WORKING PAPER

Rethinking Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: the role of aesthetics in refugee shelter

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Abstract

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has long served as a cornerstone for understanding human motivation and guiding interventions across diverse populations, including responses to forced migration. However, this working paper challenges the conventional application of Maslow's model in refugee shelter projects, arguing that its static nature, individual focus, and universal application are misaligned with the realities of forced migration contexts, and it overlooks a critical component of wellbeing: aesthetics. Aesthetics is the overarching term encompassing the somatic appreciation – and the deliberate modification – of architectural elements, landscaping, materiality of shelter, spatial design, and manifestations of cultural symbolism. Despite its foundational role in shaping policies and interventions, Maslow's Hierarchy fails to account for the importance of aesthetics and beauty in the built environment, particularly for forcibly displaced individuals and communities. By incorporating aesthetics into shelter design and planning, this paper argues for a holistic approach to fostering dignity, cultural identity, and community resilience among the forcibly displaced.

Keywords

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Abraham Maslow's 1943 Hierarchy of Needs has become a foundational framework for understanding human motivation and psychological wellbeing (Maslow 1943; 1970; 1971). It assumes that individuals progress through distinct stages, starting with physiological and safety needs, such as food, shelter, and security, before advancing to psychological needs, such as love and belonging, and ultimately to the highest order of self-fulfilment. Maslow's model has informed an extensive range of psychological interventions and social services, creating service models that prioritise and are limited to providing for individuals' 'basic needs'.[1] This hierarchy has also profoundly influenced the international humanitarian system, including responses to forced migration (Lonn and Dantzler 2017). Shelter and settlements support[2] are considered the "foundation of humanitarian response" (Global Shelter Cluster, n.d., 7). They often respond immediately to crises, providing temporary accommodations for those escaping conflict and persecution.

The influence of Maslow's Hierarchy in shelter and settlements for displaced populations is widely evident, and Maslow's Hierarchy has, in many ways, become an assumed and underlying framework guiding shelter projects in addressing the needs of forcibly displaced individuals (Bouaiti et al. 2016). To begin with, Maslow's widespread adoption has led to the categorisation and ranking of needs, deeming some as 'basic' and 'essential' and thereby others as non-essential and not (that) important (Lonn and Dantzler 2017). The Global Compact on Refugees itself demonstrates this framing of categorisation, stating that refugee hosting countries are expected to provide "safe and dignified reception conditions ... [and] meet the *essential needs* of refugees [emphases added]" (United Nations General Assembly 2018, para. 5).[3] Shelter is often labelled as a 'basic' need; while this creates broad acceptance that shelter is needed for displaced populations, it also reinforces the idea that any 'basic shelter' will do. Maslow's Hierarchy has influenced the standards and extent of what shelter should provide: Professor and leading expert in refugee shelter Tom Scott-Smith recounts a fellow architect's strong proclamation at a humanitarian conference that what is needed in refugee response is 'simply' 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" (Scott-Smith 2019, 511). While the Global Shelter Cluster outlines many more nuanced necessities in shelter projects (Global Shelter Cluster 2021), the underlying belief that what universally matters first is 'basic needs' is widely embodied. As a result, most shelters are bare, anonymous, and standardised (Katz 2020; 2022; Malkki 2002).

With record-high levels of forced displacement globally, effective shelter solutions are paramount (UNHCR 2019). In 2021, it was estimated that of the close to 90 million forcibly displaced[4] individuals worldwide, 60 million needed shelter and 17 million were provided with shelter (Global Shelter Cluster 2023, xii). While shelters are, for the most part, designed as 'short-term' solutions during a crisis, they often become long-term dwellings; for example, tents used in most camps ordinarily last one year, but it is estimated that refugees will stay in a camp for an average of 17 years (Scott-Smith 2019, 512) Despite increased calls for improved transitions from emergency responses led by humanitarian actors to recovery responses led by development actors, the rising number and percentage of forcibly displaced individuals in protracted situations has meant that linear, crisis-oriented, Maslow-informed responses continue (Global Shelter Cluster 2023, chap. B2).

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1 For example, the international service model for responding to homelessness is based on the premise that individuals experiencing homelessness cannot find a job, address health needs, or reduce substance use without first having the physical safety of a home. See: (Acker 2021)

2 The term 'shelters' in this context refers to organized emergency housing and structures, encompassing a range of designations such as emergency, transitional, and semi-permanent shelters. These shelters differ significantly in scale, structure, and available services.

3 These are listed in order as adequate safe drinking water, sanitation, food, nutrition, shelter, psychosocial support, and health care (United Nations General Assembly 2018, para. 5).

4 The paper uses the term forcibly displaced to refer to any category of individual who have had to leave their home due to "force, compulsion or coercion." (See: International Organisation on Migration, "Types of Migration." Accessed January 24, 2024, https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/forced-migration-or-displacement.) Throughout the paper forcibly displaced and refugee are used interchangeably.

While the intent behind Maslow's application to shelter projects might be well-meaning and practical to prioritise scarce resources, this working paper contends that relying on Maslow's Hierarchy in responses to forced migration is both inaccurate and inadequate. The realities of forced migration introduce nuances that necessitate a critical re-evaluation of its widespread adoption: cultural differences and individual traumas, as well as the increasing scale and duration of displacement, call into question the hierarchy's linear progression, individual focus, and the universal application; further, the initial hierarchy completely overlooks[5] what research increasingly points to as being a critical component of wellbeing: aesthetics. Using a mixed-methods approach, this working paper aims to **challenge the conventional application of Maslow's Hierarchy in refugee shelter projects and argue that the recognition of aesthetics is a powerful tool for fostering a sense of dignity, cultural identity, and community resilience among the forcibly displaced.**

We begin by outlining the mixed methodological approach used to inform this paper. The subsequent section presents our theoretical analysis, detailing the critiques and shortcomings in applying Maslow's proposed framework to refugee shelters. Following this, critical research on the role of aesthetics as a fundamental yet missing component in the Hierarchy of the wellbeing of forcibly displaced populations is presented. Several case studies then provide examples of aesthetics' role in different refugee shelters. Next, we address some critical challenges and points of resistance in incorporating aesthetics, including resource allocation and costs, balancing cultural sensitivity with the pressure for 'standardisation,' the tension between top-down and community-based approaches, and potential political resistance. Finally, we conclude by outlining policy implications to establish a foundation on how aesthetics can create more therapeutic and culturally sensitive shelter solutions in forced migration contexts.

