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Future Heritage?

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Global society is facing unprecedented challenges. Aside from the existential threats of climate change, the emergence of the pandemic and its mismanagement in many countries has revealed a very brutal picture of social, political, and economic inequalities that can no longer be ignored. Furthermore, today's generations are faced with the rapid erasure of natural resources and cultural infrastructures, which go hand in hand with chronic social ills: power grabs by elite classes and their strategies of sowing division and fear, political violence, economic injustice, and social alienation. These planetary challenges are putting the world's population through an existential test: How is one to find strength, inspiration, and hope in a moment in which weakness, cynicism, and despair seem so easy to surrender to?

If the world must change radically – as soon as possible – how, then, must the usual ways of being and doing be changed to enable life on this planet for future generations of humans and nonhumans alike? What role could culture play in this shift? This text explains the reasoning and context behind a project I've developed called the T-Serai (Textile System for Experimentation and Research in Artistic Impact). Created by the MIT Future Heritage Lab, it explores how art and design can offer creative and critical tools to not only expose global inequalities and amplify the voices of those who have been silenced, but to also imagine and create alternative futures.

I suggest that we learn from people who struggle to create a life worth living in conditions that deprive them of any sense of agency: from the thousands and thousands of people who are forcefully displaced every day around the globe. To that end, I will outline some perspectives that I gained from collaborating with displaced Syrians in various desert camps in Jordan, together with the Jordanian and Palestinian members of the host community and the international researchers from the Future Heritage Lab. During the past six years, we have been conducting research and producing educational and creative projects in the Azraq and Zaatari camps in Jordan.[1] Collaborating across political, cultural, and disciplinary borders, we hoped to trace elements of possible futures in our present moment that could prepare us for the challenges of the world to come. These insights informed our various responses to conflict and crisis at the intersection of art, design, and cultural preservation.

Toward Cultural Shelters

I would like to start with an image of "future heritage" that, to my mind, most powerfully exemplifies the problems, paradoxes, and

A sandcastle stands in front of standardized humanitarian T-shelters, Azraq Refugee Camp, Jordan, 2017. Photo: MIT Future Heritage Lab.

MIT Future Heritage Lab, *Displaced Empire*, 2021. Tent made of humanitarian textiles, discarded clothes, military camouflage mesh, and a modified carport. Installation view of *Co-habitats,* 17th International Architecture Exhibition, la Biennale di Venezia 2021. Photo: MIT Future Heritage Lab, 2017.

opportunities of the contemporary moment. The image depicts a sandcastle built by a Syrian refugee in front of his shelter in the Azraq Refugee Camp in Jordan. The sandcastle looks like a model of the famous Palmyra arch that ISIS destroyed in 2015. It stands in front of a standardized steel shelter, the ubiquitous so-called T-shelter, built by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to house displaced Syrians who were arriving in Jordan on a daily basis during the years 2016–17, in search of safety.

The Azraq Refugee Camp was established by UNHCR in 2014 as a response to the overflow of the previously established Zaatari camp.[2] Located ninety kilometers from the Syria-Jordan border, the Azraq camp shelters almost thirty-eight thousand people.[3] Jordan is the second-largest refugee host country in the world after Turkey,[4] and the Zaatari refugee camp is the largest in the country, accommodating almost eighty thousand Syrian refugees.[5] Different from the organic urban growth of the Zaatari camp, the Azraq camp appears much more rigidly structured. It is a centrally planned, closed camp administered by the UNHCR under the regulations of the Jordanian government's Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate. From a distance, the camp looks like an endless grid of white containers, bordered by an infinite fence, and surrounded by nothing but the sand of the Eastern Desert. The barren landscape extends to the horizon, and temperatures reach 118°F (47°C) in the summer. Among the fifteen other refugee camps in Jordan, Azraq is the most representative example of institutional humanitarian infrastructure. It constitutes what the humanitarian field considers an advancement in governance, security, and design. Local guidelines prohibit the building of permanent structures and the planting of crops, and limit the customization of interior spaces.

