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City Within A City: Refugee Architecture for Cultural Void of The Rohingya Children at Balukhali Refugee Camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

S. M. Arafat Hossain[1*], Apurba K Podder[2], Naimul Aziz[1]

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology, Bangladesh
[2] Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Cox's Bazar is a popular tourist destination in southeastern Bangladesh and is also recognized worldwide for its long sandy beachfront. Year after year, the city welcomes millions of tourists from home and abroad. The existence of ancient temples and Buddhist monasteries from the Mughal era exemplify the city's diverse religious culture. Since August 2017, after the sudden influx of 7,45,000 Rohingya refugees following the sanguinary ethnic violence of the Myanmar army, the city has been well known as the largest refugee camp in the world. The Rohingyas were forcefully displaced from the Arakan state of Myanmar, where they constituted a vulnerable ethnic Muslim minority. The Rohingya possess a rich cultural heritage, but after six years in displacement, their hope of returning to Myanmar remains bleak. The refugee population now exceeds 1.3 million, with 60% being children who have endured extreme atrocities and now live within the camp's barbed-wire confines. These children, who should be in the midst of their formative years, experience a profound cultural void due to the restricted conditions of the camp. This void not only destabilizes their psychological and emotional well-being but also deprives them of a normal childhood, contributing to the emergence of a "lost generation"—a generation marked by the loss of both (cultural) identity and childhood experiences. This research aims to explore how architectural interventions within the refugee camp could bridge the gap between the Rohingya children's ethnic culture and their current environment, potentially mitigating this cultural void. Using an ethnographic biography approach and engaging with adolescent children from the camp, the study has conducted an exhaustive qualitative investigation in the Balukahli Rohingya refugee camp. The research outcome reveals how refugee architecture plays a leading role in shaping the lives and identities of inhabitants under precarious 'bare' conditions.

[*] *Corresponding author.*
E-mail address: arafat.arch@aust.edu

1. Introduction

Cox's Bazar, a border city in Bangladesh with a rich heritage and diverse culture, is also one of the country's most renowned tourist destinations due to the world's longest uninterrupted seabeach [1]. Every year, the city attracts millions of tourists from both domestic and international origins. The presence of ancient mosques, temples, and Buddhist monasteries from the Mughal era exemplifies the city's diverse religio-cultural history [2]. As a border city, Cox's Bazar has also historically facilitated the migration and sheltering of individuals from Myanmar. The most recent military crackdown in Myanmar [3] resulted in the destruction of numerous Rohingya villages and brutal attacks on unarmed men, women, and children [4]. This orchestrated ethnic cleansing by the Myanmar government forced 745,000 Rohingyas to flee their homeland and seek refuge in camps in Cox's Bazar [5-6]. The Government of Bangladesh accommodated this sudden influx of Rohingya refugees on humanitarian grounds, and since then, the city has become globally recognized as the site of the world's largest refugee camp, adding a new dimension to its identity.

Within the refugee camp, the Rohingyas are enclosed by a formidable barbed-wire fence that segregates them from the host population of Bangladesh. According to the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), this fencing is a security measure intended to regulate the movement of Rohingya refugees [7]. Even within the barbed-wire boundaries, movement is restricted between different camp blocks (each block being a unit of the camp, with two or three blocks constituting a camp). This restriction fosters a sense of fear among community members, especially children, as it limits their movement and evokes memories of previous experiences with similar fences [8-9]. The spatial configuration of the camp parallels the imprisonment and confinement the Rohingyas experienced in Myanmar. Nurjahan Begum, a 34-year-old Rohingya woman residing in the Balukhali refugee camp, expressed her family's growing fear of the fence to the human rights organization Fortify Rights: "*We are afraid of the fence going up here in the camp [in Bangladesh] because the Myanmar government built barbed-wire fences on all four sides before the violence occurred. After building the fence in Myanmar, many of our mothers and sisters were killed, and young children were cut and thrown into fires*."

Drawing on Agambenian theory (1995), the fencing represents a "Space of Exception" [10], where the camp's inhabitants are reduced to *bare life*, existing as living beings stripped of fundamental rights [11-12]. This cage-like environment turns the camp into a confined city within a city. Six years after their displacement to Cox's Bazar, the Rohingyas hold little hope of returning to their homeland. The refugee population has now grown to over 1.3 million, with 60% being children who have endured the extreme atrocities of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar and are now confined within the camp's barbed-wire boundaries. The camp's restrictive conditions contribute to a profound cultural void among these children, destabilizing their psychosocial and emotional well-being, effectively rendering them a "lost generation," a phenomenon that remains significantly underexplored in the literature [13-14].

