

# POLICY BRIEF

## Beauty in the built environment and refugee self-reliance

### 1. Introduction

This policy brief explores the often-overlooked impact of purposeful home beautification practices on refugees' well-being and their potential contributions to the Global Compact on Refugees' (the Compact) objective of increasing refugee self-reliance. It demonstrates that purposeful home beautification practices among refugees, ranging from physical modifications to daily rituals, not only enhance individual and community well-being but also serve as a tangible means for refugees to exert agency, integrate past and present experiences, and heal from trauma. These acts of beautification, extending from individual homes to community spaces, foster hope, build community bonds, and exhibit resistance and resilience. The brief underscores the integral role of beautification in catalyzing and redefining self-reliance for refugees, challenging conventional frameworks and urging policy-makers to recognize refugees as active contributors to their communities rather than passive recipients of aid.

### Authors

Stephanie Acker, MPA, Research Associate, Migration Policy Centre, EUI;  
Devora Neumark, PhD, Interdisciplinary Artist, and Scholar



Issue 2023/19  
December 2023

## 1.1 Beautification: a definition

In this policy brief, beauty refers to purposeful actions to modify the built environment, referred to as “third realm beauty” by art philosopher Arthur Danto.<sup>1</sup> This involves intentional beautification of the material world, observable in the physical dwellings of homes, including shelters, camps, or temporary accommodations. This emphasis on the physical dwelling holds particular relevance to refugee studies<sup>2</sup> and policy,<sup>3</sup> and as detailed below, is specifically connected to self-reliance initiatives.

## 1.2 Emergency aid to refugee self-reliance: the new norm

Amidst a surge in global refugee numbers since 2010,<sup>4</sup> the promoted long-term ‘durable solutions’

of repatriation, local integration, and resettlement have largely remained the same in concept and scope. Consequently, more than two thirds of refugees are in protracted situations, waiting in ‘temporary’ accommodations for anywhere between five to 20 years.<sup>5</sup> Despite this extended timeframe, it is still “emergency humanitarian aid”<sup>6</sup> that has been provided.

The consequences of this crisis-response model have been profound.<sup>7</sup> As early as 2016, prior to the adoption of the historic New York Declaration and the Compact, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon declared that the current approach keeps millions of refugees depending on short-term aid, that “keeps them alive but falls short of ensuring their safety, dignity and ability to thrive and be self-reliant.”<sup>8</sup>



Women were trained to take part in the maintenance of tents at Jeddah camp in Iraq. Photo © Sami Abdulla, 2019

- 1 Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*. (Open Court Publishing, 2003).
- 2 Cathrine Brun and Ragnhild Lund, “Making a Home during Crisis: Post-Tsunami Recovery in a Context of War, Sri Lanka,” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 29, no. 3 (2008): 274–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9493.2008.00334.x>.
- 3 Helen Taylor, “Refugees, the State and the Concept of Home,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 130–52, <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdt004>.
- 4 The number of refugees doubled from 2010 to 2020; in 2022 the number of forcibly displaced migrants surpassed 100 million for the first time in history (UNHCR, 2022).
- 5 UNHCR Global Data Service, “Global Trends in Forced Displacement 2022,” *Global Trends* (UNHCR, 2023), 22, <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>.
- 6 Refugee Self Reliance Initiative and Department of Population, Refugees, and Migration, “Better Lives Now: Self-Reliance Innovation Labs Learning Briefer” (RSRI & U.S. Department of State, November 2022), 4, <https://www.refugeeselfreliance.org/resource-database1/2022-12-06-innovation-labs-briefer-s7rx3>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 UN Secretary General, “One Humanity: Shared Responsibility” (World Humanitarian Summit (A/70/709), February 16, 2016), sec. 107, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/one-humanity-shared-responsibility-report-secretary-general-world-humanitarian-summit>.

The recognition of the inadequacy and unsustainability of emergency humanitarian aid<sup>9</sup> has paved the way for a shift in focus toward alternative interventions, notably self-reliance.<sup>10</sup> The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines self-reliance as the social and economic ability of refugee individuals, households, and communities to meet their essential needs sustainably and with dignity.<sup>11</sup> While self-reliance has long been a stated goal in refugee response, the 2018 Compact has propelled its significance and accelerated its implementation,<sup>12</sup> as evidenced by initiatives like the 2018 Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative by RefugeePoint and the Women’s Refugee Commission,<sup>13</sup> as well as the development, testing, and validation of the Self-Reliance Index in 2020.<sup>14</sup> Despite facing criticism,<sup>15</sup> self-reliance initiatives have instigated positive changes, necessitating a shift in frameworks towards longer-term, more holistic approaches with a focus on assets.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.3 Growing evidence of home beautification

Synthesizing and applying the findings of four different research studies and community-based collaborations between 2008 and 2023 on home beautification in forced displacement contexts, this policy

brief highlights the emerging role of beauty in the built environment as a potential contributor to the Compact’s goal of building individual and collective refugee self-reliance.

