

Press release

HUMANITARIAN, BY DESIGN ?

LE DESIGN AU COEUR DE L'HUMANITAIRE

08 October 2026 – 29 August 2027

First Exhibition on Humanitarian Design at the Museum

Nearly 200 objects, the vast majority on public display for the first time



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HUMANITARIAN, BY DESIGN?

LE DESIGN AU CŒUR DE L'HUMANITAIRE

8 octobre 2026 – 29 août 2027

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum presents its first exhibition dedicated to humanitarian design. *Humanitarian, by Design? Design au coeur de l'action humanitaire* explores the essential role of design—whether improvised, institutional or repurposed—in contexts of crisis, displacement and extreme precarity.

From repurposed plastics to the architecture of waiting, from personal stories to images of crisis, the exhibition highlights often overlooked and fragile practices designed to help people survive, endure and preserve hope.

Nearly 200 objects, most of them never displayed before

What objects accompany humanitarian action, and what do they reveal about the lives of those who depend on them? First-aid kits, tents, prostheses, maps, emergency shelters...

The exhibition brings together nearly 200 photographs, posters and objects from the Museum's collections and private collections. Most of these works are being shown to the public for the first time.

The exhibition is structured around three perspectives:

- Objects: from standardized humanitarian kits to improvised tools used in the field.
- Spaces: camps, waiting areas, informal settlements and infrastructures where design can both support and constrain human experience.
- Imaginaries: the images, technologies and narratives through which crises are represented.

An interdisciplinary and experimental project

Every two years, the Museum presents a major exhibition developed in collaboration with the research community, focusing on humanitarian issues and cultural heritage.

In 2024, the Museum explored the sound archives of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement with *Tuning In. Acoustics of Emotion* (2024–2025).

In 2026, the Museum presents *Humanitarian, by Design? Design au coeur de l'action humanitaire* in collaboration with the research project The Future of Humanitarian Design (HUD), which brings together researchers, designers, engineers and practitioners from the Geneva Graduate Institute, HEAD – Genève, the University of Copenhagen and the EssentialTech Centre at EPFL.

The research draws on the Museum's collections as well as fieldwork conducted in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Switzerland. The exhibition design has been specially created by HEAD – Genève.

An exhibition in dialogue with the Museum's transformation

The exhibition is part of the Museum's major redesign project (2026–2028), which will culminate in the opening of a new permanent space dedicated to The Future of Humanitarian Action in December 2026, exploring future humanitarian challenges, access to healthcare and artificial intelligence.

EXHIBITION

SECTION 1 – Objects



Humanitarian action relies on countless objects that accompany everyday life in situations of crisis, from medical kits and prostheses to tents, water containers, blankets, tools and digital devices. These items, which circulate through humanitarian operations, are present in moments of emergency as well as recovery. They can support care and resilience, but they can also be associated with constraint, exclusion or even violence, shaping how aid is delivered and how humanitarian actions are experienced.

These objects are far from neutral: they are designed. Producing them involves networks of designers, engineers, humanitarian organizations, companies and donors, as well as those who use them on the ground. Their form, content and materials reflect choices about whose needs are prioritized, who participates in their design and how humanitarian responses are organized. Humanitarian objects therefore embody practical solutions but also dilemmas. Kits offer a clear example of this dynamic. Prepared in advance and ready for immediate use, they allow organizations to respond efficiently in difficult conditions. Combining selected instruments, materials and protocols, kits make humanitarian operations faster and more mobile while standardizing how assistance is delivered. What is included determines what kinds of care can be provided. Meanwhile, what is absent may remain beyond reach.

At the same time, humanitarian objects rarely remain fixed. They evolve through experience in the field, through technological innovation and through the improvisations of those who use them. People affected by crises often adapt or repurpose these objects: transforming tents into shops, containers into furniture, and tools into unexpected devices. These practices reveal forms of creativity and resilience that extend beyond the intentions of designers.

This section brings together selected examples, including Red Cross kits from the Museum's collection and other sources, as well as prostheses developed by the EPFL EssentialTech Centre.

