada in Colombia, Jeddah Camp rehabilitation in Iraq). Participants applied AAD principles to a fictitious case study, considering interventions that respect culture, foster resilience, and work within environmental constraints. The seminar addressed practical and ethical considerations including cultural sensitivity, co-design, resource adaptability, and the misconception that aesthetics are secondary to survival needs, arguing instead that aesthetics sustains the human spirit as food nourishes the body. Ultimately, it called on practitioners to integrate aesthetics into refugee care as essential to holistic, trauma-informed support.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Beautification restores identity and belonging after the loss of home, which is not merely a physical structure, but a psychosocial anchor tied to safety, memory, and identity. Forced displacement fractures this foundation, often leading to depression, helplessness, and a disrupted sense of self. Acts of beautification allow displaced individuals to intentionally reshape space, restoring autonomy, dignity, and a renewed sense of belonging even in temporary or constrained environments.

Adversity-Activated Development (AAD) reframes beautification as a catalyst for post-traumatic growth rather than superficial luxury. AAD's five core components - innovation in coping mechanisms, reclaiming identity and agency, shifting perspective, empathy and social connection, and resilience-building - provide a framework for understanding how aesthetic engagement helps individuals "bounce forward" rather than merely "bounce back." Beautification transforms adversity into resilience-building opportunities through creative adaptation to new realities.

Individual acts of beautification have measurable therapeutic and psychological effects demonstrated through Palestinian refugee camp case studies. Bilal's gardening illustrates innovation in coping by adapting limited resources into self-expression and control. Wagemann's observations of brightly painted shelters in Peru show reclaiming identity and agency as families personalise temporary homes despite knowing they face eviction. Labiba's collective flower care embodies shifting perspective by focusing on what can be nurtured rather than what is lacking, transforming displacement into a space of potential and growth.

Collective beautification strengthens empathy, social capital, and integration through shared aesthetic projects. Casa Pintada in Colombia demonstrates how Venezuelan refugees working together to paint homes builds both bonding social capital within displaced communities and bridging social capital with host communities. The Jeddah Camp Cash-for-Work rehabilitation programme in Iraq equipped predominantly female-headed households with repair skills, improving shelter safety and aesthetics while creating income, empowerment, and renewed sense of capability, illustrating how beautification fosters resilience-building and collective strength.

Aesthetics must be integrated ethically and holistically into refugee care, not treated as secondary to food and shelter but recognised as crucial to dignity and psychological wellbeing. Just as food nourishes the body and shelter protects it, aesthetics sustains the human spirit, offering identity, dignity, and psychological wellbeing. Implementation must prioritise cultural sensitivity through co-design with communities, adaptability within resource constraints by supporting existing community-led efforts, and recognition that beautification complements rather than competes with other humanitarian aid, supporting holistic wellbeing in displacement contexts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Integrate beautification into psychosocial and trauma-support programming:** Humanitarian practitioners and service providers should incorporate beautification into psychosocial and trauma-support programming as a legitimate therapeutic tool rather than treating aesthetic engagement as optional. Structure opportunities for gardening, decoration, and personalisation into community programming to support post-traumatic growth and resilience in line with Adversity-Activated Development (AAD), enabling individuals to "bounce forward" through innovation in coping, reclaiming agency, and shifting perspective.
- **Expand trauma-informed care models to include environmental and aesthetic dimensions:** Mental health professionals should recognise that aesthetics sustains the human spirit just as food nourishes the body and shelter protects it. Encourage clients to actively shape and personalise their physical surroundings to reinforce agency, support identity reconstruction, and help shift focus from loss towards creative adaptation and growth, integrating beautification as a fundamental component of holistic wellbeing rather than a secondary consideration.
- **Design shelters with built-in flexibility for modification and co-creation:** Architects, planners, and shelter designers should move beyond purely functional design by incorporating adaptable surfaces, communal areas for collective projects, and policy provisions that permit aesthetic modification without bureaucratic barriers. Recognising that displaced individuals may inhabit supposedly temporary shelters for extended periods, design must allow residents to modify, decorate, and co-create their spaces to maintain identity and dignity over time.
- **Revise funding criteria to recognise aesthetics as integral to dignity and wellbeing:** Policymakers and donors should expand funding criteria and service guidelines to acknowledge aesthetics as necessary to dignity, cultural participation, and psychosocial wellbeing rather than framing it as luxury or non-essential. Policies should allow residents greater autonomy in modifying their spaces and support small-scale, community-led beautification initiatives as part of holistic refugee care, recognising that many such efforts are already occurring and require enabling rather than restricting.
- **Adopt participatory, culturally sensitive approaches through co-design:** Host governments and implementing partners should prioritise co-design projects with displaced communities to avoid imposing external standards of beauty, ensure cultural relevance, and strengthen both bonding social capital within refugee communities and bridging social capital with host populations. Listen to and engage with refugees to ensure beautification reflects their cultural values and preferences, maintaining respect and empowerment while working adaptably within resource constraints through resourcefulness and creativity.

Owner-driven reconstruction initiatives in Sindh, Pakistan helped residents regain dignity and supported cultural continuity. Residents in front of their painted homes, Sindh, Pakistan.

Photo: Catholic Relief Services (CRS), 2025

How to Make Things Much Better for Refugees Without a Massive Grant, New Elected Officials, or Enduring Decades of Burnout

Stephanie Acker and Dr. Devora Neumark
The Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI) • July 23, 2025

BEAUTY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT · BEAUTIFICATION · HOPE · HEALING · DIGNITY · CULTURAL IDENTITY · COLLECTIVE POWER · REFUGEE SELF-RELIANCE · NEUROSCIENCE · AESTHETICS · NEUROAESTHETICS · CREATIVE RESISTANCE · HUMANITARIAN PRACTICE

SUMMARY

Presented at the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative on July 23, 2025, this co-presentation by Stephanie Acker and Dr. Devora Neumark argued that beauty in the built environment is a transformative yet underutilised tool in humanitarian response. Drawing on neuroscience, including the observation that the built environment affects us within two seconds of entering a space, and on global case studies, the presentation proposes three interconnected shifts for practitioners: beauty increases hope and healing; beauty restores dignity, memory, and cultural identity; and beauty builds collective power and bridges divides. Case studies included balcony gardening in West Bank refugee camps, where residents such as Basim describe flowers as generating peace and stability for entire neighbourhoods, and owner-driven reconstruction in flood-affected Sindh, Pakistan, where participants including Qadir Bux and Raza Muhammad describe regaining not just shelter but dignity and cultural continuity. The presentation reframed beauty not as decoration but as infrastructure, and called for modest, flexible, community-led investment under the banner of “beautiful resistance.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The built environment affects us within two seconds of entering a space, yet in humanitarian contexts beauty remains systematically undervalued. The presentation challenges this, arguing that beauty need not be costly: personalisation, creativity, and care are its core ingredients, all of which displaced communities are already practising.

Rather than citing neuroaesthetics as background evidence, this presentation makes the neurological process itself the argument, walking audiences through a two-step sequence: we first sense beauty through right brain function, then interpret and make meaning of it through left brain function. This pedagogical move reframes beauty not as subjective preference but as a predictable, universal neurological event, one that occurs within two seconds of entering a space and that humanitarian design can either support or obstruct.

Aesthetic acts function as forms of creative resistance. When displaced people garden in plastic containers on balconies and at entrances, as Basim from a West Bank refugee camp describes, or hang patterned fabric over tent frames and paint murals on shared walls, they are not merely beautifying but asserting hope, agency, and refusal to be defined solely by displacement. The presentation frames this as “the beautiful resistance,” a collective stance with both personal and political dimensions.

Beauty restores dignity, memory, and cultural identity in ways that standardised shelter cannot. In flood-affected Sindh, Pakistan, owner-driven reconstruction trained local craftspeople to rebuild homes that were structurally resilient and visually rooted in local tradition. Participants described the outcome in terms of dignity regained: as Qadir Bux put it, the floods had taken not just their homes but their hope, while Raza Muhammad noted that the training gave them not just walls but their dignity back.

The presentation closes with a concrete campaign agenda it calls “the Beautiful Resistance” intended to fund refugee-led beautification pilots in camps, shelters, and crisis areas; elevating global storytelling that centres beauty, dignity, and belonging; and building the tools, evidence, and momentum needed to redefine beauty as a basic need. This moves beyond general calls for attitudinal change to specify a programme of action, positioning the humanitarian sector not as a gatekeeper of beauty but as an amplifier of what displaced communities are already creating.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Centre beauty as infrastructure, not decoration:** Humanitarian actors should fundamentally reframe how beauty is classified within response frameworks, treating it not as an aesthetic preference or supplementary add-on but as infrastructure with measurable neurological, psychosocial, and community-level effects. This shift requires revising the language of needs assessments, programme design documents, and evaluation frameworks to reflect that beauty operates within two seconds of entering a space and shapes mood, cognition, and recovery trajectories from the outset.
- **Enable owner-driven and community-led reconstruction:** Architects, shelter coordinators, and reconstruction actors should adopt owner-driven models that train and employ local craftspeople to rebuild homes that are both structurally sound and culturally expressive, following the Sindh, Pakistan example where reconstruction restored not just shelter but dignity and cultural continuity. This approach simultaneously builds local capacity, preserves cultural identity, and produces environments that residents experience as genuinely their own.
- **Fund and resource the Beautiful Resistance:** Donors and institutional funders should invest in refugee-led beautification pilots in camps, shelters, and crisis areas, providing modest, flexible funding for paint, plants, personalisation materials, and community-led mural and garden projects. The barrier to impact is not scale of investment but willingness to recognise community-driven beautification as a legitimate and fundable humanitarian intervention.
- **Elevate storytelling that centres beauty and dignity:** Communications professionals, advocacy teams, and humanitarian organisations should actively shift the narratives surrounding displacement away from deficit and victimhood framing towards stories that foreground the creativity, agency, and aesthetic practices of displaced communities. Global storytelling that centres beauty, dignity, and belonging builds the public and institutional will needed to redefine what counts as a basic need.
- **Build the evidence base to redefine basic needs:** Researchers, evaluators, and institutional leaders should commission and disseminate studies that document the impact of aesthetic interventions on wellbeing, recovery, and self-reliance outcomes in displacement contexts, building the tools, evidence, and momentum needed to make the case that beauty belongs within the definition of basic needs. Without this evidence base, calls for attitudinal change in humanitarian practice will remain aspirational rather than actionable.

Syrian refugees painted murals to improve aesthetics in Zaatari Refugee Camp. Camp residents painting a mural, Zaatari, Jordan.

Photo: Joel Artista, 2017

Beyond Survival: Aesthetics and Justice in Displacement

Dr. Devora Neumark and Stephanie Acker
Clark University: Designing Just Cities • October 2, 2025

BEAUTY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT | BEAUTIFICATION | AESTHETICS | THIRD-REALM BEAUTY | JUST CITIES | MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS | NEUROARCHITECTURE | NEUROAESTHETICS | AESTHETIC JUSTICE | PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE | CO-CREATION | AGENCY | CULTURAL IDENTITY | DIGNITY | RESILIENCE

SUMMARY

Delivered to students in Clark University's Designing Just Cities course on October 2, 2025, this co-presentation by Dr. Devora Neumark and Stephanie Acker argued that beauty and aesthetics are essential infrastructure in displacement contexts rather than optional luxuries. Challenging the implicit reliance on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in humanitarian policy, the presentation drew on neuroarchitecture research by Maleki and Bayzidi and clinical studies by Cardillo and Chatterjee, who demonstrate that beauty is "a biologically relevant stimulus with measurable cognitive and emotional effects," to establish that the built environment shapes wellbeing, stress regulation, and social cohesion within seconds of entering a space. Four global case studies, including participatory tent transformations in Jeddah Camp, Iraq; West Bank gardens tended by Palestinian refugees; Casa Pintada's collaborative house-painting across 44 neighbourhoods in Colombia; and culturally rooted reconstruction in Deh Kamangar, Pakistan, illustrated how aesthetic expression restores dignity, agency, and social cohesion. The presentation concluded by advancing aesthetic justice as a necessary foundation for designing cities built not only for survival but for flourishing.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Beauty is foundational infrastructure for designing just cities, not ornament or afterthought. Neuroscience research by Maleki and Bayzidi establishes that 95% of our decisions occur unconsciously, driven by sensory stimuli processed within two seconds of entering a space, while clinical studies by Cardillo and Chatterjee link exposure to beauty in built environments to reduced anxiety, lower cortisol levels, and better healing outcomes. These findings validate what displaced communities already practise instinctively: that aesthetic experience is biologically and socially necessary for recovery and dignity.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has shaped humanitarian shelter policy to treat aesthetics as premature or optional (at best), reinforcing what the script describes as staff attitudes like "be grateful you at least have food and shelter." In reality, needs are not sequential; belonging, dignity, and sensory wellbeing overlap with and are inseparable from survival, particularly in crisis contexts where people may inhabit supposedly temporary shelters for decades.

Four global case studies, spanning Jeddah Camp in Iraq, Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank, Casa Pintada across 44 neighbourhoods in Colombia, and Deh Kamangar in Pakistan, reveal a consistent pattern: communities across vastly different contexts instinctively prioritise aesthetic expression as foundational to recovery. In each case, residents had to navigate, resist, or collaborate with institutional control to assert their aesthetic agency, demonstrating that even within severe constraints, people create pathways to cultural expression and environmental self-determination.

