

# On Improving Settlement and Alleviating the Psychological Problem of Unaccompanied Refugee Children and Adolescents

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**Abstract:** *The global refugee crisis is an ongoing problem in which the harm done to refugee children cannot be ignored. In response to this problem, the research will from the view of design, to find a child-friendly space designing method to improve the settlement environment on the mental health of unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents in the London borough of Croydon.*

**Keywords:** *Unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents, Settlement environment, Psychology, Child-friendly space*

## 1. Introduction

There are 84 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, and 26.6 million are refugees (as of mid-2021). Among them, over half of the world's refugees are children, who have left everything behind to escape conflict, violence, and persecution in search of a safer life. These experiences can profoundly impact refugee children's mental health from infancy through childhood to adolescence. Although this problem has undergone numerous research, there is a lack of solutions in terms of improving the living and activity-based environment and alleviating the psychological aspects of refugee children in the design field.

This research project is from the perspective of an interior and spatial designer, which is explored based on settlement environment and psychology. That will explore and analyze the relationship between them and the influence of the settlement environment on the psychology of the refugee crisis, using unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents as the research group. The solution will incorporate relevant theory through the study of a design method, attempting to use child-friendly space to improve the psychological problems of unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents in the London borough of Croydon.

## 2. Defining the Unaccompanied Refugee Children

Applying the definition of “the refugee are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country” and in keeping with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is defined as a person “below the age of 18 years, unless, under the law applicable to the child, the majority is attained earlier”. As a result, a refugee child and adolescent in this project is someone under 18 who fears being persecuted for different reasons and has been forced to leave their home countries. However, this research project will focus more on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), which is defined as “children separated from both parents and are not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has the responsibility to do so”, as my primary research target.

## 3. Croydon Research

According to Home Office statistics on asylum seekers in the UK last year, there were 48540 asylum applications in the UK in 2021, and Iran was the top nationality claiming asylum (9800 applications). In the more detailed perspectives, from 3762 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children's applications, almost all of them are from Iran. This research project will focus on Croydon, the first place of arrival

for unaccompanied refugee children in the UK. The London City Hall mentioned there are more than 1600 unaccompanied children in the care of London boroughs, and 270 of these children are in the care of the London Borough of Croydon.

Refugees who came to London seeking asylum were first housed at Barry House in Sasak and Brigstock House in Croydon, and then was dispersed to housing across London or outside the capital. However, due to Covid-19, hotels are also increasingly being used to accommodate asylum seekers. Research on settlement allocated by Croydon Service and Support Centre England found that asylum seekers in Corydon live in deplorable conditions. It is mentioned that hundreds of asylum seekers are trapped in hotels, living in small, windowless, and unhygienic rooms with no activity space, which is damp and decrepit as well. These negative factors could easily deteriorate both the mental and physical health of grown refugees, let alone the greater impact it imposes on the mental health of unaccompanied refugee children. The settlement environment in Corydon may not be friendly to refugee children, and design intervention could help mitigate the environmental issues and potentially improve the refugee children's mental health.

#### **4. Unaccompanied Refugee Children' Mental Health**

Multiple risk factors make refugee children vulnerable to psychological issues. Fazel Axwnd Stein noted that the risk factors for mental health problems in refugee children and the typical mental illnesses are linked to these risk factors. They also conducted that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and sleep difficulties, and depression were the most common psychological issues among refugee children [1]. In Norredam et al. Study, they found that the prevalence of any psychological problems would be higher for unaccompanied than for accompanied refugee children [2]. They tend to suffer from anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [3][4]. Therefore, there is a need to pay attention to the mental health issues of refugee children, especially the more vulnerable unaccompanied refugee children.

#### **5. Environmental Effects on Children' Mental Health**

The research found that the neighbourhood a child is brought up in impacts their mental health, educational attainment, and life expectancy [5]. Wheaton and Clarke also found adolescents growing up in disadvantaged areas (perceptions of danger, drug use, traffic, noise, and run-down buildings), have a wide range of externalizing behavior problems, including bullying, impulsivity, cheating, lying and a "lack of self-responsibility [6]. They even suffer from depression and anxiety disorders [7]. As mentioned above, unaccompanied refugee children are more likely to have psychological problems, and a poor environment will also impact child psychology. Therefore, the settlement environment should be improved to alleviate the psychological problems of unaccompanied refugee children.