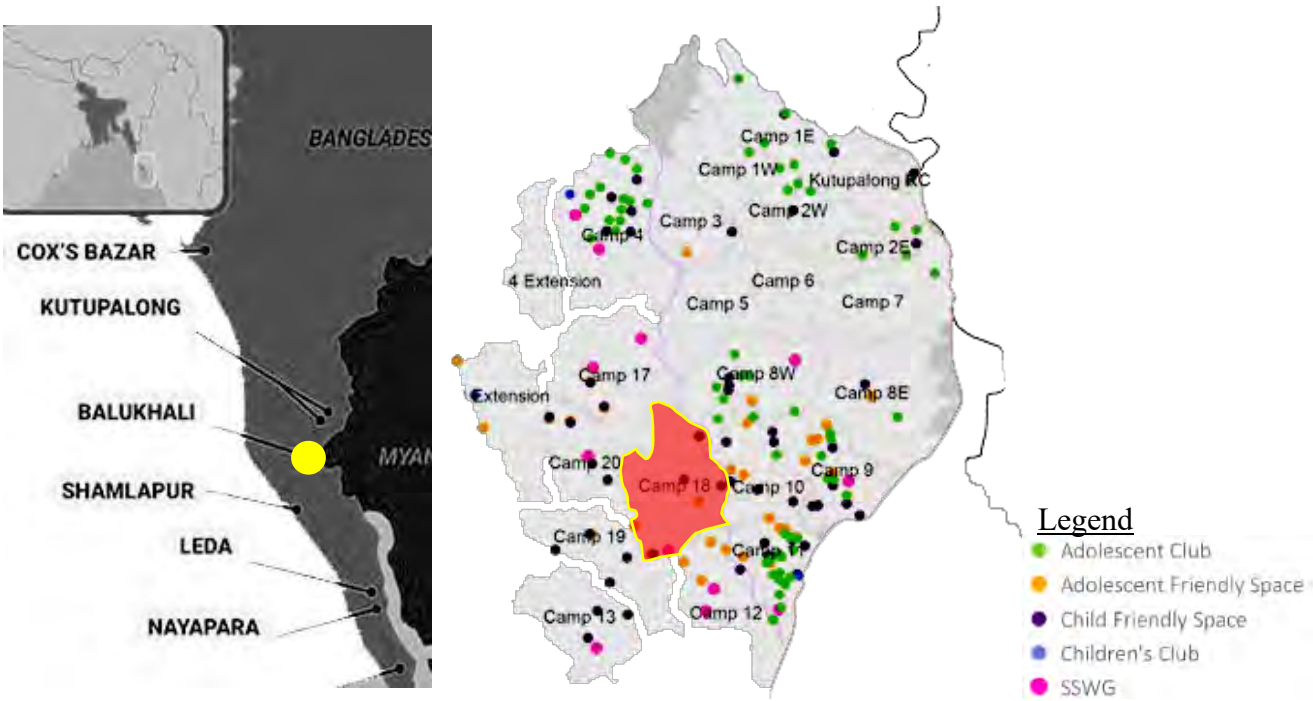
In response to the urgent need for the psychosocial development of Rohingya children, numerous Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) have been established, particularly in the Balukhali camp, by various local and international NGOs as a provisional strategy [15-16]. CFS is an internationally recognized and widely implemented architectural intervention designed for children in emergencies, such as refugee camps and disaster-prone areas. However, the CFS in the Balukhali camp has evolved into rigid, enclosed spaces from 2017 to 2022, mirroring the camp's overall confined character. his design has not undergone a critical review to assess whether it detaches children from the external environment, thereby making them more vulnerable within the enclosed nature of the camp. Moreover, it remains unclear how Rohingya children, with their distinct ethno-cultural identity, (re-)appropriate the existing model of Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) in response to the restrictive environment of the camp.

In light of these challenges, this study aims to explore how CFS can serve as a bridge between refugee camp architecture and the spatio-cultural needs of Rohingya children, facilitating healing and resilience against the various adversities of camp life. The study has two broad objectives: first, to map

the primary areas of Child-Friendly activities within camp spaces on a cluster-level scale, and second, to conduct a critical analysis of the underlying causes of the confinement within CFS and the spaces of difference. The study's findings will contribute to the development of guidelines for designing CFS that are more attuned to the camp-specific activities and needs of the children.

2. Methodology

The research site is the Balukhali camp, located near the Balukhali Panbazar in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (Fig. 1: a). It is the second-largest Rohingya refugee camp after Kutupalong and comprises 16 small and large camps, with camp 18 being the oldest and largest (Fig. 1: b). The total population of this camp is 26,801, including 6,500 families and 14718 children [17]. The camp was established during the sudden Rohingya influx in 2017 and was chosen as the study site using the purposive sampling method. The study's target group is Rohingya female children aged 7–12 years from the same Arakanese-Rohingya culture and living in the Balukhali camp. There are 7,328 female children aged between 7 and 12 years in this population, and twelve of them were randomly selected as the specific target group for the research due to their age, gender, and sexual vulnerability.



(a) (b)

Fig. 1. Camp and CFS location: (a) Location of Balukhali camp (b) Location of study camp – camp 18

In the context of the study, the building and operational costs of Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) are financially supported by donors and NGOs, who serve as the primary funding bodies. The Majhi, a traditional community leader, acts as an intermediary between the community and NGOs, playing a crucial role in the camp's governance structure [18]. Given their involvement, both the NGOs and the Majhi are identified as key stakeholders in the making and conceptualizing the architecture of CFS.

For data collection, this study employs an interdisciplinary qualitative approach, integrating methods from both Architecture and Anthropology. Specifically, it utilizes the Visual Research Method (VRM) from architecture and Spatial Ethnography from anthropology. Spatial Ethnography is a comprehensive qualitative technique that examines the everyday life and interactions within a specific space [19]. VRM involves a set of techniques that incorporate visual elements, such as maps, drawings, photographs, videos, and three-dimensional objects, into the research process [20-21]. In

this study, visual data were collected through photographs, maps, and sketches. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected CFS users and stakeholders to gather in-depth insights. Participants were chosen using the Convenience Sampling method [22].

A multi-faceted approach to data analysis was employed, integrating both visual and textual data. The visual research data, including photographs, maps, and sketches, were first analyzed to identify and map the primary areas of Child-Friendly activities within the camp spaces at a cluster-level scale. This process involved the application of the Photo Elicitation technique [23], a tool within the Visual Research Method (VRM), which uses photographs as stimuli during interviews and discussions to evoke deeper responses and insights. By engaging participants with visual prompts, this technique allowed a comprehensive understanding of how spaces are perceived and utilized by the children, particularly in relation to their cultural activities and interactions within the camp.

In parallel, the semi-structured interview data were meticulously transcribed to ensure that the verbal information was accurately captured. The transcribed data were then subjected to Content Analysis [24], a robust qualitative method used to code and examine textual data systematically. This method involves categorizing the transcribed content into themes and patterns. Through coding, key themes such as the concepts of stakeholders in building the CFS, the spatial dynamics of child-friendly activities, and the spatial-cultural contents of these spaces on children were identified.