Decisions about shelter design are typically made by institutions rather than residents, reinforcing power imbalances in crisis contexts. Authentic co-creation, as modelled in Kamangar where residents led aesthetic choices from the outset, requires moving beyond asking "Do you like option A or B?" to asking "What colours, patterns, and symbols represent home and healing for you?" This shift honours residents as experts in their own sensory and cultural needs rather than passive recipients of predetermined design.

Aesthetic justice is a practical necessity with measurable impacts, not merely an aspirational ideal. The Casa Pintada project reported that 95% of participants experienced improved trust and cooperation and over 90% reported advancement in social integration. Advancing aesthetic justice in just cities requires embedding neuroaesthetic insights into design standards, funding community capacity-building as infrastructure, enabling interdisciplinary collaboration between artists, planners, and residents, and actively dismantling power structures that exclude marginalised voices from design governance.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Embed aesthetics in shelter standards and planning from the outset:** Humanitarian agencies and shelter coordinators should treat aesthetics as a core component of shelter standards, embedding flexible funds and design allowances for personalisation, cultural expression, and participatory processes from the beginning of response planning. This means revising needs assessments, programme design documents, and operational guidelines to reflect that beauty shapes mood, cognition, and recovery trajectories from the moment people enter a space, and that restricting personalisation is not a neutral policy decision but one with measurable neurological and psychosocial consequences.
- **Integrate neuroaesthetic and neuroarchitecture research into design guidelines:** Urban planners, architects, and shelter designers should draw on neuroaesthetic and neuroarchitecture research, including Maleki and Bayzidi's findings on unconscious sensory processing and Cardillo and Chatterjee's clinical evidence linking beauty to reduced anxiety and better healing outcomes, to inform design standards that prioritise sensory wellbeing, cultural identity, and emotional recovery alongside safety and structural durability.
- **Move beyond Maslow in policy and governance frameworks:** Policymakers and governance bodies should actively dismantle the implicit reliance on Maslow's Hierarchy that treats aesthetics, belonging, and dignity as secondary or premature concerns. Policy frameworks should recognise that needs are not sequential but overlapping and relational, and that cultural expression and sensory wellbeing are inseparable from survival, particularly in protracted displacement contexts where temporary shelters become decade-long homes.
- **Facilitate authentic co-creation by centring resident knowledge:** Local NGOs, community organisers, and design practitioners should move beyond token consultation towards authentic co-creation by asking residents what colours, patterns, and spatial elements represent healing and home in their own cultural contexts, following the Kamangar model where community knowledge guided aesthetic choices from the outset. This approach reframes displaced individuals not as passive beneficiaries but as experts in their own sensory and cultural needs, whose knowledge is foundational to just design.
- **Embrace aesthetic justice as a design ethic and professional responsibility:** Emerging planners, designers, researchers, and urban practitioners should recognise aesthetic justice not as a specialised add-on but as a foundational ethical commitment that runs through every stage of design, planning, and governance. This means actively challenging power structures that exclude marginalised voices from design decisions, pursuing interdisciplinary collaboration between artists, scholars, planners, and residents, and asking in every professional context: who gets to decide the shape and meaning of the built environment, and whose sensory lives and cultural identities does it reflect?

Displaced communities in the West Bank plant gardens, fostering healing and mental wellbeing. Garden in Dheisheh Refugee Camp, West Bank.

Photo: Nizar ALayasa, 2023

Beauty in the Built Environment as Survival Infrastructure

Neuroaesthetics: How the arts and aesthetic experiences advance health, wellbeing, and learning

Dr. Devora Neumark • Johns Hopkins University • October 9, 2025

BEAUTY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT · BEAUTIFICATION · THIRD-REALM BEAUTY · DISPLACEMENT · SURVIVAL INFRASTRUCTURE · HUMANITARIAN PRACTICE · MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS · NEUROAESTHETICS · NEUROPLASTICITY · HIPPOCAMPAL MEMORY · HOPE · HEALING · DIGNITY · CULTURAL IDENTITY · COLLECTIVE POWER · CREATIVE RESISTANCE

SUMMARY

Note: This presentation was delivered by Dr. Devora Neumark as a solo presenter at Johns Hopkins University for the "Neuroaesthetics: How the arts and aesthetic experiences advance health, wellbeing, and learning" event.

Delivered to neuroaesthetics students at Johns Hopkins University on October 9, 2025, this presentation by Dr. Devora Neumark argued that beauty in the built environment functioned as survival infrastructure in displacement contexts, not as decoration or luxury. Grounding the argument in the neuroaesthetics research familiar to the audience, Dr. Neumark demonstrated through three interconnected shifts how aesthetic engagement regulated amygdala-driven fear responses, supported prefrontal cortex functioning necessary for imagining a future, and enabled hippocampal memory consolidation and neuroplasticity. Case studies from Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank, owner-driven reconstruction in flood-affected Sindh, Pakistan, and Casa Pintada's collaborative house-painting across 44 neighbourhoods in Colombia illustrated how beauty increased hope and healing, restored dignity and cultural identity, and built collective power. The presentation concluded by introducing the BRIGHTER Project at Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya as a forthcoming refugee-led art and beautification initiative.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

This presentation made the neurological case for beauty as survival infrastructure to an audience already trained in neuroaesthetics. When residents in Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank garden in plastic containers on balconies and at entrances, they are engaging processes their neighbours on the street can feel: aesthetic engagement pulls the body into present-moment awareness, reduces amygdala-driven fear responses, and supports prefrontal cortex functioning necessary for imagining a different future. Acts of beautification become neurological infrastructure for hope, allowing trauma to be sensed, processed, and integrated rather than suppressed.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has led humanitarian systems to treat aesthetics as non-essential, normalising bare, standardised spaces that may sustain life but undermine recovery and imagination. In displacement contexts, however, needs are dynamic, collective, and simultaneous; dignity and meaning cannot wait until shelter is secured. Critically, Maslow's framework entirely overlooked aesthetic experience, a gap that neuroaesthetics research has since demonstrated to be a serious omission with measurable consequences for wellbeing.

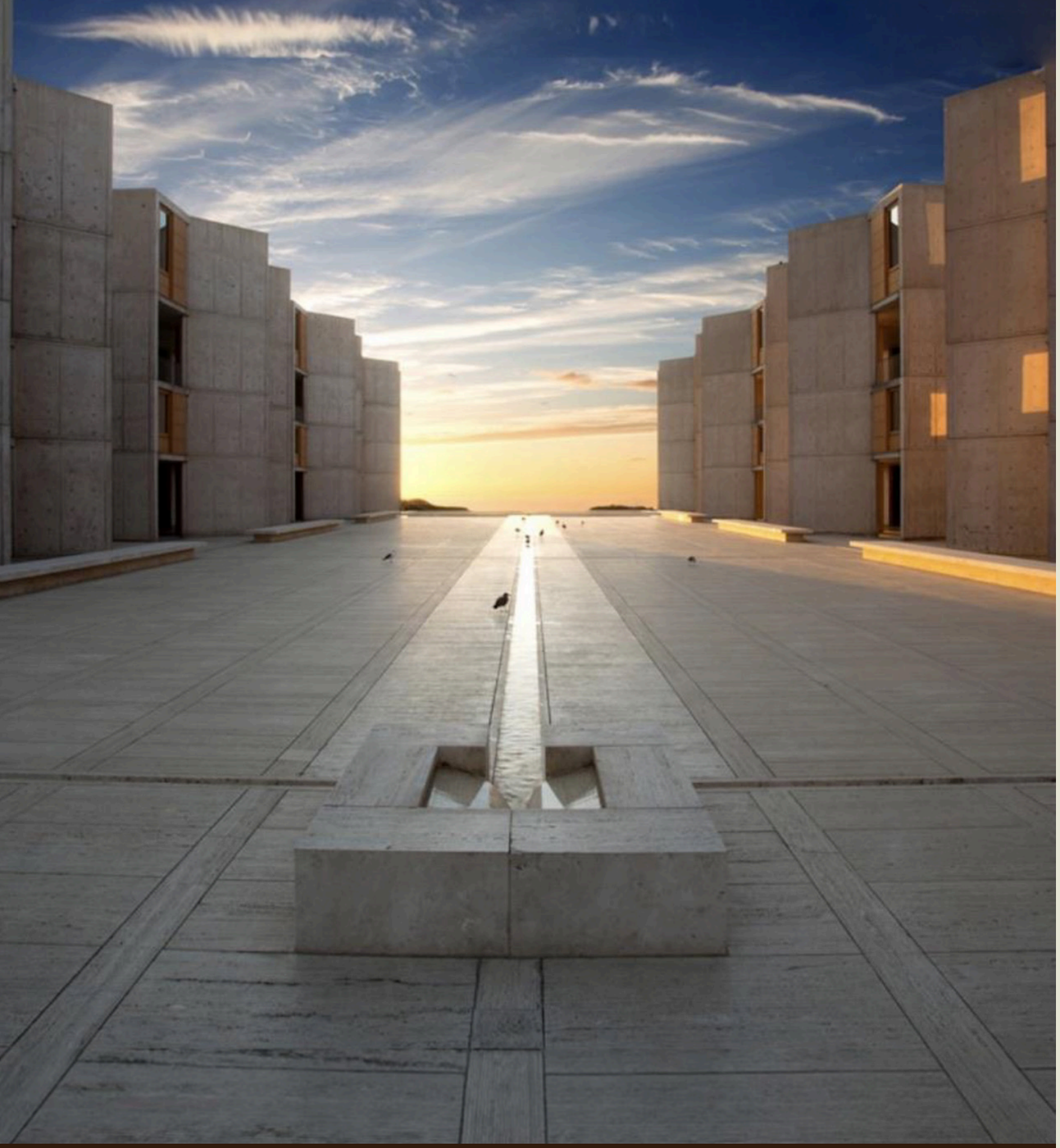
Beauty restores dignity, memory, and cultural identity by functioning as a bridge between past, present, and future. In flood-affected Sindh, Pakistan, nearly 2,000 local craftspeople were trained to rebuild disaster-resilient homes infused with traditional Sindhi design. Shabeeran Bibi described receiving not just shelter but dignity and peace of mind, while Raza Muhammad noted that the training gave his community not just walls but their dignity back. Neurologically, when homes reflect culture and personal meaning, they act as forms of environmental enrichment that support neuroplasticity and strengthen narrative continuity.

Built environments shape memory consolidation and identity formation through hippocampal and sensory pathways. Spatially embedded cultural meaning triggers autobiographical memory, reinforces belonging, and enables displaced individuals to reclaim authorship over their lives and futures. This is environmental enrichment in its most meaningful form: spaces that reflect identity, culture, and self-determination rather than mere technical provision.

Shared aesthetic labour builds collective power, as demonstrated by Casa Pintada in Colombia, where displaced Venezuelans and host community members co-painted homes across 44 neighbourhoods using techniques inspired by Indigenous Zenú traditions. Post-programme surveys reported that 95% of participants experienced increased trust and solidarity. The neuroaesthetics explanation is precise: shared creative acts activate reward circuitry and oxytocin-linked bonding, transforming fractured neighbourhoods into communities of belonging.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Recognise aesthetics as neurological and psychosocial infrastructure in humanitarian response:** Humanitarian agencies should integrate aesthetic considerations into shelter standards, funding allocations, and programme design from the outset, recognising that colour, texture, light, and opportunities for personalisation directly regulate fear responses, support trauma processing, and enable hope. Monitoring frameworks should include qualitative indicators of belonging and emotional safety alongside material outputs, reflecting the neuroaesthetic evidence that beauty shapes recovery trajectories from the moment people enter a space.
- **Design displacement housing for environmental enrichment and neuroplasticity:** Urban planners and architects should design displacement housing and transitional settlements with built-in flexibility for cultural expression, modification, and environmental enrichment, providing adaptable façades, communal spaces for shared creative work, and opportunities for residents to shape spatial identity over time. Built environments should be understood as active contributors to hippocampal memory consolidation, neurological regulation, and social cohesion, not neutral containers for survival.
- **Adopt holistic policy frameworks that treat dignity and aesthetics as inseparable from survival:** Policymakers should move beyond hierarchical, survival-first models rooted in Maslow's framework and adopt holistic standards that treat dignity, belonging, and aesthetic experience as simultaneous rather than sequential components of recovery. National shelter guidelines and urban inclusion policies should explicitly recognise beauty as part of humane living conditions, reframing refugee response from temporary containment toward long-term integration and justice.
- **Facilitate participatory design that centres displaced people as co-creators:** Community organisations and NGOs should facilitate participatory design and beautification initiatives that centre displaced people as co-creators rather than beneficiaries, following the Casa Pintada model where residents selected colours and symbols meaningful to their own cultural contexts. Shared aesthetic projects such as murals, gardens, façade painting, and public art should be structured as ongoing processes rather than one-time events, recognising that the social bonding generated through shared creative labour is itself a measurable outcome.
- **Apply neuroaesthetics expertise to advance the evidence base for beauty as survival infrastructure:** Researchers, clinicians, and practitioners trained in neuroaesthetics are uniquely positioned to generate and translate the evidence needed to reframe beauty as survival infrastructure in displacement contexts. This means designing studies that measure the neurological and psychosocial impact of aesthetic interventions in crisis settings, communicating findings in ways that inform humanitarian policy and shelter design, and actively challenging the assumption that aesthetics are peripheral to recovery. The neuroscience of fear regulation, prefrontal cortex functioning, hippocampal memory consolidation, and oxytocin-linked social bonding documented in this presentation offers a rigorous foundation for advocacy that goes well beyond intuition or sentiment.



