



# Stepping over a Threshold

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*Al Madhafah/The Living Room*, the public artwork in the Yellow House at Prästholmen in Boden, which had taken the form of a semi-public living room over the course of three years, was closed in the autumn of 2021. The space itself can still be seen from a distance, as a glazed corner on the house's ground floor. The windows were specially installed, stretching from floor to ceiling, making all the shared meals, communal cooking and gatherings that took place visible to passers-by. The heart of *Al Madhafah/The Living Room* was the big round rug and cushions, embroidered with phrases in Arabic. Now the windows will be frosted, and the space will be returned to the Migration Agency and once again become housing for asylum seekers, like the other apartments in the building.

*Al Madhafah/The Living Room* by the architect and artist Sandi Hilal was a work situated somewhere between public and private, a semi-public space challenging the roles of guest and host, and exploring the political implications of hosting. I was a frequent guest there in my capacity as curator for the project and architect at Public Art Agency Sweden, especially at the beginning, when *Al Madhafah/The Living Room* was still searching for its form, and before the pandemic made it difficult to visit.

Through the work, Sandi Hilal suggests ways to look at and practice hosting as a right and a privilege. This act of hosting took many different forms in *Al Madhafah/The Living Room* – usually, Yasmeen Mahmoud, an architect and then asylum seeker, was the one putting the kettle on and keeping the door open. On Saturdays others assumed the role of host, most often residents of Boden waiting for their asylum claims to be processed, who

Documentation from  
*Al Madhafah/The Living Room*, Sandi Hilal, Boden,  
2018.  
Photo: Andreas Fernandez

used the space to hold open collective dinners based around different culinary themes. Sometimes Mahmoud and the occupants of the house invited local politicians for a meal. Activities of a more organized nature were regularly held, such as language courses and other study activities. What concretely took place in *Al Madhafah/The Living Room* changed over time in an organic investigation of the right to claim a space, and the role of sharing it with others. Here, in the entrance to the housing for asylum seekers, hosting, an apparently everyday event, became a radical act – a way of building communities and becoming visible as a political subject with agency and a history. Making a place in the present and writing your presence into the future.

*Al Madhafah/The Living Room* raises the question about which publics are allowed to symbolize a larger national “we”, whose history is written into the collective memory. It is a question that stands in direct relationship to, and negotiation with, the contemporary conditions of democracy. Even if *Al Madhafah/The Living Room* is not explicitly memorial art, the work nevertheless reflects many of the subjects taken up by other texts in this publication. Sandi Hilal herself is clear about the work’s mission – she writes how she, through public art, wants to create places where difficult conversations can occur and where public spaces can open up for wider participation. *Al Madhafah/The Living Room* as a semi-public place inhabits the boundaries between public and private, and explores the urgencies of this in-between space.

Problematizing the opposition between public and private is a theme running through feminist architectural theory and has been significant for me in my work as architect and curator. An important reference for me with relevance in this context, is the American feminist thinker bell hooks – especially her texts dealing with the home as a place for resistance. hooks has highlighted how private and semi-private spaces can engender and create new publics. She often refers to the “homeplace” from the perspective of Black American women, and describes how homeplaces create spaces to realize oneself as a subject, healing wounds caused by racist structures, and making it possible for those who are discriminated in public to build communities.

hooks complicates ideas about a neutral public sphere, and highlights the importance of a place of one’s own to be able to develop a voice. Today, hooks’ reflections on homeplace resonate differently given contemporary polarizations with semi-private digital enclaves. This makes the question of hosting all the more relevant: *Al Madhafah/The Living Room* can be read with the idea of the homeplace in mind, but also extends it – as the act of hosting challenges the surrounding world to step over a threshold, to take the role as guest and, at least for a brief moment, relinquish the privilege of interpretation.

*Al Madhafah/The Living Room* is not a spatial proposal, but rather a relational construction, weaving a community into being and establishing a context to speak from. That said, the work also invites us to look at society’s divisions, and it directs attention to questions about the “publicness” of public art. From which publics does art emerge, and to which publics is it directed? How can public art expand a heritage of stories and make space for the experiences of subjects traditionally not publicly represented? Such questions have been vital to my own work, and were also crucial in framing Hilal’s project in Boden.

Boden is a city which, until recently, built its identity around military fortifications and preparation for war. The narrative is changing now that the green energy industry is expanding its presence in the region of Norrbotten, causing property prices to rise, and the demand for labour to grow. But that is not how it was in the autumn of 2016, when my colleague Marti Manen and I first visited Boden together with Sandi Hilal. We had invited Hilal to develop a public work at Prästhölen in Boden. The background to the invitation was a series of projects, where Public Art Agency Sweden invited civic society to propose places connected to the Swedish Million Programme housing areas as sites for artistic work. From the governmental perspective, it was an attempt to engage civil society in the creation of public artworks and to share the mandate about where and around which themes such works could take place. A multitude of constituencies with diverging desires, needs and agendas appeared at the 15 places where the artworks came to be developed. Like so often when it comes to public art, the works’ creation was played out in the midst of society’s movements and frictions, in spaces of constant renegotiation, most often from asymmetrical positions of power. That the State itself, and more specifically the Ministry of Culture, initiated this series of projects was not without significance. It caused doors to open for the local civil society, which otherwise would have been difficult to budge, but also provoked intense debates about the stigmatizing of places and the instrumentalization of art. Not least as the Ministry of Culture formulated one of the aims of the project series as “promoting cultural and democratic initiatives in certain residential areas with low voter turnout”.