1. **Participatory and art-based studies with over 200 individuals** between 2008 and 2013 found home beautification to be a significant factor in helping refugees rebuild a sense of home and to help heal the intergenerational trauma caused by forced displacement.<sup>17</sup>
2. A **case study** on rebuilding efforts **post Hurricane Katrina** conducted in 2014 and then followed up in 2023 found that the home beautification process set an example for the entire community and was instrumental in attracting people back to their neighbourhoods so that they could better determine their level of interest to return and the viability of returning, particularly in neighbourhoods that had been marked for destruction.<sup>18</sup>
3. A 2023 **deductive analysis of refugee home-making literature** identified examples of beautification amongst refugees from more than 30 different countries with six different legal statuses (e.g., seeking asylum, granted asylum, “waiting” in a protracted refugee situation).<sup>19</sup>

9 Refugee Self Reliance Initiative and Department of Population, Refugees, and Migration, “Better Lives Now,” 4.

10 The lack of durable solutions has also led to an increase in looking for “complementary pathways,” which are other legal pathways besides traditional resettlement to third or safe countries that provide at least temporary safety (e.g. student visas, work programmes).

11 UNHCR, “Handbook for Self-Reliance (Complete Publication)” (Geneva: UNHCR, 2005), <https://www.unhcr.org/media/handbook-self-reliance-complete-publication>.

12 Claudena Skran and Evan Easton-Calabria, “Old Concepts Making New History: Refugee Self-Reliance, Livelihoods and the ‘Refugee Entrepreneur,’” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 33, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez061>.

13 See Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative <https://www.refugeeselfreliance.org/>.

14 Kellie Leeson et al., “Measuring the Self-Reliance of Refugees,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 33, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 86–106, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez076>.

15 In part for the implicit and explicit ways that they prioritize individual over community self-reliance (see Estella Carpi et al., “From Livelihoods to Leisure and Back: Refugee ‘Self-Reliance’ as Collective Practices in Lebanon, India and Greece,” *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (February 1, 2021): 421–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1828852>.) and for how they abdicate responsibility from nation states for providing protection and rights that would support refugee wellbeing (see Naohiko Omata, “Rethinking Self-Reliance and Economic Inclusion of Refugees through a Distributive Lens: A Case Study from Uganda,” *African Affairs* 121, no. 485 (October 1, 2022): 649–74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adac035>.)

16 Leeson et al., “Measuring the Self-Reliance of Refugees,” 98.

17 Devora Neumark, “Drawn to Beauty: The Practice of House-Beautification as Homemaking amongst the Forcibly Displaced,” *Housing, Theory and Society* 30, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 237–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2013.789071>.

18 Devora Neumark and Stephanie Acker. “Enhancing Community Resilience through Home Beautification: Addressing Forced Climate Displacement with a Case Study on Post-Katrina Recovery and the Beacon of Hope Resource Center Initiative.” (Forthcoming)

19 Stephanie Acker, “Beauty and Beautification in Refugees’ Lives and Their Implications for Refugee Policy,” *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees* 39 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41080>.

4. A 2023 **visual ethnography of gardens created in refugee camps in Palestinian Territories** found these intentional acts of beautification by first and second-generation refugees are therapeutic and serve as a way to challenge prevailing narratives of victimhood and highlighting the creative agency of refugees.<sup>20</sup>

Based on these studies' findings, this policy brief aims to explore **how beauty** in the **built environment** can **inform** and **transform** the **current narrative** and **practices** surrounding **refugee self-reliance**.

## 2. Beautification

### 2.1 When it happens and what it looks like

The research findings indicate that refugees invest concerted effort in enhancing and beautifying their living spaces. This includes actions such as painting walls, hanging pictures, adding wallpaper, and carpeting floors. Beautification is not confined to physical modifications; it extends to daily rituals, such as burning incense, serving tea in decorative porcelain, and engaging in collective prayers on ornate mats. These acts of home beautification were true of refugees with varied legal statuses, from over 30 different countries.<sup>21</sup> Whether in shelters,<sup>22</sup> camps,<sup>23</sup> or temporary apartments,<sup>24</sup> refugees exhibit a universal tendency to create personalized spaces, turning seemingly temporary accommodations into semblances of home.<sup>25</sup> Refugees engaged in cosmetic acts of beautification early in

displacement.<sup>26</sup> They evolved into more extensive home improvements over time. Roofs transformed into gardens,<sup>27</sup> porches became covered entryways for guests,<sup>28</sup> and sterile shelters evolved into personalized homes.<sup>29</sup>

### 2.2 Individual-level benefits

As refugees actively engage in purposeful gestures to enhance and beautify their living spaces, the significance of beauty in the built environment extends beyond aesthetics; it carries practical and therapeutic benefits for individuals, providing ways for refugees to exert agency, integrate past and present, and heal from trauma.