Salk Institute, as presented by Don Ruggles

Photo: Elizabeth Daniels, 2020

Three-Part Webinar Series:

Beauty, Art, Belonging and the Neuroscience of Place

Can beauty help people heal? Rebuild? Belong?

This three-part webinar series explores how beauty, art, and design intersect with neuroscience, dignity, and resilience, especially in contexts of displacement, housing insecurity, and humanitarian response. From refugee camps and post-disaster neighbourhoods to communities painting their way back to belonging, this series reveals a radical truth: Beauty is not a luxury. Beauty is infrastructure. Each session brings together global experts in neuroaesthetics, refugee leaders, urban designers, and humanitarian practitioners.

Casa Pintada participants / community members in front of repainted home-fronts with floral prints. Colombia.

Photo: Blumont Group, 2022

Opening Session: Foundations and Field Evidence

The Case for Beauty in the Built Environment: Why Humanitarian Aid without Aesthetics Fails

Clark University • October 8, 2025

BEAUTY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT | BEAUTIFICATION | THIRD-REALM BEAUTY | DISPLACEMENT | HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE | NEUROAESTHETICS | HOPE | HEALING | DIGNITY | AGENCY | CULTURAL IDENTITY | COMMUNITY RESILIENCE | POSTMEMORY | PARTICIPATORY DESIGN | CLIMATE-SENSITIVE DESIGN | RIGHTS-BASED FRAMEWORKS | AFGHANISTAN | UN-HABITAT

SPEAKERS:

Dr. Devora Neumark is an interdisciplinary artist-researcher and co-founder of Home Ground Lab. With over 30 years of leadership in academia, policy, and creative practice, they advance beauty as essential infrastructure in displacement contexts, combining participatory art, contemplative practice, and policy to promote climate justice, community resilience, dignity, and social innovation.

Stephanie Acker, co-founder of Home Ground Lab, is a policy and communications practitioner whose work has centred on 'home' and has held roles with the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, UNICEF, and the European University Institute. She has a master's in public administration from Harvard Kennedy School of Government.

Stephanie Loose is the Country Programme Manager/Head of Office for UN-Habitat Afghanistan since October 2024. With over 25 years of professional experience in different countries, including in urban crisis and development settings, she strongly advocates for a humanitarian-development nexus. UN-Habitat has been implementing projects in Afghanistan for more than 30 years, applying people-centred, community-driven and area-based approaches.

RESPONDENT:

Professor Cathrine Brun is Deputy Director at the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS), an independent research institute located between Beirut, Lebanon and Cambridge, UK. A human geographer, her research interests concern the ethics, politics and philosophy of humanitarianism through the lens of forced migration and conflict, young people, education, housing and home.

SUMMARY

The opening session of the three-part webinar series Beauty, Art, Belonging and the Neuroscience of Place, co-hosted by Home Ground Lab and Clark University's Integration and Belonging Hub on October 8, 2025, made the case that humanitarian aid without aesthetics fails. Dr. Neumark and Stephanie Acker presented their framework for beauty as survival infrastructure across three dimensions: fostering healing and hope, restoring dignity and agency, and building belonging and resilience, drawing on case studies from Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank, owner-driven reconstruction in flood-affected Sindh, Pakistan, and the Casa Pintada initiative in Colombia. The presentation directly addressed three common objections: that beauty is a luxury reserved for later stages of response, that it is a band-aid that distracts from necessary policy change, and that if refugees are already creating beauty, humanitarian organisations have no role to play. Stephanie Loose, Country Programme Manager for UN-Habitat Afghanistan, grounded the argument in field practice, demonstrating how participatory, climate-sensitive, and multi-sectoral approaches transform temporary shelters into meaningful living environments, and closing with the observation that she herself tends a small garden outside her own container home in Afghanistan. Professor Cathrine Brun offered a critical response, asking what beauty is, whose beauty is being centred, and whether beauty is best understood as an approach or as the outcome of a broader rights-based effort to address structural inequalities in displacement. The session concluded with a generative exchange among all three speakers on the relationship between beauty, power, and the structural conditions of displacement.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Dr. Devora Neumark and Stephanie Acker

- Humanitarian aid that addresses only physical survival, food, water, and shelter, without integrating aesthetics, keeps people alive but undermines both recovery and resilience. This is not a moral argument alone but a practical one: beauty in the built environment regulates anxiety, supports present-moment awareness, and creates the neurological and psychosocial conditions necessary for hope. As Stephanie Acker summarised, food, water, and shelter keep the body alive, but beauty keeps the person alive.
- Beauty need not wait until later stages of humanitarian response and is not a band-aid that avoids the harder work of policy change. Research and field evidence demonstrate that aesthetic qualities such as colour, light, and familiar spatial patterns have immediate stress-reducing effects from the earliest phases of crisis response, and that the quality of surroundings shapes long-term healing trajectories. Postponing beauty until later stages means missing vital windows for recovery during the acute crisis phase.
- The creativity and beauty-making already happening in displaced communities is itself the evidence of what works. The humanitarian sector's role is therefore not to introduce beauty as a new intervention but to study what communities are already doing, invest in and amplify those efforts, and stop actively obstructing them through restrictive policies. Stephanie Acker closed the session by inviting participants to reorient their starting point entirely: not from "what is the problem" but from "where is there beauty and where do people see beauty," a shift from deficit to presence, and from problem to possibility.

Stephanie Loose, UN-Habitat Afghanistan

- The argument that beauty belongs only in later stages of humanitarian response rests on a false premise: that temporary displacement is genuinely temporary. As Stephanie Loose made clear from her field experience in Afghanistan, where climate change is driving rural-urban displacement into cities already under severe strain, including Kabul facing complete groundwater depletion by 2030, durable solutions will never reach the vast majority of displaced people, and the humanitarian system does not have the resources to provide them. What it can do is create enabling environments, progressively improving what communities have already built for themselves, fitting a proper window to a house someone has already constructed, reinforcing a roof, supporting housing, land, and property rights so that residents feel secure enough to invest in their own spaces. This reframes the entire

Displaced communities decorated their repaired shelters with cultural and familiar materials and designs. Interior of a decorated shelter. Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan.

Photo: UN-Habitat Afghanistan, 2025

conversation: beauty is not a later-stage luxury but an immediate and incremental responsibility.

- Small, thoughtful design decisions in humanitarian response have measurable effects on social cohesion, gender inclusion, and community resilience, as demonstrated by UN-Habitat's public space transformation in Afghanistan. With modest investment, a neglected and unusable public space was redesigned to include flood resilience infrastructure, green elements, and a gender-sensitive corner where women, who are banned from most public spaces under the Taliban, could gather safely. Critically, the project was designed not just for displaced residents but for the entire neighbourhood, reflecting UN-Habitat's area-based approach: that responses should never be designed exclusively for refugees or IDPs when they live in communities where host residents share the same level of vulnerability. The beauty of the design was not incidental to its function but inseparable from it: the space worked precisely because it was inviting, safe, and meaningful to everyone who used it.
- Listening to communities before designing for them is not a procedural nicety but the foundation of dignified and effective humanitarian response. UN-Habitat's approach in Afghanistan begins with detailed individual shelter assessments rather than standardised solutions, precisely because a window that does not fit the house it was made for fails both functionally and aesthetically. Stephanie Loose observed that even the choice to use locally sourced stones and traditional wood beam construction methods in earthquake reconstruction is itself an act of beauty, one that preserves cultural continuity while building structural resilience, and that her own team of architects and urban planners found ways to integrate beauty into every intervention, from school gardens that provided shaded gathering spaces for girls banned from formal education to water infrastructure redesigned as community gathering places. Beauty, in this framing, is not added to good design; it emerges from it.

Professor Cathrine Brun, Centre for Lebanese Studies

- Professor Cathrine Brun's critical response introduced a productive and unresolved tension at the heart of the field: is beauty best understood as an approach in its own right, or as the outcome of a broader rights-based effort to address structural inequalities in displacement? Stephanie Acker's response grounded HGL's position in Arthur Danto's concept of third-realm beauty and in the lived practices of displaced communities themselves, arguing that beauty is the approach precisely because it is what refugees are already doing and what policy frameworks have persistently overlooked. Brun did not disagree with beauty's value but challenged the field to ensure that aesthetic interventions also confront, rather than accommodate, the structural violence of displacement.
- Beauty is entangled with power in ways that humanitarian and design practitioners must actively reckon with. Professor Brun raised the questions of what beauty is, whose beauty is being centred, and whose aesthetics are valued and whose are excluded, drawing on academic and philosophical traditions that understand beauty not only as appearance or pleasure but as the qualities that evoke recognition, harmony, and meaning in human experience. These questions do not undermine the case for beauty in humanitarian response but deepen it, demanding that aesthetic interventions be grounded in the cultural values and self-defined preferences of displaced communities rather than externally imposed standards.
- The universality of the impulse to create beauty in one's immediate environment was quietly but powerfully illustrated by Stephanie Loose's closing observation that she herself tends a small garden outside her own container home in Afghanistan. This single detail reframed the session's entire argument: what displaced communities are doing when they garden on balconies, hang curtains in bare shelters, or paint facades is not a coping strategy specific to displacement but an expression of a human need that crosses every context, including that of the humanitarian worker living in a container. The question the field must answer is not whether beauty matters, but why it has taken this long to resource it.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Reorient humanitarian response from deficit to presence by asking where beauty already exists:** Humanitarian practitioners, programme designers, and field coordinators should fundamentally shift their starting orientation away from cataloguing what is lacking and toward identifying and resourcing what displaced communities are already doing. This means beginning every assessment, programme design, and community engagement process by asking where beauty exists, where people are already creating it, and what conditions would allow those efforts to flourish, rather than treating beautification as an intervention to be introduced from outside. This reorientation represents a more profound shift than any single programmatic change: it repositions displaced communities as the authors of their own aesthetic lives and the humanitarian sector as a follower rather than a leader.
- **Adopt area-based approaches that treat beauty and dignity as neighbourhood-wide rather than population-specific concerns:** Shelter coordinators, camp managers, and urban planners should move beyond designing interventions exclusively for displaced populations and adopt area-based approaches that address the shared vulnerability of entire neighbourhoods, including both displaced and host community residents. As demonstrated by UN-Habitat's work in Afghanistan, designing public spaces, community services, and aesthetic interventions for everyone who lives in a given area, rather than segregating responses by displacement status, strengthens social cohesion, reduces tensions, and produces environments that are meaningful and safe for all residents.
- **Treat incremental, community-led improvement as a legitimate and fundable humanitarian strategy:** Donors, institutional funders, and programme designers should recognise that the most dignified and effective humanitarian response is often not a standardised shelter delivered at scale but a progressive series of small, community-led improvements that build on what residents have already created for themselves. Following UN-Habitat's approach in Afghanistan, this means fitting windows that match the houses people have built, reinforcing roofs, supporting housing, land, and property rights, and providing residents with the security and resources to invest in their own spaces over time. Incremental improvement that centres resident agency and cultural expression is not a second-best option but often the most sustainable and dignified form of response available.
- **Integrate beauty into climate-sensitive and multi-sectoral design as a matter of standard practice:** Urban planners, architects, and humanitarian designers should recognise that beauty, climate resilience, gender sensitivity, and community infrastructure are not competing priorities but mutually reinforcing ones. UN-Habitat's public space transformation in Afghanistan demonstrated that a single modest intervention can simultaneously address flood risk, provide safe gathering space for women excluded from public life, strengthen social cohesion, and create a visually meaningful environment, because the design was conceived holistically from the outset rather than treating each objective separately. Beauty that emerges from good, contextually responsive design is both more durable and more culturally meaningful than beauty applied as an afterthought.
- **Engage seriously with the question of whose beauty is being centred in every intervention:** Practitioners, researchers, and policymakers should take seriously as a professional and ethical obligation the questions raised in this session: what beauty is, whose definition is being used, and whose aesthetics are valued or excluded. This means grounding all beautification initiatives in the self-defined cultural values and preferences of the communities involved, building in mechanisms for community leadership over aesthetic choices, and remaining alert to the ways that externally imposed standards of beauty can replicate rather than challenge the power imbalances of displacement. Beauty as infrastructure only fulfils its promise when it is the community's own.

Architectural image that combines pleasure and survival patterns resulting in a neurologically stressful design. The Port House in Antwerp. Antwerp, Belgium.

Photo: Tim Fisher, undated

Second Session: The Neuroarchitecture of Dignity

What Neuroscience Teaches Us About Shelter, Space & Healing

Clark University • October 30, 2025

BEAUTY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT | BEAUTIFICATION | THIRD-REALM BEAUTY | DISPLACEMENT | INFRASTRUCTURE | HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE | NEUROSCIENCE | NEUROAESTHETICS | NEUROARCHITECTURE | PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM | HOMEOSTASIS | BIOPHILIC DESIGN | HARMONY | OBJECTIVE BEAUTY | INHERITED BEAUTY | SUBJECTIVE BEAUTY | ACQUIRED BEAUTY | PREVENTIVE HEALTHCARE | PARTICIPATORY DESIGN | CULTURALLY INFORMED DESIGN | RALLI TEXTILE PATTERNS | SINDH PAKISTAN | CHAD | LUXEMBOURG RED CROSS

SPEAKERS:

Donald H. Ruggles, AIA, NCARB, ANFA, HAPI, ICAA, is CEO Emeritus of Ruggles Mabe Studio, Denver. Author of Beauty, Neuroscience & Architecture and producer of Built Beautiful, he serves as Director of Classical Studies at CU Denver co-founded the Design/HEALth Initiative and sits on multiple design and health boards.

