

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN



PARTICIPATION THROUGH DESIGN – COLLABORATIVE METHODS SUPPORTING THE SOCIAL INCLUSION OF YOUNG REFUGEES.

Ágnes Jekli*^a

^a Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest, Hungary

* jekli.agnes@gmail.com

DOI: [10.63442/KNTD5443](https://doi.org/10.63442/KNTD5443)

**KEYWORDS | INTERCULTURAL COLLABORATION, PARTICIPATORY DESIGN, VISUAL
COMMUNICATION, DESIGNING WITH REFUGEES, COMMUNITY-BASED DESIGN**

ABSTRACT | This paper explores the potential of intercultural collaboration through design in the context of the social inclusion of refugee youth.

The practice-based aspect of this research is undertaken with Open Doors Hungary, a community-based design project that creates a programme for unaccompanied minor refugees. The aim of Open Doors is to help refugee youth integrate into Hungarian society and develop their means of communication and quality relations with the host society.

Refugee youth arriving in Hungary face serious problems: the loss of home and community, the traumas suffered during the journey, the cultural differences, and the lack of a common language make their social integration extremely challenging. Xenophobia and stereotypes against foreigners exacerbate these challenges. Social inclusion requires frequent contact with the local society, and refugee youth need new tools (cultural knowledge, language skills, intercultural skills) to overcome their disadvantages.

Since 2013, the author has been working with refugee and migrant youth using participatory design tools such as regular creative sessions, workshops, and eight camps based on the integrating role of creativity and art. During these sessions, young refugees and their Hungarian and European peers got to know different visual communication tools and created common messages in the form of videos, animations, photos, posters, booklets, and murals. Through these activities, refugee youth become part of the design process; the result is based on their choices.

Combining the findings of the theoretical research and field experiences, this paper states that design thinking and participatory design methods allow interactive cultural exchange, sharing of values, safe and open discussions, and community building. As a global language, visual communication can be a tool for intercultural communication, storytelling, and self-expression. The opportunity for refugee youth and their Hungarian peers to work in intercultural teams develops new competencies and creates shared ownership and community.

1. Introduction

The ability to work in intercultural teams is an essential skill for anyone in our more and more globalised environment (Murdoch-Kitt & Emans, 2020). For migrants and refugees, it is a basic necessity when they try to settle in a new country.

The global increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugees over the last decade has been one of the challenges for our society. Hungary - due to its geographic location - has been one of the main transit countries towards the European Union (IOM, 2023). Barriers to integration are exacerbated by xenophobia and stereotypes against foreigners present in some parts of Hungarian societies, thus creating conflicts between members of the host society and newcomers. (Gyulai, 2014; Kováts & Soltész, 2022; Sík et al., 2016)

The author - coming from a graphic designer background - together with her architect partner, is the co-founder of Open Doors Hungary, a community-based social design project working for intercultural dialogue with the tools of visual communication, placemaking, and design with refugee and Hungarian youth since 2013.

Unaccompanied minor refugees in Hungary face unique challenges. Protected by the childcare system upon entry before turning 18, their perilous journey and the uncertainty of the asylum process can worsen "post-traumatic stress disorder," often stemming from the loss of roots and human connections. Cultural disparities and language barriers further complicate their social integration. Effective social inclusion demands regular interaction with the local community and the acquisition of new tools like cultural knowledge and language skills (Magyar Helsinki Bizottság, 2023). However, due to their legal status, refugees are excluded from basic democratic processes, and minors living in childcare centers have limited autonomy in decision-making.

This paper, as part of an ongoing PhD-in-practice research, focuses on the participatory aspects of visual communication and design, integrating theory and practice, employing a mixed-methodology approach. It involves a literature review on participatory design methods and intercultural collaboration, alongside examining the experiences of young refugees and their Hungarian peers.