---

20 Initial results from an ongoing study conducted by Devora Neumark, Stephanie Acker, and Anonymous.

21 Acker, "Beauty and Beautification in Refugees' Lives and Their Implications for Refugee Policy."

22 Cathrine Brun, "Home as a Critical Value: From Shelter to Home in Georgia," *Refuge* 31, no. 1 (April 2015), <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40141>.

23 Yafa El Masri, "72 Years of Homemaking in Waiting Zones: Lebanon's 'Permanently Temporary' Palestinian Refugee Camps," *Frontiers in Sociology* 5 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2020.587063>.

24 Anna Marie Steigemann and Philipp Misselwitz, "Architectures of Asylum: Making Home in a State of Permanent Temporariness," *Current Sociology* 68, no. 5 (September 1, 2020): 628–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392120927755>.

25 Layla Zibar, Nurhan Abujidi, and Bruno de Meulder Brandenburg, "Who/What Is Doing What? Dwelling and Homing Practices in Syrian Refugee Camps," in *Making Home(s) in Displacement: Critical Reflections on a Spatial Practice*, ed. Luce Beekmans et al., (Leuven University Press., 2022), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv25wxbvf.7>.

26 Kyohee Kim and Peer Smets, "Home Experiences and Homemaking Practices of Single Syrian Refugees in an Innovative Housing Project in Amsterdam," *Current Sociology* 68, no. 5 (September 1, 2020): 607–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392120927744>.

27 El Masri, "72 Years of Homemaking in Waiting Zones."

28 Steigemann and Misselwitz, "Architectures of Asylum."

29 Elizabeth Wagemann, "From Shelter to Home: Flexibility in Post-Disaster Accommodation" (Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.43234>.





### 2.2.1 Exerting agency

Beautification is a means for refugees to exert agency in their lives. When pain, grief, and suffering are too overwhelming for words, the act of beautification becomes a way to say what cannot be said and expand the ability to feel.<sup>30</sup> Beautifying a space to make<sup>31</sup> it feel like home can absorb the pain caused by losing one's home.<sup>32</sup> 'Simple acts' like rearranging a home, sweeping the floor, or intentionally placing an object, allow refugees to infuse an area with their own identity and taste.<sup>33</sup>

Often, once someone is labelled a refugee all their other identities are overshadowed or disappear.<sup>34</sup> However, acts of beautification allow refugees to resist this marginalisation—literally and figurately providing a way for refugees to take up space in the here and now and cope in a situation where control is limited.<sup>35</sup>

**“Families transformed their temporary environments into buildings that could be recognized as permanent and durable. ... New and bright colours, designed fences, decorative elements, and the use of familiar materials all contributed to create personalised houses, easy to identify in the temporary settlement. Although families knew they would be evicted from these temporary settlements in the mid-term, they put effort and care in modifying their temporary houses, showing that they are more than mere shelters to them [emphases added].”<sup>36</sup>**

Photos: Elizabeth Wagemann, 2017, Peru

30 Elliot W. Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (Yale University Press, 2002).

31 Corine van Emmerik, “Aesthetics from the Interstices. The Making of a Home in a Palestinian Refugee Camp,” n.d.

32 Neumark, “Drawn to Beauty,” 249.

33 Ibid., 231; Paolo Boccagni, “At Home in the Centre?: Spatial Appropriation and Horizons of Homemaking in Reception Facilities for Asylum Seekers,” in *Making Home(s) in Displacement*, ed. Luce Beeckmans et al., *Critical Reflections on a Spatial Practice* (Leuven University Press, 2022), 139–54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv25wxvbf.9>.

34 Cathrine Brun, “Dwelling in The Temporary,” *Cultural Studies* 30, no. 3 (May 3, 2016): 421–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2015.1113633>.

35 Ibid., 436.

36 Wagemann, “From Shelter to Home,” 2010.





### 2.2.2 Integrating past and present

Beautification becomes a tangible bridge for refugees to remember their past homes and homelands while expressing a readiness to make a new home.<sup>37</sup> The physical act of beautifying a space to feel more comfortable, secure, and personalized is a tangible expression of hope for a future<sup>38</sup> that embodies the same. The crux of beauty-making's significance lies in the process; beautification provides tangible ways to remember previous homes, honour the loss of home and recreate a sense of home in the present.<sup>39</sup>

**“Everyone agreed, being refugees from different Palestinian villages, that caring for agriculture represents for them a memory of their villages from which they were expelled in 1948. Caring for the garden reminds them of the land in the occupied villages.... It feels like jail, but we make it a beautiful place to live.”**

– Palestinian living in a refugee camp in Palestinian Territories.

