

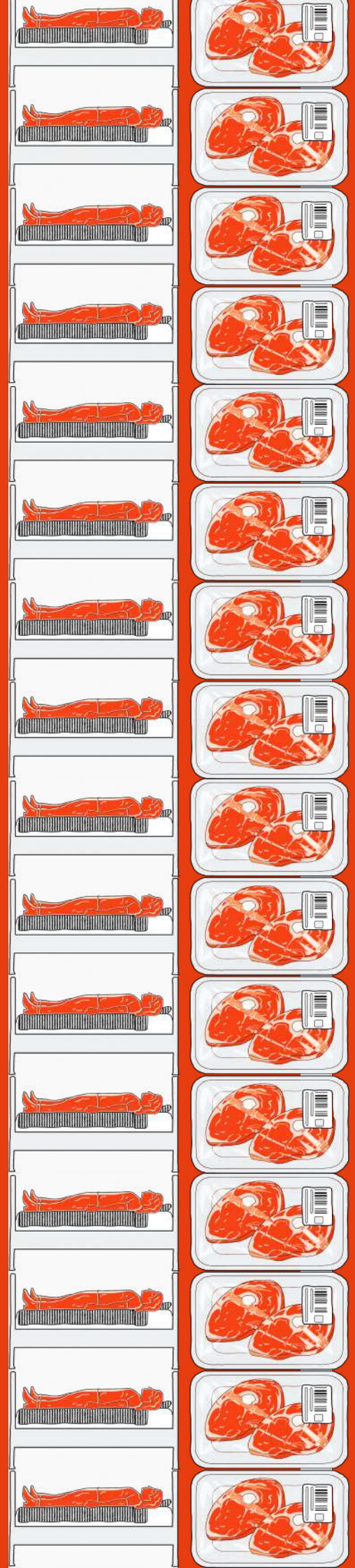
counteracting stacking

*Enabling people in the swedish asylum process
to spatially influence their living environment*

Maja Nederman Thore
Master's Thesis Spring 2025

Chalmers School of Architecture
Department of Architecture & Civil Engineering
Architecture and Planning Beyond Sustainability
Society, Justice, Space

Examiner: Marco Adelfio
Supervisors: Bri Gauger & Jessica Lundin



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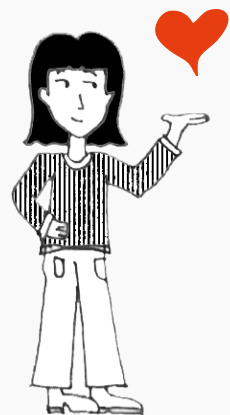


CHALMERS
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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*I would like to take this opportunity to thank, in print, all the people I have met over the past two years who are involved in the profile (see: family) society, justice, space;
You as a teaching team have impressed, inspired, and invited me into a community of incredibly knowledgeable and warm-hearted people that truly enhanced my time at Chalmers.*

*Thank you to my supervisors Bri Gauger and Jessica Lundin;
for supporting me throughout the process with interesting discussions, positive energy and as female role models.*

*Thank you to my wonderful teacher and examiner Marco Adelfio;
who, during my time at the masters, has now also become the program manager of the MPDSD = a huge win for the future of the architecture faculty.*

abstract

This thesis critically examines the furnishing of the rooms and sleeping places allocated to each asylum seeker in a Swedish asylum accommodation. The aim is to see how the architect can contribute to the global humanitarian problem that is forced displacement and refugeeism through analyzing and visualizing the environments and spaces connected to it - as well as investigate how spatial interventions can counteract the asylum seeker's lack of influence. The underlying idea is to highlight the importance of design by strengthening the link between the built environment and the humanitarian rights of the individual. In this way, an organisation such as the Migration agency which is used to consulting other professions rather than architects on these issues can be motivated to do so.

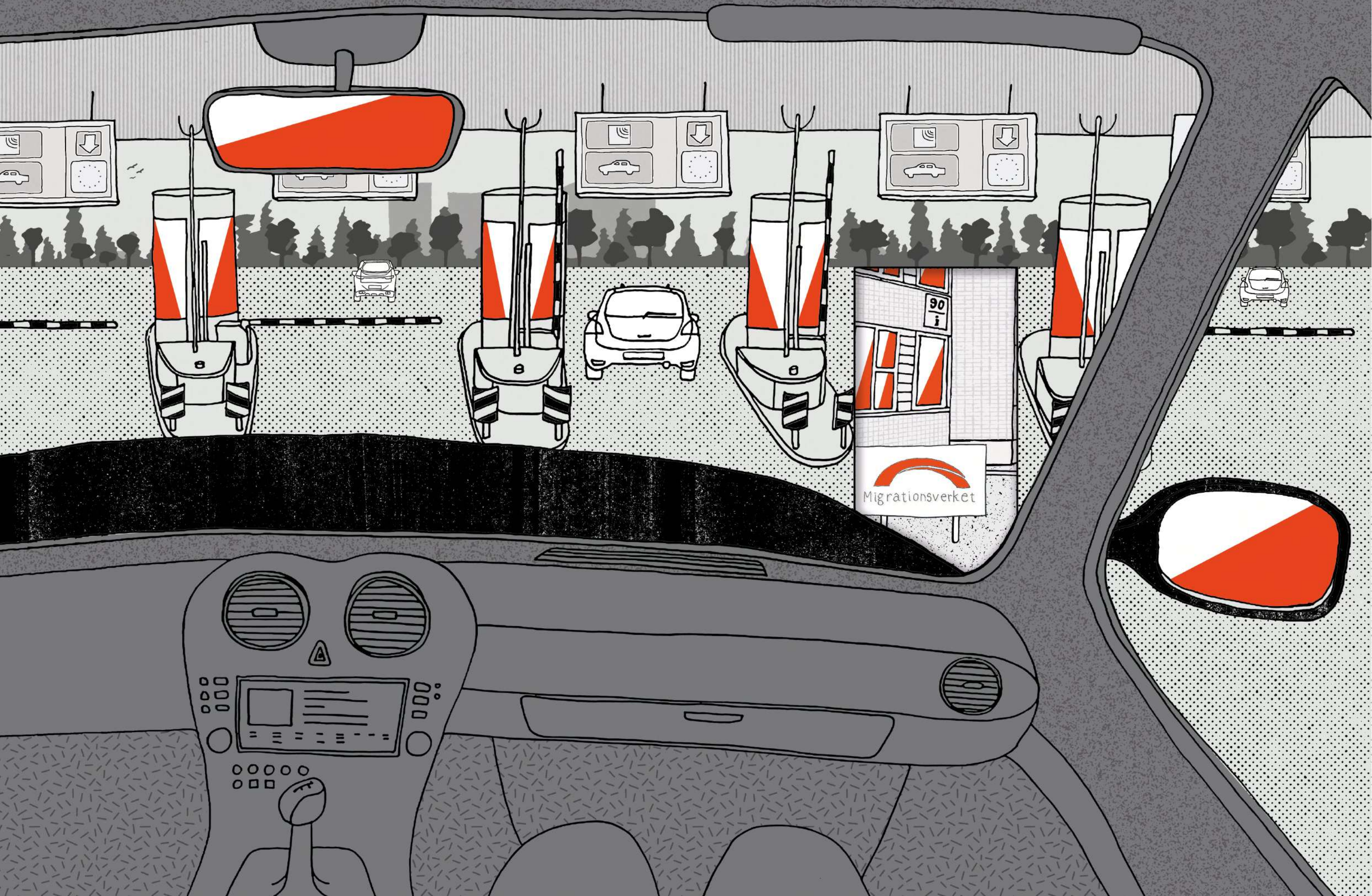
To understand and explain the complex structures that are Swedish integration and asylum reception, methods have ranged from reading international law and interviewing staff working in the accommodations - to challenging classic architectural drawing language by instead showcasing information through various types of storytelling.

