Global Design Initiative for Refugee Children
Global Design Initiative for Refugee Children [GDI] is a new model of transnational, cross-sectoral collaboration to design and build spaces that address the needs of the most vulnerable refugees: children.

Nomination

Children enjoying the swings, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, 2018
Please accept this nomination of Global Design Initiative for Refugee Children (GDI) for the 2020 AIA Collaborative Achievement Award. This promising new model for collaboration operates at the nexus of design and humanitarian action and demonstrates how designers can take on challenges of global displacement in meaningful ways.

Wars have dramatic impacts on communities, destroying and tearing them apart, and often resulting in rapid, unplanned, and unsustainable living situations that support scores of displaced individuals. In the aftermath of such devastation, humanitarian organizations have developed very effective responses to the immediate human needs, and planners and designers have learned to quickly re-establish water, electricity, housing, transportation, and other services. But communities are defined by more than services, and the focus of peace builders, planners, and designers has so far stopped short of rebuilding societies themselves - mending the divisions and social breakdowns that accompany war and devastation.

GDI was established in 2016, initially named the Syria Initiative for Refugee Children, as a new model of transnational, cross-sectoral collaboration to address the needs of Syria’s most vulnerable refugees: children. On the surface, it is an initiative to build playgrounds. In actuality, it is an important first step to developing a collaborative and adaptable process for introducing child-focused spaces into refugee contexts to support positive interactions, social cohesion, and healing. With equal emphasis on both social equity and design excellence, GDI addresses needs of children and families, encourages cohesion between and across communities, and supports the capacity of international and local design and humanitarian networks to work together in impacted parts of the world.

What began as an earnest proposal to the Board of the Boston Society of Architects (BSA) by a concerned AIA member quickly turned into a multi-year collaborative design process involving members of the BSA, BSA Foundation, and Boston Society of Landscape Architects (BSLA), as well as local and international NGOs, international architects and craftspeople, US-based design faculty and students, multiple institutes, firms, and companies, and over 75 members of the Boston design community. It also collaborates with partners in host communities to support community engagement, design development, construction management, and quality control. This nomination recognizes the contributions and collaborative spirit of everyone involved!

GDI not only merits national recognition, it will benefit from it. The AIA provides a significant platform to the design world. This award will increase national and international awareness of an innovative collaborative process, encouraging other professional, institutional, and civil society organizations to adapt and repeat it, one of the Initiative’s central goals.

Stephen F. Gray, Assistant Professor, Harvard GSD
Contributions

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), between 2011 and 2018 and since the start of the Syrian Civil War, over 5.6 million people have fled Syria seeking safety in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq. Lebanon, a country with a population of 4 million, hosts the highest number of Syrian refugees per capita in the world where more than 1.5 million have little or no financial resources and nearly 70 percent live below the poverty line. In Lebanon, there are no formal refugee camps and, as a result, Syrian refugees are scattered throughout more than 2,100 urban and rural communities and locations, often sharing small, overcrowded lodgings with other refugee families.

The exodus and diaspora caused by an ongoing civil war in Syria has led to a heightened sense of urgency for developing new tools, processes, and methods for taking on critical challenges at the nexus of humanitarian response and design. With an urgency to help and uncertainty about how best to do it, an ad-hoc committee of Boston area design professionals, academics, and NGO professionals was formed to ask three important questions:

1. **Can designers effectively contribute during international humanitarian crises?**
2. **Would the design of better public spaces in refugee camps address a real need?**
3. **What would a scalable and replicable model for designing and constructing public space for refugees entail?**

With an aim to answer these questions, GDI was formed in 2016 as a new model for transnational, cross-sectoral collaboration and the collaborative DNA to design spaces that can strengthen social cohesion and address the needs of the most vulnerable: children.

Global displacement has surpassed that witnessed in the wake of World War II, and children remain the most impacted victims. At least 3 million Syrian children under the age of six have been traumatized by war, and more than half of all Syrian refugees are under the age of 18. The average stay of refugees is more than 20 years, for many an entire childhood, and Human Rights Watch estimates that roughly half of the Syrian refugee children in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon do not have access to a formal education.

Play is inextricably linked to childhood education, as it helps their cognitive development, competence, gross motor skills and peer group leadership. Although it is also a basic human right enshrined in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1951 Refugee Convention, the needs of children are not always adequately addressed by humanitarian aid. Without opportunities to learn and play in safe environments, a generation of Syrian children is at risk.
Until recently, the planning and design disciplines have had only limited involvement in peacebuilding efforts. Approaches to designing spaces that foster reconciliation, resilience, and peace, or even help prevent conflicts, remain under-explored. GDI addresses these gaps in design and humanitarian action through a collaborative process involving:

- Transnational, Cross-sectoral Partnering: Building on, and integrating the knowledge and expertise of planners, designers, international NGOs, academic institutions, and industry partners;

- Site Selection: Identifying countries with a high need and relatively safe access;

- Design Facilitation, Fundraising, and Implementation: Engaging designers, academics, builders, and funders across the globe through design charrettes and presentations; providing training and employment opportunities for Syrian refugees living on site; and partnering locally to build capacity with local architects, craftspeople, and NGOs so that they can adapt and repeat the process.