This image of the sandcastle is striking because in it one sees the juxtaposition of two types of shelters. The white, steel T-shelter in the background epitomizes the established response to the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Beyond claiming to fulfill the housing needs of refugees, the T-shelter is an icon of the global politics of inequality, echoing the parameters that shape the established (capitalist) approach to humanitarian design based on efficiency, security, control, and surveillance. Such an approach reduces the conception of a human being to their biological needs, such as the need for food and for a roof over one's head. The DIY sandcastle in the foreground represents a different idea: self-determined shelter that prioritizes cultural and emotional needs. Built from sand, the only surplus material in the desert, this counter-model to the ready-made steel box is fragile, porous, and handmade. It is a type of shelter that humanizes humanitarian aid by putting art, culture, and creativity at the forefront of humanitarian relief. The same material also points to possibilities of future construction that is informed by transcultural heritage and that allows for coexisting sustainably with nonhuman beings.

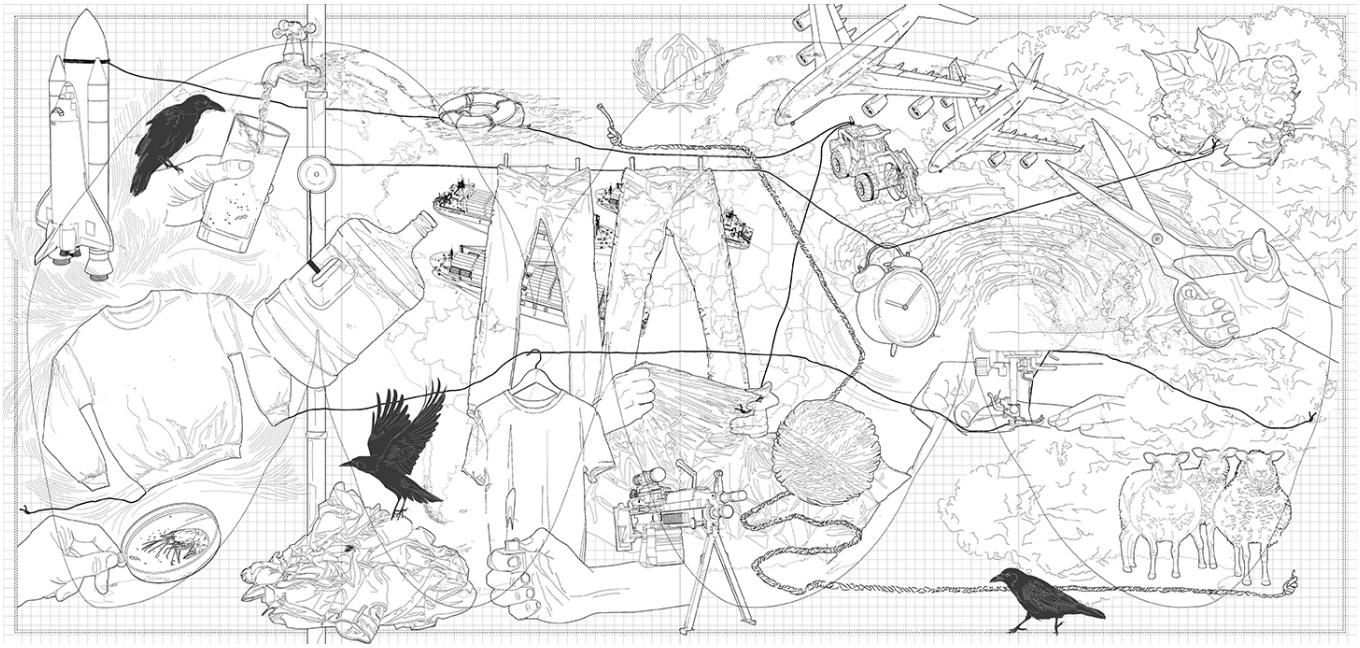
Considering the unprecedented existential threats posed by climate change, the scarcity of resources, and the ever-increasing number of forcefully displaced people that at this point have surpassed eighty million worldwide, we must ask ourselves which type of future heritage we want to build today.[6] Is the T-shelter really the best we can offer to protect the bodies of displaced people in the present and in the future?