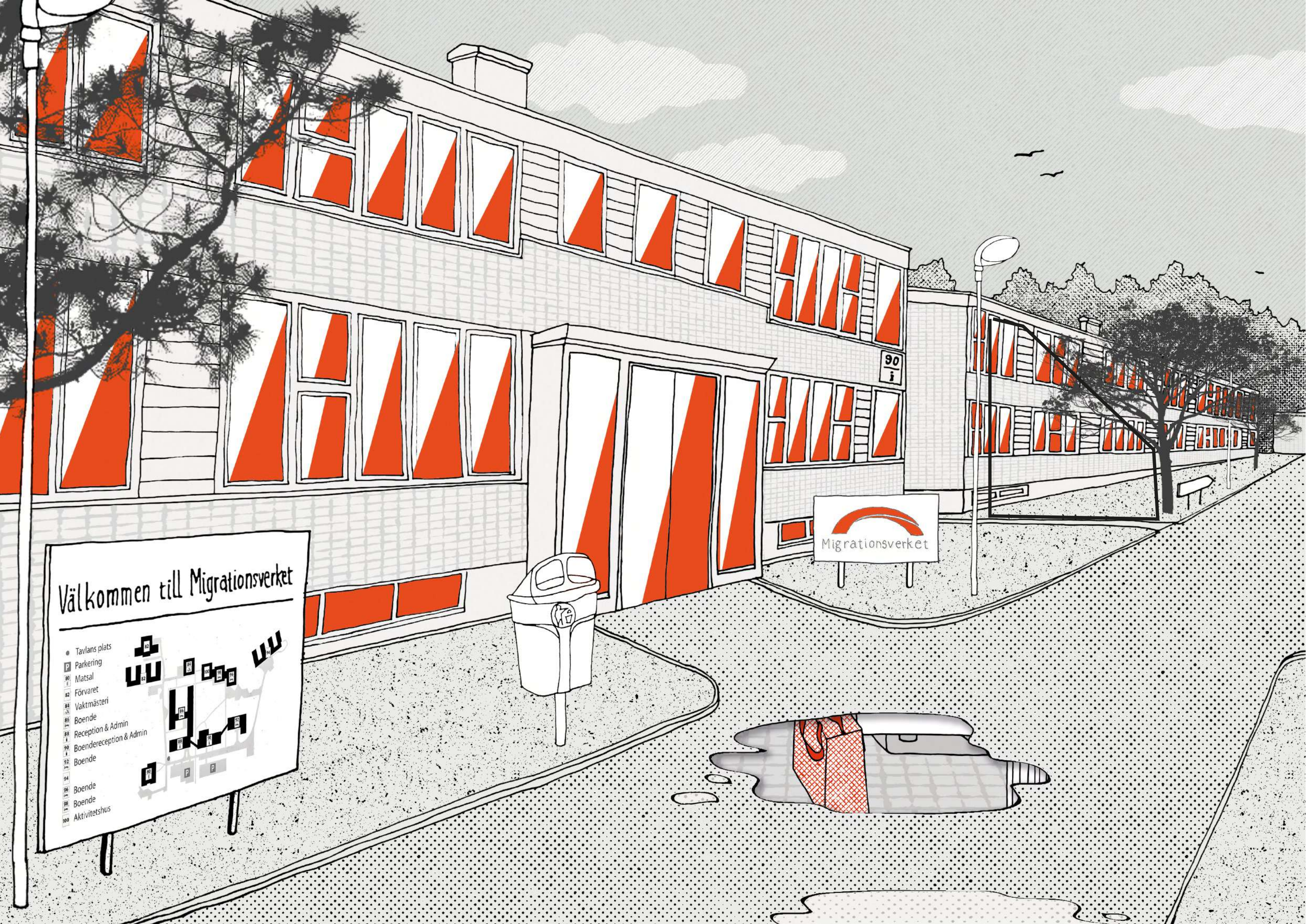
More specifically, the work examines the facilities that the asylum seeker live in during the two earlier stages of their arrival in Sweden. These two types of accommodations are exemplified via Sagåsen arrival accommodation in Kålleröd outside Gothenburg, together with the long-term accommodation Restad Gård in Vänersborg.

The study points to the fact that there are many structural and administrative factors that prevent asylum accommodations from both spatially individualizing but also changing in general. The keys to unlocking these bureaucratic locks are small, precise and allow residents to both customize and create a relationship with the environment they are living in. Proposed is a small catalog of 6 architectural keys, or interior objects, that can be implemented in the already rigid context of the rooms. The objects work to counteract the feeling of temporarity and instead enable conditions to store one's belongings and strengthens the individual's possibility to choose the amount of lighting and privacy by their own space.

Keywords:

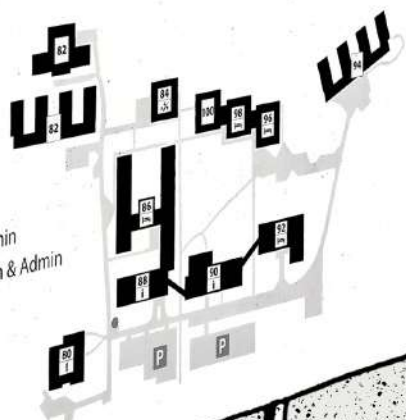
*Asylum accommodations, Small scale interventions,
Swedish migration agency, Refugee architecture,
Personalization, Bunk bed*





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- P Parkering
- 90 Matsal
- 82 Föreläsning
- 84 Vaktmästeri
- 85 Boende
- 88 Reception & Admin
- 90 Boendereception & Admin
- 92 Boende
- 94 Boende
- 96 Boende
- 98 Boende
- 100 Aktivitetshus



Migrationsverket

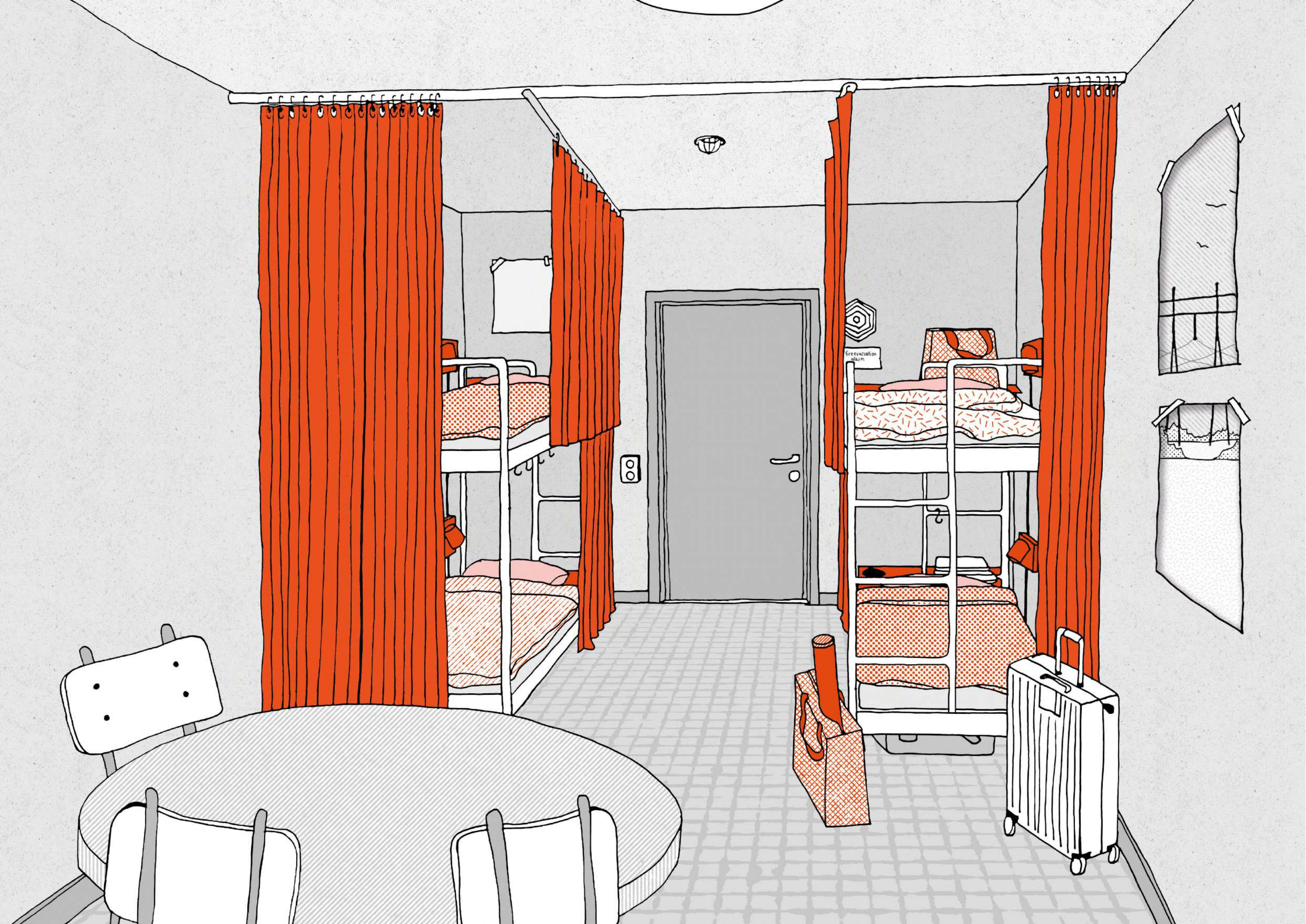






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maja nederman thore

1.1 student
background

MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE - MPDSD

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1.2 purpose & aim

I am of the belief that the architectural profession can contribute to more than to only stimulate the construction industry in Western society.

