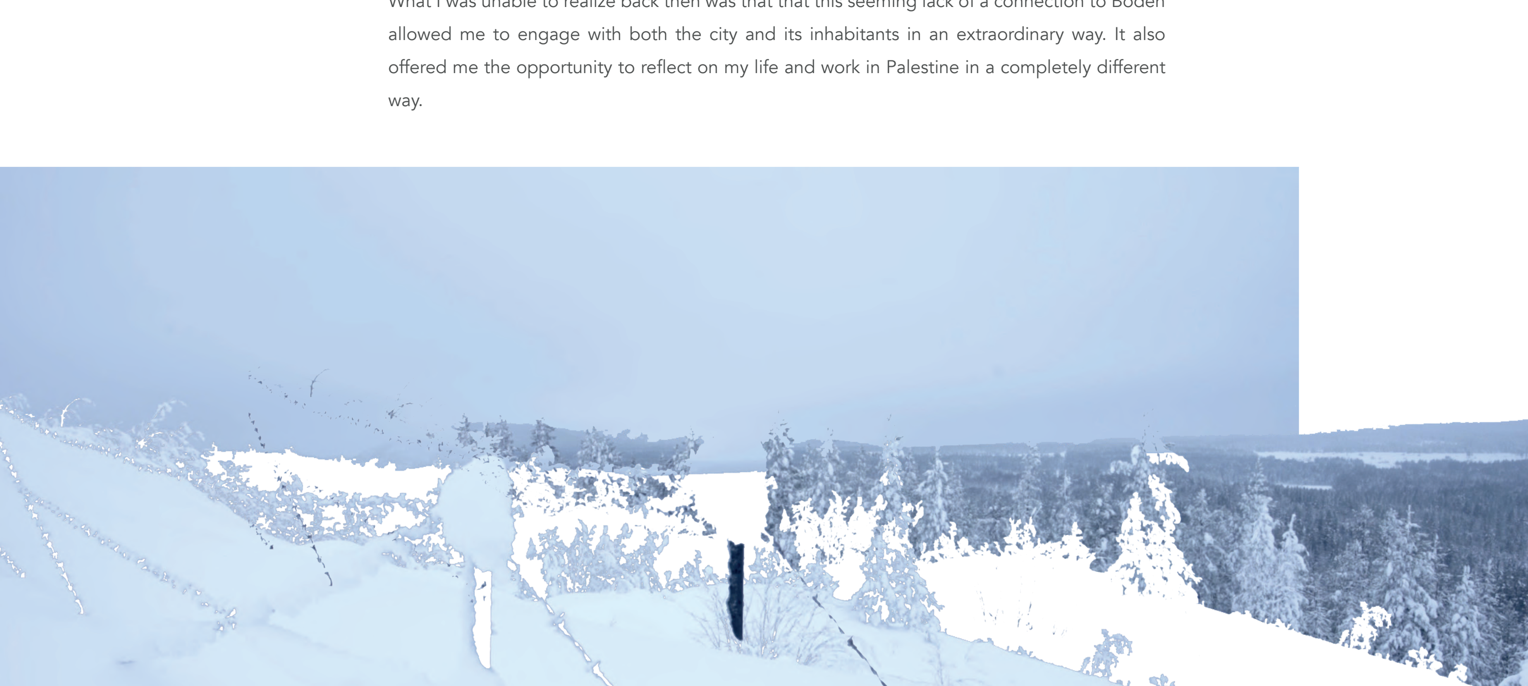
From Palestine to the Arctic circle

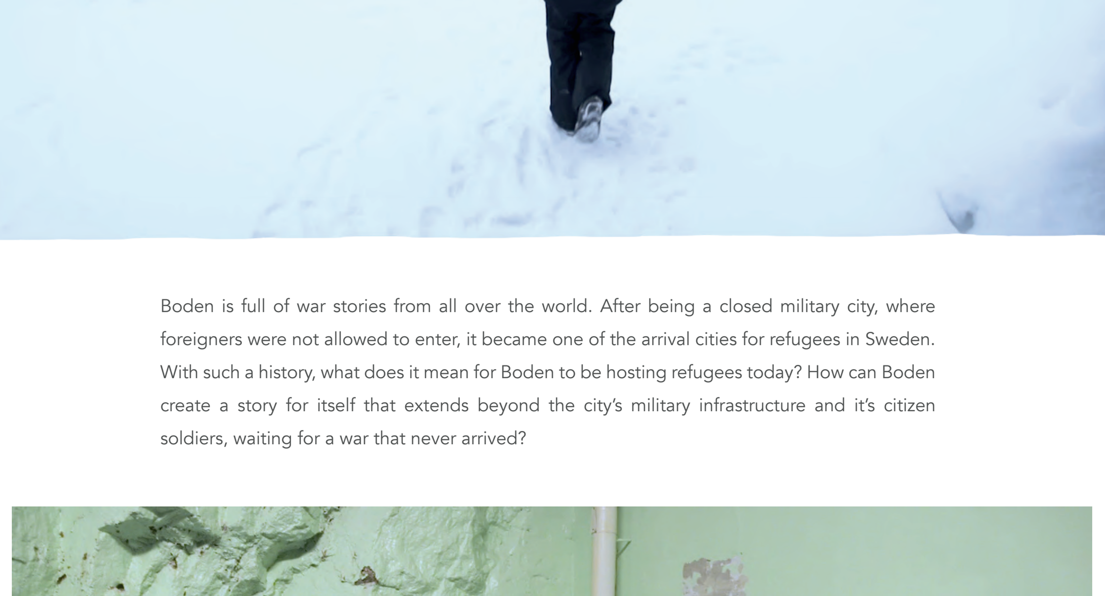
I arrived at Boden with fear and anxiety. I doubted my ability to engage with such an unfamiliar place. The first time I had ever heard of Boden was when I was asked by the Public Art Agency Sweden to do a project there. I was afraid that I simply lacked the basics.

What I was unable to realize back then was that that this seeming lack of a connection to Boden allowed me to engage with both the city and its inhabitants in an extraordinary way. It also offered me the opportunity to reflect on my life and work in Palestine in a completely different way.



The war from Russia never arrived, but refugees did

Boden is full of war stories from all over the world. After being a closed military city, where foreigners were not allowed to enter, it became one of the arrival cities for refugees in Sweden. With such a history, what does it mean for Boden to be hosting refugees today? How can Boden create a story for itself that extends beyond the city's military infrastructure and it's citizen soldiers, waiting for a war that never arrived?



The wait

After working in Palestinian refugee camps for many years, one realizes that waiting is an essential part of people's life. In refugee camps, the wait is for the day that one can return home. 70 years ago, Palestinians were forced out of their homes. Its refugees are still waiting.

The wait is very clear in a refugee camp because its narrative is its origin story—the villages and the cities from where refugees come from—and not the present life of camp itself. History defines refugees, and until their wait is over, they desperately fight for their history to persevere within the collective memory of the world. They are afraid that if they forget their own history, then the world will also forget.