2. Methods

This paper is informed by a mixed methodological approach to understand the multifaceted experiences of displaced populations and capture the nuances of aesthetics and home beautification practices among refugees and their implications for individual and community wellbeing. The three main components of the research methodology were research-creation, desk research, and community-driven dialogues.

2.1. Research-creation

Research-creation is a dynamic and innovative methodology integrating artistic practice with scholarly inquiry to generate new knowledge and insights. Unlike traditional research approaches, research-creation emphasises producing creative works, such as artworks, performances, or interactive installations, as a primary mode of inquiry. This methodology allows researchers to explore complex questions and phenomena through the lens of artistic expression, fostering interdisciplinary collaborations and pushing the boundaries of academic inquiry. Through creation, researchers engage directly with their subject matter, gaining unique perspectives and generating embodied knowledge that transcends traditional academic discourse. Research-creation thus offers a transformative research approach that blends creativity, critical thinking, and experiential learning.

Between 2008 and 2013, 26 individuals living in Canada with personal or intergenerational experiences of forced displacement, who participated in a series of dialogical live art performance events about the role of home and home beautification, were involved in an initial one-on-one semi-structured interview and several follow-up interviews. These generated more than 100 hours of audio recording that were then analysed. This research-creation process created a foundational understanding of home beautification's positive role among the forcibly displaced as they settled and rebuilt their lives in a new country.

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5 Aesthetics was eventually included in Maslow's last iteration of the hierarchy; however, it was placed at the very top of the pyramid with self-actualization.

2.2. Desk Research

To build on this research and understand the prevalence and role of home beautification and aesthetics in different displacement contexts and at a community level, a comprehensive review of existing literature and official documents related to refugee camps and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was conducted. The review comprised two distinct parts, each exploring different aspects of beauty within refugee communities. Part one focused on identifying scholarly literature addressing what Arthur Danto (2003) coined as 'third realm beauty'[6] among refugees; 51 articles were reviewed in part one. Part two examined broader literature on refugee homemaking and then conducted a deductive analysis to identify the role of beautification and aesthetics in forced migration contexts. A sample of 45 articles was analysed using established criteria, through which 41 instances of aesthetics and beauty in the built environment in forced migration contexts were identified. While the analysis identified examples of aesthetics in different forced migration contexts, we drew from the examples identified in congregate shelters and settlements for this paper. Then, we obtained photographs through a variety of public sources. Images were analysed to visually capture refugee camps' built environment and living conditions. This qualitative analysis of textual and visual data informed the study's conceptual framework and provided context for subsequent community-driven conversations.

2.3. Community-driven dialogues

Complementing the above, 30 community-driven conversations were conducted directly with residents in two Palestinian refugee camps in the Occupied West Bank. Led by Nizar ALayasa, a trusted community member and dialogue convener, these conversations took place in residents' gardens and then also in their homes and covered various topics related to home beautification practices, Palestinian cultural identity, and community resilience. Participants shared personal anecdotes, memories, and aspirations related to their living spaces within the camp. The dialogues were documented using a combination of notes, video, and still photography. Following the dialogue sessions, responses were translated from Arabic into English. Content and thematic analyses were conducted collaboratively on the verbal responses and collected photo and video imagery.

Together, these methods informed our theoretical analysis of Maslow's Hierarchy and findings on the role of aesthetics in displacement contexts. Case studies were developed based on the desk research findings and community-driven dialogues to provide more tangible examples of these findings in practice.

3. Theoretical analysis

Despite its widespread adoption and ubiquity as an underlining framework in humanitarian response and social services, Maslow's Hierarchy has faced criticism for its linear approach, individual focus, and universal applicability (Neher 1991; Gorman 2010; Kenrick et al. 2010; Tay and Diener 2011; Wordsworth 2019; Tamas 2020; Nemati 2013). Below, we expand upon these critiques to demonstrate their limits when applied to shelter responses for forcibly displaced individuals.

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6 Third realm beauty is expanded upon in greater detail in Section 3.4.

3.1. The static nature

The dynamic contexts of forced migration and shelter project responses challenge the static nature of Maslow's Hierarchy (Desmet and Fokkinga 2020, 6). The model implies a linear progression from physiological needs to self-actualisation, assuming a steady and uninterrupted trajectory. However, the reality for refugees is far from linear. As conflicts persist and other durable solutions such as resettlement remain extremely limited, refugees increasingly wait in 'limbo' for anywhere from a few years to a few decades (Donà 2015; Fábos and Brun 2015). These settings often lack fundamental rights and protections, including the right to work or freedom of movement—elements that arguably fall into Maslow's baseline level of physiological needs. Despite this, refugees do, in fact, re-make a sense of home and rebuild aspects of their lives (Fábos and Brun 2015; Boccagni 2022). Maslow's Hierarchy would imply everything in their life is on hold and out of reach until these needs are met.

Further, trauma can be a pervasive factor for displaced people fleeing conflict and violence, often complicating the satisfaction of 'basic' needs (Knipscheer et al. 2015; Luci 2020). With its linear structure, Maslow's model may fail to account for the psychological impact of displacement on individuals, placing them in a rigid hierarchy that doesn't adequately address the immediate challenges they face. Maslow's model falls short of capturing the complexity and fluidity of refugee experiences, where individuals may oscillate between different levels identified in the Hierarchy based on their evolving circumstances.

In addition to refugees' experiences of forced migration, the humanitarian responses to them are often anything but straightforward. Early conflict and post-disaster situations are "frequently described as 'chaos'" (Stephenson 2014, 43). Building shelters, improving them, and other recovery efforts often take many years, if not several decades. Further, there is frequently little coherence between government, humanitarian, and development actors' policies and programmes on shelter and housing. Assuming both people and services progress through a series of defined steps is misrepresentative of the realities on the ground. A more adaptable, responsive, and representative framework is needed.