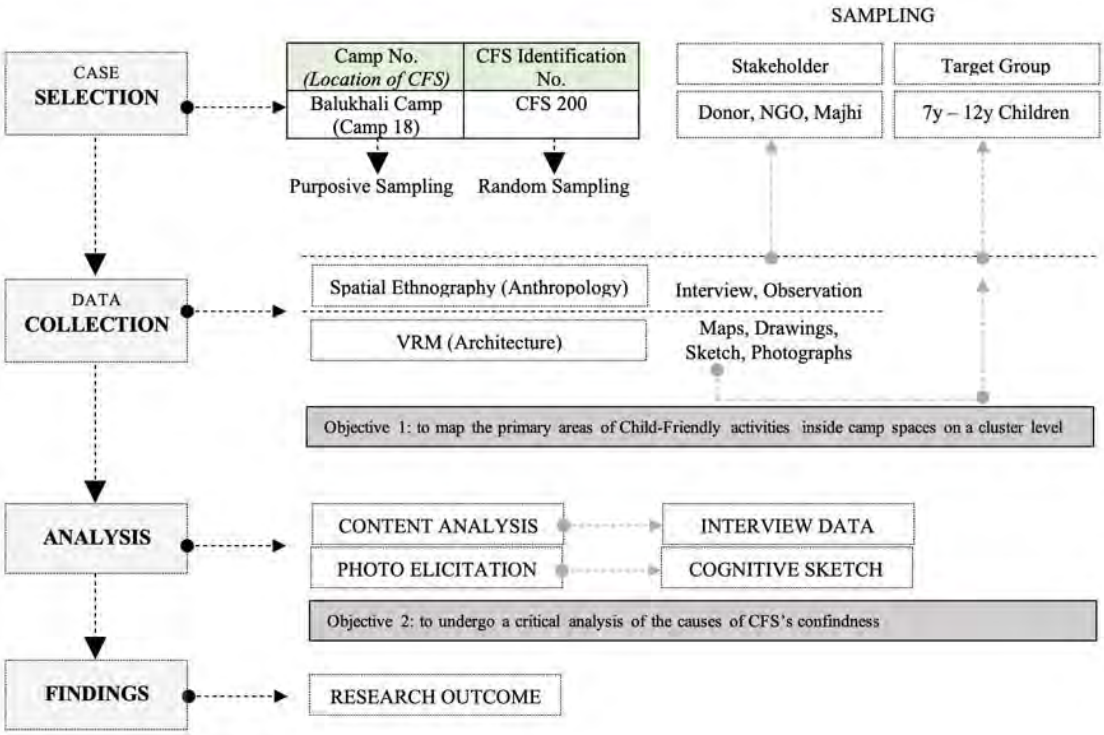


Fig. 2. Methodology diagram of the research

3. Results

1.1 Topographic situation

Camp 18 is located in a hilly area, standing fifty-five feet above ground level and vulnerable to cyclones due to its topographic features. The internal connections within the camp are risky, as individuals of all ages rely on *'shako'* (bamboo-made bridges) to travel between the hillocks. The Child-Friendly Spaces (CFSs) are positioned near the hill peak and far away from the community

households, making it challenging for women and young children to access them during the rainy season. Various infrastructures and key spaces are labelled numerically (1 to 10) with accompanying photographs and a site plan (Fig. 3). The numerical labels indicate the following: 1 – Community households in the hilly area, 2 – Limited vertical circulation for CFS, 3 – *Shako* (Bamboo-Made Bridge Connects the Hillocks), 4 – Community Mosque surrounded by ample open space, 5 – Children wandering on the primary camp road, 6 – Community drinking water point, 7 – Children carrying relief supplies on the primary camp road, 8 – Low-lying land, 9 – Shako, 10 – Open water disposal.

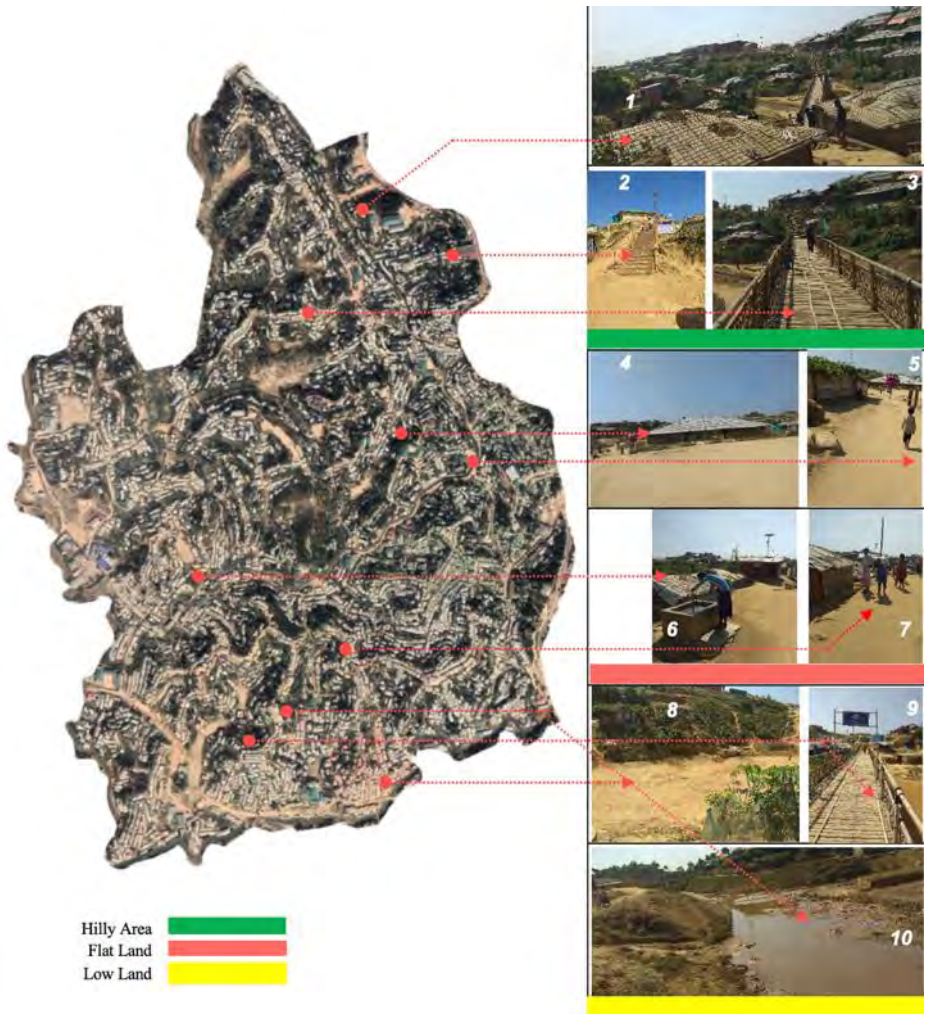


Fig. 3. Topography of camp 18 with infrastructure and other features (Field Survey, 2023)