SECTION 2 – Spaces



Photographie, sans titre, Europe, 1939-1945
© Collection MICR, Genève

Spaces, like objects, play a defining role in situations of crisis. Humanitarian environments take many forms: hastily erected refugee camps, deliberately planned detention centers, and informal settlements that emerge when people occupy spaces never meant for habitation.

Yet humanitarian space is not shaped solely through architecture or infrastructure. It is also produced through representation: maps, plans, photographs, scans and models make these environments visible and measurable, influencing how crises are understood and managed.

No space is neutral. Humanitarian environments can support care and protection, but they can also be associated with control, exclusion and surveillance. They structure how bodies move, gather and wait – and how they inhabit uncertain conditions.

Time is inseparable from these spatial forms. Some environments are defined by waiting – places where daily life unfolds in a suspended present. Others evolve gradually as people adapt, rebuild and transform the spaces around them.

This section explores these dynamics through a series of projects combining maps, films, scans and archival materials. Together, they reveal how humanitarian spaces are continuously produced – through design, negotiation and everyday practices – and how they shape the possibilities for life in situations of crisis.

SECTION 3 – Imaginaries

Humanitarian action not only transforms objects and spaces – it also shapes how crises are perceived and represented. Photographs, maps, films, data visualizations and digital environments influence how distant events become visible and humanitarian responses are understood.

These representations play a powerful role in situations marked by urgency, displacement and scarcity. They can generate attention and empathy and help people imagine possible futures after disruption. At the same time, they also raise important questions. Who produces these images? Whose stories are told? Whose experiences remain unseen?

Today, digital technologies are transforming how humanitarian action is expressed and perceived. Social media, mapping systems and immersive environments are creating new forms of visibility and participation. People affected by crises can document their own lives and circulate images globally. Yet these same systems are shaped by platforms, infrastructure and algorithms that influence what becomes visible and what remains hidden.

The objects presented in this section reveal how people express their humanitarian perceptions. They range from video games and social media representations of humanitarian crises to objects produced by people living in prisons and refugee camps – objects that point to a different future and express both constraint and hope. They remind us that imagination is not abstract. It is material, situated and shaped by unequal access to technologies and resources.

The historical archives, contemporary digital environments and hand-crafted objects on display here invite us to reflect on how humanitarian crises are represented – and on how these creations influence the ways we understand suffering, care and possible futures.



Didier Lefèvre, Cholera outbreak
Somalia, 1986, MICR/PHT-1992-66-38
© Collection MICR, Genève

SCENOGRAPHY



The exhibition design was created by designers from HEAD – Genève.

It draws inspiration from emergency shelters developed for situations of crisis, displacement and extreme precarity. In particular, it is based on the modular shelter model designed by the Swedish social enterprise Better Shelter.

Since 2010, Better Shelter, with the support of the IKEA Foundation and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), has developed prefabricated, rapidly assembled structures that can be adapted to a wide range of uses, helping to improve the living conditions, safety and dignity of displaced populations.

The Better Shelter provides a durable, weather-resistant temporary housing solution that is easy to assemble. First introduced in 2013, it has since received numerous international awards, including the Beazley Design of the Year Award in 2016.

Packed flat, much like IKEA furniture, the shelter can be assembled in four to eight hours. Once installed, it can accommodate up to five people and is designed for a lifespan of approximately three years.

Team of HEAD – Genève:

Project manager: Javier Fernández Contreras

Coordinator and conception: Damien Greder

Architectural direction: Samuel Jaccard et Yony Santos

More information on Better Shelter: <https://bettershelter.org>



CURATORS

□ The Future of Humanitarian Design (HUD)

The Future of Humanitarian Design (HUD) is a four-year research project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). It addresses the growing challenges facing humanitarian action, including armed conflicts, refugee movements and forced displacement.

HUD develops an experimental action-research approach in which international relations researchers collaborate with architects and engineers.

