

# AL MADAFEH/ THE LIVING ROOM | 2016–

The living room is where the private home opens itself to the guest, the foreigner, the outsider. It functions as a transitional space and a passage between the domestic and the public. In Arab culture, the living room is a space always ready to host unexpected guests; it is the most ornamented part of the house, never in disorder, and often has fruit, nuts, and black coffee ready to be offered at all times. It might be the space that is least used, yet still the one that is most symbolic, curated, and cared for. Boden, in northern Sweden, is largely viewed by its refugee community as a transitory place. Yasmeeen and her family, however, want to stay. In claiming the right to host and welcome diverse people into their home, their living room allows them to combine their lost life in Syria with their new life in Sweden.

AL MASHA/COMMON

MADAFEH/HOSPITALITY

MUJAWAARA/NEIGHBORING

PARTICIPATION

## CREDITS

| DAAR—SANDI HILAL AND ALESSANDRO PETTI

## HOSTS

| YASMEEN MAHMOUD AND IBRAHIM MUHAMMAD HAJ ABDULLA (BODEN)

| SANDI HILAL (STOCKHOLM)

| AYAT AL-TURSHAN (RAMALLAH)

## MEDIUM AND DIMENSIONS

| PERFORMANCE (VARIABLE DURATION)

## EXHIBITION REQUIREMENTS

| FIND EITHER A PRIVATE SPACE AND MAKE IT MORE PUBLIC OR A PUBLIC SPACE

AND MAKE IT MORE PRIVATE

| HOST OTHERS IN THAT SPACE

## SUPPORT

| PUBLIC ART AGENCY SWEDEN AND THE ARAB FUND FOR ART AND CULTURE

## IMAGES

| ELIAS ARVIDSSON, P. 361

| STELLAN HERNER, P. 361



THE YELLOW HOUSE | *Boden* | 2017



THE GUEST APARTMENTS AT NYU ABU DHABI | *Abu Dhabi* | 2018  
THE HOUSE OF SANDI AND ALESSANDRO | *Stockholm* | 2018  
THE HOUSE OF YASMEEN AND IBRAHIM | *Boden* | 2017  
THE YELLOW HOUSE | *Boden* | 2018  
ARKDES | *Stockholm* | 2018  
THE WOMEN'S PROGRAM CENTER | *Fawwar Refugee Camp* | 2018

## THE RIGHT TO HOST | SANDI HILAL

It was November 2016 when I first visited Boden. I had bought a down jacket and boots to protect myself from the cold, which can reach twenty to thirty degrees below zero. After taking a flight from Stockholm to Luleå, we took a taxi to Boden. The fifty-minute journey went through beautiful nature that conveyed a sense of loneliness and nostalgia. The taxi brought us to Bodensia Hotel. We dropped off our luggage and went out immediately.

Boden was first mentioned to me during a Skype conversation with Marti Manen and Joanna Zawieja from the Public Art Agency Sweden in July of 2016, who mentioned the possibility of working together on a project with refugees who were arriving to this city in the far north of the country. They told me that the Swedish government was interested in creating public art in particular marginalized areas. I didn't know what to expect, or if it was even possible for me to do a project in such a place, one that I wasn't able to imagine. The white snow that surrounded me upon my arrival made me feel like I had stepped outside of the world I once thought I knew. I was lost, but I adored it.

Boden was anticipating the arrival of government officials and the government-appointed artist from Stockholm with an official reception. We took another taxi to a cultural center where a small group of people were waiting. The nine of us—Marti, Joanna, myself, and six others—boarded a bus, which had the capacity to seat fifty passengers. The tour guide on the microphone celebrated the first snowfall of the year in Boden, which was enough to make us feel the importance of the event. The tour took us around the city's military landmarks. We moved from one bunker to another in the mountains, and then to some fortresses where soldiers were staying to protect the city. From there we went to some underground areas where there were mannequin soldiers dressed in historical uniforms.

An entire life in Boden was built around waiting for war, yet one that never came. "The Russians must be coming," but the Russians never came, and the war didn't either with those who did. I exclaimed to our tour guide: "All this effort and the war did not come!" The tour guide smiled, frustrated at the question. The bus had to take each tight bend in the mountain road as a three-point turn, stopping in the middle in order to adjust. We were on a bus that was not fit to roam these rugged mountains in a place prepared for a war that never arrived on a dark white day.