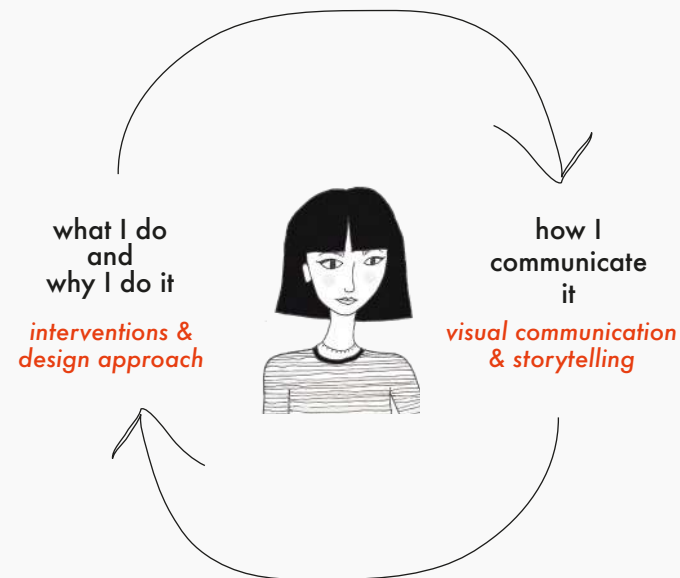
Architects are (still) one of the actors who have a great influence over the societies we live in. In other words, an enormous power to affect other people's lives. It is important to reflect more on how this hierarchy and distribution of power is structured and what conditions the power gives us to shape the future. **Architects as a group can help to shift focus on what should be considered an important built environment**, regardless of where the money is.

This also plays out in how we choose to convey the built environment that we propose, or how we communicate with the people who will inhabit and live there.

Architects are trained to portray human reality, history and future through different methods and techniques. This knowledge is valuable beyond the walls, floors and ceilings that are traditionally considered to be architecture. The skills can also be used to tell narratives and bridge information between people, whatever the subject.

Visual language is an open and inclusive way to reach a wider range of receivers as it quickly bridges knowledge gaps such as language limitations and industry-bound text formats. **Therefore, architects are well equipped to raise issues, challenges and debate in a way that can attract and include a broader section of our society to engage.**

However, there is elitist and specialized language in architecture circuits as well. We should be well aware of how this affects the common people's relationship and understanding of the built environment and its processes, and that this is not always to our advantage.



This thesis does not arise from the architect's inner desire to design something for her own sake.

Instead, it sets out to see how the architect can contribute to the global humanitarian problem that is forced displacement and refugeeism through analyzing, visualizing and improving the environments and spaces connected to it.

I want to make my chosen context visible; both for people already working in or with the system - but also to architects who I think should be more aware of the environments this system take place in.

Hopefully, I can make a professional academic report while at the same time convey a feeling that feels humane and approachable for not only architects and researchers.

1.3 thesis questions & main objectives

interventions & design approach

- How can spatial interventions counteract the asylum seeker's lack of agency while living in Swedish asylum accommodations?
- What are the architectural keys that can enable personalization within the very set frames of the Swedish Migration Agency's spatial processes?

visual communication & storytelling

- How can the architect use her visual abilities to communicate to people working with Swedish migration and asylum reception?

1.4 delimitations

Even though the starting point is broad, the result is precise.

The work looks at the Swedish context and its asylum accommodations to more specifically examine the individual rooms and the furniture in them.

The design purpose is **not** to propose any building additions, renovations or to restructure the building complexes as whole. A scenario like those stands too far from reality looking at both the financial assets of the migration agency as well as how they acquire the buildings in which they operate.

What is examined is the small scale, the possibilities within the individual rooms and the flexibility for the residents to influence the rooms. Therefore, the proposals for change are small interventions, whether aimed at design and built environments - or structural links and relationships.

The work is done to strengthen the personalization and individualization of the specific group of *asylum seekers*, not the broad definition of migrants, and **the investigation is entirely tied to the spatial processes that are intertwined with the asylum seeking process.**

The environments that the thesis will study in the asylum process are the earlier phases. In other words, not any accommodations that become relevant after forced relocation to a municipality or anything that has to do with EBO (when the refugees find housing on their own). The examined accommodations are:

🏠 "Arrival accommodation"

The first building refugees come to in order to register their presence in Sweden.

Time of stay: 3 days - 4 months.

Exemplified via: Sagåsen, Källered Göteborg.

🏠 "Accommodation during asylum procedure"

A type of long-term accommodation where refugees stay while waiting for their cases to be processed (for example an asylum application or a residence permit)

Time of stay: days - **forever**.

Exemplified via: Restad gård, Vänersborg.

1.5 methodology

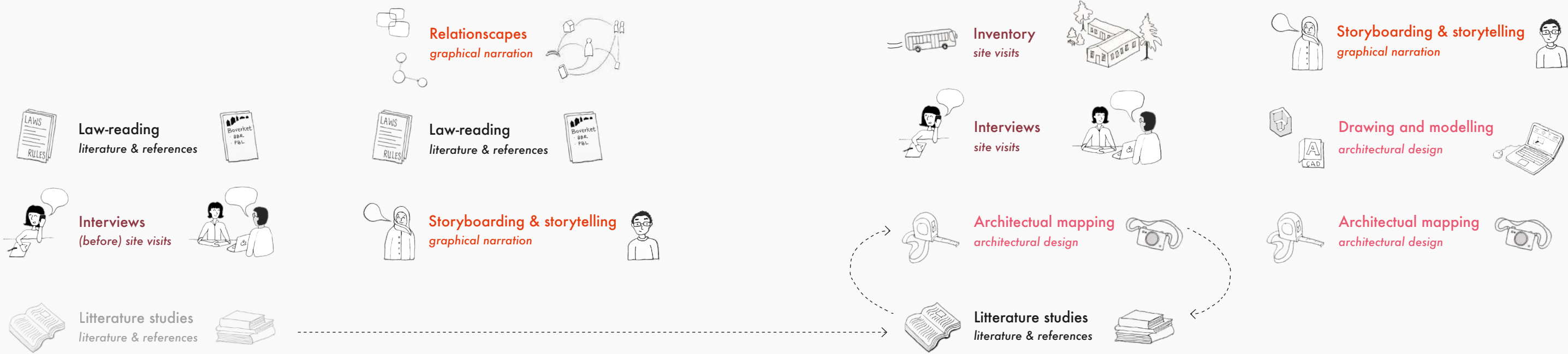
The methodology follows a research for design - based approach that is very grounded in reality. Because the thesis looks an the relationship between the built environment and humanitarian justice, it does not follow the architect's inner desire to design buildings for her own sake. The methods are chosen thereafter; and aim to both investigate and showcase the findings in a way that does not only speak to other architects or people in the construction industry.

The graphic methods therefore aim to be educational, explanatory and in human dialog with the environments showcased.

Much of the spatial and process-bound information highlighted as facts - is based on interviews and guided tours from people who work or have worked at the Swedish Migration Agency.

This is the administrator at the Migration Agency's arrival accommodation Sagåsen: Marcus Mokoena, team leader and one of the key people behind the accommodation environments at Restad Gård: Tommy Bengtsson, and former Director General of the Swedish Migration Agency & now First Deputy Executive Director of EUAA: Mikael Ribbenvik.