1.2. Distribution of CFS

The layout plan of the camp is characterized by an organic pattern that underscores two significant aspects: isolation and segregation, as evidenced by its topographical configuration (Fig. 4) and the street network (Fig. 5). The spatial distribution of the camp households, represented by white dots on the map, is connected through an irregular and seemingly arbitrary street network. This disjointed layout results in the dispersed placement of Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) across the camp (Fig. 4), which undermines their potential efficacy. The green line connecting the CFS structures illustrates the limited and fragmented connectivity within the camp, exacerbating the challenges in accessing these vital services.

An interview with an NGO official revealed the absence of specific guidelines or criteria to evaluate the need for the establishment of CFS within camp blocks. This lack of strategic planning

leads to a disconnect between the population of children in a given area and the presence of CFS, contributing to their underutilization. The limited attendance at these spaces, except during the distribution of aid such as biscuits, reflects this disconnect. In contrast, the community demonstrates an increasing interest in the religious education offered at *maqtabs* (Islamic institutions), which operate with support from small Islamic groups and, in some cases, are self-funded. This highlights the spatial and functional inadequacies of the CFS in the camp, lacking a need-based approach to their placement and functionality. The selection of a representative CFS in Camp 18 for detailed analysis (Fig. 3) allows for a deeper examination of these issues in cluster and built-form level scale within the challenging environment of camp 18.

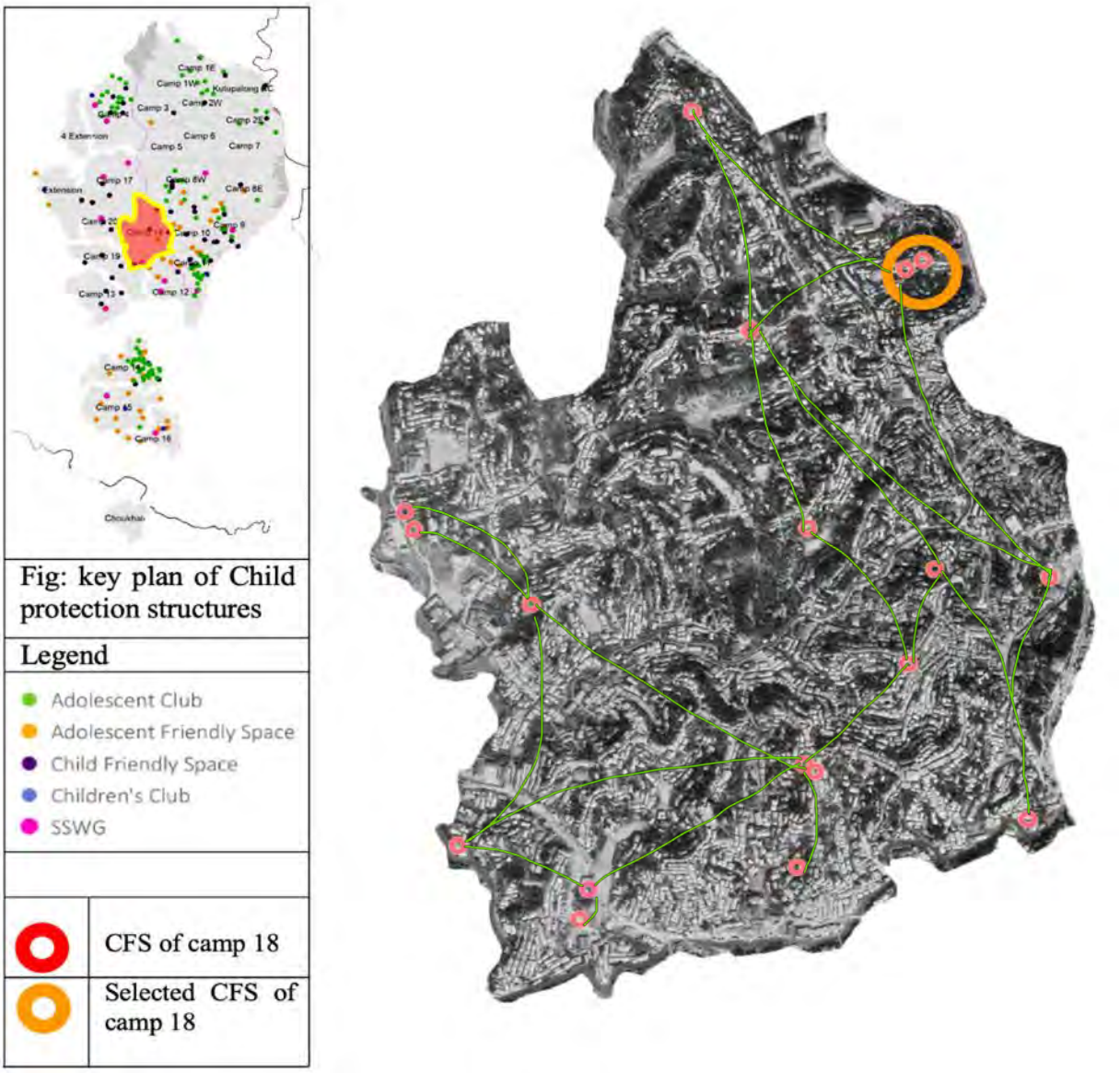


Fig. 4. Topography map of camp 18 with infrastructure and other features (ISCG, 2019; Field Survey, 2023)