Photo: Garden of the interviewee, 2023

37 Tasoulla Hadjiyanni, “Aesthetics in Displacement – Hmong, Somali and Mexican Home-Making Practices in Minnesota,” *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 33, no. 5 (2009): 541–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-6431.2009.00806.x>; Michael Vicente Pérez, “Materializing the Nation in Everyday Life: On Symbols and Objects in the Palestinian Refugee Diaspora,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 42, no. 4 (December 1, 2018): 409–27, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-018-9505-x>; Anita H Fábos and Cathrine Brun, “Making Homes in Limbo? A Conceptual Framework,” *Refuge* 31, no. 1 (April 2015), <https://refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/view/40138>; Brun, “Home as a Critical Value”; Neumark, “Drawn to Beauty.”

38 Brun, “Home as a Critical Value.”

39 Neumark, “Drawn to Beauty,” 249.





### 2.2.3 Healing trauma

For refugees who have experienced trauma, beautification gains even greater significance.<sup>40</sup> Beyond an overarching sign of improved or mental health,<sup>41</sup> the transformative potential of beautification aligns with Psychologist Susan J. Brison’s assertion that survivors of trauma must shift their focus from “what has been done to me” to “what I have done and can do.”<sup>42</sup> The ways that beautifying a space allows individuals to exert personal agency and integrate past and present experiences is a tangible way to make this shift. In addition, efforts to beautify homes were found by one of this Brief’s authors, Dr. Neumark, to positively influence intergenerational trauma. As children participated in efforts to beautify their home, it seemed to positively influence their own coping mechanisms and well-being. In addition,

if children could imagine their homes prior to displacement through the stories and images shared with them – what scholar Marianne Hirsch calls ‘postmemories’<sup>43</sup> – then the actions taken to beautify their present-day homes could be transformative. They served as a bridge connecting the past with the present and facilitated the ongoing process of healing and preserving identity.

**“When I feel nervous, I come to the garden.”**

– Palestinian living in a refugee camp in the Palestinian Territories.

Photo: Garden of the interviewee, 2023

40 Emily F. Keyes and Catherine F. Kane, “Belonging and Adapting: Mental Health of Bosnian Refugees Living in the United States,” *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 25, no. 8 (January 1, 2004): 809–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01612840490506392>; Jeroen W. Knipscheer et al., “Trauma Exposure and Refugee Status as Predictors of Mental Health Outcomes in Treatment-Seeking Refugees,” *BJPsych Bulletin* 39, no. 4 (August 2015): 178–82, <https://doi.org/10.1192/pb.bp.114.047951>; Aida Alayarian, “Trauma, Resilience and Healthy and Unhealthy Forms of Dissociation,” *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 64, no. 4 (September 1, 2019): 587–606, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5922.12522>.

41 Keyes and Kane, “Belonging and Adapting.”

42 Neumark, “Drawn to Beauty,” 248.

43 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography Narrative and Postmemory* (Harvard University Press, 1997).





## 2.3 Community-level benefits

The benefits of beautification at the individual level extend to the community level, providing a tangible way to foster hope, build community, and exhibit resistance and resilience.

### 2.3.1 Hope

The acts of beautification, beyond their individual impact, play a crucial role in the psychological well-being of forcibly displaced communities. These efforts serve as a vivid manifestation of hope;<sup>44</sup> they not only offer a visual representation of a brighter future but also provide a means to reclaim a sense of what was lost. By instilling positivity and inspiring collective planning, beautification becomes a vector of healing and hope that transcends individual spaces, creating a shared optimism within the community, inspiring a sense of collective purpose and determination among its members.

**“The immediate attention to home beautification so quickly after the displacement from Katrina was key to everything. Landscaping was the first thing, planting flowers, restoring shutters, applying new paint...these simple acts reinforced to neighbours ‘there is life here. We can rebuild.’”<sup>45</sup>**