The literature review will establish the context, exploring the role of participatory design and collaborative methods. Additionally, the author draws from 10 years of field experience, employing participatory and community-based design methods. The study aims to comprehend how participatory design can facilitate intercultural collaboration and contribute to the social inclusion process for young refugees.

2. Participatory Design with Refugees

Participatory Design emerged from the social and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s, where individuals in Western societies advocated for greater decision-making power (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013; Spinuzzi, 2005). For refugees and migrants, participating in design processes offers a unique opportunity to engage in decision-making, providing valuable lessons about democratic values. For outsiders - due to language barriers and cultural differences - it is difficult to access refugees' experiences and insights, but it is essential to understand their needs. Participatory design can be a tool to deduce tacit and latent knowledge. (B.-N.Sanders 2002)

Participatory design methods were used successfully with different groups of migrants and refugees: designing refugee shelters (Albadra et al., 2021), language learning tools (Abou-Khalil et al., 2019; Weibert et al., 2019), digital 'safe spaces' (Bustamante Duarte et al., 2021), or health-related services (Nazzal et al., 2014).

For outsiders - due to language barriers and cultural differences - it is difficult to access refugees' experiences and insights, but it is essential to understand their needs. Participatory design can be a tool to deduce tacit and latent knowledge. (B.-N.Sanders, 2002). Using different digital and physical visualisation tools, they agree that physical prototypes play an important part in finding mutual understanding between different stakeholders (Abou-Khalil et al., 2019; Albadra et al., 2021).

According to the reviewed literature, most co-creation and participatory design workshops with refugees happen within a relatively short, limited timeframe, and usually, they only stay in the research phase or only produce low-fidelity prototypes ((Abou-Khalil et al., 2019; Albadra et al., 2021). It is also found that there is a need for long-term community-based collaboration (Talhouk et al., 2019) and iteration of the process (Spinuzzi, 2005).

The designer's role needs to expand and adapt, serving as a mediator, facilitator, and design professional (Manzini & Rizzo, 2011). Participatory design fosters mutual learning among the designer, participants, and other stakeholders.

While end-user involvement is increasingly vital in various visual communication-related fields like UX/UI research and service design, participatory methods remain relatively neglected in graphic design (Taffe, 2012). Participatory design projects involving refugees and migrants are prevalent in placemaking and human-computer interaction (Abou-Khalil et al., 2019; Albadra et al., 2021; Almohamed et al., 2018; Talhouk et al., 2019; Weibert et al., 2019). Although there are some publications collecting projects created to foster peace and global understanding (Pater, 2016; Smith, 2022), to involve users in the graphic design process and rethink the role of the designer (Armstrong & Stojmirovic, 2011; Pater, 2021), or to collect tools for intercultural collaboration (Murdoch-Kitt & Emans, 2020; Mercer et al., 2023), the potential of using graphic tools directly with refugees remains largely unexplored.

3. Visual Tools in Participatory Design

"Words divide, pictures unite." (Neurath, 1936)

Visual communication, the language of images, has the potential to bridge language barriers and promote intercultural understanding - which is extremely important when the participants of the communication process do not share the same language or culture.

Visuality, as Mitchell (1986) suggests, taps into a primal layer, bypassing the intermediary step of mental images becoming verbal concepts. Unlike words, visuality connects directly to reality. While perceiving and recognizing images is universal, decoding their meaning is not (Kostelnick, 1993). Comprehending visual language is a social process contingent on social, historical, and geographical contexts, as well as prior experience and knowledge.

Visual tools are often used in participatory design projects, and they can be effectively used as conversation subjects, conversation prompts, or experiences to start social dialogue (Manzini, 2015; Manzini & Rizzo, 2011).

4. Practice-Based Collaborative Methods

Over the past decade, the author has organised ten creative camps and countless creative workshops involving young refugees, migrants, and their Hungarian and European peers. Participants learned various visual communication tools and collaborated on crafting shared messages. Through design thinking and the creative process, these gatherings fostered interactive cultural exchange, value-sharing, open discussions, and community building.