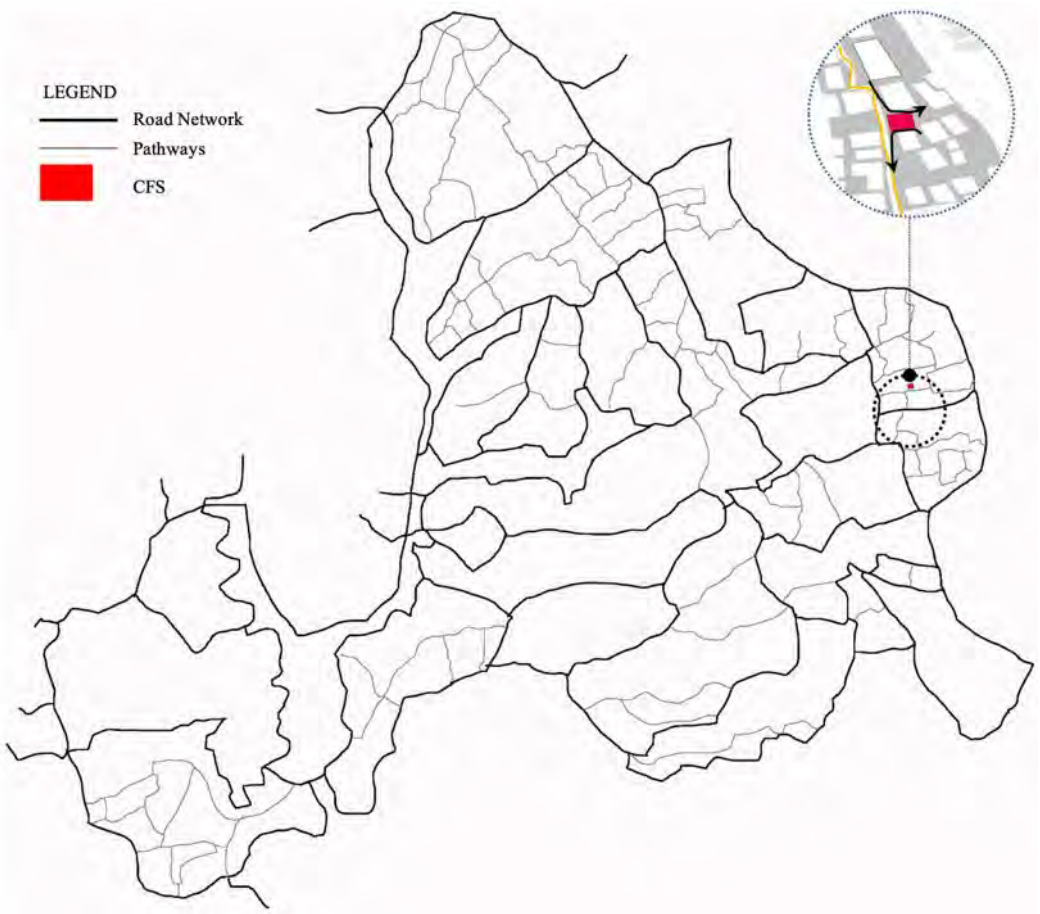


Fig. 5. Selected CFS and primary and secondary road network of camp 18 (ISCG., 2019; Authors)

1.3. Case: CFS no - 200

The Child-Friendly Space (CFS) -200 was set up in August 2017 in response to the initial influx of Rohingya refugees. It is located in block A of camp 18. The UNICEF funded the establishment of the CFS, and BRAC as a local NGO is in charge of building and managing it on a regular basis. The following analysis focuses on identifying key aspects for Child-Friendly Space within the camp spaces on a cluster level scale.

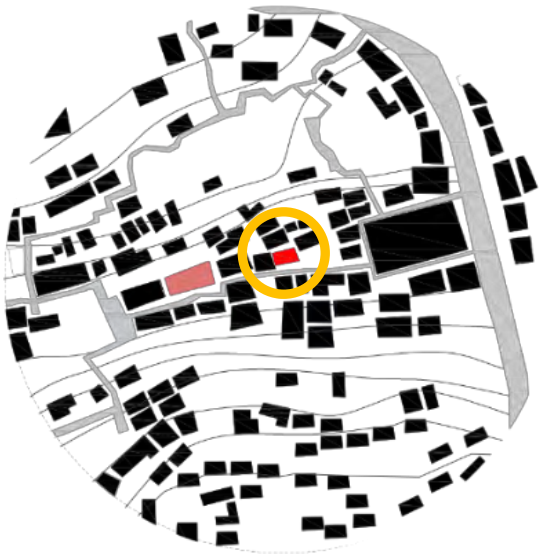


Fig. 6. Selected CFS and primary and secondary road network of camp 18 (Field Survey, 2023)

1.3.1. Cluster-scale Analysis

CFS 200 is positioned within a dense cluster of community households and is adjacent to another CFS. A seven-foot-wide street, elongated in an east-west direction, runs through this area, linking the CFS and the surrounding households. The eastern end of the street terminates at a hill slope, while the western end converges at a node where a temporary drainage channel aligns with the street. This road, although lacking formal infrastructure for child-friendly spaces, supports informal child-friendly activities and maintains a lively atmosphere, primarily driven by the children's interactions.

At the nodal point, there is a structure known as a *'Machang*,' which serves as a social gathering space for people of various ages. Despite the limited open spaces between community households, there is a notable open area, highlighted in gray (Fig. 7: Cluster Plan), on the northern side of the CFS. While the proximity of the CFS to the street suggests a potential for strong interaction, the spatial relationship between the built form of the CFS and the street appears to be more incidental than complementary, highlighting a gap of creating a more integrated and supportive CFS for children's activities and community engagement.