The methods can be categorized in 4 groups:



phase 1 - basic knowledge, big picture & complexe environments

Since the work is strongly rooted in reality and aims to map real scenarios, I started with reading various laws. This applied to both international and national laws on migration, but also how refugee reception looks in Sweden in general. Forced displacement, documents, rights, obligations and, above all, the framework for the asylum accommodations in the country.

Simultaneously I had ongoing communication with Mikael Ribbenvik, Earlier Director general for Migrationsverket Sverige, now the current First Deputy Executive Director of EUAA (European Union Agency of Asylum), on practical issues. This both on a top-down perspective because of his roles, but also on a smaller scale connected to issues on site in the accommodations as Mikael has also been head of a specific unit at a detention center in Örkelljunga. This initial phase was set to provide a basic knowledge and set an early framework for the thesis.

In parallel, I started reading some literature and looked into reference projects regarding built environments for refugees. This theory was broad and not tied to a specific context.

phase 2 - translate facts into graphics & convey a feeling

Once I had a good picture of the broader Swedish context, I started to rework the information and outtakes to be understandable for both myself and the reader. This mainly involved designing a relationscape that shows the connections and relationships that exist between different actors, places and functions.

The law reading continued, but now in a more focused and in-depth way.

I also took the opportunity to explore alternative ways of telling the story of reality, i.e. with factual and accurate content - but also while trying to capture the feeling of the facts I am conveying.

I was able to find more reference projects that discussed interesting things about the approach itself when architects are working with refugee environments.

phase 3 - face reality & get a spatial understanding

When the context was clear in theory, it was time to see how things actually looked and worked in reality. I made site visits to an arrival accommodation and a long-term accommodation where I was guided around by employees from the migration agency. I had the opportunity to ask lots of questions and was given access to see both the common areas and the type rooms. In the type rooms I was able to start mapping spatial parameters and objects by measuring, photographing and taking notes.

Once I had examined specific rooms and spaces on site, I could finally connect these environments to what I had processed from the theory. I started to map and inventory the sites from a perspective where I had the conclusions from theory as a critical lens.

phase 4 - pinpoint limitations & create possibilities

The final phase of my thesis work consisted of a mix of design, storytelling and problematization of context and theory. I worked on concretizing the design keys that I could implement in the system - to achieve, or at least set a course towards, the possibilities of personalization of the rooms.

At the same time, I continued with how to narrate my research and results. The answer was a picture book to show the physical journey through the Migration agency's phases, and a physical paper model to interact with to show my design interventions. A lot of time was therefore spent working on bringing out details and the right feeling in what I produced.

For example, the model is hand-cut and not made with a laser cutter, and the size is small, to capture the non-perfect reality of the rooms and to get an idea of how small my design proposals actually are. In the picture book, my goal was to build a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity about the future, so I worked with a cut-out concept where the reader was constantly given a glimpse of the next page.



1.6 background

In a world facing more and more humanitarian crises - in the form of war, conflict, climate change and natural disasters - compassion, engagement and cooperation is needed. When people are forced to flee from their homes and countries, they seek out what could be a new, safer and possibly better life.

Some people come here, to Sweden; perhaps because they have heard that we have a high level of gender and sexual equality; perhaps because our freedom of religion contributes to openness regardless of faith; perhaps because they have seen pictures of green forests, archipelagos, fields, snowy mountains and midsummer, which paint the picture of Sweden as a fairy tale in the north.

-

However, these individuals can quickly be awakened from the fairy tale and dream that is Sweden and instead face a cold, gray, bureaucratic reality.

The already vulnerable people may have made it to a safe country, but will start a new uncertain journey regarding their level of citizenship, rights and ability to influence their own lives.

As it stands today, asylum seekers have a very limited opportunity to influence both their housing in terms of geography where they will live, but also architecturally how they can furnish and create a sense of home in the temporary accommodations they are passed through.

In this state of uncertainty and vulnerability, it is devastating if the person concerned is also forced to be passive. Not just by waiting and wondering, but by living a life in a certain way that they have not been able to choose or control.

This is not a criticism of the Swedish Migration Agency and their work, on the contrary; a desire for cooperation and will of working with important and complex issues.

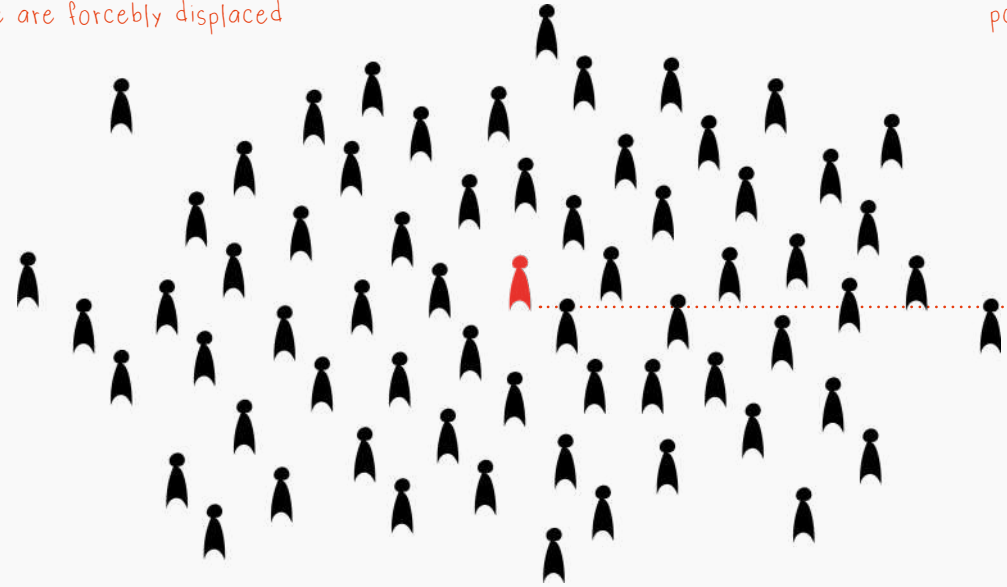
This thesis has the ambition to find structural and architectural keys that can enable people in the Swedish asylum process to influence their own living situation.

The exploration will see if the re-furnishing or re-designing of the furniture provided to the people in the accommodations can be developed and improved by an architect.

117,3
million

people are forcibly displaced

in other words
1,5%
of the whole world's
population



UNHCR (2024) states how almost 120 million people have been forced to leave their homes as a result of conflicts, natural disasters, persecution or wars that have reached such proportions that their lives are in danger.

This number is expected to grow as more areas and regions are affected by climate change. (UNHCR, 2024)

Depending on the country to which refugees arrive, the housing situations offered differ. From a global perspective, the most common scenario is the so-called 'refugee camp', but in Europe this is a limited phenomenon. Here, the majority of states offer housing in already existing built environments, or newly built accommodations with the specific purpose of serving as refugee housing. The condition of these accommodations can vary enormously in comparison between countries, but also within countries, and of course depending on the number of refugees seeking asylum in the country at that point.

These, what often has the purpose of being, **temporary environments become permanent realities for many.**

Refugee
accommodations
are no longer a
parenthesis in the
global built fabric;

but extend over huge areas, are housing a large part of the world's population and are acting as both communities and societies.

**Undeniably,
a topic for architects to engage in.**

It is a delicate situation where human issues and humanitarian work come into direct contact with international regulations and government bureaucracy. These are environments that should not be left to chance or to people without experience or understanding of the critical context.



fig. Graphics of the harsh relation between individual and bureaucracy

un migration & refugee politics - timeline (studied from the early 2000s)

Information gathered from
Utrikespolitiska institutionen Landguiden
(2024) "EU – Gränser och invandring"
(Translated: UN-Borders and immigration)

2005

- Since 2005, asylum issues have been a common policy of the EU; decided by a qualified majority voting and having cooperative decision making in the European Parliament.

2015

- The EU-member states agreed on to distribute the asylum seekers more evenly by taking into consideration the size of the country, GNP, unemployment numbers and earlier amount of refugees received. Some eastern european countries refused to receive any refugees at all, and some member states promised to contribute but did not in practice.

2020-2023

- The management proposal reappeared and the EU-member states agreed on a new migrant politics. Now refugees would be distributed between member states depending on population and GNP. (However, many rounds of negotiations remained before the European Commission, member states and the European Parliament could agree on a final migration pact by the end of 2023.)