Since completion of the first playground in summer 2018, the collaborative DNA has already been adapted to support three new projects in Lebanon, Turkey, and the United States: (1) A new partnership with a local NGO in Lebanon running schools for refugee children; (2) An ongoing relationship with an existing partner in Turkey providing innovative education, entrepreneurial development, and community-driven aid to refugee children; and (3) A collaboration with a Boston non-profit to develop safe spaces for immigrants and families of color in the Dorchester neighborhood through Community Preservation Act Funds.

Beyond improving the daily lives of children and families with these playgrounds, the Syria Initiative provides a road map for designers who want to apply their skills to issues of global importance.

For purposes of dissemination, a graphic “how to” pamphlet and poster was created, describing key considerations for transnational, cross-disciplinary collaborative process.
Partners

Global Design Initiative for Refugee Children [GDI] involves a collaboration between members of the Boston Society of Architects (BSA) and Boston design community, in partnership with the Karam Foundation (Karam) and Sawa for Development and Aid (SAWA), Kayany Foundation (Kayany) and Lena Park Community Development Corporation, local and international practicing architects, as well as faculty and students from Boston area design schools including Harvard University, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Northeastern University, and Boston Architectural College. The collaboration was also made possible by generous financial and inkind support from multiple institutes, firms, and companies that are also committed to social equity and design excellence.

The committee conducts weekly or monthly meetings, as necessary, and facilitated multiple international design charrettes via video conference with local stakeholders and more than 75 Boston area architects, designers and allied professionals.
The Boston Society of Architects is the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The BSA acted as the convener for initiative events: providing space for the panel, charrettes, and reception, including in-kind donations of staff time, marketing, donation acknowledgments, and refreshments. It was the signatory of the initial project’s MOU. The BSA Foundation and the Boston Society of Landscape Architects (the Massachusetts and Maine chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects) joined the initiative in 2018 as co-conveners.

Karam Foundation is a Chicago-based nonprofit organization and is dedicated to restoring the dignity and quality of life for people affected by conflict through innovative education, entrepreneurial development, and community-driven aid. They acted as Financial Agent, undertaking fundraising, recognition and issuance of tax exempt receipts to donors in the United States, and disbursement of funds to SAWA for labor and material expenses related to the Initiative.

Sawa for Development and Aid is a Lebanon-based NGO that takes responsibility for various camps and maintains onsite logistics. They acted as the onsite Project Manager and were responsible for managing land-lease of the site, providing construction administration services, as well as reporting on progress and allocation of funds. Project Architects in Lebanon were Layal Merhi (lead), Ahmad Al Mahairy and Wael Sinno. The team connected with the Boston architecture community through multiple brainstorming and working sessions that culminated in a series of design suggestions. They produced the final playground design and site visits to supervise the quality of construction.

Institutional Partners: Academic partnerships including Harvard, MassArt, MIT, and Northeastern provided space for reflection and continuous learning by assessing and applying lessons learned on one project to future projects. Working with our academic partners provides the Initiative with the ability to reflect on successes and failures to engage in a process of continuous learning to apply these lessons to the next projects.

Industry Partners: Industry partners in US and in Lebanon provided support in design, management, and construction capacities. Our industry partners have also contributed in-kind donation or financial contributions for the construction of Bar Elias. Kompan, an international Danish Company providing playground equipment contributed their expertise to the design process and gave equipment to be installed in the playground. A team of local carpenters in Beirut gave their time to help built a prototype and contributed time and materials.

Kayany Foundation is a Lebanese non-governmental organization founded in 2013 which provide free education to more than 3,500 vulnerable Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon. Kayany’s schooling model has now secured access to free, secular, and formal education to in 9 accredited schools each year. Friends of Kayany is a public charity based in the United States and Kayany’s fundraising arm in the US

Lena Park Community Development Corporation is a not-for-profit organization incorporated to provide integrated programs, services and access to resources that will help youth and families in the Lena Park catchment area to strengthen their family and community.
Global Design Initiative for Refugee Children

Exhibits

Getting Started  Clarifying Mission  Making a Commitment  Site Selection  Engaging Design Community  Designing & Testing

Partnering

Identifying Expertise

Collaborative Process

2016

2017

The Syria Initiative for Refugee Children is a new model of transnational, cross-sectoral collaboration to design and build spaces that address the needs of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees: children.
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In response to a military radius expansion, the camp initially designated as the project site had to be cleared.