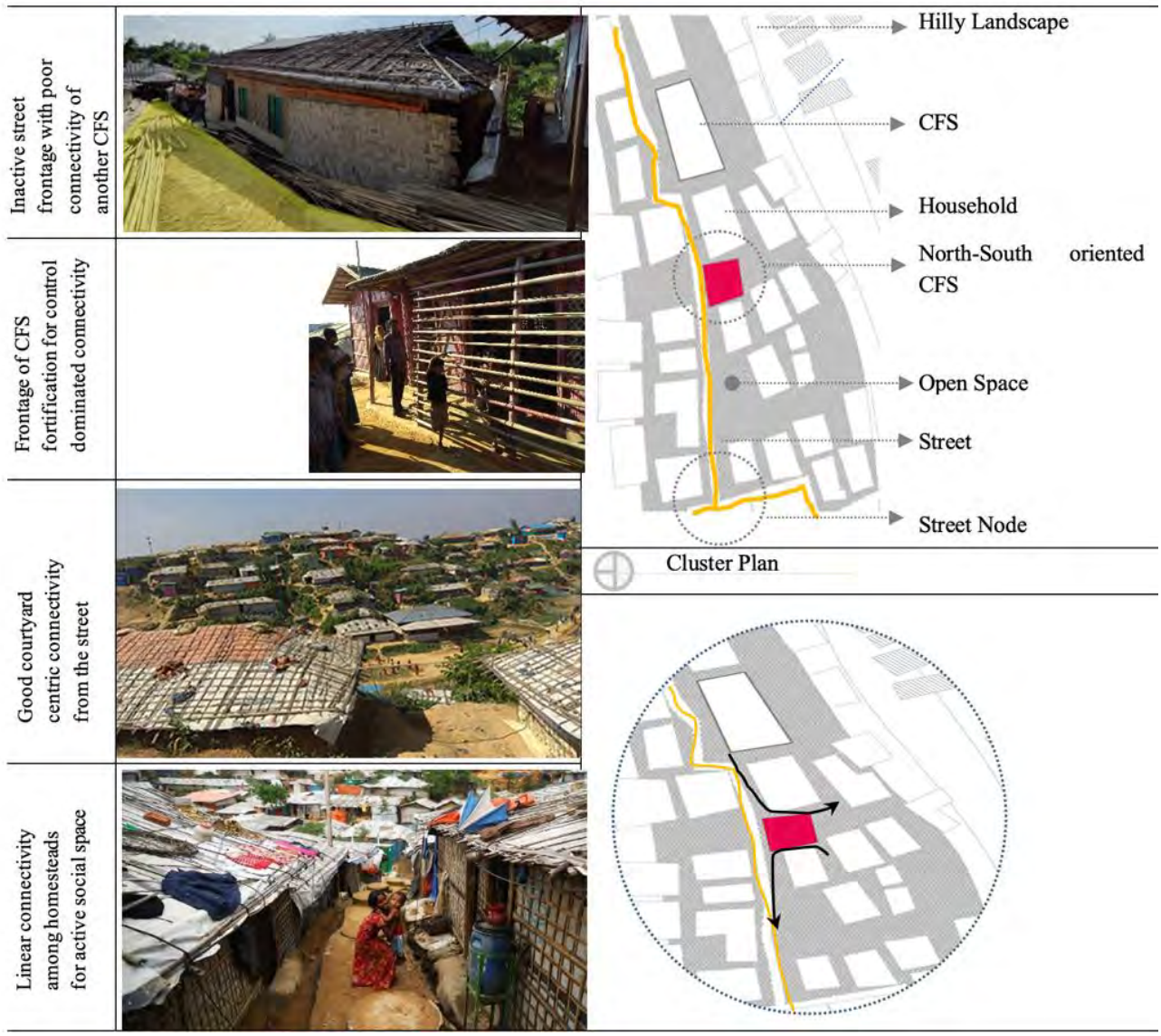


Fig. 7. Cluster-scale analysis for CFS 200 at cluster scale (Field Survey, 2023)

1.3.2. Built form-scale Analysis

The drawing analysis reveals several crucial aspects of the CFS's design that contribute to its formal rigidity and limit its functionality (Fig. 8: Plan). The CFS has a single door that serves as both the entry and exit point, restricting children's natural movement and access. The semi-outdoor space at the front is enclosed with bamboo *chatai* (bamboo mat walls), further reinforcing a sense of spatial confinement. The sectional view highlights the limited size of the openings, which constrains natural light and ventilation within the space (Fig. 8: Section).