Building Future Heritage

To explore how art and design might inform the creation of a future heritage that is more empathetic and more caring of our collective body – a term I use to refer to global society, including its most vulnerable human and nonhuman members – I introduce the T-Serai (Textile System for Experimentation and Research in Artistic Impact), a portable palace that draws from the arts and crafts of various cultural traditions that have served shared causes. The project includes a tent prototype that is used for exhibitions, as well as co-creation workshops in various locations, during which participants engage in transcultural exchange by creating their own textile prototypes. Taken together, the architectural, material, and pedagogical dimensions of the project outline a culturally sensitive, socially inclusive, and environmentally conscious framework for humanitarian design

The modular tapestries of the T-Serai are created from upcycled humanitarian textiles. They can be used to insulate and personalize refugee shelters, preserve cultural memory, and inspire hope. The tapestries can also be used for mobile storage, or to set up tents for social gatherings. The tent, produced as an exhibition piece, represents a visual critique of humanitarian design by positioning culture as an essential human need.

Building on legacies of participatory art and interrogative design, the T-Serai workshops connect people across borders to explore how the past might inform the present to shape a better future. The material dimension of the project incites contemplation and offers a critique of the social and environmental costs of our consumer lifestyle. Through the upcycling of discarded clothes, the project probes how the



MIT Future Heritage Lab, *Process Drawing*, 2019. CAD drawing, dimensions variable. The drawing depicts the environmental footprint and social cost of materials used for the T-Serai panels, pointing to our global connectedness and interdependencies.

MIT Future Heritage Lab collaborators and students, *T-Serai modules*, 2019. Photomontage of T-Serai panels designed by various participants in a workshop held by MIT, American University Sharjah, and Zaatari Refugee Camp. Photo: MIT Future Heritage Lab, 2019.

overproduction of the global textile industry could provide a resource to support the social revitalization of communities affected by war.

Displaced Empire

Presented as a mobile installation and exhibition piece – currently on view at the "Co-Habitats" section of the 17th International Architecture Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia 2021 – the tent speculates about the collective body in a near-future world in which the majority of people have been forcibly displaced.[7] The Azraq Refugee Camp has become the capital of a new sociopolitical entity called the "Displaced Empire." The displaced people have become the dominant and ruling class. The T-Serai represents the Empire's headquarters; it is a portable palace that collapses different timescales into one imploded form. The design is informed by the longer cultural history of empires and the ongoing inventiveness of people living at the Azraq camp. The tent shape is a hybrid of an Ottoman imperial tent (serai) and the UNHCR's T-shelter. The imperial aesthetic is reflected in the interior panels that feature repetitive patterns of arches with lanterns, in a color scheme of red and gold. The interior space is reminiscent of the palatial tent complexes of Ottoman sultans. These complexes had multiple functions, providing storage for holy relics, serving as the sultan's treasury, fulfilling important representational roles – anything the sultan might have needed.

Imperial "almanacs" that hang from the side panels of the tent feature drawings laser-burned on denim. These drawings depict various DIY modifications made to the Azraq camp's architecture in the past (our present), highlighting the fascinating inventions created by displaced Syrians. These inventions reveal the cultural, emotional, and architectural needs of displaced people within a context of scarcity, trauma, confinement, and struggle for a future. By altering and domesticating the standardized humanitarian T-shelters, displaced Syrians humanize humanitarian architecture, using art and design as a medium of self-determination and world-building.

Viewers learn from the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the Azraq camp's former residents – people like Wael, a young man born in Syria who grew up in the Azraq camp and sought to defy his daily reality. Despite his confinement, Wael managed to create a life worth living by building new friendships with other young people – people like Jar, who landed in the camp after being displaced from Syria. Jar dropped out of school because he did not see how traditional education could improve his future. Nonetheless, he figured out how to combat the unbearable heat of the T-shelters with DIY air conditioners and water fountains he made from shisha pipes, and he taught others in the camp how to build these things too. Wael conquered the 2021 Olympics in Japan, winning the gold medal in tae kwon do. Both Wael and Jar are protagonists of a growing population of new nomads with fractured histories and hybrid cultural identities.