3.2. Individual and collective needs

Another limitation of Maslow's Hierarchy is its sole focus on individual needs (Muñoz Arce 2019). To begin with, this is problematic as it represents a misalignment in foundational cultural values. A framework focused on individual human motivation and fulfilment is based on Western European values centred on self. This misrepresents the values of interconnectedness and *collective* well-being prominent throughout many parts of the world, specifically from the regions where most refugees are currently from (Mayaka and Truell 2021). Maslow's Hierarchy is further misaligned with the inherent nature of shelter projects, which is to respond to large flows of displaced people—a collective endeavour at its core (Rutledge 2011). Shelters must house lots of people and often in minimal spaces. The collective needs of shelter residents must be considered in shelter design. Those collective needs could vary widely, ranging from measures for additional privacy and modesty for religious reasons to having open floor spaces for meals to reflect cultural hospitality practices to creating safe and quiet communal spaces that make it easy for residents from diverse backgrounds to interact.

Lastly, the Hierarchy's individual focus neglects the importance of relationships and social capital. While these are long-established critical elements in human wellbeing, they are even more crucial for refugees' wellbeing as they navigate displacement (Rajan 2022). It is often through relationships that refugees find ways to survive and meet Maslow's basic physiological needs. Beyond the physical design and features of a shelter, one's prominent experience of shelter is based on interactions with other residents where they must negotiate a range of daily activities in a shared space (Muñoz 2018). Shelter responses that fail to account for the importance of relationships risk increasing frustration, loneliness, isolation, and, subsequently, overall wellbeing (Goh 2020). Shelter design

and the challenges of displacement can either help or hinder "the ability of neighbours to give mutual support… [which is often the] the very strength at the core" of many refugee communities (Fellows 2020, 259). To adequately address the challenges of forced displacement, a departure from the individual-centric framework proposed by Maslow is required, acknowledging the collective dynamics inherent in refugee communities.

3.3 A universal hierarchy

Maslow's model is further problematic when applied to refugee populations because it assumes a one-size-fits-all approach to human motivation and wellbeing, disregarding the diverse cultural, social, and individual variations among populations. Refugees are not a monolithic group; they come from diverse cultural, religious, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds, each with its own values, norms, and priorities. Maslow's Hierarchy oversimplifies the complex and varied needs of individuals within refugee populations and prescribes assumed remedies. Further, not only does an assumed universal progression through a set of predefined needs directly counter the international humanitarian imperative established in the 'Grand Bargain' to localise funding, policy and knowledge (UN General Assembly 2016), but it also helps to ensure that it is the values and framework of the organisations leading and funding shelter responses that get implemented. Many of these organisations are based in Europe and the United States. The prefabricated 'Ikea shelters' formally known as 'Better Shelters' exemplify this—a universal shelter that resembled a basic European home imported around the world that aid workers viewed as ineffective and unnecessary—a "solution to a problem that didn't exist" (Scott-Smith 2019, 514). A universal approach in refugee shelters risks missing the needs, strengths, and realities of the very people the shelters are intended to serve. Cultural variations play a significant role in shaping the hierarchy of needs for different groups, and a more flexible approach is necessary to address the unique circumstances of each community.

3.4. Aesthetics

As is evidenced above, Maslow's Hierarchy falls short of effectively responding to forced migration contexts: its components and application could, therefore, potentially negatively impact refugee responses. At the same time, Maslow's most used model completely overlooks something that could be fundamental to refugees' wellbeing: aesthetics. A growing body of research suggests that beauty in the built environment is integral to wellbeing, specifically to refugees' wellbeing.

Beauty in the built environment involves purposeful actions to modify one's physical dwelling space, resulting in what art philosopher Arthur Danto coined as "Third realm beauty" (Danto 2003). This involves intentionally beautifying the material world and is observable in any place of dwelling, including shelters, camps, or temporary accommodations (Acker and Neumark 2023; Neumark 2013; Acker 2023; Neumark and Acker 2024). Beauty in the built environment emphasises the subjective and often culturally influenced perception of what is aesthetically pleasing or beautiful in the built environment. It centres on the positive, attractive, or harmonious qualities in architectural elements, landscaping, spatial design, and cultural symbolism **as perceived by** individuals or communities.

Aesthetics is a broader term encompassing the philosophy and study of sensory or sensory-emotional values, sometimes termed judgments of sentiment and taste. In the built environment, aesthetics includes both positive and negative aspects of design and perception. It considers the overall perceptual experience and emotional impact of the built environment, acknowledging that aesthetics may not always equate to conventional beauty. It encompasses a broader range of design considerations, including functionality, form, and the emotional responses elicited by the surroundings.

In forced migration shelter and settlements, aesthetics and beauty in the built environment extend beyond mere visual appeal; they emerge as critical factors in shaping the experiences of forcibly displaced individuals and communities. In this sense, some of its value, meaning, and appreciation are rooted in the contextual reality. For this working paper, the term aesthetics will be used as the overarching term. Pieter Desmet and Steven Fokkinga argue that beauty is a fundamental need for human-centred design, explaining that our environments should create the "feeling that the world is a place of elegance, coherence, and harmony, rather than feeling that the world is disharmonious, unappealing or ugly" (Desmet and Fokkinga 2020, 9). While there are several shortcomings in Maslow's model, each of which could benefit by being directly addressed in shelter responses, we argue that the growing research on aesthetics suggests that the incorporation of aesthetics into the design and planning of refugee settlements becomes the through-line through which shelter can best fulfil its range of possible benefits. As detailed below, we thus argue that beauty in the built environment is not a luxury but an indispensable component of holistic wellbeing. This component is absent in Maslow's most often cited hierarchy.

4. Research on Aesthetics

Neuroaesthetics is a growing field of study that analyses the neuroscience of aesthetics. Neuroaesthetics provides the crucial connection between intentional design incorporating beauty and its positive repercussions on psychological wellbeing.