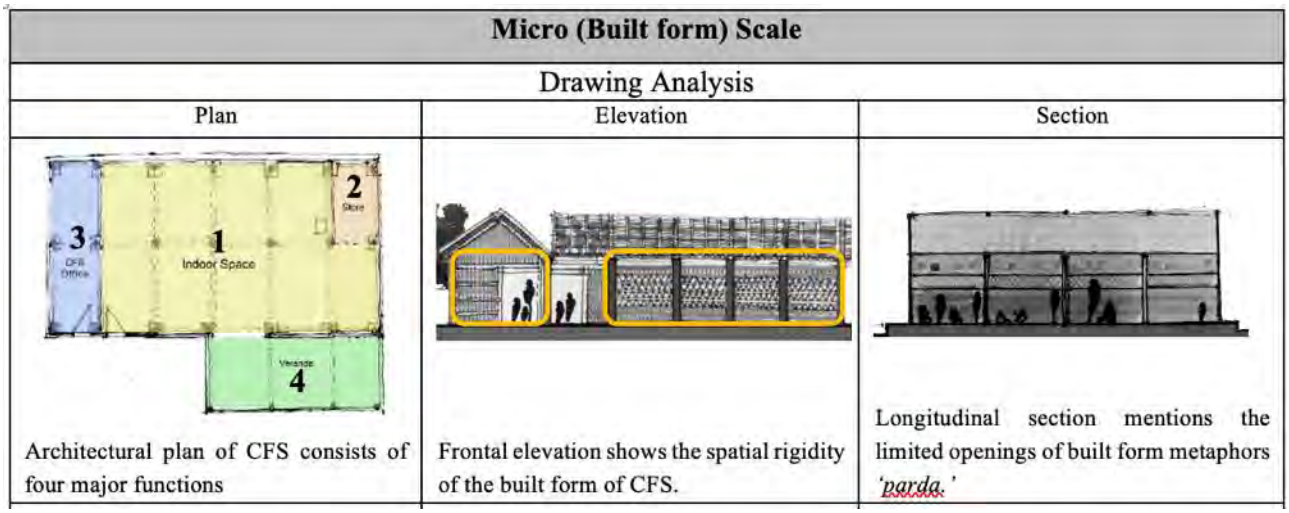


Fig. 8. Built-form scale analysis of CFS 200

The multi-functional area, highlighted in yellow (Fig. 8), is designed to serve various purposes, including a song corner, music corner, drawing corner, and storytelling corner. This area is a single space segregated from the rest of the layout by seven bamboo columns. However, the fixed layout of the space restricts its intended flexibility. The activities it is intended to accommodate generally require an open and flexible environment, yet the space is enclosed by bamboo walls, limiting movement and interaction. Moreover, the few openings available to connect with the outdoors are partially obstructed by display boards, further reducing natural interaction with the outdoor environment (Fig. 8: Elevation). The layout and structure of the area underscores how the design prioritized spatial rigidity and isolation, inhibiting its ability to engage with the environment and surroundings.

1.3.3. Conception of CFS among the children

An analysis of the visual research data within Camp 200 demonstrates that Children's perception of what constitutes a "child-friendly" space is fundamentally rooted in the concepts of freedom, openness, and flexibility. In the camp, the areas where children play commonly are spaces that encourage spontaneity and interaction (Fig. 9). These environments are not defined by rigid structures but by their ability to adapt to the children's needs, allowing them to explore, imagine, and engage with their peers and surrounding environment in an unrestricted manner.

This perception sharply contrasts with the design and atmosphere of the Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) established by UNICEF and BRAC. Their CFS, while intended to be a safe and nurturing environment, fails to align with the children's understanding of what makes a space truly "friendly" or inviting. The rigidity of the CFS design—characterized by its enclosed entryways, single entry and exit points, and compartmentalized interiors—imposes a sense of order and control that appears to be constrained to the children. Instead of being a space where they can freely engage in activities that cater to their natural inclinations, the typical/representative CFS is perceived as a space that is overly structured and, therefore, restrictive.

This contrast is critical as it underscores a disconnect between the popular CFS models practised by NGOs in the camp context and the actual needs and perceptions of the children it is meant to serve [25]. The CFS, in its current form, embodies an adult-centric view of safety and order, which does not resonate with the children's desire for fluid and interactive spaces. For the CFS to be truly effective, its design needs to reflect the children's perspective, prioritizing their conceptions and a sense of belongingness that aligns with their natural behaviours and preferences [26]. The next section of the paper briefly reflects on that.

Fig. 9. Images of child friendly activities within camp spaces and confined CFS less interactive ((Field Survey, 2023)