#### **6. Environmental Effects on Unaccompanied Refugee Children' Mental Health**

The project focuses on the psychological issues regarding the environment of unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents. Based on the psychological problems of forced displacement of unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents, and the discussion arising from the perspective of the psychological impact of the existing environment on children, the main environmental problems can be categorized into two aspects: physical and social factors [8]. Physical factors, mainly manifested in the living environment, such as poor sanitary facilities and overcrowding, thus affecting mental health [9]. The social factor is mainly the sense of security and belonging, largely shown due to the separation of unaccompanied refugee children from their families, making them more vulnerable [10]. They may not be able to embrace the unfamiliar environment, and they may encounter violence, and racial discrimination [11] [12].

#### **7. Case Study**

The case study analyzes what environmental design practices can help unaccompanied refugee children deal with psychological problems caused by physical and social factors mentioned in the literature review. The cases will be assessed in terms of the following criteria.

- 1) Whether the basic needs of refugee children are being met?

2) What environmental elements mitigate the environmental impact on refugee children's psychological problems?

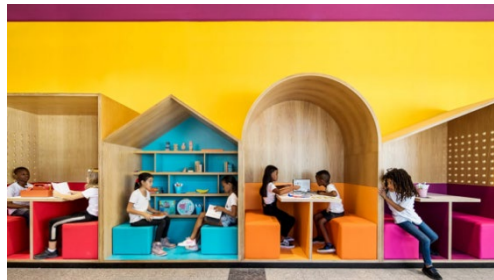
3) Is it a successful child-friendly space design?

The case study was selected based on different environmental factors: the colour, material and the incorporation of playgrounds. Through the discussion of different spatial environmental elements, how can child-friendly spaces be designed to solve the psychological problems of refugee children.

### 7.1 Hayarden School

The Hayarden school for children of refugees (aged 5-16), located in South Tel-Aviv, in the Hatikvah quarter, was designed by Designer Sarit Shani Hay, who specializes in designing pedagogical environments and collaborated with architect Chen Steinberg Navon and Ayelet Fisher in 2018.

As a second home for the children, the project aims to use different design elements in the school public space to meet the basic needs of refugee children to enhance their sense of belonging in the place. For example, a reading corner in the shape of a house, and colours used in those spaces are drawn from the flags of the countries of origin where they are from (around 25 different countries); And wood materials are introduced to soften the "noise" created by the colours in the space. The school principal said, "The atmosphere at the school has changed ever since: the kids have more self-esteem and there is less violence.". Thus, it can be seen from the project that the design may positively resolve the psychological problems of refugee children through specific improvement.



<https://www.dezeen.com/2019/02/11/hayarden-school-for-children-of-refugees-tel-aviv/>

Figure 1: Hayarden school, by Sarit Shani Hay, Chen Steinberg Navon and Ayelet Fisher

#### 7.1.1 Assessment

By redesigning the educational space, the project provides a positive educational environment for refugee children. It also uses spatial design elements to alleviate the lack of security and sense of belonging that refugee children feel after being forced to leave their country. The project in Hayarden school focuses on the use of colour and materials. The influence of colour on human beings is varied, but it is more obvious in children. According to research, children respond positively to bright colours like pink, blue and red, rather than brown, black and grey [13]. In this project, there are three main colours used: yellow, pink, and blue. The effects of these colours on children can be summarized as followed:

1) Yellow: As one of the most cheerful colours, it can keep people optimistic. At the same time, the use of bright yellow can create an atmosphere of concentration for children and help stimulate their memory.

2) Pink: Pink is a mixture of red and white that positively affects us, especially children. The colour evokes sympathy and happiness in a child's mind. In a general sense, pink is a colour that exudes feminine energy, sweetness, and happiness, and can bring a sense of calm.