A Socially Inclusive Modular System

The T-Serai panels reference the T-shelter modifications made by Azraq camp residents to personalize the standardized dwellings. As I mentioned earlier, the refugee camps are mostly planned according to paradigms of security and efficiency. This is not surprising considering the type of a crisis they are designed for, when thousands of people are arriving at a place on a daily basis. How might one accommodate their needs quickly? It is difficult to address the multiple aspects of this problem, be it politics, logistics, or economics, not to mention the emotional challenges of traumatized people who are left with nothing but bare life.

In light of these challenges, it is imperative to take into account culturally sensitive issues, like privacy concerns and the need for social connection – issues that rarely figure into humanitarian design. Standardized humanitarian shelters ignore the culturally specific spatial organization of the domestic environment in terms of gender, age, and privacy. In addition, although humanitarian agencies offer spaces dedicated specifically to sports, learning activities, and events, refugee camps lack dedicated spaces for socializing, and they often prohibit the erecting of culturally specific infrastructure. The modular tapestries can help overcome the deficiencies of T-Shelters by serving as space dividers, wall insulation, and even mobile storage. With its socially inclusive and culturally sensitive design, the T-Serai counters the logic of the T-Shelter, offering alternative architectures for displaced people, inspired by displaced people themselves – specifically, the Syrian refugees of the Azraq Refugee Camp. Above all, the T-Serai deploys culturally sensitive design as both a form of inquiry and a critique, positioning culture as an essential human need.

Abundance and Scarcity

The exterior of the T-Serai tent uses various humanitarian textiles – wool and mylar from blankets, fabric from clothing donations – as a way to reflect on surplus and scarcity in the world of displacement. All refugee camps in the world have one big problem in common: trash. Not just the trash that the camps produce, but

also the trash sent to them, the trash of the world disguised as humanitarian donations. The T-Serai is made of trash in a way that turns the careless discarding of waste into the valuable production of meaningful new cultural items. This type of upcycling is inspired by textile traditions from around the world, such as the Japanese boro technique and African-American appliqué. Many of these traditions link the patching and fixing old clothes to social bonding and the strengthening of community.

On a global scale, the project critiques the social and environmental costs of our consumer lifestyle. Many of us are guilty of buying fast-fashion items and then throwing them away when they get worn out or when we gain weight. Some of these trashed clothes might get recycled or resold, but much of it ends up in our atmosphere after being shipped to recycling facilities and burned. What isn't burned gets sent to places like Bangladesh and India, where certain villages specialize in shredding these fabrics and turning them into refugee blankets, thus closing the global loop of abundance and scarcity.

Textile manufacturing is among the most lucrative and polluting industries in the world: more than eighty billion square meters of unsold garments end up in landfills or get burned. When demand is lower than expected, leftover stock is channeled into the parallel economy of stock destruction, which works to control prices. Critiquing this wasteful capitalist strategy, the T-Serai probes how the overproduction of the global textile industry could be used to help revitalize communities affected by war. The T-Serai panels turn clothing donations into a resource for the refugee-led improvement of humanitarian architecture.

The materials used for the T-Serai panels and tapestries are humanitarian core relief items (CRI), including donated clothing that goes unused by refugees because it is culturally inappropriate. The layering of these fabrics is used to create appealing patterns, but it also increases thermal comfort without the need for air conditioning. The tapestries reduce absorbed solar radiation and the subsequent re-radiation of heat into the interior. The construction of the tapestries requires minimal low-tech infrastructure.

From the choice of materials to its manufacturing and construction, the T-Serai incorporates measures to ensure economic viability and environmental sustainability. Surplus textile material found locally is used to manufacture modular insulating tapestries. For refugees in camps, local employment opportunities are limited. The textile sector is one the few places where Syrian refugees in Jordan are allowed to work. The T-Serai framework allows refugees to use the skills they develop in textiles jobs to transform the built environment of their camp. The T-Serai promotes new ethical standards for socially inclusive design and supports the cultural resilience of threatened communities.