1.3.4. Representation of children's perception

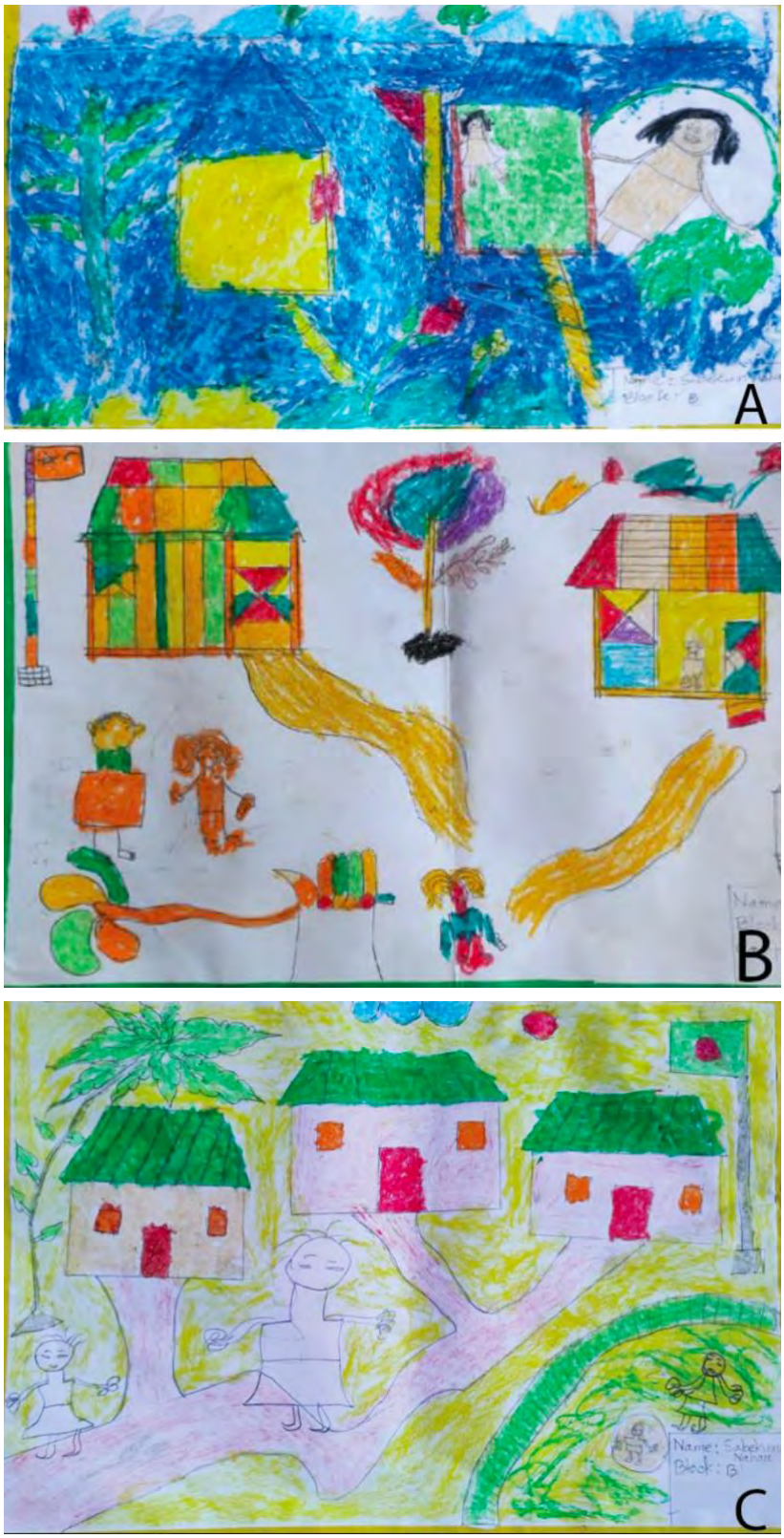


Fig. 10. Cognitive mapping by Khadiza, Amina, Halima (Field Survey, 2023)

Female children between the ages of 7 and 12 were invited to participate in a cognitive mapping session and a focus group discussion to express their perceptions of child-friendly spaces through art. During the session, twelve children participated and were asked to draw what such spaces meant to

them, resulting in a rich collection of visual data. One notable observation from their drawings was that each child included themselves in their illustration. Despite facing varied social barriers, their artwork collectively conveyed a vision of child-friendly spaces that transcended the mere physicality of buildings and structures but rather as spaces that extended beyond the confines of buildings.

Khadiza's drawing vividly exemplifies this concept (Fig. 10: A). Her drawing twice depicts her immersed in play; once amidst the expanse of a green field and then again, engrossed in a game of jump rope. The palette she chose—a vivid mixture of blue, yellow, red, and green—serves multiple symbolic purposes. Blue dominates her sketch, manifesting her aspiration to embody the freedom and wonder of a mermaid. Red, used to depict the Myanmar national flag thrice, expresses her longing and cherished memories of her homeland. Green, used to sketch four lush trees, anchors her drawing in a relation to natural settings, signifying a space of liberation and openness. Through her art, Khadiza narrates her story, intertwining her playfulness with profound personal and national identities.

Amina's interpretation shares thematic overlap with Khadiza's, yet it bears its distinct narrative elements (Fig. 10: B). Her drawing also positions her in an outdoor setting, this time accompanied by playmates, illustrating a sense of community and togetherness. Like Khadiza, Amina incorporates the Myanmar national flag, signaling a shared sentiment of nostalgia. Her depiction of two translucent camp houses adds a layer of vulnerability and impermanence to her envisioned space. The presence of merging streets leading to a vibrant node, alongside a solitary, colorful tree, injects a whimsical, playful essence into her concept of a child-friendly space, pointing towards the imaginative elasticity children possess.

Halima’s creative expression takes a slightly different approach, characterizing buildings as animate companions in her playful universe (Fig. 10: C). Her drawing is carefully structured around the interaction of three buildings connected by tertiary streets, which cultivate a sense of community through their connectivity and the formation of vibrant street nodes. Here, children, represented by jubilant figures, engage freely in play, further highlighted by the environmental elements of trees, the sun, and clouds. Notably, Halima integrates the national flag of Bangladesh, rendering her sense belongingness to the refugee camp.

Each of these drawings, while unique in their narrative and execution, collectively underscores a fundamental desire shared by the children: the longing for spaces that are open, free, and integrally connected to their sense of self and cultural identity. These drawings express the children’s deep yearning for environments that are not just physically accessible but are also emotionally and culturally resonant. They envision spaces that embrace their childhood dreams and aspirations, allowing them to interact with nature, their community, and their cultural traditions in a meaningful way.

Through their artwork, these girls communicate a powerful vision of what a child-friendly space should be. They depict spaces that are liberating, offering them the freedom to explore and express themselves without the constraints often imposed by the structured environments of the camp and NGO-built CFS. Instead, their imagined spaces are inclusive, reflecting their desire for places where they can feel a sense of belonging and connection, not just with typical architecture but with their everyday (cultural) spaces and with the larger community. In response to the harsh realities of their lives within the camp, where they often experience abuse and a sense of confinement and restriction, their conception of CFS articulates their hopes that can nurture their childhood dreams and honour their community experiences.

4. Conclusions

The Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) in the Rohingya refugee camps, as currently designed, reflect a profound misalignment between the design of these spaces and the lived experiences and needs of the children they aim to serve. While these models prioritize security and privacy, often due to the vision imposed by NGOs and donors, they inadvertently neglect the emotional, psychological, and cultural needs of the children – particularly those who have endured childhood trauma within the harsh

realities of the camp. The architecture of these CFSs —characterized by confinement, limited interaction with the outside environment, and a lack of flexibility—reflects a vision rooted in adult-centric conception (of CFS) rather than the children's aspirations for freedom, creativity, and connection in space.

The children's perceptions, as revealed through visual research data, offer a stark contrast to the existing CFS designs. Their drawings vividly illustrate a longing for open, flexible spaces that resonate with their cultural identities and (their) required opportunities for spontaneous interaction and exploration. These insights, revealed in this paper, highlight a critical need for a reimagining of CFS that shifts away from compartmentalized structures towards environments that are more integrated with the community and the natural surroundings. Such a transformation would not only meet the children's innate desires for exploration and connection but also support in psychosocially healing their trauma, creating a sense of belongingness and mitigating their cultural void.

Hence, the current design approach to CFS in the Rohingya refugee camps requires a fundamental rethinking to better align with the children's needs and aspirations. By embracing a more open, culturally resonant, and flexible design ethos, future CFS in a refugee crisis context can effectively become spaces of healing, growth, and empowerment for the children. Such spaces would offer the nurturing environments essential for children to overcome the profound challenges of life in a refugee camp, facilitating a just transition from the cultural void they experience to a more hopeful and resilient future.

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