These workshops and camps aim to facilitate intercultural collaboration among participants from diverse backgrounds, with creative professionals offering design frameworks and technical guidance. By involving participants in all stages of the design process—from research to ideation to realization—a shared understanding of each design product is ensured. This approach was consistently applied across different projects:

1. *Getting to know each other & team building* - as an important part of the process, non-verbal and visual tools ensured that participants could learn each other's names, learn basic facts about each other, and enable them to talk to each other even though they do not share a common language.
2. *Learning & practice* - each thematic camp and workshop included a learning phase where participants got to know a new technique or visual tool: manual techniques of composition such as painting, drawing or collage, creation of signs and pictograms, large-scale murals, board games, printing techniques such as screen printing, zines, photography, videos, and animations.
3. *Project & presentation* - with the learned tools, youth in mixed groups were able to create projects that enabled them to form messages together and create common products based on shared values.
4. *Evaluation and follow-up* - providing an opportunity for youth to reflect on the learned tools, give feedback, and have ideas about the possible continuation.

During the workshops and participative design projects of Open Doors, we can talk about different levels of participation:

Participant as a consultant

Sharing insights and giving feedback is crucial for refugee youth, where challenges such as differing visual symbols and narrative practices across cultures arise. Involving participants in decision-making fosters mutual understanding and helps avoid harmful stereotypes (Lipton, 2002; Pater, 2016). In the Open Doors, Community members were extensively consulted to ensure events met their needs. During COVID-19 lockdowns, interviews revealed a desire for outdoor programs and cultural exploration. Through co-design, Cultirider—a mobile community space—was created, allowing Open Doors members to visit rural Hungary and collaborate with local communities.



Figure 1. Cultirider mock-up and first Cultirider event in 2022, Ágasegyháza (photos by the author).

Participant as a content producer

The next level of involvement goes beyond participants merely providing insights and sharing needs before the design process; they become creators in the creative process itself. Design offers an open-ended framework where participants contribute content, making the final product a co-creation between the

designer and participants. Using graphic tools like screen printing, participants can personalise pre-prepared patterns, resulting in visually coherent outcomes. These patterns are developed during community brainstorming events, with some incorporating visuals drawn by multiple community members. For example, during the Bokréta Fesztivál in 2019, members of Open Doors Hungary's intercultural community space co-designed frames featuring drawings of each participant's favourite flower, later edited into a single pattern. This technique ensures participants' designs are used with minimal abstraction.



Figure 2. Bokréta Fesztivál screen-printing workshop, 2019 (photos by the author).

Participant as a co-designer

In the third step of the process, participants transition from final users to active collaborative co-designers and co-producers, leveraging their local knowledge, competencies, and solution ideas (Manzini & Rizzo, 2011). Open Doors projects provided refugee, migrant, and Hungarian youth with opportunities to work together in small intercultural teams, co-designing and co-producing various project works. For example, in international media training camps like "Open Doors Youth Voices" and "Change for Media - Media for Change," participants collaborated on producing media products. They acquired technical skills in video and animation production, allowing them to create their project works. Discussions during workshops focused on important life topics, resulting in visual representations. Films such as "Open Doors Stories" portrayed the travel experiences of Hungarian and refugee youth through narrated animations, while "Are we equals?" highlighted the differing journeys of European citizens and refugees. Additionally, "My Big Change" featured honest accounts of significant life changes from young people around the world in the form of a short documentary.



Figure 3. Change for Media-Media for change, media training, 2017 (photos by the author).

Participant as a multiplier

Repeating the design thinking process allows participants to learn and pass on knowledge. Over its 10-year span, Open Doors Hungary has seen refugee youth emerge as workshop leaders, engaging others in the design process. In collaboration with the Artemisszió Foundation, Open Doors initiated the Miradoor Creative Hub to train motivated migrants and refugees in Hungary to lead workshops. These community members have organised workshops for Hungarian and international participants, such as Afghan paper kite making, Nigerian calligraphy, and Somali cooking. Through these workshops, migrant and refugee youth not only share their skills and boost their confidence but also promote their culture, aiding their identity appreciation and inclusion in society.