Minar Thapa Magar is a National Coordinator for the Sindh Housing Recovery and Reconstruction Platform (SHRRP), supporting the Government of Sindh, Pakistan in rebuilding 2.1 million homes and recovering 50,000 settlements. As Technical Advisor at Catholic Relief Services (CRS), he brings 10+ years of experience in disaster recovery and reduction, shelter and housing, settlements approach, system strengthening and coordination

Ana Carolina Helena is an architect (WELL AP) with experience in private, public, and humanitarian sectors. Based in Luxembourg City with the Luxembourg Red Cross - Shelter Research Unit (SRU), supporting construction projects in Africa, Ukraine, and Nepal. Focused on sustainable, health-promoting architecture and its environmental, socio-economic, and public health co-benefits.

FACILITATOR:

Dr. Devora Neumark is an interdisciplinary artist-researcher and co-founder of Home Ground Lab. With over 30 years of leadership in academia, policy, and creative practice, they advance beauty as essential infrastructure in displacement contexts, combining participatory art, contemplative practice, and policy to promote climate justice, community resilience, dignity, and social innovation.

SUMMARY

Note: This webinar was facilitated by Dr. Devora Neumark, with Stephanie Acker serving as co-host.

The second session of the three-part webinar series Beauty, Art, Belonging and the Neuroscience of Place, held on October 30, 2025, examined what neuroscience teaches us about shelter, space, and healing through three distinct but converging contributions. Donald Ruggles, drawing on a chapter co-authored with Natalie Richi for the Routledge Handbook of Neuroscience and the Built Environment, argued that non-beautiful spaces are not merely unpleasant but constitute measurable stress environments with physiological consequences including chronic inflammation, cardiovascular disease risk, and compromised immune function, and proposed reframing beauty as pleasure to sidestep institutional resistance. Minar Thapa Magar described how owner-driven reconstruction in flood-affected Sindh, Pakistan, combining flood-resilient building standards with traditional ralli textile patterns, spread spontaneously across communities like wildfire, with over one million homes rebuilt by residents themselves using modest financial support and technical guidance. Ana Carolina Helena presented a shelter prototype developed for refugee camps in eastern Chad that was designed to evolve with communities through protracted displacement and candidly noted that her team never used the word beauty at any decision-making table, instead advancing aesthetic quality through arguments about sustainable construction, biophilic design, and preventive healthcare. The session concluded with a rich exchange in which all three speakers addressed how to make the case for beauty to institutional decision-makers.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Donald Ruggles, Ruggles Mabe Studio / CU Denver

- Non-beautiful spaces are not merely unpleasant but constitute measurable stress environments with serious physiological consequences. Donald Ruggles argued that the brain processes 11 million bits of information per second and categorises environmental inputs into two fundamental pattern types: exciting patterns that activate sympathetic survival responses, and beautiful patterns that activate parasympathetic pleasure responses. When spaces are devoid of harmony, proportion, and natural materials, the sympathetic nervous system dominates, raising heart rate, elevating blood pressure, narrowing mental focus, and triggering chronic inflammation, which Ruggles described as a newly understood driver of cancer and cardiovascular disease. For architects and designers working in displacement contexts to remain unaware of this evidence, he argued, is professional malpractice.
- A healthy nervous system requires balance between sympathetic and parasympathetic inputs, a state known as homeostasis, and the built environment is one of the most powerful levers available for achieving or disrupting that balance. Ruggles demonstrated that survival patterns are five to seven times neurologically stronger than pleasure patterns, which means that chaotic or threatening environments overwhelm the restorative effects of beauty with relatively little effort. In displacement contexts where residents are already carrying chronic stress from trauma, loss, and uncertainty, this imbalance is not a background condition but an active impediment to recovery that thoughtful design can directly address.
- Institutional resistance to beauty in humanitarian design often stems from the word itself, which carries associations with luxury, subjectivity, and superficiality. Ruggles proposed a practical reframe: replace beauty with pleasure and ask instead whether we want to create environments that are pleasurable for the people who inhabit them. This linguistic shift makes the neurological and physiological argument harder to dismiss, grounding what might otherwise seem like an aesthetic preference in the language of health, well-being, and biological necessity that decision-makers and donors are more likely to fund and prioritise.

Minar Thapa Magar, Catholic Relief Services / Sindh Housing Recovery and Reconstruction Platform

- Owner-driven reconstruction in flood-affected Sindh, Pakistan demonstrated that when communities are trusted with the resources and technical guidance to rebuild their

The Sindh Housing Recovery and Reconstruction Platform supported owner-driven and dignified reconstruction following floods in Sindh Pakistan. Overall description. A family in front of their home. Sindh, Pakistan.

Photo: Catholic Relief Services (CRS), 2025

The Luxembourg Red Cross shelter prototypes emphasize a sustainable construction and biophilic design that support mental and physical wellbeing in refugee camps in Eastern Chad. Evolutive shelters in Eastern Chad. Chad.

Photo: Luxembourg Red Cross. 2025

own homes, beauty emerges not as an add-on but as an intrinsic expression of belonging and resilience. With modest financial support of approximately one thousand dollars per household and training in flood-resilient construction techniques, over one million families rebuilt their homes themselves, integrating traditional ralli textile patterns, coloured wall paintings, and culturally meaningful designs. When a few houses began adopting these patterns, the practice spread spontaneously across entire settlements like wildfire, driven entirely by community initiative rather than external instruction.

- The act of marking one's rebuilt home with colour, pattern, and cultural identity is not decorative but a celebration of survival and a reclamation of dignity. Minar Thapa Magar described a 62-year-old resident who, upon completing his rebuilt home, described it as the house he had dreamed of his entire life, one he was certain would withstand future floods. The artwork on his walls represented not mere embellishment but a lifetime's achievement and the relief of a journey completed. A structure without this emotional attachment, Magar observed, is lifeless: it is four walls, but it is not a home.
- Participatory design processes that genuinely engage women and children produce more inclusive, culturally grounded, and meaningful recovery outcomes than top-down standardised approaches. In Sindh, focus art group sessions with children revealed that girls prioritised social spaces with flowers, trees, and hopscotch areas while boys gravitated toward physical games, and that a planned sealed playground needed to include a muddy area where children could play freely. Women's groups designed community centres with shaded gathering spaces suited to the extreme heat and local social practices. These community-led design inputs transformed what might have been generic infrastructure into spaces that residents felt genuine ownership over and would maintain and invest in over time.

Carolina Helena, Luxembourg Red Cross Shelter Research Unit

- Beauty in humanitarian shelter design can be advanced most effectively not by arguing for beauty directly but by reframing it in terms that institutional decision-makers already value: sustainable construction, biophilic design, and preventive healthcare. Carolina Helena candidly acknowledged that throughout the entire development of the Luxembourg Red Cross shelter prototype for refugee camps in eastern Chad, her team never once used the word beauty at any decision-making table. Instead, they made the case through arguments about biobased materials that reduce environmental impact, locally sourced compressed earth blocks that remind residents of homes in Sudan and generate hope, passive ventilation and thermal control that reduce trauma-related anxiety, and symmetric facade design that activates parasympathetic responses. The project achieved dignity and beauty precisely because the team found the language that opened institutional doors.
- The Chad shelter prototype demonstrated that thoughtful design choices can create dignified, culturally meaningful, and climate-responsive environments without significant additional cost, provided those choices are made at the design and material specification stage rather than added as afterthoughts. The prototype was conceived as an evolutive shelter, designed to follow households from emergency through transitional to more permanent phases, reusing materials across stages as camps increasingly became permanent villages. Compressed earth blocks using local construction techniques familiar to Sudanese refugees gave residents both structural resilience and a sensory connection to the lives they had before displacement and could still have after it.
- The humanitarian sector faces a critical challenge in translating compelling qualitative evidence about beauty's impact into the quantitative data that institutional decision-makers require. Carolina Helena observed that evaluation in humanitarian settings typically relies on self-reported satisfaction, where a simple yes from residents is considered sufficient evidence of success, leaving no rigorous basis for demonstrating the correlation between aesthetic quality and health, resilience, and dignity outcomes. She noted that while evidence for beauty's physical health impacts can be extrapolated from studies in other contexts, the mental health dimensions remain under-researched in humanitarian settings specifically, and raised the provocative question of whether the World Health Organisation's recent addition of urban living as a risk factor for depression might itself be partly explained by the systematic failure to build beautifully.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Reframe beauty as pleasure, health, and sustainability to overcome institutional resistance:** Humanitarian architects, shelter coordinators, and programme designers should learn to translate the case for beauty into the languages that institutional gatekeepers already respond to: pleasure rather than aesthetics, preventive healthcare rather than dignity, and sustainable construction rather than cultural expression. Following Carolina Helena's experience in Chad, where beauty was never named at any decision-making table yet was achieved through every design choice, practitioners should develop a fluency in multiple argumentative registers, deploying whichever framing is most likely to open doors in a given institutional context without compromising the underlying commitment to dignified, culturally meaningful design.
- **Treat the built environment as a public health intervention and advocate accordingly:** Architects, planners, and humanitarian designers should actively position aesthetic design decisions as public health interventions, drawing on Donald Ruggles' evidence that non-beautiful spaces activate chronic sympathetic stress responses with measurable consequences including inflammation, cardiovascular disease risk, and compromised immune function. Framing shelter quality as preventive healthcare, and making the case that investment in aesthetic design reduces downstream health costs, provides a compelling and evidence-based argument for donors, governmental bodies, and institutional decision-makers who may be unmoved by appeals to dignity or cultural expression alone.
- **Trust communities to define and enact beauty in their own reconstruction:** Reconstruction actors, shelter designers, and disaster recovery organisations should adopt owner-driven approaches that provide communities with the resources, technical guidance, and genuine autonomy to rebuild in ways that reflect their own cultural identities and aesthetic values, following the Sindh model where traditional ralli textile patterns spread spontaneously across over one million rebuilt homes without any external instruction. When communities are trusted as the authors of their own built environments, beauty emerges organically as an expression of belonging, resilience, and cultural continuity rather than as an externally imposed standard.
- **Design shelters as evolutive environments that accompany communities through protracted displacement:** Humanitarian designers and shelter coordinators should move away from emergency shelters conceived as short-term solutions and toward evolutive models that are designed from the outset to follow households through successive phases of displacement, reusing materials and adapting structures as needs change and as camps increasingly become permanent settlements. The Luxembourg Red Cross prototype in Chad demonstrated that this approach can be achieved within tight budget constraints through careful material specification, locally sourced construction techniques, and design choices that simultaneously address climate resilience, cultural familiarity, and neurological comfort.
- **Build the quantitative evidence base that links aesthetic design to measurable health and resilience outcomes:** Researchers, evaluators, and humanitarian practitioners should collaborate to generate rigorous quantitative evidence demonstrating the correlation between aesthetic design quality and health, resilience, dignity, and community cohesion outcomes in displacement contexts. As Carolina Helena observed, current evaluation in humanitarian settings relies primarily on self-reported satisfaction, leaving no robust basis for making the institutional case for beauty. Closing this evidence gap, particularly on the mental health dimensions that remain under-researched in humanitarian settings, is one of the most consequential contributions that researchers working at the intersection of neuroaesthetics, architecture, and forced migration could make to the field.

Philosophical perspectives recognise beauty as a necessary human good. Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, New York.

Photo Left: Ahodges7, July 6, 2009

Photo Right: Daniel Avila, 2007

Final Session: Creativity as Survival and Power

Beauty as Resistance: Art and Story as Healing Forces in Displacement

Clark University • November 19, 2025

BEAUTY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT · BEAUTIFICATION · THIRD-REALM BEAUTY · DISPLACEMENT · AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE · STORYTELLING · SPOKEN WORD · DZALEKA REFUGEE CAMP · MALAWI · COLOMBIA · TRAUMA · COLLECTIVE MEMORY · SOCIAL COHESION · INTEGRATION · VENEZUELAN MIGRANTS · ARTHUR DANTO · ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER · MARTHA NUSSBAUM · MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS · CASA PINTADA

SPEAKERS:

Michael Spicher, Ph.D., is a philosopher and strategic aesthetics consultant who helps people and organizations integrate beauty into culture, design, and decision-making. With over 20 years of experience, he brings deep insight into how aesthetic values shape flourishing, have spoken at global events on design, fashion, and intentional space. Based in Boston, he teaches at several area universities and also directs the Aesthetics Research Lab.

Francisco Alcalá Torreslanda is Co-Founder and Executive Director of HOME Storytellers. He has a background in corporate leadership and documentary storytelling. HOME Storytellers partners with refugees and marginalized communities to create hope-driven films and campaigns. Their new film, "We Name Ourselves," explores how art becomes survival, restoring dignity, connection, and hope in the harshest conditions.

Juan Pablo Franco Jiménez, blumont's Country Director in Colombia, leads programs improving humanitarian assistance, self-reliance, durable solutions, and integration for migrants and internally displaced persons. Previously with Colombia's government for seven years, he is an Industrial Engineer, Political Scientist and holds a Summa Cum Laude master's in public affairs from Sciences Po.