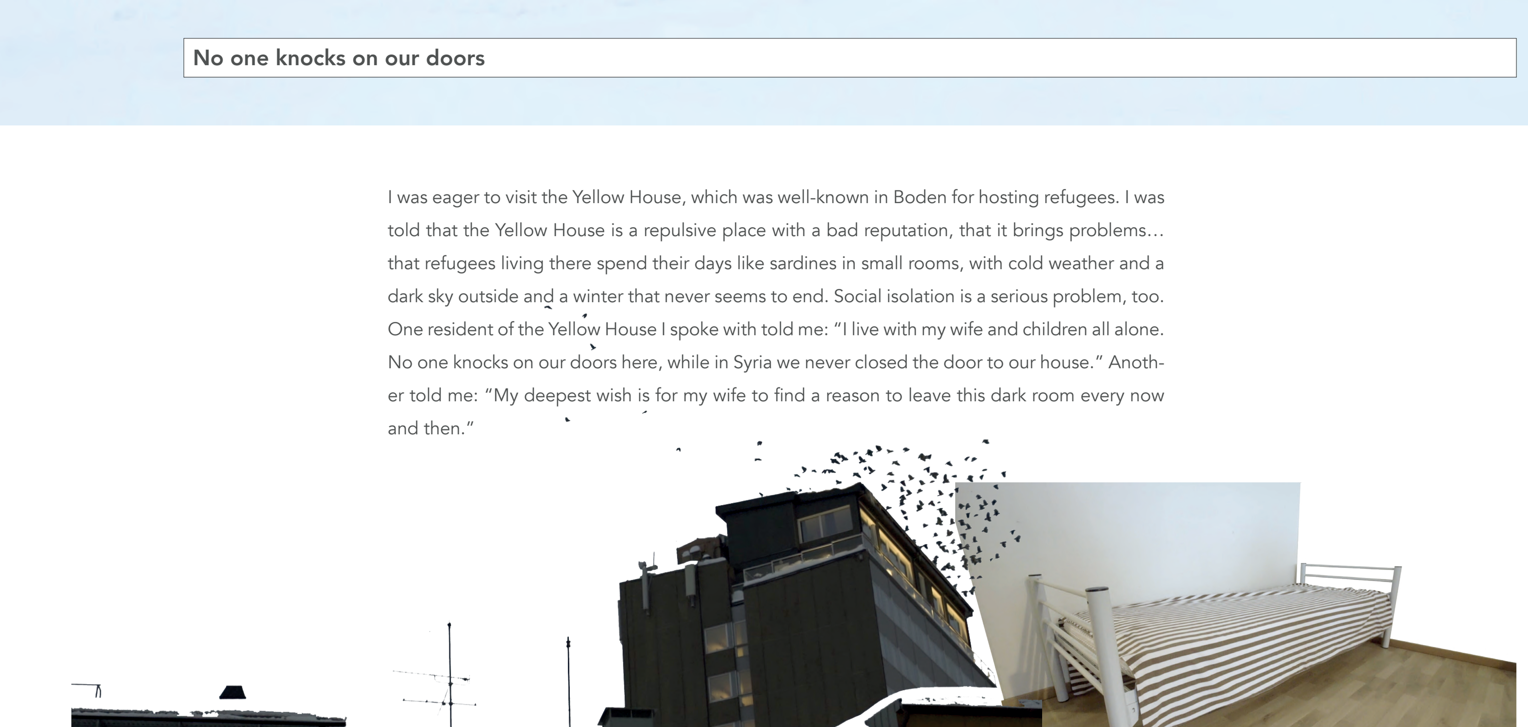
As a Palestinian, I feel stuck in history, even if it has yet to be resolved. But giving up on this history also means giving up my rights. How, then, is it possible to remember and insist on my history as a right, while keeping my rights open both to the present and to the future?

When I arrived in Boden, it felt familiar not because of its landscape or weather, but because I could recognize the feeling of waiting in the city. It became easier for me to work in a place like Boden because there was this sense of suspended temporality.

A stranger

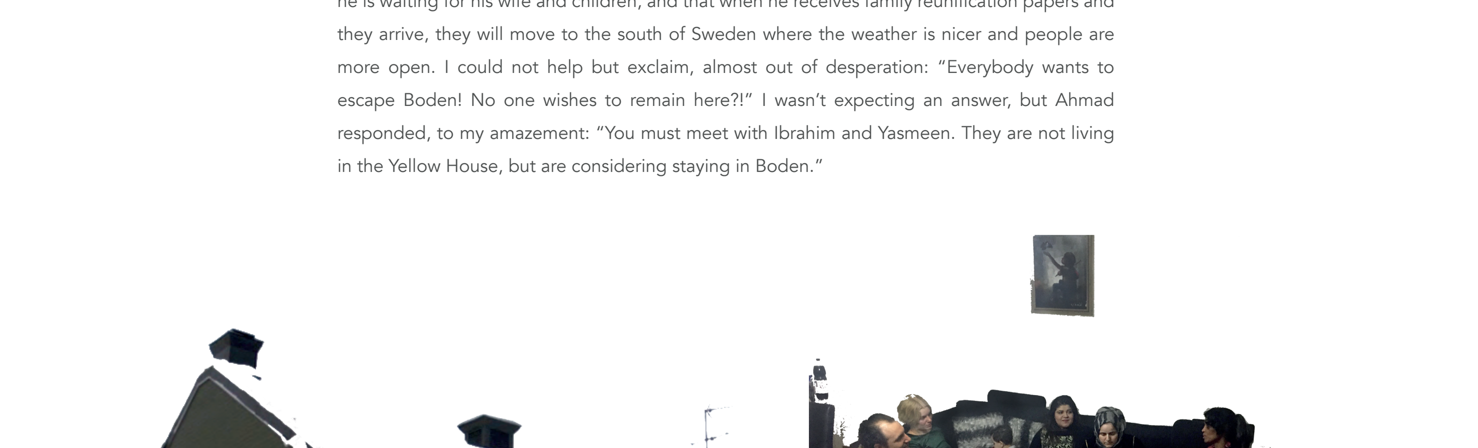
Boden is a city that glorifies years of waiting for a potential war with Russia that never came. At the same time, today Boden is a place that refugees crossed seas, rivers, and forests to get to, yet it is not what they imagined or dreamed of. This perspective became my key to the city.