> [It] is one field of research that captures the psychological effects of beauty incorporated into design. This **research demonstrates** that **design** with the **deliberate intention to incorporate beauty** is **actually imperative** to **human psychological wellbeing**, with positive effects on learning, social behaviour, and emotional wellness. Beauty and design play a significant role in the mental health of building occupants [emphases added] (Kleim 2018, n.p)

Increasing evidence shows that aesthetics in the built environment impact an individual's "mood, cognitive functioning, behaviour, and even mental health" (Coburn, Vartanian, and Chatterjee 2017, 1521). In refugee shelter and settlements, understanding and applying principles from neuroaesthetics becomes crucial. Research demonstrates that integrating beauty into shelter design has clear and positive benefits for various individual and social dimensions. By deliberately incorporating aesthetically pleasing elements into the design of living spaces, forcibly displaced individuals are provided with an environment beyond mere functionality. This positively impacts their mental well-being and contributes to a sense of dignity, identity, and community cohesion.

What follows describes the numerous, meaningful, and positive roles that aesthetics can play in refugee contexts. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate the limitations in Maslow's defined set of needs and establish how aesthetics and beauty are indispensable needs.

4.1 Wellbeing and mental health

The built environment plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' emotional and overall wellbeing: "The degree to which residents feel their city is beautiful [is] key to understanding not only their happiness but health and other factors related to quality of life" (Goldberg, Leyden, and Scotto 2012, 7). For refugees, the physical surroundings are not merely utilitarian but contribute to their overall sense of identity and place.

However, shelters are often intentionally created as "bare shelters" (Katz 2022, 158), comprising the most minimal and functional dwelling places. They are designed to be anonymous, standardised, and universal, like Maslow's Hierarchy (Katz 2020; Scott-Smith 2019). One study found that regardless of shelters' design and production, most were implemented in a "top-down approach,…[had] significant occupant dissatisfaction,…[and had a] detrimental impact on occupants' health and wellbeing" (Albadra et al. 2021, 262). Aesthetic elements, encompassing colour schemes and architectural styles and incorporating cultural symbols, play a crucial role in shaping mood, alleviating stress, and nurturing a connection to one's heritage. Creating an environment that is visually, mentally, and emotionally engaging while being culturally sensitive holds the potential to substantially enhance refugees' overall feelings of security, dignity, and belonging. Moreover, it can improve mental health, successful community integration, and long-term resilience outcomes.

4.2 Cultural Identity and self-expression

The concept of 'cultural identity' revolves around the idea of cultural tradition, which refers to a community's heritage. This heritage encompasses tangible and intangible expressions of creativity, such as languages, rituals, beliefs, historical sites, literature, artistic works, archives, and libraries. It's acknowledged that collective creative efforts rooted in tradition reflect shared expectations within the community. These efforts serve as important symbols of community solidarity and contribute significantly to shaping and expressing the community's identity.

Refugees' lived experiences demonstrate how aesthetics is a profound catalyst in shaping interactions and interpretations of cultural and physical surroundings. The built environment transcends being a mere backdrop. Instead, it transforms into a canvas for cultural expression as "aesthetics plays a fundamental role in how individuals and communities interact with and interpret their cultural surroundings" (Lefrançois, n.d., n.p.). Intentionally integrating aesthetic elements that reflect a refugee community's diverse cultural identities helps create visually meaningful spaces. Further, beautifying one's dwelling or space can empower individuals to reclaim agency over their narratives (Durrant and Lord 2007). This emphasis on aesthetics, therefore, goes even beyond visual appeal; it provides a means of self-expression and allows refugees to assert their identity in the face of adversity, create environments conducive to preserving and embodying collective memory, and "retain a sense of humanity, dignity, and resilience" (Saito 2017, 19).

4.3 Community Resilience

Community resilience is a dynamic and multifaceted concept that encompasses the collective ability of a community to adapt, recover, and even thrive in adversity (Rashidfarokhi and Danivska 2023; Abramson et al. 2015). For communities, "the built environment can help to strengthen connections and create a sense of community/place" (Rashidfarokhi and Danivska 2023, 751). In light of immense uncertainty, disruptions and the need to re-make and re-build many aspects of their livelihoods, this is critical for forcibly displaced communities. Since aesthetics play a pivotal role in fostering a sense of belonging and community, shelters that prioritise aesthetics create spaces that encourage social interaction, collaboration, capacity development, psychosocial wellbeing, and mutual support (Neumark and Acker 2024). As a key element in this resilience framework, aesthetics becomes a potent force in transforming shelters beyond functional spaces into culturally relevant environments. The aesthetic appeal of public spaces can serve as a catalyst for community engagement, promoting a collective sense of purpose and shared identity (Francis et al. 2012).

4.4 A fundamental human right

Maslow's Hierarchy implies that aesthetics are merely a luxury. However, many scholars contend that that is not the case. Danto (2003) claimed that "while beauty might be optional for art, it is not an option for life. It is a necessary condition for life as we would want to live it" (p.160). Winson Nagan and Aitza Haddad (2012) argued that aesthetics is fundamental to human dignity. They say that "human rights aspects of aesthetics are implicated in one way or another in all the basic values behind the human rights principles in international law" (Nagan and Haddad 2012, N.p.). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly Articles 19 and 27, underscore the rights to freedom of expression and participation in cultural life, emphasising the significance of aesthetics as a fundamental human right.

Moreover, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples could be applied to this critique as it recognises and protects the cultural rights of Indigenous communities, contributing to a more holistic understanding of human rights beyond the linear tradition of Maslow's Hierarchy. Integrating these principles fosters a comprehensive approach that values individual and collective wellbeing, embracing diverse expressions of human experiences. The right to live in a visually pleasing and culturally resonant environment is vital for maintaining a sense of self-worth and identity, particularly for those who have experienced forced displacement. Acknowledging aesthetics as a human right challenges the perception of beauty as a subjective luxury and positions it as an integral part of a person's overall wellbeing.