Figure 4. Afghan paper kite workshop, 2022 (photos by the author).

5. Results

Visual tools - tangible results

The visual tools during the workshops of Open Doors, such as drawings, collages, storyboards, and mockups, proved to be a significant help for intercultural teamwork between refugee youth and their Hungarian and European youth.

Iterative process - long-term commitment

Open Doors has maintained a growing intercultural community since 2013. The long-term relationship with the target group has ensured the improvement of appropriate participatory design methods and communication tools. The iterative process allowed participants to become multipliers of the process and implement design thinking in other areas of their lives.

From participation to community

The long-term work working with the same (but organically growing) community allowed participants to create deeper connections, find friends, and form a diverse community along similar value.

Local projects - global topics

Through the 11 years of its work, Open Doors provided a framework for small-scale local projects involving a diverse community of refugees, foreigners, and Hungarian and European youth coming from different backgrounds to share ideas and find common interests and values so they could become part of a larger network.

6. Conclusion

This practice-based research aimed to explore the potential of participatory design methods in direct work with young refugees and migrants. Existing literature demonstrates the successful use of participatory design methods with refugees, particularly in visualising and prototyping future solutions. However, the involvement of end-users in the graphic design process remains relatively overlooked.

Fieldwork within the Open Doors project revealed a demand for long-term community-based solutions among participants. They can engage in various roles (consultant, content producer, co-designer, multiplier), offering mutual learning opportunities for all stakeholders.

The author plans to summarize the methods and findings in a methodological handbook and a visual communication card pack as the next steps in this ongoing PhD-in-practice research. These resources facilitate collaborative design processes in intercultural teams and can be shared with designers, social workers, and institutions.

Reference

- Abou-Khalil, V., Helou, S., Flanagan, B., Pinkwart, N., & Ogata, H. (2019). Language learning tool for refugees: Identifying the language learning needs of Syrian refugees through participatory design. *Languages*, 4(3), 71. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages4030071>
- Albadra, D., Elamin, Z., Adeyeye, K., Polychronaki, E., Coley, D. A., Holley, J., & Copping, A. (2021). Participatory design in refugee camps: Comparison of different methods and visualization tools. *Building Research & Information*, 49(2), 248–264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09613218.2020.1740578>
- Almohamed, A., Vyas, D., & Zhang, J. (2018). Designing for refugees: Insights from design workshop. *Proceedings of the 30th Australian Conference on Computer-Human Interaction*, 92–96. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3292147.3292196>
- Armstrong, H., & Stojmirovic, Z. (2011). *Participate: Designing with user-generated content*. Princeton Architectural Press.
- B.-N. Sanders, E. (2002). From user-centered to participatory design approaches. In J. Frascara (Ed.), *Design and the social sciences* (Vol. 20020425, pp. 1–8). CRC Press. <https://doi.org/10.1201/9780203301302.ch1>
- Bustamante Duarte, A. M., Ataei, M., Degbelo, A., Brendel, N., & Kray, C. (2021). Safe spaces in participatory design with young forced migrants. *CoDesign*, 17(2), 188–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2019.1654523>
- Gyulai, G. (2014). *Külföldiek Magyarországon*. Magyar Helsinki Bizottság. International Organization for Migration. (2023). *Migration in Hungary*. <https://hungary.iom.int/migration-hungary>
- Kostelnick, C. (1993). Viewing functional pictures in context. In N. Roundy, R. Blyler, & C. Thralls (Eds.), *Professional communication: The social perspective* (pp. 243–256). Sage.