3) Blue: Blue lowers a person's body temperature, blood pressure and pulse rate. Since blue is also the colour of the sky and the ocean, it inspires a sense of inner peace and tranquility in children.

Regarding materials, wood is the dominant material used in this project. Research has shown that educational environments built from or containing wooden features can directly and positively influence children's physical and mental health. Buildings made of wood can relieve stress and enhance our sense of well-being. As a result, the colour and material can lead to a positive influence in the design of the environment. It is worth mentioning that this project from the case study also sets up some collaborative learning spaces for group cooperation, which can better enable children to do some group activities and let them interact more with each other in a social manner. Combined with the child-friendly space design

principles, the space meets the need to provide a safe, stimulating, and supportive environment for refugee children, making it both an attractive and comfortable space. Therefore, it can be regarded as a successful friendly space design.

## 7.2 *Ibtasem Playground*

The Ibtasem playground is a pilot project located in Bar Elias, Lebanon that is coordinated by the “Catalytic Action” and has been completely funded by an international crowdfunding campaign. It was built by a team of volunteers in cooperation with the end-users of the space, the refugee children themselves. The Ibtasem playground is a pilot project located in Bar Elias, Lebanon that is coordinated by the “Catalytic Action” and has been completely funded by an international crowdfunding campaign. It was built by a team of volunteers in cooperation with the end-users of the space, the refugee children themselves in 2015. Since 2011, the crisis in Syria has devastated lives and uprooted families forced to find safety elsewhere. Children are particularly vulnerable in this context, with many Lebanese living in informal refugee settlements where there is no safe space to play. Ibtasem project is based on the basic needs of refugee children, that built a playground in the refugee camp. The design allows refugee children to play in a safe manner by creating a playground with a wide view through inviting the refugee children to participate in the playground to enhance their sense of belonging to it. The design construction is modular and quick to build, and easy to assemble, disassemble, transport and reuse. While accommodating many play elements in a small area: graffiti walls, basketball courts, swings, climbing nets and so on.



<https://www.catalyticaction.org/ibtasem-playground/>

Figure 2: *Ibtasem playground, by CatalyticAction*

### 7.2.1 *Assessment*

The project is designed to cater to the fundamental demand for a playground for children in refugee camps, where safe spaces for play are often lacking. For refugee children, it provides an active, relaxing, and educational space. It focuses on using the playground to assuage the psychological problems of refugee children. Firstly, an open activity space can ease the lack of security of refugee children due to environmental factors and allow refugee children to participate in the construction process, thus enhancing their inner sense of belonging to the playground. Secondly, the variety of play elements in the playground can better meet the psychological needs of different refugee children. Combined with the basic design principles of child-friendly spaces, this project is a good way to integrate the local environment and involve children in the construction of the space, therefore alleviating the negative psychological influence of the complex environment of the refugee camp.

## 7.3 *Discussion*

Based on the research and analysis of the two case studies, it can be concluded that the design of environmental elements in terms of colors, materials, and the incorporation of playgrounds can improve the psychological impact of the negative environmental factors listed in the literature review on refugee children to some extent. Therefore, intervention through the design method is necessary for unaccompanied refugee children, as good design can ease the child's security or belonging caused by environmental factors. So, is it confident that the psychological needs of refugee children can be addressed through such a design approach? Elrha's study mentioned that although child-friendly space interventions can have a positive impact, they are not always appropriate, must be adapted to the context, and the psychological impact of the space on the child will diminish in the long term. So, from the available information, it seems that child-friendly spaces, despite being a promising design practice, still

have some problems and shortcomings. Therefore, we should improve the design approach by considering the needs of refugee children to enhance the environment and the impact of psychological problems of refugee children and provide a better living environment.

## 8. Conclusion

This research project confirms that child-friendly space can as an intervention improve the influence of the environment on psychological problems. In the past, insufficient attention was paid to this area and there was less relevant research, which ignored the mental health issues of unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents before, and now people have started to study it, although it is still not enough. Therefore, it is more important to focus on the needs of unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents, including the physical factors of the environment, as well as the issues of security and sense of belonging in future research, and try to solve this problem with design interventions to better promote this matter.

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