

More design, less innovation

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Those working in international agencies to develop shelter solutions for displaced populations can learn much from human-centred design practices of professional architects and planners.

Over recent decades, the word innovation has proliferated across multiple industries and is widely drawn upon to tackle many kinds of problems. In the case of shelter and settlement planning for displaced populations, the pursuit of innovation by the humanitarian community has tended to be unhelpfully siloed. Innovation units have popped up in numerous UN agencies and NGOs, yet, for all the innovation, most long-standing problems remain.

Agency innovation units may be effective for trying new methods but the innovation model is not always a viable path to better shelter solutions. Opportunities and insights

may be created but better shelter and planning solutions that emerge through techno-centric innovation teams may be more vulnerable to failure when attempts are made to scale them up across the industry, across budgets and across regions. Innovation alone is not the answer – unless paired with good design.

Good design is not a profound or magical process. It requires the design professional to get very close to the user community to conduct ethnographic research and then rapidly build low-cost and low-quality prototypes for testing with the immediate stakeholders. A good designer will repeat this process many times until

a solution emerges to meet stakeholders' needs. A design professional understands that solving a complex problem requires more than research and planning; the proposed solutions must be iteratively prototyped, piloted, tested and modified.

Good design is not found in a boardroom strategy session, nor in a cluster meeting, but only happens when the designer is embedded in the field, making observations, and quickly testing solutions. While design methods can be replicated across any geography, a well-designed product is very specific to the needs of a specific group and an immediate location. A good designer will never transplant a solution from one group of stakeholders to another – even if their problems appear identical at the outset. Yet too often design is understood as an outcome rather than a process. Design is often outsourced via high-profile partnerships or through global design competitions which continue to veer toward imported solutions. Though these designers are capable, it is unlikely that they can get as close to the problem as UN or NGO staff on site.

It is common practice today for shelters and settlements to be planned using satellite images and relying on structured social surveys contracted to a local NGO. Rapid site visits and surveys are not a substitute for proper design ethnography – that is, using detailed observation to try to understand how people live their lives in relation to buildings, infrastructures and objects. Design ethnography generates insights to drive better shelter design in complex conditions. Architects and planners, who are trained in empirical social research processes and human-centred design, can offer an example to agencies that struggle to achieve shelter solutions that are effective on technical grounds and that also take into account the interaction between people and technology.

It is of course a reality that host country policies towards displaced people may make it difficult to implement a robust design process or ideal solutions. Where the demand for camp systems is imposed in preference to urban integration, architects and planners are often constrained in their

attempts to do their work to the highest professional standards. Exceptions have emerged, such as the construction of Za'atari camp in Jordan, but these exceptions are not commonplace and Za'atari continues to maintain many of the characteristics of a refugee camp. These challenges are inevitable as design professionals are not educated in migration law or national policy, and thus struggle to communicate and deploy their work in a context where people expect an immediate technical solution – not an iterative social process.

To work within these organisational and cultural constraints while creating more contextually responsive shelter solutions takes time, and strategies for success are still emerging. For example, the use of a 'lean start-up' methodology¹ has helped many organisations embrace a common design principle in order to scale up and modify projects through iteration. Until large organisations embrace the principles of design as already understood by most shelter professionals – a process of on-site, iterative user research and rapid prototyping – camps will continue to reflect big innovations rather than incremental design. If humanitarian and development organisations learn to leverage design as a process, not a product, the results will reverberate globally.

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1. An organisational method to identify – within weeks, not months – what technical solutions work and which do not, by using short cycles of product experimentation rather than long-term, multi-phase strategies.



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