I wondered how the people of Boden felt when the government decided to build a military base in their city. Did they feel that Boden had been taken over, or were they happy with the arrival of the soldiers, generals, and their families who might help bring prosperity to the town? I could not find answers to these questions, but it was clear that even though Boden's history and culture was based on a war that never arrived, the refugees did.

I was eager to visit the Yellow House, which was well known in Boden for hosting refugees. I was told that the Yellow House was a place with a bad reputation, that it brought problems to Boden. When we left the hotel the next morning, snow covered the streets and the dim light added a sparkle to the place. At the Yellow House I was met by a few journalists who asked what I was going to do.

The weather was very cold outside and we all stood in a narrow, dark passage at the entrance to the main door, waiting for two people from the immigration office who would accompany us on the visit. We could hear the sound of washing machines in the shared laundry room on the first floor. It was not the best start. I felt alienated. The only answer I gave to the journalists was that I did not know what I was going to do yet. I explained that I had come to Boden hoping to start my story with the city and its people, to dream and think together about what to do there.

The journalists left once the immigration office staff arrived. I didn't feel comfortable paying my first visit to the place in the presence of the immigration officers, but I was a guest and I had to respect my hosts. I wanted to speak with those who would accept hosting me, so I asked if we could visit an Arab family, as the common language would help. They told me that they did not know who lived here, and that we should knock on peoples' doors and ask about their nationality. This was surprising since they had told me that they were officials from the immigration office and were in charge of the Yellow House. They informed me that they came from time to time to inspect the place and make sure things were working properly, but that they had no interaction with the residents.

We started from the top floor. The official knocked on the door. After a few minutes a young man in his twenties came out in pajamas. He looked at us for few seconds before the official talked to him in Swedish, which he did not understand. I asked him in Arabic if he was an Arab, but he did not understand that either. His tension increased. I had no language or words to assure him that we were there for an art project, that this had nothing to do with his request for asylum. Everyone remained silent for a few endless seconds. The tension did not appear on the face of the official, who after a while said to the young man, "Okay, thanks," and then looked at us, urging us to go. We followed him. I looked over my shoulder to find the young man still staring at us, and finally I heard the door close.

We knocked on another door and I slipped back a little. The door opened, and the employee indicated with his hand that we could go in. We entered the house, which was dark. I was invited into the living room of the man, a Syrian-Palestinian who had lived in Gaza Camp in Jordan. He was also wearing pajamas. He greeted us and invited us to sit. His wife was in a nearby chair and there was a woman looking at us from the next room. The man told us that they shared the house, which is not more than sixty-five square meters, with an Afghan family, and that it was difficult for them to establish friendly relations with this other family due to the lack of a common language.

They explained that the smells of their food vary and their cooking methods are quite different. Both families were suffering.

They had fled via the Mediterranean on a difficult journey. I asked the man why they left Jordan when the situation there is still safe. He told us that he was originally from Haifa, that his father fled to the Gaza Strip during the 1948 war, and that they were then forced to move again to Gaza Camp in Jerash, Jordan. They were never able to obtain any official documents in Jordan, nor were their children, who were born there. He said that their situation was fine because their children could still go to school, but after the Syrian war and the refugee crisis, Syrians were given priority and there was no room left for anyone without documents. I asked him about his condition in Boden. He answered me, frustrated. "There is no life for me here. I am here for my children. I don't think I'll be able to build a life here. I eat and drink and my children go to school. It's hard to build a social life here again. I accepted my isolation for a better future for my children. That's all I care about."

His wife sitting next to him was nodding her head in agreement. I asked her about her state of mind and if she had started learning Swedish. She replied: "Yes, I am learning a little through the internet and with the help of my young son who started going to school here. He helps us understand some of what is going on around us." I asked her why she hasn't decided to take a language course that might help her start building a social life and getting to know the city better. "I can't do that," she said. "The Swedish government does not offer Swedish language courses for free until our request for asylum is approved." "How long does that take?" I asked, astonished. She replied that it could take a few years. "What!" I uttered aloud, surprised. "What do you do during these years?" "We wait," she answered quietly, as if my declamation did not surprise her.

I was eager to translate everything that was said to the immigration office staff. I asked them if it was true that refugees were not given Swedish language courses? They answered me quietly, as if I were the only one who didn't know: "Yes. There are some small institutions in the town trying to provide some independent Swedish courses, but it's not enough." I asked about the reason for this regulation. They responded that what they had heard was that the Swedish government couldn't spend too much of their resources on those who cannot stay. "But children are allowed to go to school?" "Yes, yes, their children have the right to attend Swedish schools."