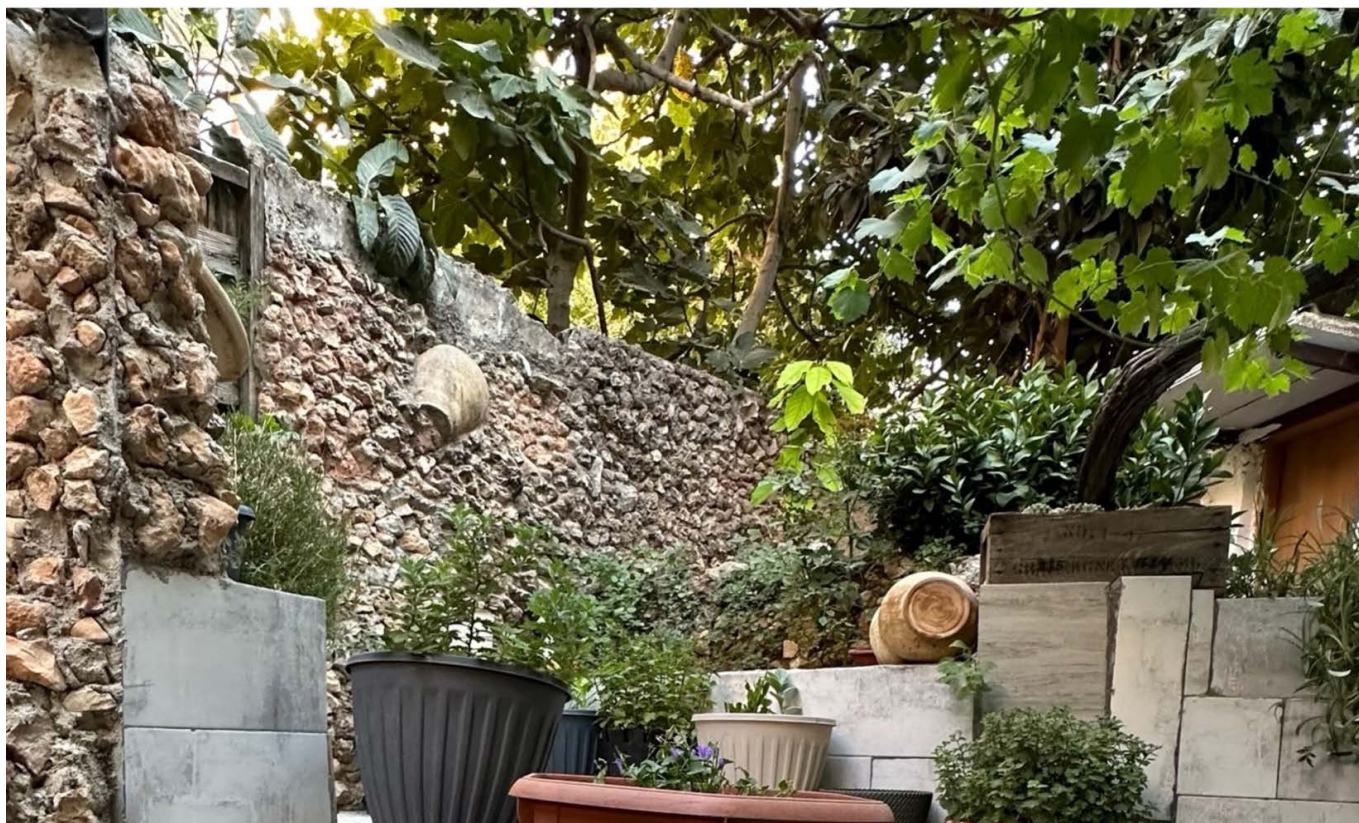
– Denise Thornton, Founder, Beacon of Hope.

Photos: Neighbourhood rebuilding post Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2009

44 Luce Beekmans et al., *Making Home(s) in Displacement: Critical Reflections on a Spatial Practice.*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.11116/9789461664099>.

45 Denise Thornton, Interview by authors, Video conference, July 11, 2023.





### 2.3.2 Building community

Within the built environment, beautification practices give rise to culturally specific rituals of hospitality, celebration, and commemoration. These communal expressions not only connect refugees to each other but also serve as a conduit for the transmission of cultural traditions, linking individuals to their homeland.<sup>46</sup> Beyond aesthetics, these shared practices foster a sense of collective identity, establishing a solid foundation for community bonds and joy – essential sources of support and resilience in the trying context of displacement.<sup>47</sup> By forging these communal bonds, individuals experiencing forced displacement construct robust social structures ca-

pable of effectively navigating the uncertainties inherent in their circumstances and “find synergies on issues that would otherwise produce competition or conflict.”<sup>48</sup> These social structures become vital support networks, providing not only emotional sustenance but also practical solutions, the opportunity to learn from each other<sup>49</sup> and share strategies for adapting to and overcoming their challenges.