Lebanon was selected for the following reasons: (a) The Lebanese government allows free movement in and out of refugee encampments; (b) Refugee facilities exist in a tenuous state, typically on private land with one to two years terms from local landowners; and (c) One member of our committee – and many in the Boston metropolitan design community – had professional contacts in Lebanon and able to travel there regularly, allowed the committee to maintain personal connections with local partners for a higher likelihood that the process would run smoothly.
You cannot photograph us. Safety is a huge concern and we cannot be seen. We live for hope - a large family, babies, and always being together.

“A garden with a fountain of water, and a place to sit with my daughter in the shade.”

“A playground? Swings!!!!”
FUNDRAISING

The design process and fundraising were inextricably linked. Ultimately, $50,377 was raised, covering the cost of construction and research. Those funds were sourced as follows: 50% Academic Institutions; 50% Private Foundations, Individuals; and In-kind donation of play equipment from Kompan.

DESIGN FACILITATION

Discussions with the Project Architects during the charrette.

The initial presentation from a participating team.

Site strategies emerging from the charrettes.

Process guidelines emerging from the charrettes.
The primary challenges and corresponding design responses, orchestrated by the Project Architects and supported by the committee, profoundly impacted the design, and are structured as follows:

(1) Permanent Impermanence (instability)
A 1-meter, 2-meter, and 3.5-meter modular wood frame designed without below grade footings that could be simple, sturdy, and legally compliant in Lebanon. The frames were also designed to be as easily assembled as they were disassembled in case of relocation.

(2) Irregular Spaces
A tessellating structural system that could expand and contract to fit any space, and a rigid, surface-supported structure on a gravel base for a light touch approach.

(3) Range of Needs.
A variety of spaces for large groups or individuals would be inviting for all ages of children and adults, including (a) a place for the children to play safely, (b) an abutting place for the parents and guardians to meet while watching their children play, and (c) spaces for young adults to play actively. The ability to be adapted over time with replaceable and interchangeable equipment was also a key response to varying needs.
**CONSTRUCTION**

Construction began in December 2017 with leveling the ground, pouring a gravel base, and milling the modular structural system at three heights (1 meter, 2.5 meters, and 3.5 meters) to support swings, climbing structures, shading devices, hammocks, seating, gardens, seesaws, and other play items.
PERMANENT IMPERMANENCE

Details that allow for easy assembly and disassembly was mocked-up by a Syrian millworker who was eventually hired to do the wood work.

Beginning of construction, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, December 2017

Children gather in the space and testing the activities as architects continue to detail the play space, February 2018
The on ground partner is the project manager on site arranging the land-lease, preparing the site for construction, providing construction administration services. It is responsible for the allocation of funds.

**ON GROUND PARTNER**

The local architects connect with the Boston architecture community through workshops and produce the final playground design as well as mock-ups. They conduct regular site visits to supervise the construction.

**LOCAL ARCHITECTS**

**YOUR INITIATIVE?**

- **4 IMPLEMENT**
  - Partner with a local builder.
  - Source materials.
  - Develop details & test prototypes.
  - Construct 1/1 detail mock-ups.
  - Train local workers for construction.
  - Prepare the site.
  - Supervise construction.

- **5 DOCUMENT**
  - Document process.
  - Inscribe and visualize needs, challenges and key considerations that influence decisions and outcomes.
  - Inscribe and visualize partners and division of roles.
  - Disseminate information to encourage other organizations to adapt and repeat the process.

- **6 REFLECT**
  - Conduct a post occupancy evaluation.
  - Consider how to increase the agency of the local architects.
  - Evaluate how to better engage with the users at every stage of the process.
  - Reflect on time management.
  - Develop and nurture long-term relationships with the partners.

- **FINANCIAL PARTNER**
  - Signatory providing events.
  - Adverting fundraising disbursement.
  - Developing a fundraising plan.
  - Hold fundraising events.

- **PARTNER**
  - Typical financial partner is the fudiciary making a commitment to the project.
  - On ground partner is the financial partner, contact is director, the financial partner making a funds contribution.
  - On ground partners contacting the financial partner.

- **FACILITATE**
  - Identify & vet potential partners.
  - Explore precedents.
  - Identify potential sites & needs.
  - Its members are key to explore, the management of the Initiative.

- **STEERING COMMITTEE**
  - Willing to devote regular time for diverse backgrounds who are initiating new partnerships.

- **REPRESENTATIVE**
  - Acknowledging design ideas provided by the design community.
  - Site visits to supervise the construction.
  - Construct 1/1 detail mock-ups.
  - Training local workers for construction, providing material.
  - Hiring of workers.

