

Design as a therapy: Using Design Methods to Support Processing Trauma of Forced Migration and Loss of Place

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Abstract *Asylum seekers experience a strong trauma of forced migration caused by the push factors (war, torture or natural disaster), the multiple loss (home, goods, community, family, existence) and the confusion over cultural differences. The purpose of this paper is to find connections between migration studies (1), trauma studies (2) environmental psychology (3) and design methods (4) in order to develop the base methodology of “design therapy” and through that a new approach to support processing the trauma caused by forced migration. Over the past 10 years, the author has facilitated countless creative workshops and participatory design projects with young refugees, immigrants and their disadvantaged Hungarian peers. She corroborates her field experiences with the literature and in-depth interview research.*

The paper presents the psychological process of migration with an extra focus on aspects of forced migration, and then highlights the main milestones and goals of the stages of processing trauma. In the second part, the paper introduces the practical aspects of place attachment and also the process of design methodologies (with the focus of Design Thinking and Human Centered Design). Third, the author compares the needs and challenges of the recovery stages of trauma with the process and outcomes of design methodologies, illustrated with examples of her 10-year field experience. Based on theoretical research, in-depth interviews and field experiences, the paper states that design methods can be successfully used as a complementary treatment in all three stages of processing trauma (creating security, restoring memory and grieving the losses, reconnecting to the present), because (1) trauma takes away the sense of control from the victim, while design process encourages participants to take initiative, implement plans, and make decisions alone; (2) flashbacks of traumatic memories keep the victim in the past, while working in the design process makes participants focus on the present; (3) trauma creates helplessness while design process calls for action; (4) traumatic events affect the most basic human relationships, breaking family, friendship, love and community ties, while the design process helps developing cooperative skills in the frame of teamwork.

This paper is part of a practice-based doctoral research, where the purpose is to understand how architectural and design methods can support the process of place attachment. From the results,

a design therapy toolkit will be created, which can support processing the trauma of loss of home by developing place attachment.

Figure 1: Design Therapy method map. Source: Author.