**“My garden is a place for family and friends to gather inside the camp, despite the limited space.”**

– Palestinian living a refugee camp in the Palestinian Territories. Photo: Garden of interviewee, 2023

46 Aynur De Rouen, “Imagine Home: Making a Place in Binghamton,” *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019): 23–33; Sandra Dudley, “Feeling at Home: Producing and Consuming Things in Karenni Refugee Camps on the Thai-Burma Border,” *Population, Space and Place* 17, no. 6 (2011): 742–55, <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.639>; Hadjiyanni, “Aesthetics in Displacement – Hmong, Somali and Mexican Home-Making Practices in Minnesota”; Helen Taylor, “Narratives of Loss, Longing and Daily Life: The Meaning of Home for Cypriot Refugees in London” (University of East London, 2009), <https://repository.uel.ac.uk/download/045c8c9e18771430cebaf6c12fcb8145b141179991dfd0bb-5d5777abbd1ea547/17459704/532990.pdf>; Nithya Rajan, “Creating Refugeescapes: Afghan Refugee Women’s Strategies of Surviving and Thriving in Delhi,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 0, no. 0 (May 3, 2022): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2022.2069686>; Isabel Gil Everaert, “Inhabiting the Meanwhile: Rebuilding Home and Restoring Predictability in a Space of Waiting,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 19 (December 15, 2021): 4327–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1798747>.

47 Rajan, “Creating Refugeescapes.”

48 Nuffield Council on Bioethics, “After Hurricane Katrina: A Review of Community Engagement Activities and Initiatives,” August 2019, <https://www.nuffieldbioethics.org/assets/pdfs/Community-engagement-after-Hurricane-Katrina.pdf> para 13.

49 Ibid.





### 2.3.3 Resistance and resilience

Beautification emerges as a form of resistance and a means of resilience for communities grappling with displacement. Resilience here should be understood as a process rather than an outcome and, in the context of community, refers to “the capacity of a system to withstand or recover from significant disturbances” that threaten its adaptive function, viability or development.<sup>50</sup> Voluntary acts of beautification provide a tangible expression of defiance against marginalization, offering a visible testament to the community’s strength and determination. Moreover, deliberate acts of beautification become an avenue to facilitate collaboration and participation, empowering the community to shape its environment actively in the face of adversity, whether in reactive, responsive, or proactive resilience modes.<sup>51</sup> These acts of resistance and resilience through beautification not only enhance the phys-

ical landscape but also contribute to the emotional and social fabric, fortifying the community against the challenges of displacement, however temporary or permanent.

**Displaced individuals in Sulawesi Indonesia worked together to redesign and rebuild their homes in a way that was safer, reflected their past homes, and kept them close enough to the sea to continue fishing, the source of their long-term livelihoods.<sup>52</sup>**

Photos: World Habitat, 2021

50 David M. Abramson et al., “The Resilience Activation Framework: A Conceptual Model of How Access to Social Resources Promotes Adaptation and Rapid Recovery in Post-Disaster Settings,” *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research* 42, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 42–57, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11414-014-9410-2>.

51 See Esther Carmen, Ioan Fazey, Helen Ross, Melissa Bedinger, Fiona M. Smith, Karin Prager, Kerri McClymont, and David Morrison, “Building community resilience in a context of climate change: The role of social capital,” in *Ambio* 51, 1371–1387 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-021-01678-9>, for an articulation of the differences between reactive, responsive and proactive resilience and the way that these function in community resilience.

52 “Building Homes Collectively for Better Habitat,” World Habitat, accessed November 27, 2023, <https://world-habitat.org/world-habitat-awards/winners-and-finalists/building-homes-collectively-for-better-habitat/>.



### 3. Beautification and self-reliance

#### 3.1 A catalyst for self-reliance

Beautification's benefits at both the individual and community levels hold profound implications for initiatives fostering refugee self-reliance, acting as a cornerstone and catalyst for self-reliance indicators. Refugee Self-Reliance initiatives aim to enhance the economic and social wellbeing of refugees, as evaluated by the Self-Reliance Index across 12 domains, including housing, education, health, employment, and social connections.

At the individual level, beautification's benefits, encompassing agency, coping skills, and integration, are foundational for various aspects of self-reliance. They reshape one's emotional connection to their home (domain 1); support children's capacity for learning and education (domain 3); contribute to overall physical and psychological wellbeing (domain 5); enhance feelings of safety and security (domain 6); provide resilience for the pursuit of employment (domain 7); and facilitate improved relationships (domain 12).

Moreover, community-level benefits of beautification, fostering hope, cooperation, and resilience play a crucial role in several domains of self-reliance. They contribute to collaborative efforts influencing housing initiatives (domain 1), creating safer neighbourhoods (domain 6); identifying employment opportunities and boosting financial resources (domains 7 and 8); and building more cohesive communities and coordinating financial support to neighbours in need (domain 12).

The benefits of beautification are integrally linked to self-reliance, providing both a foundation and a catalyst. The absence of elements such as agency, coping, healing, hope, community, and resilience, can impede progress across various self-reliance measurements.