5. Case studies

Examining successful examples of integrating aesthetics into refugee settlements provides valuable insights into the transformative power of thoughtful design. The case studies highlight the potential impact of aesthetics on the wellbeing of forcibly displaced individuals and offer practical lessons for current and future shelter initiatives.

5.1 United Nations' Banja Koviljača refugee centre in the former Yugoslavia

An early example of focussing on aesthetics in shelter design is the 1964 United Nations' Banja Koviljača shelter, designed by architect Mihajlo Mitrović, which was built to provide a temporary residence for refugees and asylum seekers. However, Architect Mitrović envisioned the shelter as more than a temporary residence and aimed to create an environment that reflected the local cultural heritage and promoted transcultural exchange (Staničić 2022, 184). He drew inspiration for the design from the picturesque surroundings, integrating traditional Serbian elements to create a building that blended seamlessly with the natural landscape.

The shelter, situated on the edge of the Banja Koviljača spa complex, comprised two tracts—a dormitory and a restaurant—connected by a narrow passage. The architectural style embraced local materials, such as 'broken' stone, and featured wide overhanging eaves reminiscent of traditional Serbian construction. The centrepiece was a large, multifunctional living and dining room with a triangular hearth, symbolising Serbian tradition's inexhaustible spring of energy and life (Staničić 2022, 184). The unique design of the shelter garnered praise from both local and international quarters. It won the prestigious Borba Award for Architecture in 1967. It was described as the country's most beautiful building, demonstrating that "creativity and beauty are possible, even necessary" in refugee shelters (Staničić 2022, 188–89).

Present-day appearance of the United Nations Refugee centre in Banja Koviljača, designed by Architect Mihajlo Mitrović and built in 1964 (Staničić 2022, 184).
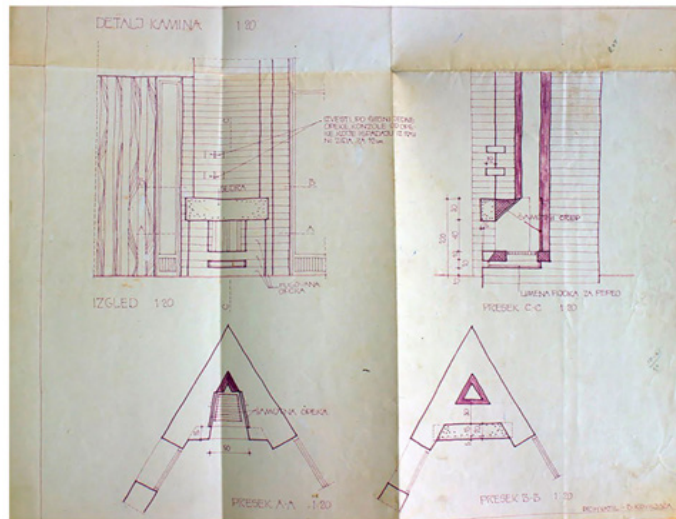
"Detailed drawings of the fireplace/hearth, the centrepiece of the entire refugee centre" (Staničić 2022, 185).

5.2. Al Jeddah Camps, Iraq

Aesthetics in refugee shelters can be straightforward, practical, and empowering. Located in the Nineveh Governate, the Jeddah Camps were established during the ISIS occupation of Mosul. One of more than 20 other camps across north Iraq, the Jeddah 1 camp was established in 2016 to provide shelter to 2,500 families fleeing violence. The initial shelters were designed as tunnel tents, using a galvanised steel pipe frame and a three-layered canvas. Despite their limited lifespan, as of 2019, the tents had no maintenance since their initial construction. Prolonged exposure to severe summer conditions had deteriorated almost all tents, rendering them practically unusable (Country Analysis Iraq 2023).

Women were trained to take part in the maintenance of tents at the Jeddah camp in Iraq. Photo © Nahla Rafeaa, 2019

Women put a decorative tarp over a tent. Photo © Sami Abdulla, 2019

To address this problem, after receiving approval from government authorities, the implementing organisation first conducted focus groups with the predominately female-headed households and then together designed a Cash-for-Work programme that would both engage women, improve skills and livelihoods, and make crucial improvements to shelters. Residents were hired, trained, and provided technical supervision to replace damaged tents. By the end of the project, all 2,500 tents had been repaired (Global Shelter Cluster 2019). Improving the aesthetics of the shelter had several benefits: it created safer, more secure, and better-looking shelters, engaged women, brought the community together, created jobs, and improved residents' skills.

5.3 The Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan

"**We need initiatives that have no other purpose than aesthetics**" (Healthy housing for the displaced 2017, n.p.).

Contrasting to the Jeddah 1 camps, incorporating aesthetics into refugee shelter projects can take on significant, colourful, artistic expressions, as seen in the Zaatari Refugee camp in Jordan. Located in northern Jordan, the Za'atari refugee camp currently hosts approximately 80,000 displaced individuals who have been forced to flee the war in Syria (Oxfam, n.d.).

Mohammad Jokhadar, a Syrian artist who escaped Homs in 2013 and served as a barber in Zaatari refugee camp while conducting complimentary art classes for children, established the Jasmine Necklace collective of artists in 2016. This was a volunteer project to paint shelters in the camp with support from the Norwegian Refugee Council. Dividing the camp into twelve sections, each area was painted with specific themes or dominant colours, injecting individual character into the once-anonymous streets. The themes often reflected the refugees' places of origin or Syria's lush landscapes, contrasting with the desert-like surroundings of the camp. One theme focused on Syrian archaeological sites to educate children about their cultural heritage. Lasting over a year, the project garnered significant attention from visitors and is considered one of the most successful initiatives in Zaatari, resonating with Syrian refugees' shared yearning for beauty as it is entirely grounded in aesthetics.

A Jasmine Necklace mural in the Zaatari Refugee Camp. Photo © Joel Artista, 2017

The Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan is an example of a refugee settlement that goes beyond mere functionality and actively prioritises aesthetics. In one study, researchers found that decorating provides an escape from the camp and compensates for the loss of identity, home, and leisure. Within contexts of austerity, decorating spaces is a valuable and vital aspect of living, coping, and supporting people's sense of identity and pride. Through painting and decorating public and private 'spaces', refugees transform them into 'places', creating a sense of home. The research highlights "how the capability of decorating, crafting and making is an enactment of freedom within contexts of political restrictions and resource limitations" (Nabil et al. 2018, 1).