FACILITATOR:

Stephanie Acker, co-founder of Home Ground Lab, is a policy and communications practitioner whose work has centred on 'home' and has held roles with the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, UNICEF, and the European University Institute. She has a master's in public administration from Harvard Kennedy School of Government.

SUMMARY

Note: This webinar was facilitated by Stephanie Acker, with Dr. Devora Neumark serving as co-host.

The third and final session of the three-part webinar series Beauty, Art, Belonging and the Neuroscience of Place, held on November 19, 2025, explored beauty as a form of resistance through art and storytelling in displacement contexts. Stephanie Acker opened by sharing her personal journey: from a family that fled the Holocaust, through decades of policy and advocacy work across grassroots, municipal, federal, and international levels, to burnout and a pivotal realisation that refugees were already using beauty to rebuild their lives, a discovery that reoriented everything. Dr. Michael Spicher grounded the session philosophically, opening with Primo Levi's account of reciting Dante's poetry in Auschwitz as evidence that aesthetic experience is a basic human good necessary for flourishing rather than a luxury deferred until after survival, and tracing the Western devaluation of beauty to the destruction wrought by two World Wars. Francisco Alcalá Torreslanda presented his documentary film We Name Ourselves, following teenage poets in the severely overcrowded Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi who write, perform, and teach spoken-word poetry as a lifeline, an act of resistance, and a refusal to be defined by the label refugee. Juan Pablo Franco Jiménez extended the Casa Pintada work introduced in earlier sessions to include its application in conflict-affected Colombian communities, where collective painting transformed not only neighbourhoods, but spaces physically marked by paramilitary terror, including a health post painted with a death figure that residents had been afraid to paint over until Casa Pintada gave them the courage and means to do so. The session concluded with a rich discussion among all three speakers on why Western culture devalued aesthetics, what beauty as resistance means in practice, and how creative expression functions simultaneously as survival, healing, identity affirmation, and political assertion.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Dr. Michael Spicher, Aesthetics Research Lab

- Aesthetic experience is a basic human good necessary for flourishing rather than a luxury deferred until after survival needs are met, a claim that can be demonstrated not through logical argument alone but by observing what people actually do. Across cultures and contexts, people spend time, money, and energy grooming, decorating, and travelling to experience beauty, and the absence of aesthetic experience is immediately felt as deprivation. Primo Levi's account of reciting Dante's poetry in Auschwitz, where he said he would have given up his daily food just to remember a connecting line because for a few moments he forgot who he was and where he was, illustrates that aesthetic experience is not a distraction from survival but one of the most fundamental expressions of what it means to remain human under conditions designed to erase humanity.
- The Western devaluation of beauty can be traced directly to the destruction wrought by the two World Wars, after which artists including Max Ernst and Barnett Newman explicitly rejected beauty as a goal, seeing it as complicit in a civilisation that had failed catastrophically. This historical rupture, combined with the efficiency-driven values of late capitalism and the widespread misreading of Maslow's hierarchy as a licence to defer aesthetic needs, produced institutional cultures that systematically dismiss beauty as secondary. Philosophers including Martha Nussbaum with her capabilities approach and natural law philosophers who identify aesthetic experience as a basic human good offer a counter-framework: not a hierarchy but a constellation of goods, none of which can be completely neglected without diminishing human life.
- Acts of genuine aesthetic creativity and beauty are inherently acts of resistance in a world that has systematically beaten creativity out of people. Spicher observed that even Arthur Schopenhauer, the philosopher most associated with pessimism and the view that life is suffering, argued that beauty and art provide the only moments of genuine rest from that suffering. More pointedly, the world actively discourages aesthetic engagement as people age, replacing the brightly coloured, creatively stimulating environments of childhood with the oppressive uniformity of adult institutions. In this context, every act of beautification in a displacement setting, every poem written, every wall painted, every garden tended, is not merely therapeutic but a form of rebellion against the systemic denial of beauty to those deemed unworthy of it.

Francisco Alcalá Torreslanda, Home Storytellers

- In Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi, a camp built for 10,000 people and hosting more than 55,000, a group of teenage poets write, perform, and voluntarily teach spoken-word poetry to younger children three times a week. This is not a programme or an intervention but something that arose entirely from within the community, and it functions as what one of the poets described as a lifeline: the thing that kept him grounded after everything

HOME Storytellers' new film, "We Name Ourselves," follows a group of teenage poets in Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi. Filming for "We Name Ourselves". Dzaleka Refugee Camp, Malawi.

Photo: HOME Storytellers, 2025

Casa Pintada used collaborative arts-based projects as a tool to build social cohesion between displaced Venezuelans and host communities in Colombia. Casa Pintada workshop in Alto Bonito. Colombia.

Photo: Blumont Group, 2024

he had been through. The contrast between the harsh material conditions of the camp and the vibrant creative movement within it was, as Alcalá Torreslanda observed, what first revealed to his team that art is a strategy not just for survival but for thriving.

- Hope-driven, community-led storytelling that centres dignity, agency, and creativity rather than trauma and victimhood is both an ethical imperative and a more effective tool for narrative change. The documentary We Name Ourselves was made with minimal reliance on interviews, following the poets in their daily lives and personal moments to achieve authenticity, and the protagonists were invited to shape the film's direction from the outset. The title itself reflects the film's core argument: these young people refuse to be defined as refugees and insist on being known by their names, their poetry, and their roles as teachers and changemakers. This approach helps audiences connect through recognition rather than pity, which is more likely to shift narratives and generate sustained engagement.
- The story does not end when the film does. The visibility generated by We Name Ourselves is being used to resource a set of concrete community-led initiatives in Dzaleka including a national screening tour across Malawi to open dialogue on refugee policy, a virtual portal connecting the camp to global educational and cultural partners, and the development of science, technology, and artistic expression labs alongside an expanded library. This model, using art and storytelling as a platform for longer-term community development rather than a one-off intervention, demonstrates how aesthetic expression can generate material improvements in livelihoods, education, mental health, and cultural participation when it is treated as infrastructure rather than decoration.

Juan Pablo Franco Jiménez, Blumont Group Colombia

- The Casa Pintada methodology, introduced in earlier sessions as a tool for building social cohesion between displaced Venezuelans and host communities in Colombia, has a deeper and more challenging application in communities affected by decades of armed conflict. In Lammono, a community of approximately 200 families who had all fled in the late 1990s and were slowly returning, a woman who had returned to a house almost consumed by jungle painted it purple and painted the door and façade with paint rolls from the Casa Pintada technique. The testimony from that community captures what followed: seeing their houses painted gave residents the motivation to return and reclaim the space they had abandoned when armed conflict took over their homes.
- Some spaces carry the physical imprint of terror in ways that make them psychologically inaccessible to the communities that need to use them. In one Colombian community, a health post that had been used as a jail and torture site by paramilitaries had a death figure painted on its front wall, and residents were afraid to paint over it even years after the paramilitaries had left. It was only through the Casa Pintada process, which gave communities both the practical tools and the collective courage to transform such spaces, that residents were able to say: we were afraid, but now we are strong enough to change it. The entire building was eventually demolished and rebuilt with two of the original walls retained as a deliberate act of memory, and a school remembrance hall was created at a site where a teacher had been killed, transforming a place of daily trauma into a space of collective dignity and historical witness.
- Scaling dignity-centred aesthetic interventions within large institutional systems requires working as locally as possible and demonstrating impact in terms that local governments already value. Franco Jiménez described how one municipality in Santander de Quilichao allocated approximately 50 thousand dollars of its own local funds to continue the Casa Pintada methodology, framing it simultaneously as violence prevention, youth engagement, and a public health intervention led by the health secretary. This reframing, similar to Carolina Helena's strategy of advancing beauty through the language institutions already speak, demonstrates that aesthetic interventions can be institutionalised when their benefits are articulated in terms of measurable outcomes that decision-makers can see, fund, and take political credit for.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Recognise aesthetic experience as a basic human good and design programmes accordingly:** Humanitarian practitioners, policymakers, and programme designers should internalise the philosophical case that aesthetic experience is not a luxury deferred until survival needs are met but a basic human good inseparable from flourishing. Drawing on the capabilities approach articulated by Martha Nussbaum and the natural law philosophical tradition, organisations should audit their programme frameworks for implicit hierarchical assumptions that treat creativity, cultural expression, and beauty as secondary concerns, and replace them with frameworks that treat these dimensions as simultaneously necessary rather than sequentially optional.
- **Support community-generated creative movements rather than importing external interventions:** Practitioners working in displacement contexts should actively seek out and resource creative movements that have already emerged organically within communities, following the model of the teenage poets of Dzaleka whose spoken-word practice arose entirely without external prompting. Supporting what communities have already created, providing space, materials, platforms, and connections to wider networks, is more sustainable, more dignified, and more culturally rooted than designing aesthetic programmes from outside. The question to ask is not what creative intervention we should introduce but what is already happening here and how we can amplify it.
- **Use storytelling and documentary practice as tools for narrative change and community empowerment:** Communications practitioners, filmmakers, journalists, and advocacy organisations should adopt hope-driven, community-led storytelling approaches that centre displaced people as agents, teachers, and changemakers rather than as victims defined by their suffering. Following the methodology of We Name Ourselves, this means spending time without cameras before filming begins, following people in their daily lives rather than relying on formal interviews, inviting protagonists to shape the direction of the work, and ensuring that the visibility generated by storytelling is converted into concrete resources and opportunities that benefit the community directly.
- **Facilitate the transformation of spaces marked by trauma and terror through participatory aesthetic processes:** Post-conflict reconstruction actors, urban planners, architects, and community organisations should recognise that some spaces require not just physical rebuilding but a collective process of aesthetic and symbolic transformation before communities can fully reclaim them. Following the Casa Pintada experience in Colombia, where communities found the courage to paint over representations of paramilitary terror and to create remembrance halls that transformed sites of violence into spaces of collective dignity, practitioners should design participatory processes that give communities both the practical tools and the collective empowerment to decide what their spaces mean, what should be remembered, and what should be transformed.
- **Advance beauty through the languages that local institutions already speak:** Practitioners and advocates seeking to embed aesthetic values within larger institutional systems should follow the strategy demonstrated across multiple entries in this compendium, from Carolina Helena's reframing of beauty as sustainable construction and preventive healthcare to Juan Pablo Franco Jiménez's reframing of Casa Pintada as violence prevention and public health, by translating the case for beauty into the terms that local governments, health ministries, donors, and institutional decision-makers already value and fund. Working at the local government level, where officials can directly observe the change in communities, offers the greatest opportunity for aesthetic interventions to be adopted, institutionalised, and resourced from within existing systems rather than remaining dependent on external humanitarian funding.

Dheisheh Refugee Camp. Where did all the trees go?

Photo: Nizar ALayasa, 2025

Annex A

The Beautiful Resistance: A Global Storytelling Series

In shelters, camps, and overlooked corners of the world, people are using beauty to reclaim space, declare their worth, and keep hope alive.

The Beautiful Resistance is a global storytelling campaign honouring these acts. Each story is a reminder:

- Beauty is not optional; it's infrastructure.
- It's how we survive, remember, and resist.
- And it belongs to everyone, everywhere.

Charles Lipanda is a Congolese refugee, poet, and founder of African Youth Artistic Poetry (AYAP).
Charles Lipanda leads a poetry workshop with youth at Dzaleka Refugee Camp, Malawi.

Photo: Francisco Alcalá Torreslanda, 2025

Where Walls Once Held Prisoners, Poems Now Set Us Free

Charles Lipanda on poetry in Dzaleka Refugee Camp • September 26, 2025

At the age of nine: discovering poetry as survival

I was only five years old when I became an orphan. By the time I was a teenager, I was fleeing war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. When I was 14, I arrived at Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi, carrying the weight of trauma and loss. In a place marked by limited opportunity, I turned to poetry as a lifeline.

“I let my heart mourn just like my pen bleeds on scratches of papers and collected them to form a poem,” I said about my first poem, *At the Age of Nine*. “I have written so many poems that not only help me heal but also serve as therapy for others.”

Building AYAP: a collective of young creatives

Now, six years later, I am the founder and president of African Youth Artistic Poetry (AYAP), a collective within the camp that offers writing workshops, performances, and mentorship for children and teens. Through AYAP, poetry has become a tool for self-expression and healing.

I also created Our Voice, Our Advocate Festival, which took place only once in 2023 and brought life to us refugees. But due to a lack of funds, it never occurred again. We came up with AYAP Celebration, which takes place twice a year, so as to keep artists in motion, so they can share their stories and develop their talents even in a camp like this.

Beauty in a place built to contain

Dzaleka Refugee Camp, formerly a maximum-security prison, was constructed to accommodate up to 12,000 people. Today, it shelters over 57,000 refugees and asylum seekers from countries including Burundi, Rwanda, and the DRC. Humanitarian aid has declined in recent months, making the camp more crowded and under-resourced than ever. Despite these conditions, young artists like me continue to find ways to create and connect.

Hope has a name: Tumaini and the power of performance

In response, other young poets and I have created our own spaces to be seen. Talent shows, poetry battles, and open mics offer moments of release. The annual Tumaini Festival, dubbed the only arts festival in a refugee camp, transforms the camp into a creative hub. With more than 50,000 attendees, it is one of the few chances for young refugees like me to perform for a bigger audience.

Tumaini means hope. The festival not only brings us hope but also offers more opportunities to meet with the right people... It is where our poets go and showcase their abilities in the spoken word industry.