#### 3.2 Reconceptualising self-reliance

Beautification not only contributes practically to self-reliance but also challenges existing self-reliance frameworks. Despite the Refugee Self-Reliance Index adopting a more holistic approach than before,<sup>53</sup> it still faces criticism for its limited scope and Western origins.<sup>54</sup> The findings on home beautification expose fundamental flaws in the language and framing of self-reliance, which typically views displacement through the lens of loss, suffering, and anonymity.<sup>55</sup> The research findings on home beautification highlight that refugees are "creative agents,"<sup>56</sup> challenging the perception of them as "passive beneficiaries of humanitarian aid."<sup>57</sup> Beautification further reinforces this, affirming the dignity and humanity of refugees while challenging the prevailing victimhood narrative.

The research examples demonstrate beauty as actions taken by refugees, emphasizing verbs describing what they are doing rather than adjectives describing what had been done to them. Recognizing refugees as "change-makers"<sup>58</sup> through beautification shifts the narrative away from focusing solely on the trauma, loss, and the need for help. If policymakers aspire for refugees to be self-reliant, the language used, as seen in the Compact, must

53 Leeson et al., "Measuring the Self-Reliance of Refugees."

54 Heather Wurtz and Olivia Wilkinson, "Local Faith Actors and the Global Compact on Refugees," *Migration & Society* 3, no. 1 (June 1, 2020): 155, <https://doi.org/10.3167/arms.2020.030112>; Carpi et al., "From Livelihoods to Leisure and Back"; Bernard Mayaka and Rory Truell, "Ubuntu and Its Potential Impact on the International Social Work Profession," *International Social Work* 64, no. 5 (September 1, 2021): 649–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728211022787>; Charlotte Tusasiirwe, "Is It Indigenisation or Decolonisation of Social Work in Africa? A Focus on Uganda," *African Journal of Social Work* 12, no. 1 (May 4, 2022): 1–11, <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajs/w/article/view/224731>.

55 Liisa H. Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 495–523, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155947>; David Jones Marshall, "'All the Beautiful Things': Trauma, Aesthetics and the Politics of Palestinian Childhood," *Space and Polity* 17, no. 1 (April 1, 2013): 53–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2013.780713>.

56 Irit Katz, "Adhocism, Agency and Emergency Shelters," *Structures of Protection?: Rethinking Refugee Shelter* 39 (2020): 236, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1tbhr26.22>.

57 Luce Beeckmans, Ashika Singh, and Alessandra Gola, "Rethinking the Intersection of Home and Displacement from a Spatial Perspective," in *Making Home(s) in Displacement: Critical Reflections on a Spatial Practice*, ed. Luce Beeckmans et al. (Leuven University Press, 2022), 16, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv25wxvbf.4>.

58 Ibid.

avoid simultaneously depicting them as burdens on host countries (objective one of the Compact) and as capable of caring for themselves (objective two of the Compact).

## 4. Policy implications of integrating home beautification into refugee self-reliance efforts

### 4.1 Acknowledging and encouraging beautification

The preceding sections underscore the agency and healing potential embedded in the act of beautification. Service providers should actively acknowledge and encourage refugees' engagement in beautifying their living spaces.

### 4.2 Empowering refugees in shelter and camp management

Shelter and Camp Management play pivotal roles in shaping the living conditions of refugees. Recognizing the therapeutic and transformative impact of beautification, allowing and empowering refugees to modify and personalize their living spaces becomes a practical way to leverage these benefits. Shelter and Camp Management could also explore participatory initiatives and review policies to provide freedom of expression.

### 4.3 Validating beautification as a measure of self-reliance

Researchers can contribute to the integration of beautification into self-reliance initiatives by systematically testing and validating its inclusion as a measurable indicator. The transition from understanding the psychological and social benefits of beautification to quantifying its impact on self-reliance requires rigorous validation, aligning with the broader goals of refugee well-being.

### 4.4 Expanding measures

The transition from acknowledging the transformative potential of beautification to it becoming a critical aspect of policy implications and service

delivery requires a shift in and expansion of measures. The findings challenge prevailing concepts of self-reliance, emphasizing the need for an even broader, more holistic approach, which include incorporating beautification, as well as other aspects of wellbeing, as indicators of self-reliance.

### 4.5 Shifting narratives

A shift in language among policymakers, service providers, researchers, and donors will portray refugees not merely as recipients of aid but as creative agents actively contributing to their communities. Aligning policy language with the objective of self-reliance, as outlined in the Compact, requires a departure from portraying refugees solely as burdens on host countries. Instead, recognizing their capabilities and positive contributions becomes integral to fostering a more effective and dignified refugee response.