2010

- The migration system that Europe had used in the early 2000s became problematic when the EU implemented stricter restrictions about carrier liability. This made it much harder for refugees to travel to Europe via train or plane. The transportation companies suddenly became responsible for controlling that all passengers had visas, and if not - to immediately deny their wish to travel. Because of this the refugees started to seek alternative paths to Europe by crossing the Mediterranean sea on more or less safe boats. Italy, Spain and especially Greece were exposed to large refugee flows by boat, but it did not take long until the people arriving sought out other countries, and began the journey north. All this happened without paper or authorization, which made it legally complicated for any state to refer to the Dublin Regulation as there was no proof of what the first country of arrival had been.

2017

- A new migration management proposal started to be discussed. The aim was to achieve a more effective distribution of refugees when a certain country receives an abnormally high number of asylum applications. The proposal included that countries not accepting refugees would have to financially compensate the countries accepting them. No agreement could be reached about this.

2016

- To slow down the stream of migrants the EU leaders negotiated and wrote a contract with Turkey to stop the crossings via the Aegean Sea. As an exchange the EU agreed to contribute financially to the receptions of refugees in Turkey.

2024

- The new pact was approved by the EU parliament. Through this pact the migration politics within the EU have been stricter. Migrants are put in custody until the case is handled and the ones that do not have enough reason to apply for asylum are not allowed to cross the borders of the union. Those who are evaluated to have grounds for asylum are distributed among the member countries. If a country does not take its quota, it has to pay compensation.

the "race for the bottom"

Ribbenvik (2025) explains how there is a concept in migration policy at the national level called "race for the bottom" that he has encountered in his work. This is a phenomenon, or perhaps movement, where states politically work to dismantle parts of their existing refugee reception to actively make them 'worse'. By creating a worse image of their country's refugee reception, it can spread and make it less attractive for refugees to flee to / seek asylum in. In other words, sates are racing to be the worst - the bottom.

Ribbenvik clarifies that the "race for the bottom" is of course strongly linked to the politics prevailing in the country and how current governing parties view refugee reception in general.

When I look at these changes that have taken place in European migration policy, I can see that a gradual restriction is taking place. This means, in theory, that it will be much more difficult for refugees to be allowed to stay in Europe, but also their ability to move within the UN and influence which country they want to go to as a "final destination".

Either way, the UN can set whatever laws it wants, but this does not mean that the humanitarian and environmental disasters that occur around the globe will stop. I perceive that the pressure of asylum seekers will continue, and at times increase, to reach countries here in hope to create a new future for themselves. Affected people will (continue to) risk their lives to cross UN borders regardless of what the law says. Refugees will arrive, the question is if they are allowed to stay.

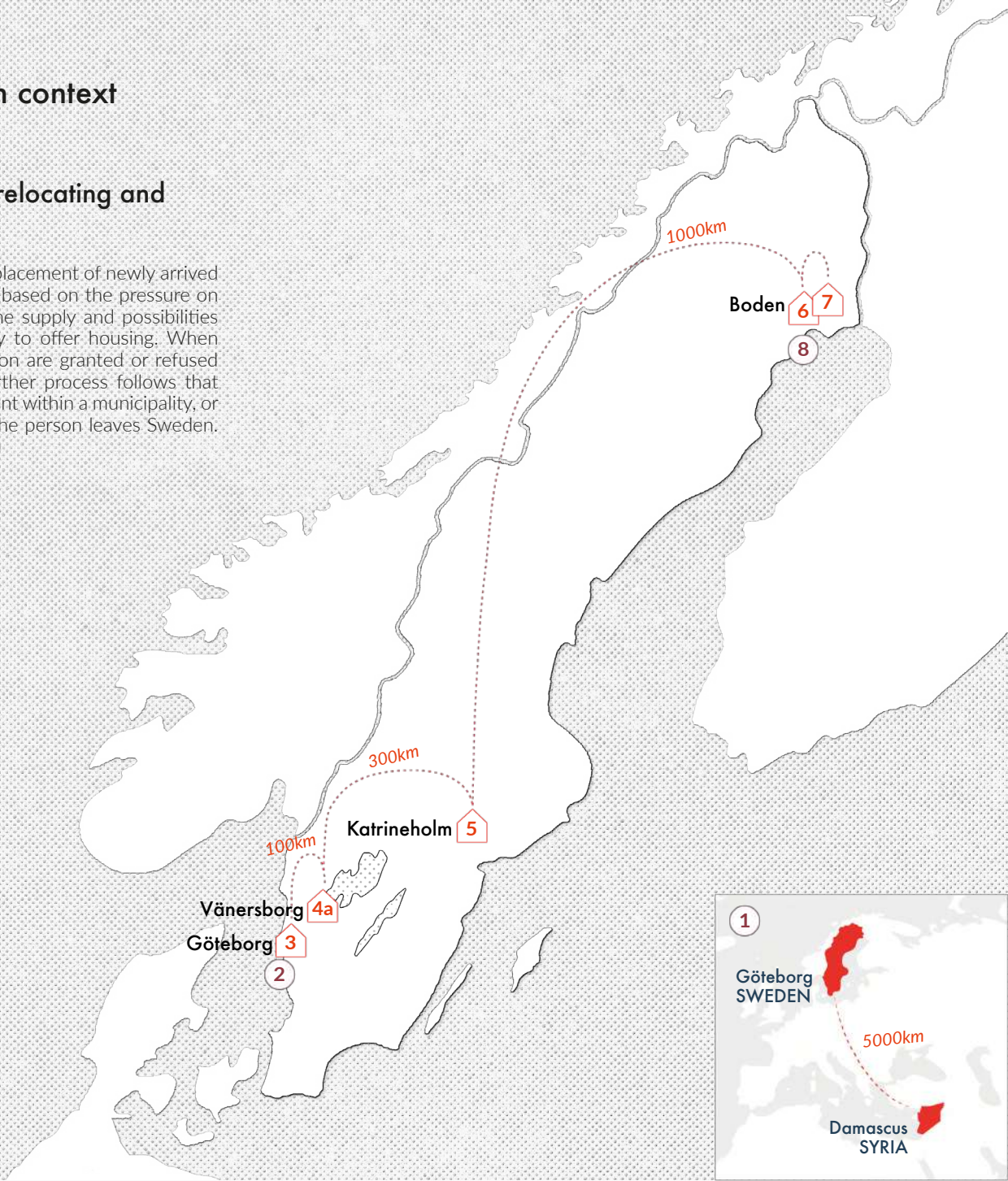
I wonder what their first time in Sweden is like and how we welcome them to our country.

What are the built environments where refugees spend their time while waiting for the asylum process?