We name ourselves: a film, a movement

One of those opportunities includes *We Name Ourselves*, an upcoming documentary that features some of us. The film follows a group of teenage poets from Dzaleka as we prepare for the Tumaini Festival. Filmed last October, the project explores how art can offer hope, resilience, and a sense of identity for young refugees facing systemic barriers.

The film, produced by Home Storytellers, challenges negative perceptions of refugees by highlighting our creativity, humanity, and untapped potential.

I have already made steps toward that future. I have published two books; *Our Voice Is Our Advocate* and *Being Refugee Wasn’t a Choice* and continue to lead AYAP workshops. The program welcomes youth from across the camp’s communities. “We provide a safe space for expression,” I say. “Poetry is in their blood now.”

Casa Pintada aimed to help violence and displacement-affected communities rebuild trust and stability. Neighbors paint houses through Casa Pintada, Colombia.

Photo: Blumont Group, 2013-2025

Building Community Through Color: Lessons from Casa Pintada

Juan Pablo Jimenez, Blumont Group Country Director, Colombia

October 3, 2025

We Chose Paint

When we integrated Casa Pintada into our activities in 2021, our goal was to help people affected by violence and displacement build community connections and rebuild stability. The medium we chose to work with was paint; Casa Pintada literally means painted house in English.

Casa Pintada uses paint rollers to work almost like textured stamps – you load them with paint and roll them across walls to create repeating patterns and symbols. Artist Vicky Fadul developed this technique inspired by the Zenú, an indigenous group from Colombia known for their intricate woven patterns. Instead of requiring artistic training, anyone could create beautiful, meaningful designs on their homes.

In the past four years, we brought Casa Pintada to 44 neighbourhoods across 22 Colombian cities. These weren't just any neighbourhoods. They were places facing poverty and social exclusion, often carrying scars from decades of armed conflict. Then came waves of Venezuelan families fleeing their own crisis, adding new tensions to communities already stretched thin.

Creating a sense of community and building trust among neighbors is never simple, and the challenge is even greater when people are coping with trauma and loss. We saw Casa Pintada as an opportunity to break down the barriers, and that by repairing homes, we could help people heal as well.

Bringing Color Back

The heart of Casa Pintada was a week-long workshop led by Vicky Fadul. About 25 community members, usually women and youth, would learn painting techniques and how to create symbols that reflected their shared experiences, then they would paint homes, community buildings, or other shared spaces. Ultimately, it is about community and belonging. Everything was driven by local needs and opportunities – from what neighborhoods we worked in to how we worked with local officials to bring in funds and support.

I watched these workshops unfold across dozens of neighborhoods, and the pattern was always the same.

- Day one: people arrived polite but cautious, Colombians clustering with Colombians, Venezuelans with Venezuelans.
- Day three: someone would laugh at a shared mistake with the paint.
- Day five: they were planning which houses to tackle next, mixing not just paint, but also stories about what they'd left behind and what they hoped to build in the future.

In the San Fernando neighborhood, a Colombian man who served on both the local welcoming committee and as president of the community action board told me:

> "Casa Pintada not only beautified the neighborhood but also united our community. We had young people who, in one way or another, have different behaviors in the community. The workshop involved them as students, gave them confidence, and showed them that they can overcome the situations they face daily."

A Foundation for Belonging

We saw the difference, but also systematically tracked it. In 2023, after surveying 232 participants from the painting workshops, the numbers confirmed what I was witnessing:

- over 95% reported very good or good levels of trust with their neighbors, nearly 97% reported strong cooperation,
- more than 95% felt solidarity in their community, and
- approximately 93% reported progress in social integration between Colombians and Venezuelans.

The statistics, compelling as they were, couldn't capture moments like watching an elderly Colombian man receive help painting his house from Venezuelan neighbors, or seeing children from both communities collaborate on a mural depicting the Cartagena sunset, symbols of a shared place they were building together.

People began paying attention not just to how their own homes looked, but to their blocks, their gathering spaces, their shared environment. There was a pride and connection to the place. People felt a sense of belonging and they were more likely to stay in their communities rather than continuing to migrate elsewhere.

Perhaps the most powerful testimony came from a Colombian woman named Zulay in the Juana Rangel neighborhood in Cúcuta:

> "This has been a process of integration with the community. We've come together, and now you can feel the harmony and change in the neighborhood. It's been a wonderful experience, truly. I'm very grateful because we've learned a lot from the Venezuelan migrants, who are people we work hand in hand with."

What we saw, in bright, vibrant color, is that creating something together, something visible, something that said, "we belong here," could bridge divides.

Looking Ahead

Funding for Casa Pintada ended in January 2025, when policy and budget cuts were made across the U.S. foreign assistance portfolio. We were in the midst of collecting endline data from eight neighborhoods, data that I believe would have reflected the continued, positive impact of this work.

Even without that data, just seeing it, Casa Pintada proved that beauty in the built environment isn't just decoration, it's infrastructure for social cohesion. When Venezuelan and Colombian families transformed houses together, they were building more than aesthetic improvements.

They were constructing trust, cooperation, and integration, and building a new opportunity for stability.

Participatory workshops encouraged women and girls to express their challenges and aspirations related to current shelter conditions and desired improvements. Women participating in a workshop, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

Photo: Ishrat Bibi, 2024

Drawing Gardens in Cox's Bazar

Sue Webb and Janina Engler-Williams on listening to girls' dreams of home

October 10, 2025

Dreaming Beyond the Shelter Walls

Some sketches are neat and orderly, others full of wild green space.

One girl talks about wanting to decorate the walls of her shelter.

Another adds flowers along a walkway.

The conversation flows easily here, in a space where they feel comfortable and respected – something rare in the crowded, tightly controlled world outside this room.

The drawings were part of a research project exploring women's and girls' experiences of their built environment (their shelters) and their priorities for how these might be improved.

In a context where shelters are often small, overcrowded, and offer little privacy, the girls' pictures were more than wishful thinking. They were a form of quiet resistance, a way to reclaim space, even if only on paper.

Small Acts of Beauty, Deep Acts of Courage

Back in their real shelters made of bamboo and tarpaulin, opportunities for personal expression are limited. Still, a few women have made small aesthetic changes: a curtain here, a carefully arranged corner there. But many were too shy to share photos of these small transformations, reminders of how personal and vulnerable such acts can be.

The Shantikhana itself stands in contrast to the shelters. Beyond being a centre for skills training or mental health support, it offers something less visible: a sense of control, continuity, and calm.

In a place where so much has been lost, it provides space for imagination, for planning, and for self-expression.

One woman described it simply: "This place saved my life."

From Imagination to Design

The conversations and drawings from the workshop have also shaped practical change. The local team and technical advisors took inspiration from the girls' visions, particularly the gardens, and integrated these ideas into a draft shelter upgrade design they hope to roll out. One version includes a small homestead garden, a reflection of what was imagined inside the Shantikhana.

In a setting where women and girls have little control over their physical surroundings, the act of drawing a garden, or talking about decorating a wall, becomes more than an aesthetic choice.

It becomes a way of asserting presence, dignity, and hope. A plan, not just a dream.

The story was from a research project called Amplifying Rohingya Women's Shelter Priorities (ARWSP), a collaboration between CARE Bangladesh and the Global Shelter Team at CARE International UK.

After a 1995 arson fire destroyed their home, Dr. Devora Neumark returned to the site to peel 80 pounds of beets, inspired by memories of their grandmother. S(us)taining live art performance, Montreal.

Photo: Mario Belisle, 1996

How an Arson, a Dream, and a PhD Led to Confirming That Beauty Is Survival

Home Ground Lab co-founder, Dr. Devora Neumark shares how loss, art, and research-creation confirmed beauty's power to heal from displacement

October 13, 2025

I'm a second-generation Holocaust survivor, born to refugees from Russia and Poland.

As a queer individual committed to Palestinian rights, you can imagine that my upbringing in an Orthodox Jewish home with a Rabbi as a father was not what one would call easy.

But I was exposed to so much art and beauty through cultural and religious traditions.

Even as a child, I wondered:

- Could aesthetics have a role beyond religion?
- Could beauty interrupt social suffering?
- Could it be a force for healing and justice?

This became personal in a whole new way for me in 1995, when an arson fire destroyed my home. Everything was gone, just twisted metal and ash where my life used to be. I felt completely powerless.

Then one night before the six-month anniversary of the fire I had a dream of my Russian grandmother's hands, reddened from peeling beets as she prepared borscht for Passover.

As a performance artist, I woke up compelled to re-create that image.

I returned to the ashes of my home, barefoot in a white dress, and peeled beets; 80 lbs of beets! The juice stained my hands red.

In the moment, I didn't fully understand how this creative gesture was helping me process the trauma, but I was deeply curious about the connection between beauty and displacement. That curiosity became the driving force for my PhD research-creation about beauty in the built environment for the forcibly displaced.

Beauty, Displacement, and Healing

During one of my research events, a participant named Alexis, a refugee and immigration lawyer, spoke the words I hadn't yet articulated for myself:

"As refugees, we lose our sense of beauty. And when that happens, we lose our sense of everything. Of life itself."

That's when it hit me.

I had lost my sense of beauty, and with it, my sense of life during that fire.

But the creative gesture of peeling those beets, barefoot, on the sidewalk in front of the gaping hole that was my home, helped restore it.

Passing on Beauty, Breaking the Cycle

I began working with first, second, and third-generation refugees from all over the world.

And I noticed something extraordinary: when families beautified their homes, it changed how their children understood their displacement stories. It had the ability to stop trauma from being passed down.

I had found my answer to those early questions:

- Yes, beauty can interrupt social suffering.
- Yes, it can be a tool for healing.
- Yes, it can carry justice, not only through protest, but through presence.

Amid violence and destruction, Kurdish communities created murals as expressions of grief, pride, and resistance. Murals in Amude, Rojava.

Photos: Kathleen DeWitt, 2016-2017

Walls of Memory, Walls of Defiance

Kathleen DeWitt on Kurdish street-art during war

October 17, 2025

The Kurds are the world's largest stateless peoples, spread across Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

For more than a century, they have endured repression, forced displacement, and campaigns of extermination — from the chemical gassing of Halabja in 1988 to the Anfal genocide that killed tens of thousands.

When the extremist group DAESH (ISIS) rose to power in the 2010s, entire cities were displaced, and Kurdish communities, who were already shaped by decades of persecution and repression, were again fighting to exist.

Amid the destruction, murals began to appear on the walls of schools, underpasses, and roadsides, serving as public expressions of grief, pride, and resistance.

Kathleen DeWitt, who worked in the region as Logistics and Program Manager for two humanitarian NGOs at the time, photographed some of these pieces of art. She described:

> "All of these are in response to the violence and war we were surrounded with. Defiance in the face of those who would like to eradicate Kurds."

Painting the future in the midst of war

In Rojava, northern Syria, the Kurdish-led self-governed region became known for its defense forces and for its vision of equality, pluralism, and local democracy.

Here, on the walls of Amude, murals began to appear during the war against DAESH.

There aren't plaques or signatures, just scenes of daily courage.

One wall shows a woman holding a dove by an open window.

Another, a bird breaking a chain.

Elsewhere, a woman with a blue headscarf gazes over bombed buildings, her flowing hair painted across the ruins.

As is often the case with art, it doesn't soften reality but *holds* it—especially when it's beyond words to convey.

Remembering what was nearly erased

Across the border, in Iraqi Kurdistan, towns like Akre and Duhok became frontline cities for sheltering families who had been displaced.

In Akre, a long series of murals climbs a hillside.

Each section represents a chapter in Kurdish history: the gassing of Halabja in 1988, the Anfal campaign, the mass displacements following the invasion of Kuwait.

Scenes of soldiers, families, and grieving women unfold across cracked concrete, their images punctured by holes.

But, in the final scenes, the imagery changes to waterfalls and greenery offering a glimpse of peace imagined and remembered.

Claiming equality

Together, the murals of Amude and Akre form a conversation across time and place.

In one city, paint was used to resist erasure in the moment and to claim visibility during war.

In another, it became a means of remembering what had already been lost.

One of Akre's murals reimagines one of the most recognizable photographs in modern history: soldiers raising a flag after battle. Here, though, it is schoolgirls who lift the Kurdish flag, their feet planted not on rubble but on stacks of books.

It's a striking reversal. The image transforms a symbol of conquest into a claim for equality and for the future of Kurdistan. Instead of victory through force, it shows victory through knowledge and collective ascent.

Like the walls themselves, the mural takes up space long denied to women and to Kurds alike—an act of both remembrance and rewriting.

Remembering, enduring, and rebuilding

While it's not known who created these works, they changed how those streets felt.

In the middle of destruction, they offered a different kind of strength: the ability to mark presence, to say *we are still here*.

From Iraq to Syria, from Akre to Amude, these murals form a visual archive of Kurdish endurance.

They show how beauty can carry history when formal records are destroyed, and how art can outlast the politics that seek to silence it.

Beauty is a way people remember, endure and rebuild.

About the Author:

By training, Kathleen DeWitt is an engineer and a conflict resolution professional. She has worked for industry, government, academia, and NGOs on five continents. These photographs were taken when she was an aid worker in humanitarian settings in two of the four Kurdistan regions, during the war against DAESH.

Dheisheh Refugee Camp is home to the many Palestinian families displaced since the 1948 Nakba. View of Dheisheh Refugee Camp, West Bank.