## 5. Conclusion: essential beauty in the built environment

Beauty in the built environment is not a luxury but an essential aspect of human existence, particularly for those facing profound adversity. The findings across various displacement contexts suggest that beauty is vital for refugees' wellbeing. Art philosopher Arthur Danto posited that beauty is not optional for life; it is a necessary condition for life as we would want to live it.<sup>59</sup> A participant in the arts-based study remarked, "As refugees, we lose our sense of beauty and when that happens, we lose our sense of everything, of life itself."<sup>60</sup> If the opposite of this is true, then clearly beauty cannot be considered merely superficial<sup>61</sup> or an afterthought in the pursuit for refugees to meet their 'essential needs sustainably and with dignity. Instead, emerging research suggests that beautification could be transformative and informative in achieving the Compact's goal of building refugee self-reliance.

Furthermore, the acknowledgment and nurturing of the innate impulse for beauty can contribute significantly to individual and community resilience, identity preservation, compassionate connections,

59 Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, 160.

60 Neumark, "Drawn to Beauty," 242.

61 *Ibid.*, 249.



healing, and the restoration of a sense of home for refugees. The policy implications derived from this research underscore the importance of recognizing and promoting beautification in the built environment as a valuable and transformative tool in the pursuit of refugee self-reliance. These implications extend beyond immediate practicalities, calling for a paradigm shift in language and values associated with self-reliance, and, ultimately, in how the world views and responds to the challenges faced by individual refugees and refugee communities in their quest for a dignified and self-reliant life.

## Migration Policy Centre

*The Migration Policy Centre (MPC) conducts advanced policy-oriented research on global migration, asylum and mobility. It serves governance needs at European and global levels, from developing, implementing and monitoring migration-related policies to assessing their impact on the wider economy and society.*

## Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

*The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS), created in 1992 and directed by Professor Erik Jones, aims to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research on the major issues facing the process of European integration, European societies and Europe's place in 21<sup>st</sup> century global politics. The Centre is home to a large post-doctoral programme and hosts major research programmes, projects and data sets, in addition to a range of working groups and ad hoc initiatives. The research agenda is organised around a set of core themes and is continuously evolving, reflecting the changing agenda of European integration, the expanding membership of the European Union, developments in Europe's neighbourhood and the wider world.*

[www.eui/rsc](http://www.eui/rsc)



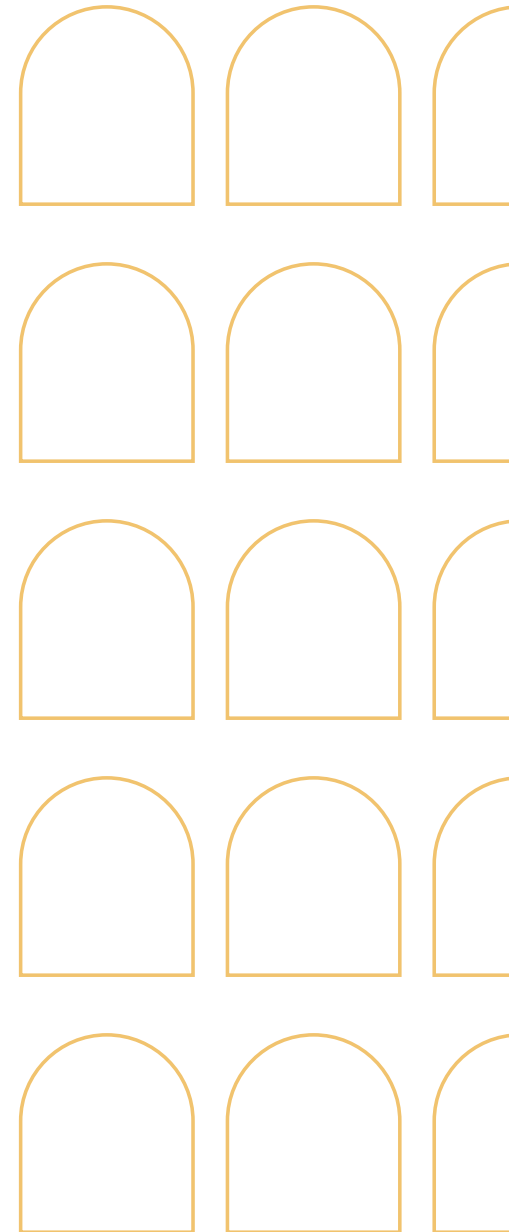
Co-funded by  
the European Union

© European University Institute, 2023  
Editorial matter and selection © Stephanie Acker, Devora Neumark, 2023

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\) International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which governs the terms of access and reuse for this work. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.

Published by  
European University Institute (EUI)  
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014  
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy



doi:10.2870/87638  
ISBN:978-92-9466-377-1  
ISSN:2467-4540  
QM-AX-23-019-EN-N