

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: January 21, 2020

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Essential Play: Boston designers make space for refugee children.

[Editor's note: High-resolution images are available upon request.]

(Boston, MA January 21, 2020)—The Boston Society of Architects/AIA (BSA/AIA) and the Boston Society of Landscape Architects (BSLA) today announced that The Global Design Initiative for Refugee Children (GDIRC) has received recognition by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Collaborative and Professional Achievement Jury as a 2020 Institute Honors “Collaborative Achievement” recipient.

The GDIRC is a volunteer-led initiative of the BSA/AIA and the BSLA, in close collaboration with many academic and industry partners—over 75 volunteers; architects and landscape architects, builders and photographers, faculty and students—including Harvard University Graduate School of Design and the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

Refugee crises, whether caused by natural disasters or violent conflict, are one of the most widespread and urgent humanitarian issues of our time. Global displacement today has surpassed anything witnessed since World War II, and it is estimated that as many as 25.4 million refugees have already been forcibly displaced (of the 68.5 million who are either internally or externally displaced). While intended to be temporary, stays in refugee camps often endure for years. Approximately half of those living in camps are children, who spend their critical developmental years in conditions of hardship, disease, and risk of physical and emotional harm. According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, the average length of time spent in a refugee camp, if one survives, is more than seventeen years—an entire childhood.

The Global Design Initiative for Refugee Children was established in 2016 when architect Nathalie Beauvais approached the BSA asking if she might organize fellow designers to help in some way. Since then, this volunteer group has worked to facilitate the design and construction of spaces for play. Play, as recognized by psychologists and educators, is a critical part of healing and learning, helping to educate and prepare a future generation to one day return and rebuild their communities.

According to Stephen Gray Assoc. AIA, co-leader of GDI and assistant professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, “the Global Design Initiative for Refugee Children is a new model of collaboration to design and build spaces that address the needs of the most vulnerable refugees: children. Beyond improving the daily lives of children and families with these playgrounds, GDI also provides a road map for designers who want to apply their skills to issues of global importance.”

As sculptor, teacher, and playground builder Mitch Ryerson reflects, “Many of us in GDI are professionally involved in work around play and design for children in the United States. In the work we do here, we are constantly reminded that playing with other kids in a safe space is not only fundamental to growing up, it is a human right. This project gives us a way to offer our expertise to help address a basic need for children who are trapped in desperate situations for much of their childhood.”

Since completion of the first playground in a Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon in summer 2018, the collaborative model of this initiative has already been adapted to support two new projects in Lebanon and the United States, with additional projects in early planning stages. This national Collaborative Achievement award by the American Institute of Architects provides a significant platform to the design world, increasing national and international awareness of this unique process and encouraging other professional, institutional, and civil society organizations to adapt and repeat it, one of GDI’s central goals.

For more info and to get involved, visit: www.gdirc.org

Global Design Initiative leaders

Nathalie Beauvais, Int'l Assoc. AIA; GDI founder; design critic, Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

Shirine Boulos Anderson, AIA, LEED AP; principal, Ellenzweig

Stephen Gray, Assoc. AIA, assistant professor, Harvard Graduate School of Design

James Kostaras, president & CEO, Habitat for Humanity Greater Boston

Ramzi Naja, head of innovation, NuVu/Karam

Gretchen Rabinkin, AIA, Affiliate ASLA; executive director, Boston Society of Landscape Architects

Mitch Ryerson, principal, Ryerson Design; visiting lecturer, Massachusetts College of Art and Design

Patricia Seitz, AIA, LEED AP; professor and chair, Architecture, Massachusetts College of Art and Design

ABOUT THE BOSTON SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTS/AIA

The Boston Society of Architects/AIA (BSA/AIA) is the eastern Massachusetts chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and is New England's largest building industry association. Established in 1867, the BSA/AIA, with more than 4,500 members, is the second largest chapter of the AIA. The BSA/AIA produces a diverse array of programs and editorial content focused on keeping the profession strong, creating thought leadership, and providing a forum for conversation, discovery, and debate about design. The BSA/AIA, together with the BSA Foundation, make up the Boston Society for Architecture (BSA), a diverse community committed to improving the quality of life for everyone through architecture and design. By hosting professional and youth design education programs, fostering community engagement and membership networks, and initiating civic transformation, the BSA is making this a region where architects thrive and communities flourish. For more information, visit: architects.org

ABOUT THE BOSTON SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

Landscape Architects work to plan, design, and construct the outdoor environment with a focus on inclusive and resilient public spaces. Founded in 1913 as the first local chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Boston Society of Landscape Architects (BSLA) today includes over 600 landscape architect professionals and students throughout the two states of Massachusetts and Maine. BSLA connects, convenes, and celebrates landscape architects and the greater design community, as it advances the profession of landscape architecture and supports the creation of extraordinary environments throughout the region and the world.

www.bslanow.org

www.asla.org