Photo: Nizar ALayasa, 2025

Our Lost Trees: The Story of Dheisheh Camp

Nizar ALayasa, Palestinian Traveler, on the trees that memory never let die

October 24, 2025

Seven years before the First Intifada, I was born in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp – one of the largest Palestinian refugee camps in Bethlehem – established by UNRWA to shelter those displaced from their villages. My family, who came from the village of Zakariya, shared a story much like that of the other families.

They arrived at the camp believing it would be a *temporary* refuge, a place to stay for only a few days before returning home. Yet, that temporary stay became a painful reality, one that lasted for generations – and for me, it became the only world I knew.

Although I was born decades after the year of displacement and the Nakba, I grew up listening to my grandfather and grandmother speak about Zakariya and the surrounding villages.

In my childhood, the camp was surrounded by barbed wire that made it feel like a large prison. There was no freedom of movement, and within a space of barely half a kilometer, I found myself confined. Yet, through my childlike eyes, it was heaven on earth. Along its narrow alleys grew fig trees, cactus trees, and mulberries – trees that filled the camp with life, warmth, and unforgettable memories.

As a child, every corner of the camp was an adventure, and every tree bore witness to a moment of joy or wonder. I would run between the trees, breathe in the scent of ripe mulberries, and sit beneath the shade of the figs, telling myself stories born of imagination. Despite the camp's small size, it felt to me as vast as the world – full of life, safety, and curiosity.

But time changed, and with it, the camp's features faded.

The fig, mulberry, and cactus trees I once knew have mostly disappeared. The green fences of trees that once shaded the alleys and offered comfort are now gone. The camp remains enclosed by wire, and life within it continues steadfastly – yet something of the beauty of childhood has vanished, leaving behind a blend of nostalgia and sorrow in my heart.

Still, the memories of the camp and its trees remain in my mind as a bridge between past and present. They remind me that even in the smallest and most confined of places, beauty can still flourish – and that memories are the only trees time cannot uproot.

A few months ago, a question crossed my mind: Where did all the trees go?

This question led me on a journey – a search for answers through a series of recorded interviews with residents of the camp, asking them: Where did the trees go, and why are they no longer here? Here are some of their voices:

Khaled Lutfi Lakhmour, from the depopulated village of Zakariya, still insists on planting in the narrow space before his home:

"Despite the limited space in front of our house in the camp, I planted cucumbers, cauliflower, and cabbage in a small garden. Planting is not just about crops – it's a source of spirit and motivation for life. If water were consistently available, we would have planted even more."

Hussein Al-Qassas, originally from Sarafand, provided some important history:

"Because the people of the camp are refugees from agricultural villages, they continued planting the same trees they used to grow in their villages and homelands. You can notice the planting of figs, grapes, and cactus."

"For example, the people of the village of Ajjur were famous for planting cactus in their village, and they continued planting cactus here in the camp as well, just as they planted them in their villages. For this reason, figs, grapes, and cactus became common here, because the people of these villages used to grow them in their villages, such as Zakariyya and Jarash. Here, where I stand, there used to be a large mulberry tree, along with fig and cactus trees. Today, there are only buildings."

Anwar Abu Joudeh from the depopulated village of Zakariya, recalled the following:

"In this house, there used to be many trees, and specifically in this area, there was a loquat tree and a grapevine. In the exact spot where this concrete pillar now stands, there used to be a large loquat tree that produced large fruits with big seeds. Unfortunately, I had to remove it when building the house, due to my need to expand for my children. As we expanded the construction in this particular area, the tree was removed, and the pillar was placed here instead. As you can see, Mr. Nizar, the pillar is not perfectly straight, which could be due to the moist and decomposed soil in this location. This is the reality of the camp and the situation we live in today."

Montaser Abu Alia, from Al-Qabu, spoke with pride of a tree that survived:

"In the middle of this area stands a large mulberry tree that has been here for a very long time. My cousins still collect its fruits to this day. It's one of the few trees that remain standing."

Ali Shafoot, from Al-Faluja, showed me his small garden and said:

"We planted this fig tree in rocky soil. We felt the need to grow something green – something alive. We are trying, as much as we can, to turn this small space into a garden, a place where we can breathe and feel alive."

Ratiba Ibrahim Khalil Abu Rayala, who arrived in the camp in 1967, remembered a time when space and trees were abundant:

"When I got married, this place was full of life. There were two mulberry trees right here, and we grew up eating their fruit. But with time, the trees were uprooted to make room for new houses. Despite the tight space, we still grow mint, roses, and peppers in every corner we can find. We insist on living."

Today, as I walk through Dheisheh Camp, I realize that its people are still deeply rooted, even if most of the trees are gone. Below is a recent photo of part of an old UNRWA room, with a fig tree standing in front of it. I took this photo just two days ago; a quiet reminder that some roots still cling to the soil of memory. The branches may have been cut, but the roots remain alive in memory, in resilience, and in the quiet persistence of those who continue to plant hope in every small corner

This text, including the quotations, was translated from the original Arabic by Nizar ALayasa.

About the Author:

Nizar ALayasa is a Palestinian traveler from Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, where he has lived as a refugee since birth. His family was initially displaced from the village of Zakariya during the 1948 Nakba. Born seven years before the outbreak of the First Intifada, Nizar grew up in the camp, surrounded by fences and checkpoints. These circumstances fueled his curiosity and love for exploring the world beyond its confines.

Nizar's passion for exploration began at an early age, relying on his memory to preserve the details of his experiences since he lacked the means to document what he saw. With the rise of social media, he began creating short videos that highlight historical, natural, and religious sites across Palestine, showcasing the beauty and depth of the land while moving beyond stereotypical images tied to political conflicts.

Through his work, Nizar presents Palestine as a place of environmental beauty and cultural significance, highlighting the everyday life of its towns and villages. Despite the challenges he faces as a refugee living in the Dheisheh camp, Nizar continues his journeys with determination and a deep belief that beauty can be a form of resistance, and that documenting everyday life in Palestine is an act of survival and resilience. His projects have garnered widespread interest locally and globally, with followers appreciating the richness and authenticity of his posts.

His stories and images have inspired many young Palestinians and Arabs to explore their own countries and rediscover places they had only heard about. This has made him a symbol of a new generation of Palestinian travelers who use the camera as a tool for knowledge and identity.

His current project, My Homeland Is Not a Camp, documents various sites in the West Bank reflecting the rich history and beauty of Palestine. Nizar ALayasa is also actively working on improving the gardens in refugee camps near Bethlehem through an initiative aimed at enhancing the quality of life for refugees. He strives to create green spaces that contribute to the aesthetic and psychological wellbeing of camp residents while providing areas where children and families can enjoy recreational activities. These efforts reflect his deep belief in the importance of improving the surrounding environment, despite the numerous challenges refugees face daily.

Owner-driven reconstruction initiatives in Sindh, Pakistan incorporated traditional motifs and architectural designs into shelters, Sindh, Pakistan.

Photo: CRS Pakistan, 2025

Where Beauty Means Resilience

Minar Thapa Magar on how Pakistani communities rebuilt not just homes, but heritage

October 31, 2025

The Flood That Washed Away More Than Homes

When the 2022 floods swept through Deh Kamangar in Pakistan's Sindh province, they didn't just destroy houses, they erased dreams. Shabeeran Bibi watched helplessly as the waters carried away everything she and her daughter Kanwal had built over the years.

> "We had lost our roof, our security, and our hopes," she recalls.

For months afterward, families like theirs lived in temporary shelters, battling harsh weather and uncertainty. The village that had once buzzed with life felt abandoned, its spirit as broken as its buildings.

A new kind of recovery takes root

But something remarkable began to happen when Catholic Relief Services (CRS), working with Sindh People's Housing for Flood Affectees (SPHF) and local partners, provided cash assistance and technical training to help 755 families rebuild their homes using flood-resilient techniques.

This wasn't just reconstruction, it was renewal.

As each new house took shape, something unexpected emerged. Without any master plan or design manual, families began painting their walls in vibrant geometric patterns. Drawing inspiration from the cherished ralli quilts that had warmed Sindhi families for generations, they transformed simple concrete structures into canvases of cultural pride.

The intricate patchwork designs that adorned traditional ralli blankets now came alive on house walls; bold blues, warm yellows, deep reds arranged in the same symmetric patterns their grandmothers had stitched by hand. Every geometric shape told a story of survival and continuity.

> "When the waters destroyed everything, we thought we had lost our identity too," says Qadir Bux, another flood survivor.

> "But now, looking at these beautiful walls, I see heritage alive again."

The healing power of beauty

The transformation was profound. Villages that had seemed lifeless after the floods now pulsed with color and energy. Children played in courtyards framed by painted walls. Neighbors gathered to admire each other's artistic choices. The beauty wasn't just decorative; it was deeply healing.

For Shabeeran Bibi and Kanwal, their new home represents far more than shelter. Standing proudly in front of their ralli-inspired walls, the message is clear: We are here, we are strong, and we are home again.

> "This house is more than a roof," Kanwal says. "It's a new beginning."

The strongest foundation of all

In a place where families had lost everything, they discovered that rebuilding wasn't just about bricks and mortar. It was about reclaiming dignity, celebrating identity, and decorating hope back into their lives, one geometric pattern at a time.

The colorful walls of Deh Kamangar stand as proof that even in the aftermath of disaster, aesthetics matter. And sometimes, beauty in the built environment is the strongest foundation of all.

About the Author:

Minar Thapa Magar is a National Coordinator for the Sindh Housing Recovery and Reconstruction Platform (SHRRP), supporting the Government of Sindh, Pakistan in rebuilding 2.1 million homes and recovering 50,000 settlements. As Technical Advisor at Catholic Relief Services (CRS), he brings 10+ years of experience in disaster recovery and reduction, shelter and housing, settlements approach, system strengthening and coordination.

Vincent Nsengiyumva, a survivor of the Rwandan Genocide, now teaches Rwandan drumming to new generations in Canada and continues to play a wide range of Rwandan traditional instruments.

Photo Left:
Salima Punjani, Montreal, 2015

Photo Right:
Vincent Nsengiyumva,
Châteauguay 2025

When Music Becomes Medicine

Vincent Nsengiyumva on drumming through grief and into hope

November 7, 2025

The rhythm that survived genocide

In Nyanza, the cultural heart of Rukali in Rwanda's southern province, I learned to play traditional instruments at my grandparents' knees. They were Indigenous Rwandan musicians who passed down more than melodies. They shared a living connection to culture, to community, to belonging itself.

I remember the times when all people, regardless of their backgrounds, celebrated events together. Singing, playing instruments, dancing together, sharing everything to support one another.

Those memories would become my lifeline.

When the world broke apart

In 1994, when I was just 15 years old, Rwanda descended into 100 days of unimaginable horror. Neighbors turned against neighbors. Friends became enemies. The genocide erased an entire generation.

I lost everyone. My entire family stolen away in waves of violence that defied comprehension. It was unbearable to contain the feelings and emotions bottling up inside.

With my entire family dead, I came to the harsh realization that I was all alone in a world filled with cruelty. It seemed as though demons had possessed people, driving them to commit unspeakable acts with chilling indifference.

The genocide ended, but for a 15-year-old orphan, the hardest part was just beginning. Alone, grieving, forced to help dispose of thousands of decaying bodies along the roads with my bare hands, I faced a choice between drowning in trauma or finding something, anything, to hold onto.

The gift my grandparents left me

In my darkest moment, I understood that all I had left were the musical skills my wonderful grandparents had planted in me like seeds. Music became my lifeline, putting food on the table.

I sought out musicians and dancing troupes across Rwanda, joining anyone who would have me. Every performance became an act of survival. But it became something more too. With each traditional instrument I played, each song I sang, each dance I learned, I was rebuilding myself from the inside out.

While I was playing my traditional instruments, dancing, and singing, I was learning more and more about my culture and music. I was improving both my musical ability and my mental health with every passing day that I got to play music and dance.

Building on broken ground

I found mentors who saw potential where others might have seen only trauma.

I am deeply grateful to the renowned musician Bwanakweli Nathan for teaching me how to sing and play traditional trumpets, amakondera, which proved invaluable later on. Additionally, I owe much to Rujindiri and Sebatunzi, masters of the traditional Rwandan zither, for inspiring me to play the inanga and helping me develop my skills.

Later, I became a member of the National Ballet Urukerereza of Rwanda, performing alongside professional artists as a custodian of Indigenous Rwandan culture. It was more than a job. It was proof that my life could change, that beauty could emerge from ashes.

It took a long time to finally accept and believe that my life would change for the better, and this professional practice was a significant factor in this process.

Breaking tradition to heal

As I rebuilt my own life through music, I began teaching women to drum.

Before the genocide, drumming had been reserved only for men. But after witnessing the trauma that women survived, I knew they needed their own path to healing. When women took up the drums, they claimed a voice and reclaimed their stories. The rhythms they created became their own form of resistance and recovery.

Carrying culture across oceans

In 2009, I moved to Canada, becoming one of very few cultural Rwandan ambassadors in North America. Thousands of miles from the hills where my grandparents first placed an instrument in my hands, I continue their legacy.

Music feels like my destiny and the fulfillment of my life's purpose. I use it to offer healing to others because it continually brings me back to life.

The questions that never quiet

This year marks 31 years since the genocide against the Tutsi of Rwanda. As a survivor, certain questions still echo in my mind.

Why were we subjected to such horrors?

Why did I survive while so many perished?

The questions may never find satisfactory answers. But I cling to the belief that there is a greater purpose. Personally, I see it as my responsibility to shape a brighter and more peaceful future.

