

# Not Another Shelter. Traps of Solutionism in Humanitarian Design

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**Abstract** *In this paper, the shelter—on the one hand a prerequisite or necessary infrastructure with the potential to increase the quality of life, and on the other hand, a paradigmatic example of a design fix—will be I mobilized as a discursive figure to examine the multiple imbrications of design and crisis at the intersection of activism and solutionism. My goal is to historicize the assumptions underlying design fixes by mapping the emergence of humanitarian and planetary design paradigms during the 1960s and 70s. By examining how these paradigms manifest in contemporary humanitarian design scenarios, this paper aims to frame design not as a technology for addressing crises but as an epistemology that narrates, conditions, and shapes responses to crises as well as social imaginaries.*

**Author keywords** *solutionism; corporate-humanitarian design; design fix; disaster relief; shelter*

Within the context of disaster relief or humanitarian design<sup>1</sup>, the shelter as a temporary housing unit is a frequently resurfacing social design response to homelessness in cities or the displacement of people due to political conflict, war, or environmental calamity<sup>2</sup>. Usually, these low-tech and often co-designed living units are made with easy-to-access materials and offer immediate relief, short- or mid term housing, security, and perspective. The *AGRIshelter*, for example, was the winning project of the so-called Refugee Challenge (RC) – a design contest launched in 2015 by the international organization *What Design Can Do* (WDCD) in collaboration with the IKEA

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- 1 “Disaster Relief” or “Humanitarian Design” are established tags to filter design projects on the popular design blog Dezeen.
- 2 Examples for contemporary shelter projects: Mad Housers Project <https://www.madhouse.rs.net/> – Accessed September 2023), ParaSITE by Michael Rakowitz (<http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/parasite> – Accessed September 2023), Tiny Homes by Lehrer Architects (<https://www.lehrerarchitects.com/project/alexandria-tiny-home/> – Accessed September 2023), or Essential Homes Research Project by Norman Foster (<https://normanfosterfoundation.org/?project=essential-homes-research-project> – Accessed November 2023.)

Foundation (Figure 1). Presented on WDCD's website as a “solution for the shortage of refugee shelters” in the wake of the Syrian war the temporary housing unit made of wood, straw, and other biodegradable materials received a 10.000€ cash prize and the design team was invited into an “acceleration programme” to develop prototypes and business plans to realize the project.

In this paper, the shelter—on the one hand a prerequisite or necessary infrastructure with the potential to increase the quality of life, and on the other hand, a paradigmatic example of design solutionism—will serve as a fulcrum that allows me to shift between the case study of the *AGRIShelter* and emergent architecture and design paradigms of the late 1960s and 70s. My aim is to historicize some of the assumptions that have developed under the rubric of design fixes and examine the multiple imbrications of design and crisis at the intersection of activism and solutionism. I am invested in a denaturalization of the technological fix as the predominant design response to crisis and I focus on understanding the specific histories of the ideas that have shaped design and vice versa.

## 1. Bad World, Good Design

When asked what designers can do, if they want to help, former refugee camp director Kilian Kleinschmidt, a panelist in the talk series “Good Design for a Bad World” (Figure 2) held at the Dutch Design Week in Eindhoven 2017, responds by saying: “Certainly, don’t design yet another shelter for refugees – please!” (Dezeen, 2017, 19:54-19:58) In reference to the variety of design responses—from apps to makeshift backpacks and shelters—triggered by the Syrian war in 2015, his remarks illustrate the general accusation that design in its fantasy of problem-solving is not actually fixing anything. Intimately, almost interchangeably, interwoven with problem-solving, design products for disaster relief frequently run the risk of resembling what co-panelist Rene Boer, founder of the blog *Failed Architecture*, calls “more of a gimmick than a structural solution” (Dezeen, 2017, 16:05-16:08), which not only isn’t helpful, but actually harmful in the sense that gimmickry diverts from structural issues to the benefit of localized, short-term remedies.