Boden is a city that glorifies years of waiting for a war that has never come. At the same time, it is a place that refugees crossed seas, rivers, and forests to get to, yet it is not what they imagined, what they dreamed of. During my work in refugee camps in Palestine, I experienced the strength of refugees who had never lost their desire to live and struggle for a better future. But in Boden, I met people who made me feel as if they had lost just that. In Boden I was searching in vain for the political and social agency I encountered in Palestinian refugee camps.

Most of Boden's refugees spend their days like sardines in small rooms, with cold weather and a dark sky outside and a long winter that never seems to end. There is social isolation, too. One resident I spoke with told me: "I live with my wife and children all alone. No one knocks on our door here, while in Syria we never closed the front door." 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, saddened by what I saw, but 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 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 the country where the weather is nicer. I could not help but exclaim, almost out of desperation: "Everybody wants to escape Boden! Does no one want to stay here?!" I wasn't expecting an answer, but surprisingly, he said: "You must meet Ibrahim and Yasmeen. They are considering staying in Boden." I could not believe what he was saying. Who were these people? What is it that they saw in Boden that others didn't?

I kindly asked if Ahmad could call Yasmeen and Ibrahim. He called Ibrahim but couldn't reach him. I asked if he knew Yasmeen's phone number. He didn't, but he did tell me that Yasmeen is an architect. I spent more than an hour in Ahmad's room waiting for Ibrahim to return the call. I asked him to try again, but he still didn't pick up. I felt that I had to meet with Yasmeen and Ibrahim before I left, which was in just a few hours. We sent Ibrahim a text message, asking that he call us, and we did same thing from Marti's phone. But after waiting for a while with no response, we left the Yellow House and went for lunch before heading to the airport.

I went with Marti and Joanna to a restaurant, where I shared my fears of failing to implement any project in a place like the Yellow House where residents don't dream of change, but are rather just waiting to leave. While we were chatting, Marti's phone rang. He answered, speaking in Swedish, but I was able to understand that it was Ibrahim on the line. He finished the call and said that we were invited to their house, which is nearby. We finished our lunch and rushed there.

Ibrahim came out to greet us and welcomed us inside. Yasmeen was waiting for us in the corridor. I shook hands with her and stared shyly into her eyes before entering their living room. We met Yasmeen's mother, whose face did not hide the looks of wonder and curiosity at the nature of our visit. She was sitting with a small girl, who was watching an Arabic cartoon. She looked at us in surprise and went back to watch TV. I asked her name:

"My name is Lin"

"How old are you, Lin?"

“I am six years old.”

“Are you happy in your school in Boden?”

“Yes,” nodding her head bashfully.

I told Yasmeen and Ibrahim that their daughter is almost the same age as my own, and that children adapt quickly to new spaces.

“You are right! Lin quickly adapted to living here. By the way, Lin is not our daughter, but we love her as if she were ours.”

“What? Whose daughter is she?”

“She is Yasmeen’s cousin’s daughter.”

“Where is her family?”

“In Turkey”

“How did that happen?”

“They could not come to Sweden. Lin came with us in the same boat almost a year and a half ago. Lin has submitted family reunification documents. Hopefully they will be coming soon.”

“But why did they send her alone?”

Yasmeen said to me, nervously: “They did not send her alone. She joined me on our boat. She sat in my lap. Our boat took us to the right destination. We began the journey with Lin’s family, but their boat didn’t arrive.”

I was confused, trying to imagine the story. Yasmeen’s mother was offering us coffee, fruits, and sweets. I looked at Marti and Joanna and began translating the story of Lin into English to try and include them in the conversation.

Over coffee, I said: “In Beit Sahour, we usually offer coffee to our guests before they leave. Is it similar in Syria?”

Yasmeen responded: “No, we offer our guests coffee when they first arrive. But we also offer it to them again before they leave. First, we offer sweets or dates, and then fruit.”

“We usually offer coffee in the beginning if the gathering is a coffee gathering, which usually takes place in the morning.”

“We do it differently in Syria.”

I explained Arab hospitality to Marti and Joanna, and then went silent. I looked around and thought to myself: I entered the house of Yasmeen and Ibrahim with Marti and Joanna, who are representatives of the Swedish government. Yet here, Yasmeen and Ibrahim, in their small living room, can change the familiar roles: instead of being refugees hosted by the government, they can play the role of host, hosting the Swedish government. Their living room gave them the opportunity to refuse their role of obedient guest, complying with the norms and rules, and exercise their right to be a host.