The message here is clear: within the constraints of refugee camps marked by political restrictions and limited resources, the act of decorating and transforming spaces into meaningful 'places' serves as a vital means for refugees to escape, cope, and regain a sense of identity, pride, and home.

Crucially, the aesthetics of Zaatari Refugee Camp contribute to a more positive and resilient refugee community. The visual appeal of the surroundings has been shown to positively influence mental health, reduce stress, and create a more cohesive social fabric among residents. Zaatari's success lies in meeting the basic needs of refugees and in recognising the importance of aesthetics as a fundamental component of their capacity for resilience and overall wellbeing (Nabil et al. 2018).

5.4. Al Azraq Refugee Camp, Jordan

Addressing the 'bare' aspects of standard refugee camps and the growing displacement worldwide, Syrian refugees living in the Azraq Refugee camp in Jordan collaborated with humanitarian workers, host community members and the MIT Future Heritage Lab to reimagine what a refugee shelter could look like. The T-Serai[7] shelter worked to criticise the standard humanitarian refugee T-Shelter (UNHCR 2015). It drew inspiration from the mobile architecture traditions of the region, specifically the Ottoman Empire and combined historical aesthetics with contemporary design principles. Constructed from humanitarian textiles and discarded clothes, the aim was to design a "culturally sensitive, socially inclusive, and environmentally conscious framework for humanitarian design," challenging the standardised shelter model prevalent in refugee camps (Akšamija et al. 2021).

The modular textile system of the T-Serai is built around textile storytelling, enabling refugees to personalise their living spaces and express their cultural heritage. It also emphasises the role of aesthetics in addressing the emotional and psychological needs of refugees amidst the constraints of war, trauma, and displacement. The project empowers displaced communities to reclaim agency over their built environment and envision alternative futures by humanising the standardised T-Shelters through art and design. Furthermore, it challenges the prevailing paradigm of humanitarian aid by advocating for culture as a profound human need and a catalyst for resilience in times of crisis. Through initiatives like the T-Serai, which repurposes surplus textiles to support social revitalisation, the project exemplifies how aesthetics can serve as a tool for social activism and cultural preservation within refugee contexts.

Standard T-Shelters at Al Azraq refugee camp. Photo © MIT Future Heritage Lab

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7 Textile System for Experimental Research in Alternative Impact. See: https://www.futureheritagelab.com/projects#/tserai/.

The Portable Palace of the Displaced Empire. Photo © Dino Rowan, 2021

**Demonstrating the cultural gaps in humanitarian refugee interventions.
Photo © Dino Rowan, 2021**

5.5 Palestinian refugee camps in the Occupied West Bank

Of the more than 871,00 registered Palestinian refugees in the Occupied West Bank, the majority live in 19 refugee camps, some of which are located near major towns like Bethlehem and Hebron. Established in 1948, these camps were initially intended as temporary shelters for those displaced during the Nakba (catastrophe). Originally planned as short-term solutions, they have persisted over decades, with refugees facing ongoing challenges related to living conditions, access to resources, and the protracted nature of their displacement. Community-driven conversations were conducted in 2023 and 2024 by storyteller Nizar ALayasa with 30 residents living in the Dheisheh and Al-Azza Refugee Camps. Half took place in residents in gardens, and the remainder inside their homes.

The significance of gardens to Palestinian refugees was emphasised, with the focus often on the spiritual connection between gardening and the memory of displacement since 1948. Many residents expressed their sense of belonging by showcasing cherished possessions like keys to former homes and ancestral agricultural tools, which inspire them to maintain farming practices and create personal spaces within the camps.

> Everyone agreed, being refugees from different Palestinian villages, that caring for agriculture represents for them a memory of the towns from which they were expelled in 1948. Caring for the garden reminds them of the land in the occupied villages…. **It feels like jail, but we make it a beautiful place to live** [emphases added].[8]

The conversations also revealed the pain and distress experienced due to limited agricultural spaces, highlighting a deeper desire to express identity and resilience. Furthermore, they demonstrated that intentional acts of beautification by first and second-generation refugees are therapeutic and serve to challenge prevailing narratives of victimhood and highlight the creative agency of refugees. Nizar reflected the following:

> After recording more than ten different gardens in the camp, I received numerous requests from others who also have gardens and an interest in agriculture, asking me to film their gardens and **showcase their beauty to the world**. After recording these gardens, my belief grew stronger that even in confined spaces, we can create hope through these gardens and **send a message to the world that Palestinian people in the camps love flowers, trees, and gardens just like any other people in the world** [emphases added].[9]

Palestinian refugee camp gardens in the Occupied West Bank. Photos © Nizar ALayasa, 2023

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8 From text exchanges with co-authors in the fall of 2023
9 From text exchanges with co-authors in the winter of 2024.

6. Addressing challenges

While it might be easy to state that aesthetics is important and should be incorporated into shelter projects, actually doing so can be hindered by both conceptual and implementation challenges.

6.1 Resource constraints and practical challenges

Integrating aesthetics into refugee shelters may face challenges, especially in resource-constrained environments like refugee shelter projects (Global Shelter Cluster 2023). However, it is crucial to recognise that aesthetics need not be synonymous with extravagance. Simple yet thoughtful design choices can go a long way in creating visually appealing and culturally relevant spaces without significant financial burdens. Leveraging local materials and engaging in upcycling practices can be innovative solutions to overcome resource constraints, emphasising sustainability and affordability in pursuing aesthetic enhancements. Additionally, partnerships with local artisans and community-driven initiatives can further mitigate practical challenges, turning limitations into opportunities for creative and meaningful design.