Figure 1: “good design for a bad world trademark” Dezeen. <http://www.dezeen.com/gooddesignforabadworld/> [Screenshot by Johanna Mehl]



The discussion on stage is embedded in a broader talk series on the role of design in the face of global challenges, collaboratively organized by the online magazine *Dezeen* and the Dutch Design Week, featuring panels on climate change, terrorism, forced migration, pollution, and politics. Its programmatic questions “Can design tackle the really big problems facing the world? Or is design helping to cause these problems?” (Fairs, 2018) seem to echo a familiar conundrum inscribed in imaginaries of design as an agent of social change since the late 1960s. The invocation of a “Bad World” in the title of the lecture series mirrors the proclamation of a “world problematic”, a term used by The Club of Rome in the *Limits to Growth* report in 1972 to describe their contemporary global condition: “the major problems facing mankind are of such complexity and are so interrelated that traditional institutions and policies are no longer able to cope with them, nor even to come to grips with their full content” (Meadows, 1972, pp. 9–10). Coupled with Cold War insecurities and against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, publications such as the *Limits to Growth* fed into a growing understanding of the world and its perceived problems as a set of globally connected phenomena that elude reliable solution strategies. This significant shift in the Western consciousness was undergirded by the realization that technological progress had not necessarily improved life or societal togetherness, that the planet

was polluted, that resources were not endless, and that the global community was characterized by extreme social disparities.

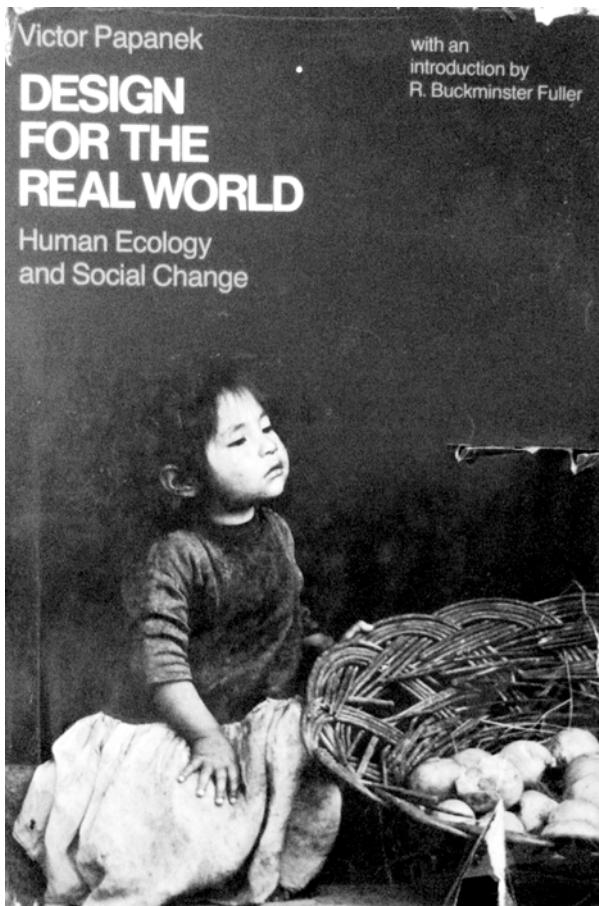
This period heralded a major paradigm shift for what *Dezeen* calls “good design” emerging as a discipline with aspirations for managing world problems to make it a better place. The discipline moved away from addressing structural, aesthetic, and client-specific concerns. Instead, it began to tackle broader issues of social policy, striving to consider global systems and redefining the client as either an individual recipient of benevolence or as “humanity” as a whole. In the aftermath of WWII, as economic disparities and environmental and urban issues in the developing world prompted increased involvement from NGOs, design and architecture professionals were included from the outset, because they were leveraged as experts on solving problems no matter the size and level of complexity. Questions of human settlement and the construction and enforcement of societal norms and values through material configurations of the environment have been, of course, fundamental to a traditional architectural and design discourse long before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, aid work had not traditionally been considered prestigious within the realms of architecture and design. That changed when design expanded its jurisdiction to include problems of social policy. In the following, I address the emergence of two defining design paradigms—humanitarianism and the idea of the planetary—to historically situate and interrogate some of the assumptions encoded in framing global crises in terms of institutionalized design practices.

## 2. The Humanitarian Paradigm

The 2017 Refugee Challenge in particular provides an opportunity to revisit the 1976 United Nations Conference Habitat, which was held in Vancouver and thematically focused on the problem of human settlements. It ran parallel to an exhibition titled “Habitat: Towards Shelter” at the Vancouver Art Gallery that showcased “shelter designs for the developing world” submitted as part of an international design competition. In a 1976 article promoting the exhibition, urban planner and architect Frederick Gutheim proclaims that

“[...] the competition identified one major problem facing the developing countries—the squatter settlements that now comprise nearly half of the population of Third World cities. Here was a problem to which design could contribute solutions and that would give a new meaning to architecture.” (Gutheim, 1976, p. 3)

Figure 2: Front cover, Victor Papanek, with an introduction by R. Buckminster Fuller, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, 1971, Pantheon Books.



