

Stories

A safe haven for young refugees

An art project by the Anouk Foundation offers unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in Geneva the opportunity to process stressful experiences and develop a sense of belonging.

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Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and carers from the cantonal accommodation “PHC les Augustins” as well as employees of the Anouk Foundation celebrate the successful completion of the art project together. © UNHCR/Nino Janashvili

"Art liberates the mind," says Jeremy, one of around thirty unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UMAs) living at the cantonal shelter "PHC les Augustins" in Geneva. He is one of the young people who recently participated in a special art project in collaboration with the [Anouk Foundation](#).

Opened in April 2024, the accommodation in the heart of a Geneva residential district offers these young people not only a safe roof over their heads but also a supportive community.

Worldwide, [children are particularly affected by displacement and forced migration](#) , accounting for more than 40 percent of refugees and stateless people. Those who have had to flee without their parents are particularly vulnerable, as they are often alone and defenseless. These children have often experienced traumatic experiences before and during their flight. This makes child-friendly spaces where they can play safely, learn, and receive psychological support all the more important. Such spaces help them build social networks and develop strategies for coping with everyday challenges.

An environment that provides support

"Les Augustins" accommodates 56 young people in two- or three-bedroom apartments. The one-to-four staff ratio allows for close, individualized support that addresses the specific needs of the young people. This intensive care is crucial for these young people, who often have experiences of violence, exploitation, and neglect.

Regular group activities contribute to strengthening a sense of community. One example is the weekly Wednesday cooking class, where the young people prepare dishes from their home countries. Furthermore, integration into the neighborhood and participation in city life are actively encouraged. Leisure activities and sports are integral parts of the program, giving the young people space to live their childhood despite the stressful experiences.

The healing power of art: The Anouk Foundation project

Particularly impressive are the colorful murals that decorate the hallways and common areas of "les Augustins." The [Anouk Foundation](#)

In collaboration with the young people and the support team, the project created vibrant works of art that are far more than mere decorations. For two weeks, the young people intensively explored the paintings and actively participated in their design. The works tell stories of solidarity, hope, and resilience—precisely the values that should empower the young people as they integrate into their new homeland.



Ani (left) and Alex (right), employees of the Anouk Foundation and leaders of the art project at the "les Augustins" accommodation, present some sketches for the murals.

The art project was led by Alex and Ani, two employees of the Anouk Foundation. Both emphasize the importance of art for mental health: "The artistic process helps the young people process their experiences while creating welcoming and child-friendly spaces," explains Ani. "The young people can leave their mark here and show that they belong."



Lorraine Mukeze, manager of the “Les Augustins” accommodation, explains the thoughts and ideas behind the mural in the common room.

The mural in the common room, depicting birds, is particularly meaningful. Each new arrival can add a bird in the future—a symbolic gesture expressing community and belonging. "This act shows the young people that they have a place here and are part of the community," emphasizes Lorraine Mukeze, the shelter's director.

For Jeremy, who recently moved into the accommodation and was particularly involved in the art project, painting became a way to forget his worries and discover a new passion. At a certificate presentation ceremony for the participating young people, he received a framed picture of himself at work as a token of appreciation and success for his efforts.

A place of hope and community

"Les Augustins" is more than just accommodation – it's a place of hope and new beginnings. The combination of a dedicated support team and a wide range of leisure and social activities offers young people the chance to process their past and actively shape their future. The healing effect of art, evident in the Anouk Foundation project, demonstrates that creative expression can play an important role in overcoming trauma. Here, the young residents not only have a roof over their heads, but also the opportunity to fill the walls of their new home with their own stories – stories that give them strength and encourage them to take control of their lives.