I started working in Boden in the moment that I was preparing myself and my family to leave Palestine and become a stranger in Sweden. When visiting Boden, I realized how strongly I was holding on to my past; afraid that if I leave Palestine I would lose everything and become an outsider, a stranger, a permanent guest. I was not sure how to combine my present life in Sweden with my past in Palestine. Yet standing in the snow-covered landscapes of northern Sweden, it felt as if my personal crisis mirrored Boden's. I felt connected as a stranger.

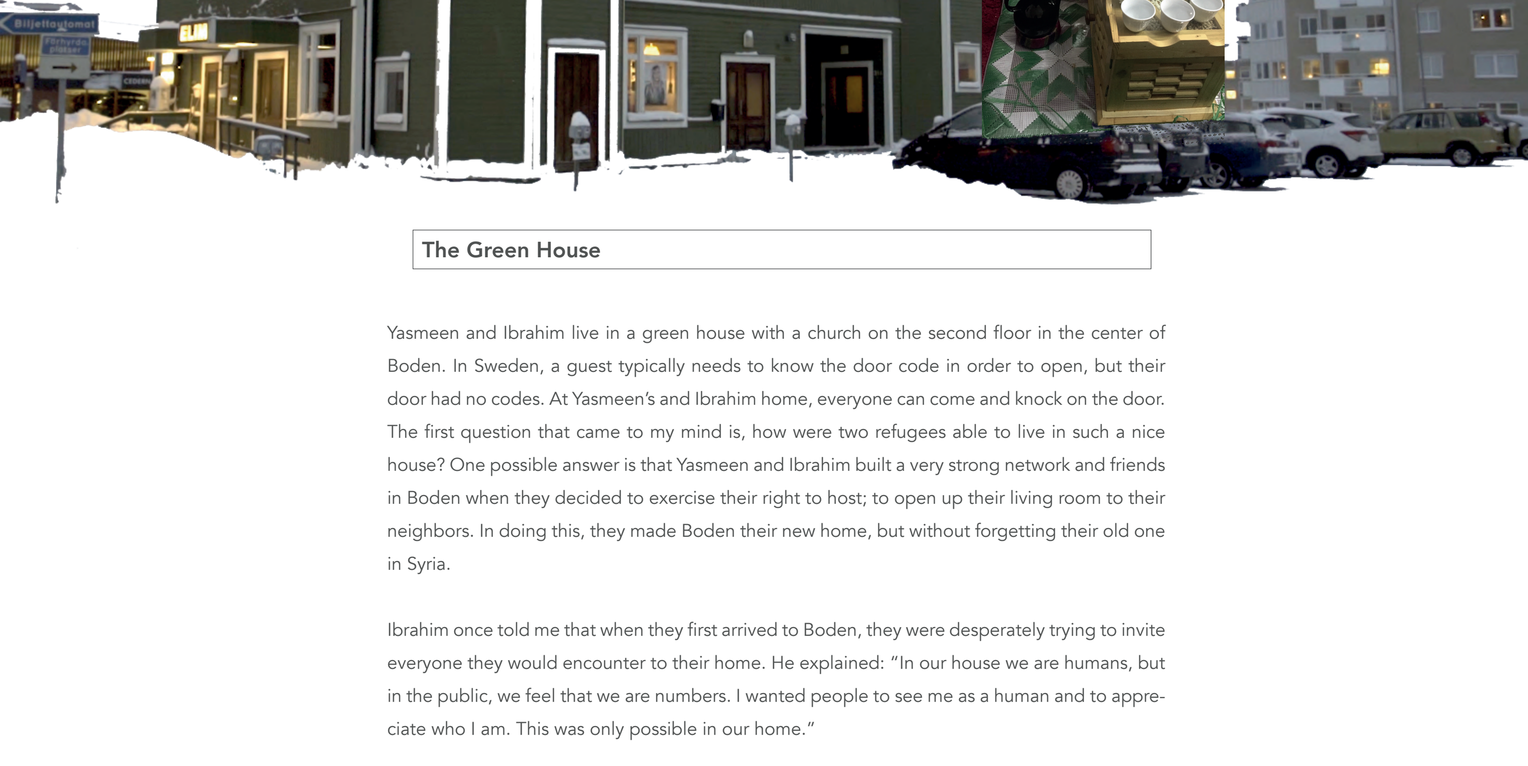


No one knocks on our doors

I was eager to visit the Yellow House, which was well-known in Boden for hosting refugees. I was told that the Yellow House is a repulsive place with a bad reputation, that it brings problems… that refugees living there spend their days like sardines in small rooms, with cold weather and a dark sky outside and a winter that never seems to end. Social isolation is a serious problem, too. One resident of the Yellow House I spoke with told me: "I live with my wife and children all alone. No one knocks on our doors here, while in Syria we never closed the door to our house." Another told me: "My deepest wish is for my wife to find a reason to leave this dark room every now and then."