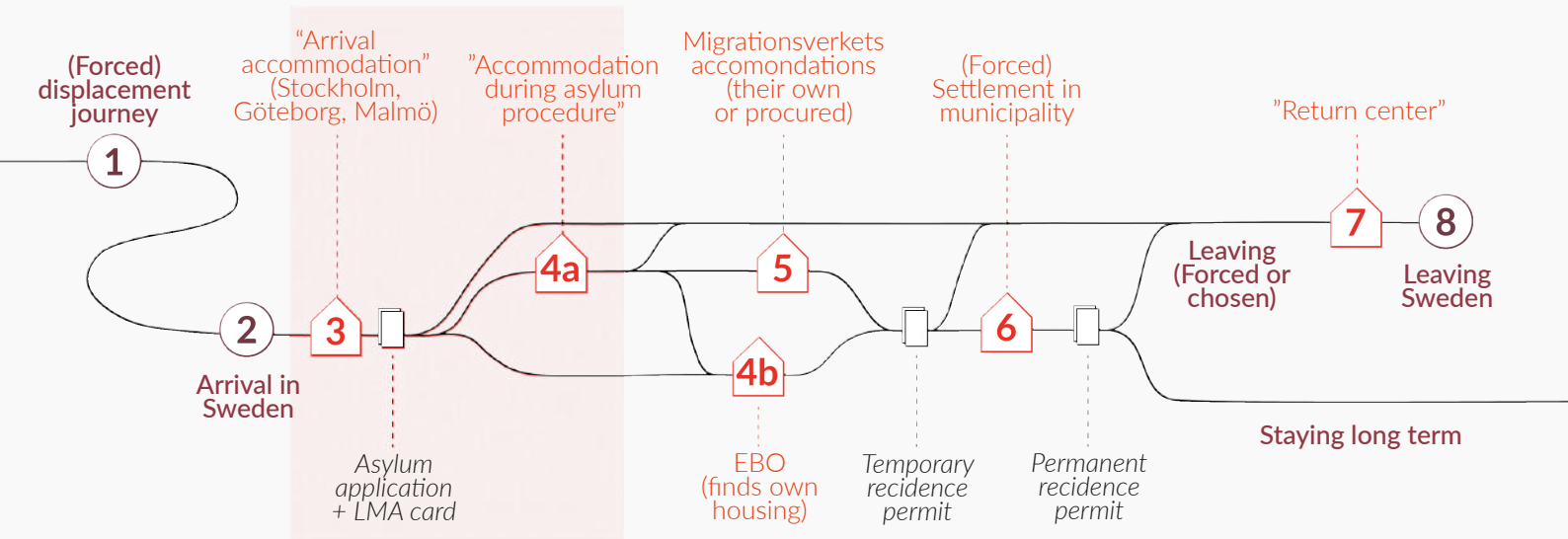
1.7 the swedish context

pieces of paper, relocating and restarting

The Swedish system of placement of newly arrived refugees is mainly based on the pressure on asylum reception and the supply and possibilities of the Migration agency to offer housing. When the individuals in question are granted or refused residence permits, a further process follows that either leads to a placement within a municipality, or eventually a day when the person leaves Sweden. (Migrationsverket, 2024)



my thesis investigation



Fictitious LMA-card

"The LMA card is a plastic card with a photo of you showing that you are an asylum seeker. When you apply for asylum in Sweden, you are photographed. Later you will receive a so-called LMA card. The card is not an identity card, but proof that you are an asylum seeker and that you are allowed to stay in Sweden while you are waiting for a decision." (Migrationsverket, 2024)

Fictitious Temporary residence permit

"A temporary residence permit gives you the right to live and work in Sweden for three years. You have the same right to healthcare as a person with a permanent residence permit. You will receive a residence permit card as proof of your residence permit. The card is not an identity document or a travel document." (Migrationsverket, 2024)



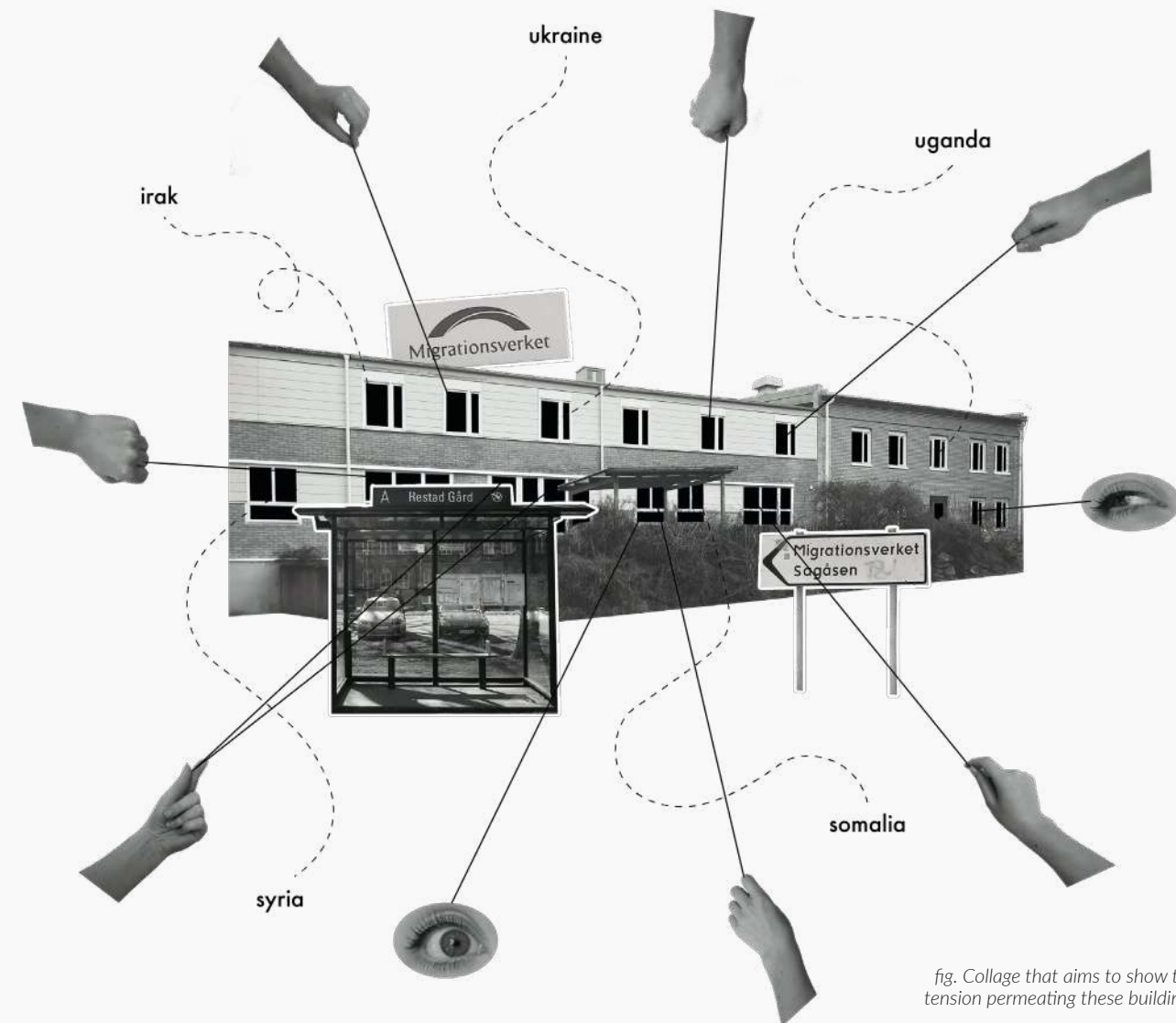
fig. Collages of real life ID cards provided by the Swedish migration agency

buildings in tension & vulnerable individuals

The accommodations contain a melting pot of cultures and nationalities which makes the picture of needs more complex. Different traditions, religions and customs are placed within walls that belong to a more traditional Swedish context and building tradition. In addition, all asylum accommodations in Sweden are premises rented by the Migration Agency from other mixed property owners and where the premises themselves were not originally designed to be asylum accommodations (Mokoena, 2025).

These cultural worlds must coexist in rooms that I see have been furnished in a standardized way. Although this is understandable as the rooms need to be flexible for the high turnover of residents it makes me question **for whom** it is flexible; perhaps flexible for the ones managing the building, but perhaps at the expense of the individuals living there.

I believe that these rooms can continue to be flexible for the staff and administration of the Migration Agency - but at the same time allow for individual needs and personalization.



