



13 - 14TH MAY 2024

a symposium on

the future

of humanitarian design.

Humanitarian design is growing in influence. A variety of vocations – engineering, computer science, architecture, law, political science, and beyond – are increasingly seeking to design interventions of relevance for humanitarianism broadly conceived. But the status of such interventions remains unclear. For some, humanitarian design intensifies a longstanding critique of the apolitical nature of humanitarian action. For others, even more critical, it further enshrines a postcolonial logic of domination perpetuated through humanitarianism. But, at the same time, humanitarian design is here to stay and reflects a more generally accelerating entanglement of politics with digital, material, and technological ecologies. It has also – despite the criticisms – done much good and necessary work in different global contexts.

What then is the future of humanitarian design?

In this symposium, we invite contributions exploring the social, political, and critical status of humanitarian design across contexts (aesthetic, material, technological, engineering, architectural, commercial, ecological, digital, etc.). Contributions are welcomed in any format (talk, essay, artwork, audio-visual, experimental, multi-modal, etc.), around the following themes:

Problems // Provocations

Why is humanitarian design so naïve? Why is it accused of ignoring the root causes of humanitarian crisis? Why does it adhere so closely to the ‘oligarchical’ logics of the electronic age? Why do the good – critical – inclinations of those involved in humanitarian design so frequently translate into interventions that, at best, do not fit with the contexts they are designed for or, worse, create new problems? Why do the intended beneficiaries of humanitarian design so frequently reject its work? Should we abolish humanitarian design?

Practices // Pragmatics

What is humanitarian design? And what might it become? How does it juggle between the material, the aesthetic, and the technological? What are the power relationships between those that design and those who are designed for? What practices can elide continued imbalances between the global north and the global south in this respect? Practically and pragmatically, how does (or does not) humanitarian design cultivate transdisciplinary and transvocational contributions to its goals?

Contexts // Cases

Concretely, what kind of cases and contexts does humanitarian design currently address? Who are its ‘users’ or ‘beneficiaries’? What contexts does it principally engage, and why? What is the difference between designing for those who suffer from humanitarian crisis and those who cause such crises? What alternative genealogies of humanitarian design exist? What alternative practices do they engage? Why?

Futures // Failures

Are there more radical ways of designing humanitarian design able to elide the concerns of its critics and the failures of its past and present? Can humanitarian design contribute to emancipatory political processes without neglecting the pragmatic need to alleviate suffering and prevent harm in the here-and-now? What theories, concepts, practices, and methods must we develop to shift the trajectory of humanitarian design?

Details

The Future of Humanitarian Design symposium takes place between May 13th – 14th 2024 in Geneva, Switzerland. It forms part of a broader research project on the future of humanitarian design led by Principal Investigators Jonathan Luke Austin (University of Copenhagen), Javier Fernández Contreras (HEAD-Geneve), and Anna Leander (Geneva Graduate Institute). For more information see www.humanitarian.design.

Submissions:

Please submit an abstract (250 words/examples of other material) of your potential contribution by **28th February 2024**. We will notify the participants by mid-March 2024, and publish the program soon thereafter. Submissions can be sent directly to silke.oldenburg@graduateinstitute.ch. We are able to support travel expenses for accepted contributions.