Kováts, A., & Soltész, B. (2022). *Valahol otthon lenni—Menekültek társadalmi beilleszkedése Magyarországon*. Menedék–Migránsokat Segítő Egyesület.
https://tudastar.menedek.hu/sites/default/files/valahol_otthon_lenni.pdf

Lipton, R. (2002). *Designing across cultures* (1st ed.). HOW Design Books.

Magyar Helsinki Bizottság. (2023). *Szakmai segédlet a kísérő nélküli kiskorúakkal foglalkozó gyermekvédelmi szakemberek számára*. https://helsinki.hu/wp-content/uploads/szakmai_segedlet_web-FINAL.pdf

Manzini, E. (2015). *Design, when everybody designs: An introduction to design for social innovation*. The MIT Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9873.001.0001>

Manzini, E., & Rizzo, F. (2011). Small projects/large changes: Participatory design as an open participated process. *CoDesign*, 7(3–4), 199–215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2011.630472>

Mercer, L. E., Moses, T., & Miller, C. D. (2023). *Racism untaught: Revealing and unlearning racialized design*. The MIT Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15077.001.0001>

Murdoch-Kitt, K., & Emans, D. (2020). *Intercultural collaboration by design—Drawing from differences, distances, and disciplines through visual thinking*. Routledge. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780429268823>

Nazzal, K. H., Forghany, M., Geevarughese, M. C., Mahmoodi, V., & Wong, J. (2014). An innovative community-oriented approach to prevention and early intervention with refugees in the United States. *Psychological Services*, 11(4), 477–485. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037964>

Neurath, O. (1936). *ISOTYPE*. Kegan Paul.

Pater, R. (2016). *The politics of design: A (not so) global design manual for visual communication*. BIS Publishers. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2022.2136904>

Pater, R. (2021). *Caps lock: How capitalism took hold of graphic design and how to escape from it*. Valiz.

Sík, E., Simonovits, B., & Szeitl, B. (2016). Az idegenellenesség alakulása és a bevándorlással kapcsolatos féltelmek Magyarországon és a visegrádi országokban. *REGIO*, 24(2), 81.
<https://doi.org/10.17355/rkkpt.v24i2.114>

Simonsen, J., & Robertson, T. (2013). *Routledge international handbook of participatory design*. Routledge.

Smith, C. E. (2022). *Designing peace: Building a better future now*. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

Spinuzzi, C. (2005). The methodology of participatory design. *Technical Communication*, 52, 163–174.

Talhok, R., Balaam, M., Toombs, A. L., Garbett, A., Akik, C., Ghattas, H., Araujo-Soares, V., Ahmad, B., & Montague, K. (2019). Involving Syrian refugees in design research: Lessons learnt from the field. *Proceedings of the 2019 on Designing Interactive Systems Conference*, 1583–1594.
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3322276.3322335>

Weibert, A., Krüger, M., Aal, K., Salehee, S. S., Khatib, R., Randall, D., & Wulf, V. (2019). Finding language classes: Designing a digital language wizard with refugees and migrants. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 3(CSCW), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3359218>

P/REFERENCES OF DESIGN

This contribution was presented at Cumulus Budapest 2024: P/References of Design conference, hosted by the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest, Hungary between May 15-17, 2024.

Conference Website

cumulusbudapest2024.mome.hu

Conference Tracks

Centres and Peripheries
Converging Bodies of Knowledge
Redefining Data Boundaries
Bridging Design and Economics
Speculative Perspectives
The Power of Immersion
The Future of Well-being
Taming Entropy: Systems Design for Climate and Change
Ways of Living Together
Cumulus PhD Network

Full Conference Proceedings

<https://cumulusbudapest2024.mome.hu/proceedings>

ISBN Volume 1: 978-952-7549-02-5 (PDF)

ISBN Volume 2: 978-952-7549-03-2 (PDF)

DOI Volume 1: <https://doi.org/10.63442/IZUP8898>

DOI Volume 2: <https://doi.org/10.63442/TADX4016>

Conference Organisers

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest (MOME)

mome.hu

Cumulus Association

cumulusassociation.org