6.2 Balancing cultural sensitivity with standardisation

Striking a balance between cultural sensitivity and the need for standardised solutions poses a challenge. While each refugee community is unique, there are overarching principles that can guide the integration of aesthetics without imposing a one-size-fits-all approach. Collaborative processes involving refugees' input in the design and planning stages can help navigate this delicate balance. It is necessary to establish adaptable frameworks that allow for cultural variations while maintaining a level of standardisation that ensures the scalability and replicability of successful aesthetic interventions. By fostering a dynamic exchange of ideas and incorporating feedback loops, the challenge of balancing cultural sensitivity with standardisation can transform into an opportunity for co-creation and shared ownership of the shelter environment.

6.3 Collaborative rather than top-down approaches with refugee communities

Including refugees in the design and decision-making processes is paramount (Albadra et al. 2021, 262): collaborative approaches that prioritise the voices and preferences of the displaced population ensure that the built environment reflects their aspirations and values. Engaging refugees as active participants rather than passive recipients fosters a sense of ownership and investment in their surroundings. This collaboration should extend beyond design input to skills-building programs, empowering refugees to contribute actively to implementing and maintaining aesthetically enhanced shelters. Establishing long-term partnerships with local organisations and authorities further strengthens collaborative efforts, creating a sustainable model for ongoing community involvement in the evolution of their living spaces. Prioritising participatory decision-making ensures a more holistic and practical approach to refugee support, acknowledging the collective nature of displacement and the strength found in community resilience.

6.4 Overcoming political resistance

In addition to the practical challenges outlined above, incorporating aesthetics into refugee shelters might never be considered because of political resistance. Despite the acknowledged benefits, refugee-hosting countries often resist or are practically unable to go beyond fulfilling the so-called 'essential' needs outlined by Maslow's Hierarchy and the Global Compact on Refugees (Achilli, Yassin, and Erdogan 2017; Ferris and Kirisci 2016; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016). Maintaining austere living conditions is a way to manage the perception of forced migrants in shelters, portraying a "bare life" (Malkki 2002, 353). Not investing in the shelters can also feel like a way for host countries to reinforce the supposed temporary nature of forced migrants' time in their country.

However, for hosting countries that are either hostile towards or overwhelmed by large influxes of forcibly displaced migrants, creating more aesthetically pleasing shelters could actually help to ease the pressure they feel in hosting so many individuals (Acker 2023) and help to build refugees' self-reliance and ability to sustain their own livelihoods (Acker and Neumark 2023). Research suggests that better and more aesthetically pleasing shelters aid recovery and resilience and can reduce long-term dependency on social services (Colburn et al. 2022). While bare shelters might be more cost-effective in the short-term and "feel more palatable," investing in the aesthetics of shelters can be what helps refugees "recover and move on, not what makes them settle down in a host country and require more" (Acker 2023, 12).

7. Policy Considerations

The prevailing understanding of human needs, as encapsulated in Maslow's Hierarchy, often falls short in addressing the complex and dynamic requirements of forcibly displaced populations. A crucial oversight in this framework is the neglect of aesthetics as a vital element for mental health, happiness, resilience, belonging, and dignity. As humanitarian responses predominantly focus on 'basic' needs, it becomes imperative to recognise the profound impact that incorporating aesthetics into shelter design can have, enhancing even the most fundamental physiological and safety requirements outlined by Maslow. Indeed:

> If aesthetics can be a powerful ally in enhancing basic amenities for human flourishing, I cannot think of any good reason for not utilising its powerful influence. I believe that we need to reclaim aesthetics' prominent place in the project of world-making and its inseparable connection with the rest of life (Saito 2021, n.p.).

As we challenge the conventional use of Maslow's Hierarchy in refugee contexts and emphasise the importance of aesthetics in the built environment, it becomes imperative to translate these insights into critical considerations for policy. The following policy considerations aim to guide a more comprehensive, holistic, and nuanced approach to refugee shelters.

7.1. Community-based approaches

Collaborative efforts are vital to rethinking Maslow's Hierarchy in refugee contexts, and community engagement and co-design need to be central to such efforts.

Incorporating aesthetics into shelter design must be based on local priorities and build on local capacities. Planning must explicitly implement mechanisms to actively engage local leaders and organisations in the design and planning process. This can include establishing community design committees, conducting participatory design workshops, utilising participatory mapping and visualisation tools, facilitating community consultations and feedback sessions, and providing training and capacity building. Collaborative efforts should prioritise community-driven design processes, where the voices and preferences of refugees are central to decision-making (Albadra et al. 2021, 249). These activities can help ensure that shelter designs meet the needs and preferences of the people they are intended to serve. Giving precedence to community-driven processes where refugees' voices and preferences should be considered core to decision-making. Initiatives that actively involve displaced communities in the planning and implementation stages ensure that the resulting built environment aligns with their aspirations and cultural values.

Further, establishing partnerships between designers, policymakers, and refugee communities can help ensure that solutions are sustainable and culturally sensitive, empowering refugees to actively participate in shaping their living environments. Collaborative efforts should recognise and leverage the expertise within refugee communities. By acknowledging the knowledge and skills displaced individuals bring, initiatives can tap into local wisdom, fostering a sense of agency and resilience. Collaborative partnerships that embrace the strengths of both designers and refugees can lead

to more sustainable and culturally relevant solutions. Another critical consideration is intentionally working with targeted populations, such as women's groups, children and youth, and individuals with disabilities, which can ensure that shelter designs and projects cater to and reflect the diverse needs, preferences, and cultural specificities of different segments within the population. Aesthetic projects with these different sub-populations can also be incredibly empowering and healing, serving as an inroad for engagement.

7.2. Adcovcacy and Communication

Many refugee shelters have strict policies that prohibit residents from modifying their units. Shelter practitioners could advocate for policies allowing residents the greatest agency possible in modifying, personalising, or decorating their own and community spaces. Even if shelters have no money to invest in aesthetics centrally, they can give residents the freedom to be creative and improve their spaces. The act of beautifying a space has several deeply therapeutic benefits in and of itself. It can also help foster community ownership by taking care of the property and improving residents' pride in their community while making a shelter more welcoming and beautiful.