The exhibition agenda anticipates contemporary problem-solving narratives of corporate-humanitarian design practices and was emblematic for a widespread reorientation within the architecture and design community towards aid. Following World War II, numerous design organizations emerged in collaboration with governmental, corporate, and cultural entities, such as the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design, the International Council of Graphic Design Associations, and the International Design Conference in Aspen. While these organizations played a significant role in creating paternalistic geopolitical narratives that depicted a division between wealthy, benevolent nations and poorer, develop-

ing ones, their efforts were also focused on addressing social issues such as global poverty and human settlement. Notably, the UN conference served as a catalyst for establishing architecture-focused NGOs like *Habitat for Humanity International* and, later, *Architecture for Humanity* (1999).

Against the backdrop of rising environmental and social consciousness in the 1960s, critiques began to surface in the design community that took aim at its modernist implications and industrial ties. “There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them”, the famous opening sentence of Victor Papanek’s *Designs for the Real World* (1971, p. 9), (Figure 3) is one of many quotable denunciations of design coupled with a disappointment over its tendency to first and foremost solve the problems of the already privileged (see Clarke, 2021).

The *First Things First Manifesto*, which prompted graphic designers to reorient their skills toward “worthwhile purposes” (Garland, 1964), as well as Papanek’s call to employ design for “the genuine needs of man” reflect a broader commitment to transform disciplinary practice for the common good (Papanek, 1971, p. 15). This movement was anchored in the belief that “[in] this age of mass production when everything must be planned and designed, design has become the most powerful tool” that had to be deployed with “high social and moral responsibility” (Papanek, 1971, p. 102). Papanek’s reimagination of industrial design under the frameworks of “basic human needs” aimed at a subversion of capitalist modes of production, not only for the “Third World”, but also for post-industrial nations who needed to solve the problems of and with modern design in the post-war era (see Borgonovo & Franceschini, 2019). His new design paradigm which proclaimed that “[d]esign must become an innovative, highly creative, cross-disciplinary tool responsive to the true needs of man” encapsulates several ideas about design in relation to global crisis (Papanek, 1971, p. x). The assumption that designers are inherently skilled at understanding third-party conditions suggests they act as detached observers, implying that when they analyze or examine issues and human needs, they do so from an external vantage point. In this scenario design is presumed an innocent practice, devoid of inherent political implications, and only becomes political when explicitly directed with intent. However, this viewpoint is problematic as it overlooks the fact that the assessment of “long-term needs” in design processes is socially, politically, and culturally situated and that design products create subjectivities and contribute to a social imaginary. Already Papanek was subjected to criticism by his peers who described his “designs for development” as a neocolonialist project and, as design historian Alison Clarke puts it, “patronizing at best, deeply harmful at worst” (Clarke, 2016, p. 47).

Yet, the core values he embodied remained fundamental to the formation of what we today view as social design. It is precisely such an understanding of designers as experts on social (and virtually any) issues that reverberates in contemporary projects like the Refugee Challenge. Indeed, in a 2016 article on *Dezeen* promoting

the #RC, WDCD founder Richard van der Laken uses a rhetoric that positions universal problem-solving as a skill unique to designers: “Daring and innovative ideas are needed to deal with the long-term needs of so many new residents in many areas of life. This is what designers are good at.” (Winston, 2016)

### 3. The Planetary Paradigm

Shelter designs that reflected a shift toward power technologies for planetary survival include Paolo Soleri's desert home (1970), Robert Schwartz' Styrofoam dome (1964) or Steve Bear's “Zomes”, all mentioned in *Design for the Real World* as demonstrations of the “elegance of solutions possible with a creative interaction of tools, materials, and processes” (Papanek, 1971, p. 13). While the dome, as the paradigmatic shape representing alternative shelter designs that proliferated in the 60s and 70s, doesn't strictly fit into the realm of humanitarian or social design, I would like to propose that the architectural expressions from this particular historical context are pertinent for comprehending how design was harnessed by non-governmental entities that rehearsed new models for organizing societies on a planetary scale<sup>3</sup>.

