The Future of Humanitarian Design (HUD)

Anna Leander | Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva
Javier Fernandez Contreras | *Haute école d'art et de design* (HEAD), Genève
Jonathan Luke Austin | The University of Copenhagen

1.0   Summary

War. Refugee flows. Forced displacement. Death. The challenges facing humanitarian action are worsening. Contemporary conflicts are more frequent and protracted, refugee flows are rapidly destabilizing geopolitical structures, and humanitarian actors are under growing threat. To meet these challenges, humanitarian organizations are turning to (emerging) technological solutions and 'design thinking' as possible solutions. However, these shifts have been substantively critiqued by social scientists who warn that they risk privileging a managerial approach that depoliticizes humanitarian crisis. They also caution that this embrace of technological solutionism lacks an understanding of the ways technologies are socially embedded and pose unforeseen risks or dangers. Paradoxically – however – a majority of social scientists also self-exclude from engaging with the forms of material, aesthetic, and technological design that they critique, and fail to offer alternative and actionable modes of political engagement that are preferable.

The Future of Humanitarian Design (**HUD**) is a research programme designed to overcome this status quo. At its center is the principle that humanitarian crisis must be addressed through a **transvocational ethos** integrating the insights of practitioners, technologists, designers, *and* social scientists. HUD's mission – and **first goal** – is thus to develop a **future-orientated ecological approach** to the co-design of technological, material, and aesthetic interventions. That approach combines the methodological and conceptual tools developed by designers and technologists with the complex models of 'ecological' social relations that are increasingly used across social science. These approaches contain a deep understanding of the ways in which human behaviour is driven by relational interactions between different actors, including material, technological, and aesthetic objects. In doing so, HUD will propose what it terms a Materially-grounded, Aesthetically-Resonant, and Participatory-Ethos to Socio-ecologically-embedded design (**MAPS**) that aims to inject a deep understanding of sociality and politics into debates on the role of design and technology in humanitarian action.

Achieving this cannot be an abstract undertaking. It requires – instead – a practical and situated anchoring in humanitarian practice. The **second main goal of HUD** is thus to pilot its MAPS approach through the co-design and (technical) prototyping of three material-aesthetic interventions targeted at three spaces of humanitarian action – prisons, (refugee) camps, and (aid) compounds – and three common forms of violence that occur in each space (violence-in-detention, gender-based violence, and violence against aid workers). Specifically, we focus on the place of 1) 'sousveillance' algorithms to disrupt violence in detention, 2) lighting technologies to disrupt gender-based violence, and 3) architectural re-designs of aid compounds to reduce the risk of violence against humanitarians. These interventions will be developed through a **novel box-to-box (or b²b methodology)** elaborated across HUD's research. Critically, that methodology privileges extended periods of co-design with key local, international, and other stakeholders.

The MAPS approach and b²b methodology are designed to have applicability beyond the humanitarian dilemmas HUD addresses. Indeed, we see their development as **integral to further conceptual development and extended knowledge production**. HUD's scientific ethos is founded on the contention that *making is thinking* and that the academic disciplines and professional practices it draws upon will expand the scope of both their capacity to engage with the world on practical terms *and* to analyze and understand its dynamics through acts of co-design. HUD's **third main goal** is thus to explore how applied work of this kind can generate a deeper and more sustainable understanding of humanitarian crisis and action and therefore become better at working towards alternative, less violent and more open future visions for world politics: our ultimate concern is with the *future* of humanitarian design.

To achieve these goals, **HUD synthesizes insights from across the social sciences that explore global problems with those of development engineering, architecture, design theory, and humanitarian practice.** This is reflected in HUD's core team which combines social scientists, designers, development engineers and practitioners based at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, the *haute école d'art et de design,* Genève (HEAD), the University of Copenhagen, the *école polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne* (EPFL), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Terre des hommes,* and *Médecins Sans Frontières*. It also includes two research partnerships with two leading institutions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Colombia. This team will work collaboratively across HUD, connecting and cross-pollinating the insights of each involved field and discipline conceptually, methodologically, and practically. The **fourth main goal** of HUD rests on this process. **We aim to take HUD as an experiment in and of itself for exploring the challenges and potential promises of deeper transvocational collaborations of this kind.** In doing so, HUD will generate a series of reflexive lessons learnt and best practices that will assist others in developing similarly transvocational enterprises, something that scientists, practitioners, and wider society all agree is urgently required at this moment.

HUD's core result will be the development and dissemination of its MAPS framework and b²b methodology. These are designed to cut across boundaries, well beyond the state-of-the-art, and to encapsulate HUD's aim of reconceptualizing what social and applied science can/should constitute. The project will therefore **produce an unusually diverse range of project deliverables.** This includes the three material-aesthetic interventions into humanitarian crisis that HUD will co-design. These will be produced to a proof-of-concept level, prior to their possible dissemination. We will then convene a public and interactive audio-visual exhibition that disseminates HUD's findings on the potential of working with design to diminish violence in the context of humanitarian crisis. The researchers will also co-author more traditional academic outputs (monographs, peer-reviewed articles, white papers) but do so – again – transvocationally, writing across the disciplines within which its different team members are based. In short, these deliverables **reflect HUD's ambition to stand as a field-defining project laying the foundations of an emerging discipline.**