In the case of Sandi Hilal’s work, the State, or more precisely Marti Manen and I in our capacities as the State’s representatives, played a productive role in building up the narrative. We invited Hilal to work with us, based on her experience of working practically and theoretically with questions concerning migration, temporary publics and explorative spaces for collective learning, often through collective work. I had found out that she was on the point of moving to Sweden and saw that her experience and eye would give an important perspective to the work in



Boden, not least as the local application from Boden had raised questions about the place's architectural challenges and a wish to create a place for the exchange of knowledge.

Our first encounter with Boden and Prästhölm made us painfully aware of the distance between the city's established narratives and the voices of the new residents of Boden that we met. The asylum seekers in the Yellow House were not the ones applying to work with an artist, instead it was the local art gallery Havremagasinet, as well as the Defense Museum and the communal housing company, BodenBo.

We spent our first day in Boden on a guided bus tour through ruins and fortifications, testifying to a military presence in the area, which up until the 1990s had been closed to foreigners. "All that effort, and the war never came", as the guide wistfully commented. The nostalgic sentiment also had to do with the strong community feeling which had developed in these bunkers – despite their restricted access, they had been at the heart of local society. Today the city, which has always been open to newly arrived residents (albeit in the form of conscripts), has more and more inhabitants from other places and continents with actual experiences of war. The absence of their voices on our guided tour added to the antiquated feeling. When we went to the Yellow House the following day, the divide became even more apparent. In one room after the other we were offered tea and heard the same story: "During the summer, there's a lawn outside the Yellow House, where you can spend the day in each other's company. But now, in November, there's no one else. Now the darkness is overbearing and loneliness weighs heavy." That day we encountered many people in different stages of despair. There was a lack of common areas in the house and the feeling of isolation was increased by the long process of gaining asylum, with limited possibilities for social engagement in the larger society.

The image changed at the end of the day when we met Yasmeen Mahmoud and Ibrahim Muhammad Haj Abdullah in an apartment in another part of Boden. Mahmoud, who had studied architecture in Ar-Raqqa, had been in Boden for over a year and had decided to stay. With her living room as a base, she engaged herself in building networks and supporting other newly arrived immigrants. We were welcomed as guests in Mahmoud's living room with an openness and warmth that caused Hilal to refer to this meeting as a reversed situation – the refugee couple refused to play the eternal guest but instead took on the role of the host and invited in emissaries from "the Swedish government". The work found its starting point in this meeting. It was Yasmeen Mahmoud and Ibrahim Muhammad Haj Abdullah's engagement and agency, as much as their actual living room, that placed the focus on the act of hosting and the role of the host. Mahmoud

came to work alongside Sandi Hilal and was given a central role in developing the organization and the care of the living room in the Yellow House.

The practical management of *Al Madhafah/The Living Room* evolved over time through ongoing discussions about keys, timetables, cleaning and shopping lists – practical details crucial to a shared space. *Al Madhafah/The Living Room* was, on the one hand, a setting that looked for alternative forms of organizing, and on the other, a work facilitated by public art institutions associated with bureaucracy and project-based forms of financing. Many of the thoughts around hosting were articulated through the trial and error of the practical management. Steeped in the praxis of Swedish statist individualism, I was personally initially an advocate of a booking system in the style of the shared laundry rooms found in this country, so that everyone in the house, at least on paper, could have the same rights and responsibilities. But this proposal ignored the possibilities, mandate, and responsibility of the host. If *Al Madhafah/The Living Room* was to work as a place where communities could be shaped, it needed a clear provider in the role of a host. This is how the key to the space, as well as the living room itself, can be seen as the physical manifestation of the work.

*Al Madhafah/The Living Room* is closed now, but the conversation continues elsewhere; Yasmeen Mahmoud is still present as the host for Saturday meetings, now at the ABF – the Workers' Educational Association – and in her own living room at home. Sandi Hilal has continued the project in other forms, in new places and contexts. I am writing this text in Stockholm as a representative of a state institution, admittedly with my own experiences of being both guest and host in this country, but, in this text writing from the curator's point of view. While it is not possible for me to recount all the stories that filled the living room in Boden, I chose to reflect on this work in relation to memorial art: how *Al Madhafah/The Living Room* highlights a presence and a history in the city which transcends old sentiments, and how it challenges established society to assume the role of guests in order to weave our stories together into new ones.

The work of memory can help us in understanding who we are against the background of the past, something that Rebecka Katz Thor discusses in her contribution to this volume. *Al Madhafah/The Living Room* makes a parallel movement and helps us understand who we are and which pasts we carry with us in constituting this "we". In all of its practical ordinariness, the work highlights how the public sphere is in constant negotiation. Who is going to take responsibility for the keys? And who is prepared to cross the threshold and assume the role of guest?