I was frustrated and saddened by what I saw, but I did not lose hope. I kept knocking on doors. A young Iraqi man, Ahmad, invited me into his room. We sat on his bed, where he told me that he is waiting for his wife and children, and that when he receives family reunification papers and they arrive, they will move to the south of Sweden where the weather is nicer and people are more open. I could not help but exclaim, almost out of desperation: "Everybody wants to escape Boden! No one wishes to remain here?!" I wasn't expecting an answer, but Ahmad responded, to my amazement: "You must meet with Ibrahim and Yasmeen. They are not living in the Yellow House, but are considering staying in Boden."



The Green House

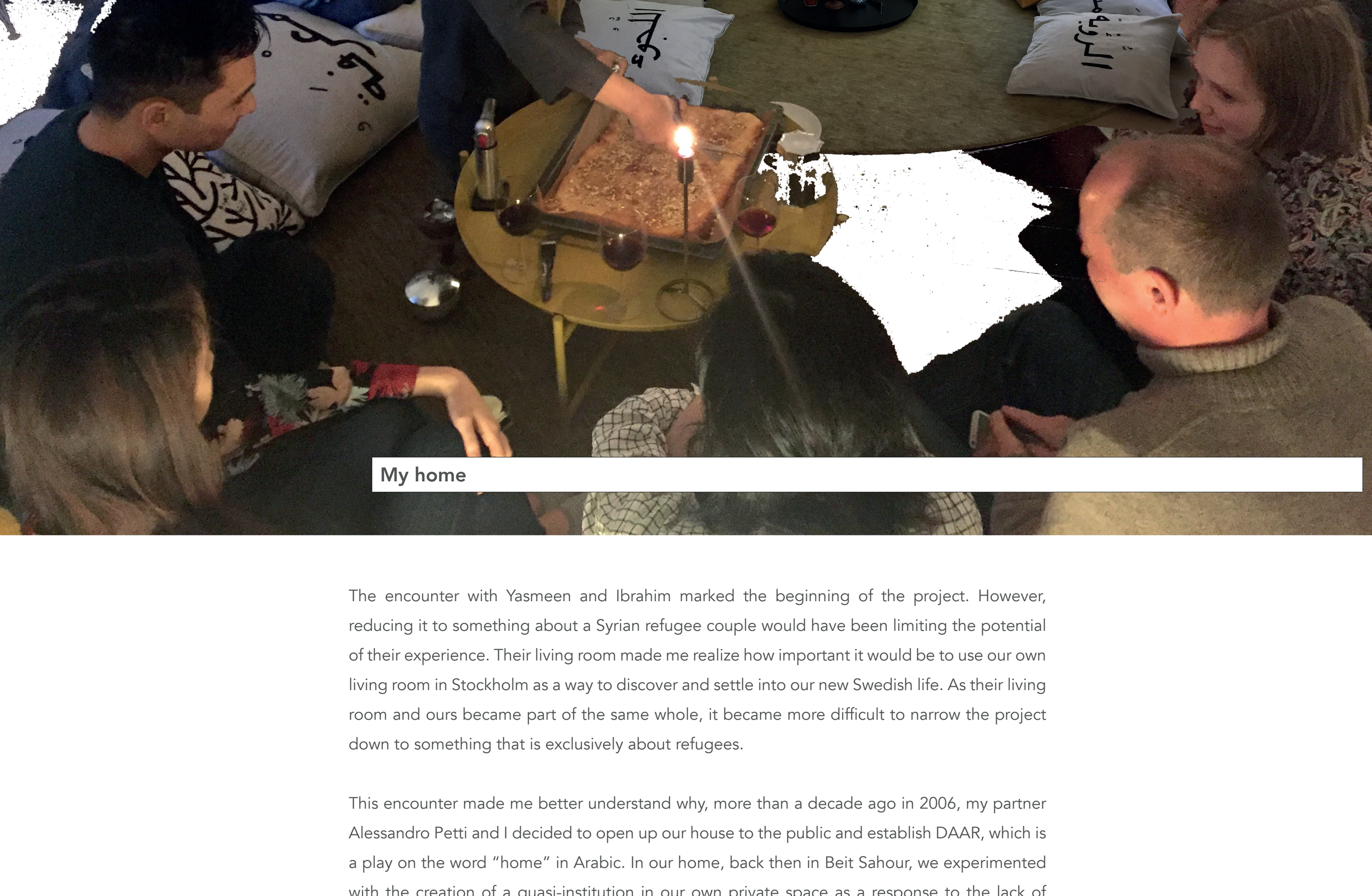
Yasmeen and Ibrahim live in a green house with a church on the second floor in the center of Boden. In Sweden, a guest typically needs to know the door code in order to open, but their door had no codes. At Yasmeen's and Ibrahim home, everyone can come and knock on the door. The first question that came to my mind is, how were two refugees able to live in such a nice house? One possible answer is that Yasmeen and Ibrahim built a very strong network and friends in Boden when they decided to exercise their right to host; to open up their living room to their neighbors. In doing this, they made Boden their new home, but without forgetting their old one in Syria.

