



WHAT'S THE FUTURE OF HUMANITARIAN DESIGN?

A CRITICAL-PRAGMATIC DEBATE WITH:

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MAISON DE LA PAIX | A2

What's the future of humanitarian design?

A critical-pragmatic debate

The relationship between humanitarianism and design is longstanding. From the architectural design of refugee camps and aid compounds, through the engineering of water pumps and other technical objects, towards the institutional design of humanitarian law itself, different actors have long been engaging a mix of material, technological, ideational, and aesthetic [interventions into humanitarian crisis](#). Nonetheless, in recent years, that relationship has been radicalized. Today, commercial entities, architectural offices, engineering schools, and others define themselves as engaged with the task of humanitarian design, deemed a direct and material conduit for expressing care. This form of engagement emerges as a self-critique of various design disciplines prior neglect of humanitarian suffering globally, but also as an implicit critique of more traditional modes of humanitarian action focused on legal, institutional, and other interventions.

Yet the humanitarian design movement is equally critiqued for its own ethos. This includes accusations of a naïve belief in [techno-fixes to political problems](#), continued attachments to [commercial interests](#) seen as exploitative (*viz.* Ikea's *BetterShelter*), its dominance by actors in the global north who are generally ignorant of the contexts they seek to intervene in, and – more generally – a lack of a critical-reflexive orientation towards the world able to uncover the structural roots of humanitarian suffering. Some thus see the rise of humanitarian design as opening a '[post-humanitarian](#)' era that naturalizes rather than politicizes suffering.

In this debate, we seek to explore the *future* of humanitarian design. Or, rather, its possible futures. While many of the critiques of humanitarian design are well-founded, it is clear that humanitarianism and all other societal spheres are being irrevocably shaped by the rise of novel technologies and the restructuring of the global political order. As such, humanitarian design will have an increasingly important impact globally. The questions we seek to engage in this debate are thus all related to imagining distinct futures for humanitarian design that both take seriously current and emerging critiques of its influence but also pragmatically navigate the real-world limits that currently prevent translating critique into concrete alternatives. Specifically, speakers are invited to reflect on any of the following questions in relation to their own work:

- How can humanitarian design be 'localized' away from its dominance in the global north?
- How can humanitarian design separate itself – as a field – from the restrictions of commercial, geopolitical, and other interests, whilst still retaining the capacity to engage problems concretely?

- How can humanitarian design engage with those who hold political power? In a manner that echoes humanitarianism's original embodiment in institutions such as the ICRC, which engage not only those who suffer but also those who cause suffering and/or have the power to halt it;
- How can humanitarian design embrace more 'radical designs' that leverage the power of emerging technologies to address underlying political drivers of humanitarian suffering?
- How can critics of humanitarian design, typically from the social sciences, engage pragmatically to translate those critics into concrete change, and what are the challenges to such transdisciplinary and transvocational engagement?

Event Details:

What's the future of humanitarian design? is the opening event for the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) funded project 'The Future of Humanitarian Design' (HUD). HUD is a transdisciplinary and transvocational research endeavour working to explore the future of humanitarianism and its relationship to design, technology, and political life through critical yet pragmatic forms of action research.

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Speakers:

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More Information:

www.humanitarian.design