- **SUPERVISING**
  - Providing design community.
  - Site visits to supervise the construction.

- **CONSTRUCTION**
  - Construction administration for construction, providing materials.
  - On ground partner is the financial partner, contact is director, the financial partner making a funds contribution.
  - On ground partners contacting the financial partner.

- **ADMINISTRATION**
  - Responsible for ensuring the design community.
  - Site visits to supervise the construction.

- **PLANNING**
  - Developing opportunities to mobilize the design community.
  - Local architects connect with possible on ground partner.
  - Site visits to supervise the construction.

- **MANAGING**
  - Prepare the site.
  - Train local workers for construction.
  - Construct 1/1 detail mock-ups.

- **PROJECT**
  - Working with the financial partner.
  - On ground partner is the financial partner, contact is director, the financial partner making a funds contribution.
  - On ground partners contacting the financial partner.

- **THE DESIGN COMMUNITY**
  - Designing and prototyping contextual solutions.
  - Supporting local designers to developing design concepts and prototyping.
  - Participating in workshops and developing design concepts.

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In Spring 2018, the GDI proposed to the Kayany Foundation, to partner on the design of a small playground in their largest primary school at Majd A-Anjar. Kayany Foundation is a Lebanese non-governmental organization (NGO) that established 9 temporary schools (Ghatas), to bring quality education to the most vulnerable Syrian refugee children residing in Informal Tented Settlements (ITSs) in the Bekaa Valley.

The idea was to develop a model that would be realized within a budget, and which could be replicated thereafter in the four other primary schools. The driver in Boston, Massachusetts, was not only to raise awareness of the growing refugee needs globally, but to explore the role of design and potential contributions in kind by the design community in this domain, in keeping with the mission of the GDI.
The development of the project spanned several months, and included a hands-on workshop with a group of the students to get their concepts and ideas on what they would imagine as the best play space. There were several online meetings to share precedents and illustrative concepts, and gather input from the Kayany NGO founder Nora Joumblatt, on the program, functionality and design aspects of the project. Funding for this project was assured by Friends of Kayany, a US-based NGO dedicated to raise funds for the schools at Kayany.

The GDI efficiently created a Subcommittee who worked on the project to create drawings and write outline specifications to ensure quality and adherence to U.S. playground safety standards. The diversity of the team members was noteworthy, as they were very effective collaborators in generating the design and documentation for construction by a local contractor.

- Nathalie Botbol, Architectural Designer; Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia Scholarship Contest recipient for 2019/2020, for a Masters in Advanced Ecological Buildings
- Tina Binazir, Architectural Designer, Master of Architecture, Boston Architectural College
- Mitch Ryerson, Artist and Designer, Adjunct Professor of Furniture Design, Massachusetts College of Art and Design
- Shirine Boulos Anderson, Architect, Principal at Ellenzweig, Architects and Planners

Hariri Contractors bid the project in early July 2019, and began construction of the playground in mid-July. Shirine Boulos Anderson was in Lebanon at the time, and managed the construction administration of the project, reviewing shop drawings and responding to requests for clarification as they arose. In addition, she recruited five volunteers to paint the plywood panels that were used to brace the structural elements. The colorful designs on the panels are meant to be uplifting for the children, and are representations of fish, frogs, and hot air balloons. This effort also included help from Abu Radwan, the Majd Al-Anjar school day supervisor who participated in the painting and provided much appreciated support.

The project was completed before the first day of school on September 2, 2019. The children’s enthusiasm was such on this first day of school that the school principal had to stagger recesses for each class so that the children could truly enjoy their first experience!
In 2018, GDI also facilitated a co-design process with residents and staff of the Lena Park Community Development Corporation – a neighborhood-based affordable housing provider in a minority-majority, historically underserved, largely immigrant community in Boston - to transform a vacant lot into a new park for family day care programs and community events. A central goal of GDI was to expand the standard community engagement process to include youth-designed pilots, empowering residents of all ages to lead in the design of their spaces. GDI's pro-bono collaborative process led to a successful grant proposal, securing $600,000 to build this new park as one of the City of Boston’s 2019 Community Preservation Act-funded projects.
**Lessons Learned**

- Be on the ground with partners and stay involved with process management and oversight. It was exceedingly valuable for members of the committee to communicate with site personnel and visit the site regularly.

- Increase the agency of the Project Architects, engaging them more closely with the construction process to support the committee’s supervision efforts. NGO supervision abilities may be limited, and the architects, despite not being sufficiently funded, must assume a significant role.

- Make time for deeper engagement with the users (children) through meaningful involvement at every stage of the process.

- Allow for extra time for logistics including budgeting, fund management, initiative oversight, and communication.

- Develop and nurture long-term relationships within the partnerships for future projects.
THANK YOU