Co-creation Across Borders

Through transdisciplinary design processes and cross-generational knowledge exchange, the T-Serai project helps preserve the living culture and social relations of communities threatened with erasure. Besides collaborating with displaced Syrians in Jordan, the project organizes students from the USA, Europe, and the UAE to engage in cross-cultural co-creation. This multi-directional exchange of knowledge among participants from different backgrounds advances pluralism and self-determination.

The reverse-appliqué technique of the T-Serai panels borrows from the rich appliqué traditions of the MENA (Middle East North Africa) region, including the Egyptian *khayamiya* technique, which uses intricate patterns and sophisticated craftsmanship to decorate the interiors of tents. One of the better known examples of appliqué technique from the region, *khayamiya* is known for its symmetrical designs and beautiful vegetal patterns. *Khayamiya* textiles can still be purchased along the Street of the Tentmakers in Cairo.

Textiles use iconography and ornament to express cultural identity and history. Creators of T-Serai panels use textiles to record their personal stories and preserve cultural memory. The panels also highlight the dialogic dimension of textile patterns from neighboring countries, and promote knowledge transfer among participants from different backgrounds.

To conclude, I would like to share a few stories from students of mine who created their own tent panels:

"My grandmother was a known seamstress. She often made a piece of clothing called a *Quechquemitl*, a shawl-like garment sewn together from two pieces of rectangular cloth. The *Quechquemitl* has been worn by indigenous people in Mexico since pre-Hispanic times. Women from various traveling communities often share cross-stitching techniques and unique patterns from their indigenous groups. Since the colonial period, the *Quechquemitl* has been popularized. For my T-Serai panel, I sought to preserve and develop the common yet intricately beautiful embroidery patterns of the *Quechquemitl*."

– Alejandro Gonzalez-Placito

"My tapestry is inspired by the carpet-weaving tradition of Pirot, a town in Southern

Serbia. I grew up with these carpets, which are called *ćilimi*. The world *ćilim* comes from the Farsi *gelim* and the Turkish *kilim*. The specific Pirot tradition was influenced by both Ottoman carpets and Bulgarian *chiprovtsi* carpets. My design looks at the ornamental symbols of *kornjača* and *sofra*. Although I was specifically inspired by the Serbian tradition, the influences of these symbols span across Europe and the Middle East."
– Alexander Boccon-Gibod

"My tent panel tells the story of the Kazakh people through the ornamental symbology of the yurt, which reflects the nomadic Kazakh lifestyle. The *shanyrak* symbol sewn into the center of the panel was a family heirloom passed down from generation to generation. It represents the hospitality and openness of the Kazakh people and also recalls their strong ties to their roots. My design seeks to make visible the changes that Kazakh migratory life has experienced under various ruling states, and draw connections to the challenges of displaced Syrians today."
– Jierui Fang

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The findings and designs presented in this essay build on my collaborative writing with Melina Philippou and on multi-annual research conducted by various researchers at the MIT Future Heritage Lab, together with outside collaborators. For the full list of credits, please see the list of collaborators with the T-Serai project: https://www.futureheritagelab.com/projects#/tserai/.

2
Jordan currently hosts approximately 2.9 million Palestinian, Syrian, Iraqi, Yemeni, and Somali refugees. About 85 percent of the 654,700 Syrian refugees are urban based, with the remaining population living in camps. UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019*, unhcr.org, 3, 20 https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019.

3
"Jordan: Azraq Camp Factsheet (July 2020)," UNHCR Operational Data Portal https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/78179.

4
"Jordan: Azraq Camp Factsheet (July 2020)," 20.

5
"Jordan: Za'atari Camp Fact-sheet (January 2020)," UNHCR Operational Data Portal https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/73845.

6
UNHCR, "Forced Displacement Passes 80 Million by Mid-2020 as COVID-19 Tests Refugee Protection Globally," unhcr.org, December 9, 2020 https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/12/5fcf94a04/forced-displacement-passes-80-million-mid-2020-covid-19-tests-refugee-protection.html#:~:text=While%20a%20full%20picture%20for,displacement%20released%20today%20in%20Geneva.

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See https://www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/2021/co-habitats.