In the 1960s the American countercultural movements adopted design as a small-scale, grass-roots, low-tech tool to self-organize outside of established societal settings. Propagated through publications such as Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968–1972), Lloyd Khan's *Domebook* (1971) and *Shelter* (1973), or Antfarm's *Inflatocookbook* (1971), shelter technologies such as the geodesic dome by Buckminster Fuller represented a (cost-)efficient, sustainable and versatile building strategy that was associated with technological optimism, futurism, and alternative politics. Papanek's manuals for *Nomadic Furniture* (published together with James Henessy in 1973) echo the sprouting, inflatable, recyclable, experimental, and modular shelter designs and their material symbolism as well as their Do-It-Yourself aesthetic<sup>4</sup>. The different versions of dome structures as well as the manuals that propelled their popularity are an example of how shelter technologies and their “vernacular” aesthetic—something that to the Western eye looked archaic and futuristic at the same time—came to represent counterculture values. These aesthetics had a firm grip

3 In her paper “The Planetary Test”, historian of science Orit Halpern mobilizes Victor Papanek's writings on the “age of mass production when everything must be planned and designed” (1971, p. 9) to identify what she calls the “planetary turn in design: The reinvention of human life and habitat as an experiment, even opportunity, for design intervention and growth at terran scales.” (2019, p. 14)

4 The cover headline “How to build and where to buy lightweight furniture that folds, collapses, stacks, knows down, inflates or can be thrown away and recycled. Being both a book of instruction and a catalog of access for easy moving” resonates with various experimental shelter technologies of Open Land and “Drop Out” communities.

on “real-world” sites (such as the commune “Drop City” in Colorado built in 1960) as well as the imagined futures in science fiction productions. While movies or TV series of the 1970s frequently referenced design and architectural visions of future dome dwellings, designers and architects explicitly employed science-fictional or speculative modes to sketch their visions of future habitats<sup>5</sup>. Even though the adoption of a fulleresque techno-oriented, imperial understanding of design seemed at odds with pressing emancipatory movements and a growing skepticism towards technology as a reinforcement of capitalist control, the technocratic designs provided by Fuller and his peers were endorsed by counter-culturalists as models for utopian, decentralized communities<sup>6</sup>. Design practice was emerging under the rubric of offering innovative, just, and rational models for thinking about better, global futures. Propelled by seductive aesthetic visions of dome cities and liberated communities, technological fixes became a political and aesthetic paradigm for an imagined shift towards a more democratic and participatory society. While the point is not to unambiguously declare the shelter technologies of the 1970s as predecessor models of the *AGRIshter*, I argue that they stand for a specific understanding of “what design can do” that anticipates contemporary declarations of the “problem-solving power of design” (What Design Can Do, 2021) to create more just and sustainable futures while assuming a key position in tackling global crisis.

#### 4. More Problems Contained

The design fixes realized under the umbrella of the RC unwittingly participate in a distraction from the systemic causes of migration and global precarity while they scope out an idea of what design can offer. Arguably, suggesting that an increase of migration flows must be met with a new range of design products diverts from the socio-economic, political, cultural, and deeply historical conditions that force refugees to flee their home countries and seek asylum in the first place. This is partly

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5 SF movies that feature domes are, for example: 2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968); Silent Running (Douglas Trumbull, 1972); Logan’s Run (Michael Anderson, 1976). From the late 1960s through the 1970s, architect and design “radicals” produced experimental, anti-establishment, speculative architectural plans, mappings, as well as interior designs and objects. Among the most renowned proponents of science fictional approaches were Italian designers and architects (Archizoom, Superstudio, and Studio Alchimia), but also British groups such as Archigram or American groups such as Antfarm produced speculative works connected to widespread movement of alternative, fantastical, and experimental practices as instruments of cultural critique.

6 For an account of the entangled legacies of counter culture, design, and the military-industrial complex that contributed to the development of digital technology and digital utopianism, see for example Turner 2006.

a matter of how problems are framed for and by designers within humanitarian-corporate operations<sup>7</sup>. The *AGRIshelter* is marketed to solve the problem of a “lack of temporary housing”, a formulation that constructs a specific narrative of the “refugee crisis” so that product design is able to offer a compelling solution. It operates as a non-governmental regulating force and is seductive in its aesthetic. The images of biodegradable, smooth and clean dwellings tell a story of being displaced that circumnavigates war, the (infra)structural violence of refugee camps, or political persecution. By making a problem of social policy a design problem, then, it becomes compartmentalized and decoupled from larger historical, political, and social processes. Or vice versa: To think of global crises in terms of design is connected to institutionalized procedures of managing sub-problems and diverts from the conditions that – in this example – force people out of their homes.