Ibrahim once told me that when they first arrived to Boden, they were desperately trying to invite everyone they would encounter to their home. He explained: "In our house we are humans, but in the public, we feel that we are numbers. I wanted people to see me as a human and to appreciate who I am. This was only possible in our home."

When they first arrived in Boden, Yasmeen and Ibrahim were sent to live in a single room in a refugee camp. They moved several times, and with the help of all the guests they invited into their home, they were able to find their green house. Finally, they could have a dynamic living room and an active social life.

Hosting the government

The first time I visited Yasmeen and Ibrahim's house, I was accompanied by representatives of the Swedish Public Art Agency, or in other words, by members of the government. In their small living room, Yasmeen and Ibrahim changed the familiar social roles: instead of being refugees hosted by the government, they were hosting the Swedish government. Their living room gave them the opportunity to refuse their role of obedient guest, complying with norms and rules, and exercise their right to be a host. The figure of the host is quintessential to the project. There can be no living room without a clear host. The host comes first. What is required, then, is to find ways to inspire, encourage, and invite the host that is hidden in many of us to come out. The living room is designed ad hoc by and for the host.



My home

The encounter with Yasmeen and Ibrahim marked the beginning of the project. However, reducing it to something about a Syrian refugee couple would have been limiting the potential of their experience. Their living room made me realize how important it would be to use our own living room in Stockholm as a way to discover and settle into our new Swedish life. As their living room and ours became part of the same whole, it became more difficult to narrow the project down to something that is exclusively about refugees.

This encounter made me better understand why, more than a decade ago in 2006, my partner Alessandro Petti and I decided to open up our house to the public and establish DAAR, which is a play on the word "home" in Arabic. In our home, back then in Beit Sahour, we experimented with the creation of a quasi-institution in our own private space as a response to the lack of public space in Palestine. It was a place where we could discuss with other people how to live under colonialism and how to rethink struggles for decolonization and the creation of common spaces. Our DAAR-Home in Stockholm aim to function as quasi-institution in a similar way, as a response to the lack of political agency given to outsiders in the European public today.

Al Madhafah: the living room

Located between the domestic and the public spheres, Al Madhafah, in Arabic, means the living room; the space in the house dedicated to hospitality. The Madhafah is constantly maintained and always ready with fruit, nuts, and black coffee for the unexpected guest who may knock on the door anytime during the day. While it may be the room that is used the least, it is the most symbolic, curated, and cared for area of the house. The Madhafah project expanded from Yasemeen and Ibrahim living room and my living room to the a new living room in the Yellow House, where Yasmeen takes the responsibility of the host.

The Madhafah in the Yellow House

Who has the key to the living room is a conceptual question, not a practical one. When we talk about a collective space like the Madhafah on the ground floor of the Yellow House, it is important to understand who has the keys, who lets people in and out, whether the door is always open or if it can be closed when needed, etc. These are the operative terms to understand if we want to change existing power structures within the domain of refugee integration. Yasmeen has the keys to the Yellow House living room because she offered to be the host there, in addition to her own living room. But who else does she give them to? Who has the responsibility to manage the space? How can everyone exercise the right to host, and with a sense of duty and responsibility?