In addition, advocacy is needed to highlight the impact of aesthetics to donors and shelter funders. Donors and shelter funders will likely not prioritise aesthetics if they are not aware of the impact they can make. Sharing research and examples of how other shelters have incorporated aesthetics can create a vision for how transitional shelters could be designed differently. Communication strategies and plans can also play a pivotal role in advocating for the beautification of shelters. Through storytelling and reporting, they can challenge negative stereotypes about refugees and highlight the positive impact of aesthetic improvements. Organising conferences and webinars promotes knowledge exchange and collaboration among stakeholders, emphasising aesthetics' essential place in creating better living conditions for refugees.

7.3. Funding and Planning

To effectively incorporate aesthetics into refugee shelter policies, a fundamental shift is needed in how policymakers perceive the needs of forcibly displaced individuals. It's crucial to position aesthetics not merely as a supplementary concern but as a core component of discussions around wellbeing, underscoring its significance for human dignity, cultural identity, and the resilience of communities.

One way to integrate aesthetics into refugee shelter policies is by setting straightforward design and planning standards for refugee settlements. These standards should prioritise cultural sensitivity, diversity, and the creation of visually appealing environments. By defining place-based benchmarks for aesthetic considerations, policymakers can help to ensure that refugee communities benefit from intentional and thoughtful design practices. Recognising the ongoing nature of the beautification process, policymakers and decision-makers could enhance their efforts by creating frameworks that empower refugees and other migrants to continually nurture environments that hold personal meaning and signify beauty for them. This approach emphasises the importance of sustained efforts rather than treating beautification as a one-time task to be completed and checked off a list.

Shelter programs and settlements are diverse, encompassing various scales, scopes, and durations. Integrating and supporting the Global Shelter Cluster's efforts to promote dignified and holistic shelter solutions could be a practical approach to encourage greater adoption of aesthetics. This involves identifying different entry points for aesthetics based on the multiple routes and methods of shelter support. For instance, as humanitarian shelter assistance often meets only 15 per cent of the need, many refugees engage in self-recovery and find their own solutions (Oxford Brookes University, n.d.). Collaborating with new initiatives to support this self-recovery process could be a practical and viable entry point for adopting aesthetics.

To encourage the implementation of aesthetic principles, policymakers could explore financial incentives for organisations and agencies involved in refugee shelters. This can include grants, subsidies, or other forms of support for projects that prioritise aesthetics in their design. Financial incentives would not only stimulate creativity in the field but also underscore the value placed on aesthetics as a fundamental aspect of refugee wel-being. Aesthetics could be included in formal funding requests and tenders and used to seek in-kind donations, leverage volunteers, and target new corporate donors. Many aesthetic projects can use in-kind donations and supplies and entail hands-on components that can leverage volunteers. Further, most companies want to invest socially in projects that align with their values and mission. Thus, investing in shelter aesthetics underscores values of art, creativity, and design, which could be especially appealing to public relations firms, art institutes and foundations, home goods suppliers, and interior design and architecture firms.

7.3 Training and Evaluation

Recognising the pivotal role of aesthetics in refugee shelters also requires a paradigm shift in training professionals involved in the process. Architects, urban planners, and humanitarian workers should receive specialised training beyond the conventional understanding of basic needs. This comprehensive training should equip professionals with the knowledge and skills necessary to integrate aesthetics, monitor its effectiveness, evaluate its impact on mental health and community dynamics, and continuously assess and learn from the outcomes.

In addition, training programs and educational curricula for the social service workforce and other professionals involved in refugee shelters could incorporate modules specifically focused on the aesthetics of the built environment. By integrating aesthetic principles into academic and professional training, future practitioners will be better equipped to approach refugee shelters with a holistic understanding of the needs of displaced communities. Given the interdisciplinary nature of refugee shelters, cross-disciplinary training initiatives could be established. For example, collaboration between professionals from different fields—architects working alongside psychologists—can foster a more holistic and integrated approach. These initiatives could facilitate knowledge exchange and encourage professionals to consider the aesthetic dimension integral to their work.

Another critical aspect is to increase evidence on the incorporation of aesthetics. Monitoring, evaluation, assessment, and learning (MEAL) staff can work first to develop and add indicators that measure aesthetic integration as part of ongoing monitoring of shelter provision. Further, MEAL staff can develop mechanisms and commission studies to assess the impact of aesthetic interventions on the wellbeing and resilience of displaced populations. This could include collecting feedback from residents, conducting surveys, designing quasi-experimental studies, and documenting case studies to showcase successful examples of aesthetic integration.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this working paper advocates for a transformative shift in refugee shelter design, challenging the limitations of Maslow's Hierarchy and proposing the integration of aesthetics as a foundational need for holistic wellbeing. The critique of Maslow's model highlights its static nature, individual focus, and universal application, emphasising the crucial role of aesthetics in enhancing mental health, cultural identity, and community resilience. Real-world case studies demonstrate successful aesthetic integration in refugee shelters, showcasing the potential for a more dignified, culturally sensitive, and resilient environment for displaced populations. Recognising the potential benefits of aesthetics, multiple policy considerations are proposed to help advance the adoption of aesthetics into shelter design.

There are still significant areas for further research: examining the influence of shelter residents' cultural backgrounds on shelter dynamics and decision-making emerges as a critical next step. Exploring the integration of local crafts in shelter design may provide valuable insights, especially in understanding their potential links with refugee and migrant livelihoods. Further studies could identify culturally appropriate determinants of wellbeing, particularly regarding health and mental health, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the factors shaping the overall wellbeing of forcibly displaced communities. Additionally, expanding on the human rights aspects of aesthetics in the built environment of shelters would offer the opportunity to advance our comprehension of how dignity, freedom of expression, and participation in cultural life intersect within the context of forced displacement and the making of home.

In rethinking Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and its widespread influence in the context of forced migration, a more holistic vision emerges that acknowledges the interconnected nature of wellbeing, customises responses to unique community needs, addresses immediate requirements, fosters environments conducive to empowerment, and nurtures resilience. In rethinking and redefining the 'essential' components of human flourishing, a new paradigm and standard for refugee shelters emerge.

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