The RC illustrates how the portrayal of designers as universal problem-solvers needs to be considered in the context of a Western gaze that is inextricably linked to the historiography of design. By proclaiming to meet the needs of people on the move, the #RC constructs a specific imaginary of refugees in the process. Within the corporate language frame of the design challenge, refugees are portrayed as a user group with specific needs that are in turn conditioned by the limits of the product they are matched with. In the panel discussion mentioned above, Kleinschmidt argues that refugee-specific products, such as shelters, dehumanize refugees while at the same time produce them as objects perpetually in crisis. They are “not a species,” he reminds the audience, “so, there is no need of tech for refugees, of design for refugees, of architecture for refugees [sic!]” (Dezeen, 2017, 01:35-01:43). In an essay on the soft power<sup>8</sup> of humanitarian design movements, political scientist and Black Studies scholar Cedric Johnson argues that within this kind of relation between the designer and the designed-for, “the global poor are construed as objects of

7 In their book *Design Justice*, Sasha Costanza-Chock suggests that institutions frame “problems for designers to solve in ways that systematically invisibilize structural inequality” (2021, p. 121). A similar conclusion is drawn by ethnographer Tim Seitz, who published a study of so-called Design Thinking processes that undergird the development of products, systems, and services within business and social innovation contexts: “Design thinking is made visible as a laboratory practice that can only take place in specific environments. [...] I argue that design thinking does not actually generate information about end users and their problems. Instead, it constructs specific imaginations of people and their problems in such a way that design thinking can offer convincing solutions.” (Seitz 2017, p. 45)

8 The term “soft power” is introduced by political scientist Joseph Nye in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990) and further developed as a concept in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2005): “What is soft power? It is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies” (Nye, 2005, p. 6).

elite benevolence and non-profit largesse, rather than as historical subjects possessing their own unique worldviews, interests, and notions of progress" (Johnson, 2011, p. 448). The proclamation of a "temporary housing problem" weighs especially heavy when we consider that displacement in most cases is anything but temporary. According to the website of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), also known as the UN Refugee Agency "refugees may spend years and even decades living in camps and it is common to have entire generations growing up in the camps." Following Kleinschmidt, the logic underlying temporary settlements suggests that a refugee is only legible and therefore supportable if they eventually return home.

In 2016, design scholar Ruben Pater published an article heavily criticizing the WDCD Refugee Challenge for the framing of a humanitarian crisis as a design challenge. One of his main arguments is that they propagate neoliberal ideology in suggesting that the "free market is much better at solving the world's crises than governments are" (Pater, 2016). The idea of global challenges being "too big for governments and NGOs alone" aligns with a handover of public services to the private sector (Pater, 2016)<sup>9</sup>, a process that culminates for example in the privatization of border control through companies like Frontex. The nature of the competition further shifts the focus from the group of people the design is *for* to the group of people the design is *from*. "Who can build the best shelter?" is the question that moves into the center while the racial biopolitics and systemic dependencies of the settlements that house these shelters fade into the background. This shift of focus is reflected in a jury statement about the winning shelter design: "There is a little utopian thinking revealed in this project," they commented, potentially referencing its claim to be able to prevent the formation of ghettos, "but that's a whole lot better than a 'dystopia'" (Agrishelter, 2021). This kind of framing suggests that the criteria against which the competing products are measured are not only pertinence or suitability, but also the construction of favorable narratives. Again, the RC renders the question of whose agency is centered ambiguous. The hashtag "#RefugeeChallenge" that contestants were instructed to use to share their designs on social media is a good example of how design responses to crises are embedded in corporate structures that capitalize on catastrophes. Unlike #MeToo, which was used by survivors of sexual assault to share their own first-hand experiences, the hashtag #RefugeeChallenge centers an externally imposed narrative that significantly downplays the suffering and trauma that comes with displacement and sidelines the lived experiences, backgrounds, and stories of refugees.

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9 A shortened version of his article was published on *Dezeen*. Many of his arguments are echoed in this paper.

## 5. Shelter-Making = World-Making

The shelter as a discursive anchor helps trace contested histories of socially ambitious design practices of post-industrial nations, operating within a humanitarian paradigm as non-governmental forces that rehearse new models for organizing societies. This paper only provides a glimpse into the potential avenues of examining the histories and intersections of design and aid to posit that humanitarian design's response-ability is contextually dependent, subject to change, and subject to debate and that the ways we are trained to design for crisis are historically contingent and traceable. I mobilized different shelters to map out the emergence of a humanitarian and planetary design paradigm in the 1960s and 70s to understand the underlying and encoded assumptions about design in times of crisis today.

In this way, this paper understands design less as a technology that tackles crisis, but rather as an epistemology that narrates and conditions response-abilities to crisis, because shelter-making is always world-making in the sense that it encapsulates geopolitical narratives and shapes social imaginaries. Design practices that increase the literacy of the convoluted worlds beyond the shelter could contribute to forming new humanitarian and planetary paradigms, which don't prompt designers to come up with fixes, but takes seriously the uneasy and ambiguous histories, imaginaries, and political undercurrents of what is perceived as a design problem.

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