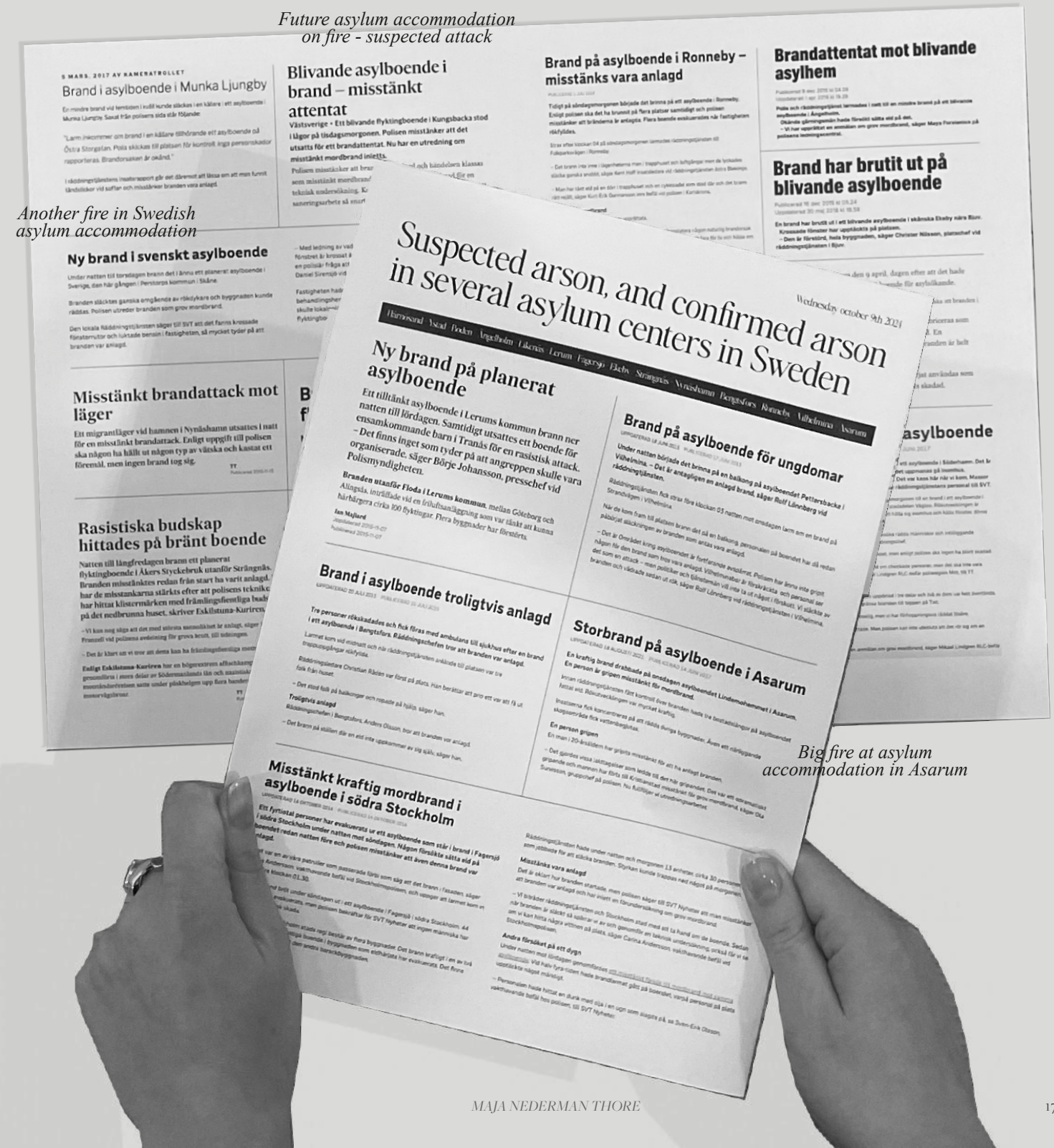
It is easy to understand that the majority of people seeking asylum have gone through very difficult experiences before coming to Sweden. **Asylum seekers are an incredibly vulnerable group given both their history and perhaps harrowing journey to our country, but also because of the uncertain future that awaits them.** Bengtsson (2025) also points out that **a large proportion of those living in asylum accommodations suffer from deep mental illness and PTSD.**

This can result in the form of individuals isolating themselves and thus becoming even more disconnected from the outside world and other people - which puts them in a very destructive spiral. **These people need some kind of stability or way to take charge over their own lives, even if their lives are very tied to the inner walls of the migration agency.** It also justifies how these accommodations are not environments whose design should be left to chance or to people who do not have empathic intentions or knowledge about the subject.

To add on to this already very critical situation, I investigated how asylum accommodations have been portrayed or showcased for the public the last 10 years. The information about the living environments for refugees were limited, except for an amount of news articles from the same year. How the Swedish media has reported on the subject shows that it peaked in 2015 following the large wave of refugees arriving in Sweden, mainly from Syria. Essentially the focus was on what turned out to be a number of arson attacks on these buildings; the majority of what the police investigated as hate crimes or threats, but actually also incidents created by the residents themselves.

Therefore asylum accommodations appear to be in a unique situation. The buildings has such an emotional charge attached to them - that **there is extreme discontent from all sides; partly from people on the outside and partly from those on the inside using the building.**

Below you can see *real* articles that reported on fires in Swedish asylum accommodations in 2015 - that I have put together into a fictional newspaper



the bunk bed

Portrayed together with asylum seekers in the accomodations, they stand with their strong presence in the background, the bunk beds. A piece of furniture that may not be reflected upon by organizers, observers or the residents themselves, but which can actually carry a very deep and problematic and objectifying symbolism.

Before the site visits, I was unsure whether these bunk beds were still a given part of the refugee accommodation-context or whether they were the result of the more extreme situation that occurred during the "refugee crisis" in 2015. But it turned out to be very central, if not the most central part of the whole interior environment of the accommodations. **As the solitary piece of furniture that is recurrent - and in most rooms the only piece of furniture - it becomes clear how this bed is crucial to the spatial experience in the rooms.**

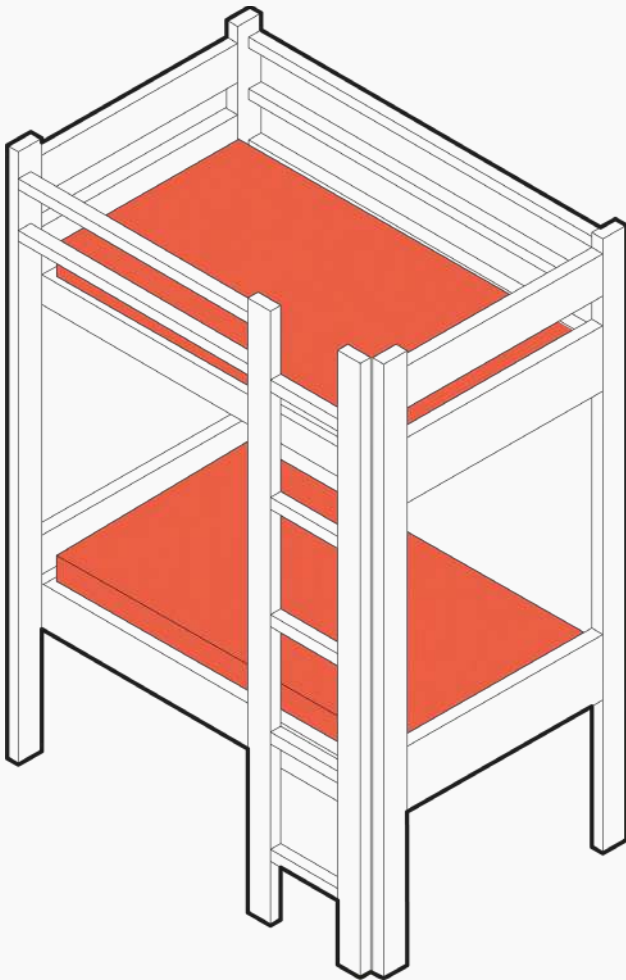


fig. simple sketch of a bunk bed

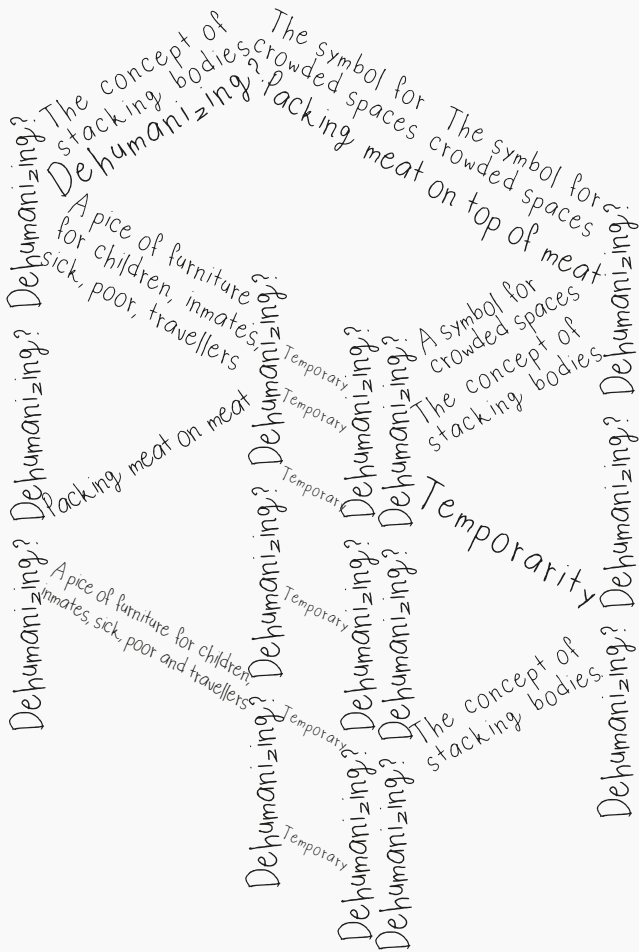


fig. word collage specifying associations with the bunk bed

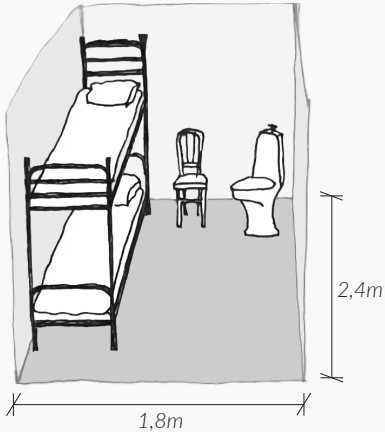
I would argue that this piece of furniture breathes temporariness and anything but permanence. It is strongly associated with children, travel, captivity or crowdedness and body-stacking.