I dedicate my talent to all who need healing, using my music and traditional instruments to bring hope to others, even when it's not easy, and perhaps especially then.

Passing it forward

Now I have a young son, and I watch him growing up in a world so different from the one I knew at his age. When I teach him the same traditional instruments my grandparents taught me, I'm not just preserving our culture. I'm showing him that love is stronger than loss, that beauty can rise from ashes, that music carries the voices of those who came before us.

My grandparents gave these gifts to me. I give them to my son. And through my performances and teaching, I offer them to anyone who needs to remember that healing is possible.

Beyond my own family, I teach traditional Rwandan drumming to a new generation of young people in Canada. When I see their hands learning the rhythms, when I hear them finding their voice through the drums, I see the cycle continuing.

These young drummers may not carry the same scars I do, but they carry forward the same culture, the same resilience, the same refusal to let beauty be silenced.

The sound of resistance

In my hands, traditional Rwandan instruments don't just preserve the past. They build bridges to the future. Every performance is an act of beautiful resistance against the violence that tried to silence my culture, my family, my very existence.

The music my grandparents gave me didn't just save my life.

It gave me a way to save others, one song at a time.

When I play, I play for the grandparents who taught me.

For the family I lost.

For the 15-year-old boy who chose music over despair.

For the women who found their voice through drums they were never allowed to touch.

For my son, who will carry this legacy forward.

For the young drummers learning these ancient rhythms in a new land.

And for everyone who needs to remember that even after the deepest trauma, beauty can be medicine, and art can be the strongest act of survival.

About the Author:

Vincent Nsengiyumva is an interdisciplinary musician, composer, and teacher specialising in traditional Rwandan music and dance. A survivor of the 1994 genocide, Vincent found healing and purpose through music, training under renowned masters including Bwanakweli Nathan, Rujindiri, and Sebatunzi before joining the National Ballet Urukerereza of Rwanda at age 15.

Since immigrating to Canada in 2009, Vincent has become one of North America's leading ambassadors of Rwandan culture. He founded and continues to direct the Komezinganzo Group, which performs traditional Rwandan music and dance across Quebec and beyond. He was the first to challenge tradition by teaching women to drum, an art form historically reserved for men, creating pathways for healing and empowerment.

Vincent performs on multiple traditional instruments including the inanga (Rwandan zither), ingoma (drums), amakondera (horns), and umuduli (single-string instrument), as well as modern instruments. He has performed at major festivals and cultural events throughout Canada, including the Montreal First Peoples Festival. In 2021, he collaborated with Vancouver-based Onibana Taiko on the Canada Council-supported project "Big Drums with Heart: Creating a Virtual Village of Beats & Melodies with Taiko & Rwandan Drums," exploring the connections between Japanese taiko and Rwandan ingoma drumming traditions through virtual exchange during the COVID-19 pandemic. He has composed original albums including Iwacu Heza (My Beautiful Homeland) and teaches traditional Rwandan drumming to new generations of young people, using music as medicine to offer healing while preserving and sharing the rich cultural heritage of Rwanda. Vincent currently works as the Computer Specialist Analyst for the First Nations Regional Adult Education Centre in Kahnawake.

St. Benedict's-White Earth Saint Benedict's Mission School with Students, near White Earth Ojibwe Reservation, Minnesota, USA.

Photo: College of Saint Benedict Saint John's University Libraries, 1871-1899

A Mother Transforms Homelessness

Jessie Ryker–Crawford, PhD, (White Earth Chippewa)

November 14, 2025

Taken from home too soon

I have to begin my story with prefacing that my mother was Native American (Anishinaabe also known as Chippewa). Born in 1940, she had been taken away from her family at the age of 4 years old to be placed into the St. Benedict's mission school and orphanage in St. Joseph, Minnesota. The brutality and inhumanity she experienced over the span of her growing years left definite scars upon her psyche, and she struggled with alcoholism throughout most of her life. Her schooling at St. Benedict's was minimal and mainly focused upon training her to become a maid and child carer for wealthy families.

Losing home again and again

I and my younger sister grew up in Seattle, about as far away from my mother's youth as she could get. Because of her lack of education and – both directly and indirectly – because of her skin color, Mom was only able to ever receive minimum-wage jobs. There were a number of times when we would lose our apartment when the rent could not be met. Everything except for some of our clothes had to be left behind – all of the bedding, the kitchen utensils, the toys, the household objects that held our memories of 'family' had to be abandoned. At those times of unhousing and homelessness, my mother struggled the most with her alcoholism.

But she would gather herself together, save money up, and find another apartment that could be afforded. I remember her excitedly leading my sister and I into our new housing. There, she had made a new refuge of beauty and wonder. She would purchase knick-knacks from Salvation Army, from Goodwill, from second-hand stores, and place them around this new, sparce space of ours. We often did not have mattresses (could not be afforded), but blankets galore would be set up for each of our very own sleeping area within a one-room apartment.

Turning bare rooms into wonder

But what I remember most, were the Christmas lights. She would hang the lights around the room and when we walked in they would be the only light…making the space look wondrous and magical. I vividly remember the awe I had as I stepped into the new apartment for the first time; bathed in soft red, yellow, green, and blue lights. I still hold a great affinity for Christmas lights, and I never wait the decent time (after Thanksgiving?) before I string them in, and on, the houses I live in.

My sister and I would wander around this new, small space, picking up and 'oohing' and 'ahhing' over the knick-knacks, the small toys now meant for us, the few kitchen utensils, the added clothing – all second-hand, all weathered and worn, but now all ours.

What she taught me about courage

Writing this up for the very first time, I am hit with the realization of how devastated, and then how courageous, my mother had been to bring beauty up from the ashes. I only remember her crying just once when we lost an apartment. It had been a sweet little space – in an old Seattle 1920s-era house turned into five apartments. We had the basement space, and it was the largest that we had ever lived in. It had built-in shelving and filigreed cabinets, and it had been painted a soft yellow throughout. She did break down when losing that space.

But every other time, she would simply explain that we would be getting another place soon. And she would speak of how lovely our new apartment would be, and that she would find one in the same area so that my sister and I could keep going to our schools and continue to grow up with our friends. We never doubted her. To this day I am not afraid of homelessness, and I channeled her strength to my own children when I found myself in that same situation: we will find a place of beauty. And we will start over.

Breaking the cycle in one generation

I didn't know about her internal fear. About her pain of having her children homeless once again. About the dread she must have harbored that homing might not happen this time. I just didn't know. Because she never let on.

I want to end my story with sharing that, despite the beatings and cruelty my mother experienced during her growing up in an Indian mission school, she never beat me or my sister; she gave us all the love and kindness that she retained in her heart despite it all, and we grew up feeling loved and cared for (to the best of her abilities while she struggled with her own insecurities and pain and her attempts to 'drink' it all away), and most importantly, we felt that we were people of high worth. Something she never felt about herself despite attempts to self-heal throughout her life.

She broke the cycle of historical trauma…not through seven generations, but through one.

That kind of power and perseverance of spirit cannot be minimalized. My mother was a strong and beautiful woman; not perfect, but who would be? Many other Native American children of her generation grew up struggling with histories of abuse, neglect, and yes even sexual abuse and torture. The Indian Boarding School Era of the 1600s to the mid-1900s left a wake of Native American children grown that never recovered or did not make it to adulthood at all. There were more than 500 government-funded or government-sanctioned Indian boarding schools across this nation, where children were forced to enter – forcibly taken from families and purposely moved far away from the reservations where their families lived. Heartbreaking photos exist of tipis set up near these spaces of horror, when parents and grandparents, siblings and extended families, moved to desolate areas next to the schools in the hopes of getting back their young. All to no avail. There are multiple stories of children hidden and, occasionally, kept safe at home. Very, very occasionally kept safe at home.

The term "Boarding School Survivor" must be a badge of courage for everyone who did survive. But it is a bitter, bitter badge. What is survival? It doesn't mean being healed with all the shackles of atrocities-past shaken off. Far, far from it. It means just that: to survive. To continue. Despite all the odds. My generation, the children of Boarding School Survivors, felt…feel…the weight of what they went through. We also survive. For some, barely. Because the devastation of spirit was so nearly complete for so many of our parents, for so many of our tribal communities. But over and over, generation by generation, we will continue. In beauty. Because our upcoming youth deserve it.

About the Author:

Jessie Ryker-Crawford, PhD, (White Earth Anishinaabe, Chippewa) served as the Dean of Academic Affairs at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) where she holds the rank of Professor Emeritus. The founder and former Director of the IAIA MFA in Cultural Administration, she received her PhD in Sociocultural Anthropology through the University of Washington exploring the crucial changes in the museum field through the advocacy and activism of U.S. Native American and Canadian First Nations tribal leaders, artists, activists, and museum professionals.

Photo Credit: In the collection of Vera Kisfalvi, n.d.

Nana Brought the Doll to the Train

Veronika (Vera) Kisfalvi

December 5, 2025

I'll start with the doll, which in and of itself was absolutely nothing special. I had received it as a birthday present in May of 1956, I'm not sure from whom, maybe from everyone in the family. I had immediately grown very attached to it, despite its generic doll qualities, which were quite dull. I must have given it a name, but I can't recall it. Made of celluloid, manufactured in Russia on an assembly line, it consisted of separate arms, legs, body and head, held together on the inside by coarse, knotted elastic bands and metal hooks. Sex indeterminate. I think the eyes could close, which would have made it somewhat special. But maybe they were painted on, always open, I'm not sure. No artificial hair, instead something moulded that was supposed to resemble hair, but without much colour. It wore clothing made of cotton that someone had found somewhere: underwear, dress, no shoes. Yes, it was very plain, but it was inconceivable that I would not have it with me where I lived, where I slept.

But somehow, inexplicably, in the chaos and anxiety of the night my mother and I left for Austria, the doll had been forgotten. I guess it was my mother who had packed our belongings, and since no-one was supposed to suspect that we were leaving for good, what we took with us had to be reduced to the bare minimum. Concerned with the essentials, she must have somehow left the doll behind. That evening, as my mother, my grandfather and I walked the two blocks to the train station at the end of our street, I had no idea that it had been forgotten.

But then, from behind us, I could hear Nana calling me by one of my nicknames: "Veruka, Veruka!" There she was, running after us. I can see her, a large woman approaching her late fifties (an ancient woman, in my seven-year-old eyes), wearing the long skirts that she always wore, and the ubiquitous lace-up leather boots that women of her age favoured, her long single braid waving from side to side as she charged down the street. She was carrying something in her hand that I knew had to be very important. As she got closer, I saw what it was.

I can't remember what was said. I imagine there was some crying on everyone's part. You have to understand that we had said our goodbyes before we left the house. I didn't know when or if I would ever see her again. No-one outside the family was to know that we were leaving. I had been told not to cry or to show that I was scared as we walked down the street, to control myself, so that we didn't look suspicious in any way. I suppose I was holding my mother's hand, scared and numb. And then there was my Nana, running down the street with my doll. She had found it and knew that I could not leave without it. It was so wrenching to see her again, to have her physically close to me, and then to have to part from her once more.

Now, looking back, I don't know whether I loved that doll because it was a special present, or because my grandmother thought it was so precious to me that I had to have it. From that moment, that doll was imbued with my presence in my grandmother's heart and hers in mine.

I held that doll in my arms as we left my home in Budapest, it was tucked in our small suitcase when we walked across the border to Austria and left Hungary for good, then through the emergency housing in Vienna and the refugee camps in the foothills of the Alps, across the Atlantic by boat, landing in Quebec City and continuing on to our new home in Montreal. Eventually the doll's clothes were lost, one of the legs cracked, and after some years the elastics inside broke and the whole doll fell apart. I wrapped all the parts in a towel and put them in a box, meaning to have the doll repaired, but when I looked for it a few years ago I couldn't find it. Too many moves to too many different homes, I guess.

As I was writing this, I spent some hours searching for a doll like that on eBay and on Etsy but could find one that was only somewhat similar. Yet even had I found one that was exactly the same, it would not have been my original doll.

In June 2025, as luck would have it, looking through my photo albums, I found a photo of the actual doll! I am holding it in my hands, below. My cousin Péter Hidvégi, sitting next to me, is holding his doll, quite similar. It looks like the eyes of my doll were not painted on but could actually open and close.

About the Author:

Veronika (aka Vera) Kisfalvi

In the aftermath of the Hungarian revolution of 1956, Vera left her first home in Budapest (a little cocoon shared with her divorced mother and extended family of maternal grandparents, aunt and uncle) at the age of seven. She and her mother arrived in Montreal in late 1957, after being sponsored by her aunt. They moved in with her aunt's extended family by marriage, sharing their two-bedroom flat on rue St-Urbain for a few months, which already housed an intergenerational group of a grandmother, her two sons and their wives, and their two newborns. They soon moved on to different quarters shared with other new arrivals, finally settling into their own apartment after her mother remarried. The doll described in this story was a constant in her life through all the moves.

Uncomfortable with the curiosity she first aroused at her school upon arriving, she was determined to assimilate as quickly as possible and learned English at breakneck speed. At home, her mother would speak to her in Hungarian, but Vera would always respond in English, typical of many immigrant families at the time. These days, she is grateful for all the memories, even if they're sometimes a bit inexact...

Her grandparents eventually emigrated to the US in 1958 and settled in the Bronx; she could now see them relatively regularly and even went to live with them for two more years, between the ages of eleven to thirteen, when she returned to Montreal, where she has been living ever since.

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