I asked Yasmeen: “Do you have a job?”

“I am training in an architecture office some sixty kilometers away from Boden. I take the bus every morning to get there but I am not happy there. I often enter and leave the office without speaking to anyone. But I continue to go because I have to start somewhere!”

“Would you like to work with me?” I asked.

I saw signs of surprise, not only on her face but on those of all who were in the room. It was a surreal moment, as if events of a film were happening in front of me. I felt that everyone around me was having the same experience. In this living room, I found a strength that I had searched for but was unable to find in the Yellow House. How can we convey this feeling to those around us? Is there a way to infect others around us with this feeling? How can we bring hospitality as a means of creating agency back to the Yellow House?

Yasmeen replied: “Yes, I would love to work with you. But what do you want me to do?”

“We will decide together what to do! What is important now is to know whether you would want to do it.”

She answered, with a smile: “Yes!”

## THE LIVING ROOM NETWORK

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

This collaborative process led the municipal housing company BodenBo to offer us a ground floor apartment in the Yellow House to create a public living room. At the same time, I was invited to take part in an exhibition at ArkDes, the Swedish Center for Architecture and Design in Stockholm. This invitation gave me the opportunity to “amplify” my own living room as a public space in the museum while Yasmeeen and Ibrahim could do the same in the Yellow House.

The challenge in both spaces was to give a public dimension to the private sphere. In the Yellow House, we asked the engineer to tear down all of the walls and keep only the load-bearing ones. Yet at ArkDes, the need was the opposite: by building a threshold of four walls and three doors, a private space was created in the already public space of the museum.

The design of the living room in ArkDes was inspired by the square that we designed in Fawwar Refugee Camp. There, it became clear that in the absence of the state, the only way to manage the public space in the camp was to create a threshold: four walls and four doors that could create the intimacy people needed to use as well as manage the space. Another living room is in Fawwar Refugee Camp itself and was set up by Ayat Al Turshan, a former participant of Campus in Camps. Her living room is slightly different from ours in Sweden. In Fawwar, the madafeh are typically run by men, and Ayat had long been invested in working for the right of women to be in the public. Thus, the concept of *madafeh* and a space of public hospitality owned by both men and women, where women can claim the right to host, is highly controversial.

Another living room took place on the NYU Campus in Abu Dhabi. We arrived as perfect guests, but decided to open the temporary home the university gave to us to the community and become hosts. We invited students and faculty members into our living room and created a sense of intimacy that helped question the relation between professor and student, between guest and host, as well as creating a sense of belonging to the campus, to the exhibition that we were there for, and to the meaning of permanent temporariness in a place like Abu Dhabi.

As I write, a new living room is being established in Ramallah in collaboration with the municipality. In the context of Qalandya International, and as a guest of the

municipality, I am claiming to be a host in a public space, in the house of Beit Al-Saigh, and invite guests who will also host in the madafeh. Young artists and architects will discuss how artistic practice in Palestine can be a critical force today without becoming either complicit in a regime of occupation and oppression or hostage to capitalism. Ayat will also bring her madafeh from Fawwar to Ramallah.

It is important to think of the project as a network of madafehs that generates a movement of people who see the possibility to fully exercise their own agency in the act of hospitality. The presence of Ayat in Ramallah is a perfect example of this. By bringing her madafeh from Fawwar to Ramallah, Ayat's living room will gain a public dimension and hence greater legitimacy in her own community. Moreover, her presence will bring the voice of the camp to the very heart of the city, and thus gain the political and social recognition that Ayat craves and needs to continue her work. This collective recognition is at the core of the idea of the network, as each living room brings strength and visibility to the others. As Yasmeeen gave me strength through her hospitality, I am now giving strength to Ayat. This network allows us to look at ourselves in the mirror and understand our own lives through the experiences and stories of others, however different they may be. None of us were capable of creating a sense of belonging to the public by ourselves, but we all shared the desire to contribute to the life of the place we live in.

The creation of a network of living rooms is at the core of a political movement that puts hospitality at its center. This is not an abstract thought, but something that starts with the creation of physical spaces: living rooms that can activate hospitality. Many people exercise the right to host without realizing the power it carries. Thus, the creation of a network is not relief, but rather recognition of the universal right to host.