Its objective is to better integrate concepts and theories from the social sciences into engineering, architecture and design practices in order to improve the living conditions of the world's most vulnerable populations.

The project involves six doctoral and postdoctoral researchers and two research coordinators. It also works closely with partners from organisations such as Médecins Sans Frontières, Terre des Hommes and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), as well as research institutions in Colombia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

HUD is a collaboration between the Geneva Graduate Institute, the University of Copenhagen, the Space and Communication Design Department at HEAD – Genève, and the EssentialTech Centre at EPFL Lausanne.

humanitarian.design

□ La Haute école d'art et de design – Genève (HEAD)

Founded in 2006 through the merger of two bicentenary institutions—the Geneva School of Fine Arts and the Geneva School of Applied Arts—HEAD – Genève builds on a rich artistic and cultural heritage while fostering emerging creative talent on both the national and international stages.

Renowned for the quality of its Bachelor's and Master's programmes in Fine Arts, Cinema, Space and Communication Design, Visual Communication, and Fashion, Jewellery and Accessory Design, HEAD – Genève has established itself as one of Europe's leading schools of art and design.

As both an academic and cultural institution, HEAD – Genève maintains close ties with the artistic community and the local economy. Located in the heart of Geneva, its campus reflects its ambition to create a centre of excellence for art and design while promoting international and interdisciplinary exchanges that also support the development of its research institute.

hesge.ch/head

□ International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum

The Museum asks a central question: How does humanitarian action concern all of us, here and now?

To explore this question with its audiences, it brings together artists, cultural partners and researchers to reflect on the issues, values and contemporary relevance of humanitarian action. In doing so, the Museum positions itself as an open, welcoming and agile place of memory, creativity and debate.

Through the production of original artistic projects and ambitious partnerships in Switzerland and around the world, the Museum contributes to the international visibility of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and of Geneva.

At the intersection of everyday life, art and humanitarian action, the Museum creates and shares innovative experiences, bringing together the expertise of humanitarian practitioners, artists and the public.

redcrossmuseum.ch

PRESS VISUALS



Johnson & Johnson (Editor)
A Hand Book of First Aid
United States, 1903
MICR/BBT-1988-108-2
© Collection MICR, Genève



Youth Red Cross leaflets: spreading
your support across the globe
Switzerland, 1956
MICR/BBT-2000-219-68
© Collection MICR, Genève



Help children in need through the Youth Red Cross's cardboard boxes
Switzerland, 1965
MICR/BBT-2000-114-9
© Dépôt FISCER, Genève. Collection MICR, Genève



Emergency first-aid kit
China, 1950-1960, MICR/COL-2009-3-1
© Collection MICR, Genève



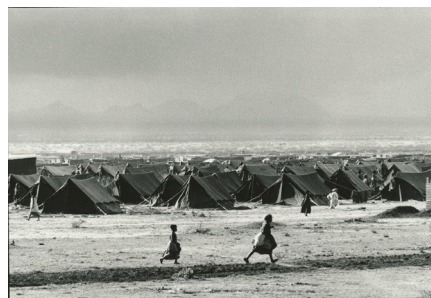
First-aid kit
Switzerland, c. 1950
MICR/COL-2017-4
© Collection MICR, Genève



Untitled
Europe, 1939-1945
MICR/PHT-1987-30-2
© Collection MICR, Genève



Refugee camp set up by the Red Cross following
the fire in Thessaloniki, Greece, 1948
MICR/PHT-1984-22-28, © Collection MICR,
Genève



Didier Lefèvre, Cholera outbreak
Somalia, 1986, MICR/PHT-1992-66-38
© Collection MICR, Genève

PRATICAL INFORMATION

International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum
Avenue de la Paix 17, 1202 Genève

Dates:
8 October 2026 – 29 August 2027

Opening hours:
Tuesday to Sunday from 10am to 5pm.
Every Thursday from 10am to 8 pm.

Rates: CHF 15
Free for children under 12.

www.redcrossmuseum.ch

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Co production



—HEAD
Genève



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