The opposite of an adult independent person in a permanent state.

Here follows a brief inventory of the scenarios in which bunk beds are used in contemporary society. These scenarios range from prisons to hotels and TV shows, but **what the majority of them have in common is the absent sense of permanence and individualism.** By looking at these examples, one can discern different spatial parameters that vary; mainly the size of the rooms, the number of bunk beds and how the beds are positioned towards each other.

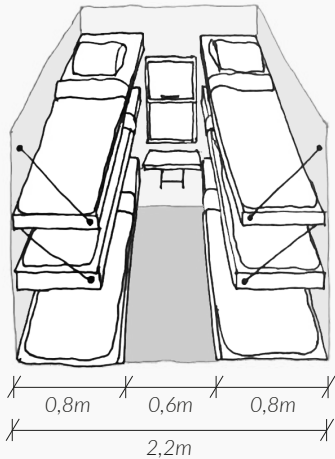
A typical prison cell for two people, USA

- Spatial inventory
- Small room
- 1 bunk bed
- 1 row
- 2 bunks
- Bigger distance between bunks
- Metal



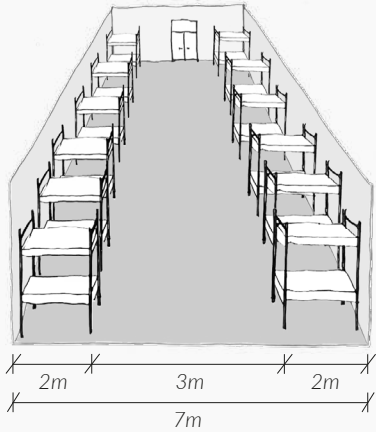
A train "Couchette" cupé, France

- Spatial inventory
- Small room, symmetrical
- 2 bunk beds
- 2 rows
- 3 bunks
- Narrow distance between bunks
- Fold-outs



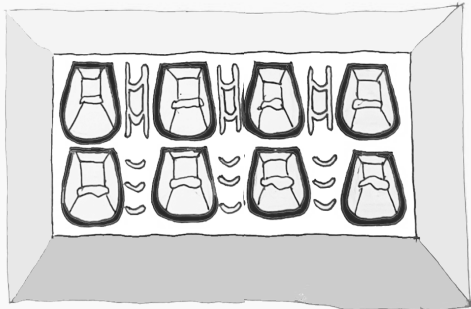
A dormitory in a military facility, USA

- Spatial inventory
- Big room, length
- 24 bunk beds
- 2 rows
- 2 bunks
- Bigger distance between bunks



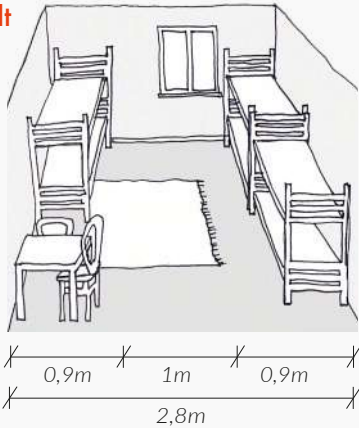
A so called "Capsule hotel", Japan

- Spatial inventory
- Big room, wide
- 8 bunk beds
- 1 row
- 2 bunks
- Closed surface between bunks
- Metal, Laminate, Plastic, Leather



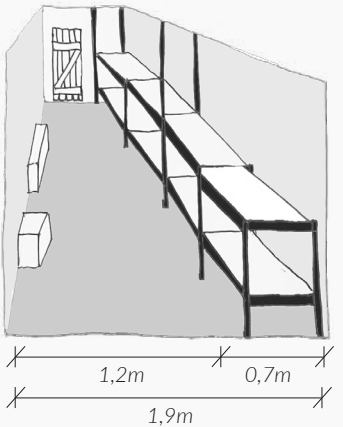
A traditional hostel, alt camp school, Sweden

- Spatial inventory
- Medium sized room
- 3 bunk beds
- Not arranged in rows
- 2 bunks
- Bigger distance between bunks
- Wood



Museum of a war hospital, Australia

- Spatial inventory
- Narrow long room
- 4 bunk beds
- 1 long row
- 2 bunks
- Narrow distance between bunks
- Wood
- Feet by head



The "dormitory room" in the tv-series Squid Game, Fictional South Korea

- Spatial inventory:
- Huge room
- Infinite bunk beds
- Over 30 rows
- 3 - 6 bunks
- Narrow distance between bunks
- Metal



The art deirector of the series said the following about the dormitory: "Rather than treating them like people, she suggested the contestants be presented like objects piled on the warehouse shelves." (Keskeys, 2024)

the relationscape

To understand the role of the asylum accommodation - in the larger organism that is Swedish refugee reception - on the right page I developed a relationscape. The relationscape explains the different actors & forces involved in the situation, as well as their relation and connections between each other. With this method it is possible to find shortcomings and later - keys - that can be added into the equation to achieve a better result depending on aim and purpose.



The diagram shows four layers ranging between individual, unit (building), organization, and state. A complex structure that demands any actor to indulge in both law reading and budget disposition to comprehend what and who is pulling the strings.

LOU Lagen om offentlig upphandling (The public procurement act)

Applies to contracts awarded by public authorities (public procurement)

Procurement = The actions taken for the purpose of acquiring goods, services or works by awarding contracts. (This also applies to architectural competitions)

The law exists to (among other things):

- Ensure that public authorities (e.g. the migration agency) treat everyone equally who wants to get a business contract with the public sector.
- Promote cost-effective use of inhabitants' tax money.

fig. A short summary and simplification of Sveriges Riksdags (2016) publication of the LOU

The relationscape structure shows that financial funding, or rather budgeting, is crucial for the changes and purchases that are made to the accommodations. This budgeting takes place in several stages, both for the whole agency - regions - but also for each unit. Similarly, procurement can also take place at various levels, which affects the outcome.

If new furniture or interior is needed in an asylum accommodation, it is probably the staff or the head of a specific unit who will draw attention to the need. It is then assessed whether the purchase need is important enough to receive a share of the budget. If this is the case, the migration agency formulates the assignment based on its preferences, functional needs and cost, which is then put out for procurement.

This puts the Swedish Migration Agency in a somewhat inflexible situation, as everything they want to buy has to go through a procurement process. But I wonder if it is not only a problem that the LOU itself negatively affects the outcome of the procurements, but also that the Swedish Migration Agency does not know how to formulate their desires design-specifically or spatially enough to get a good result.

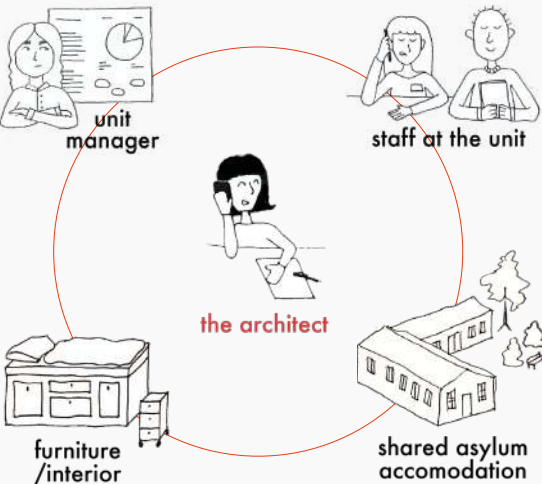


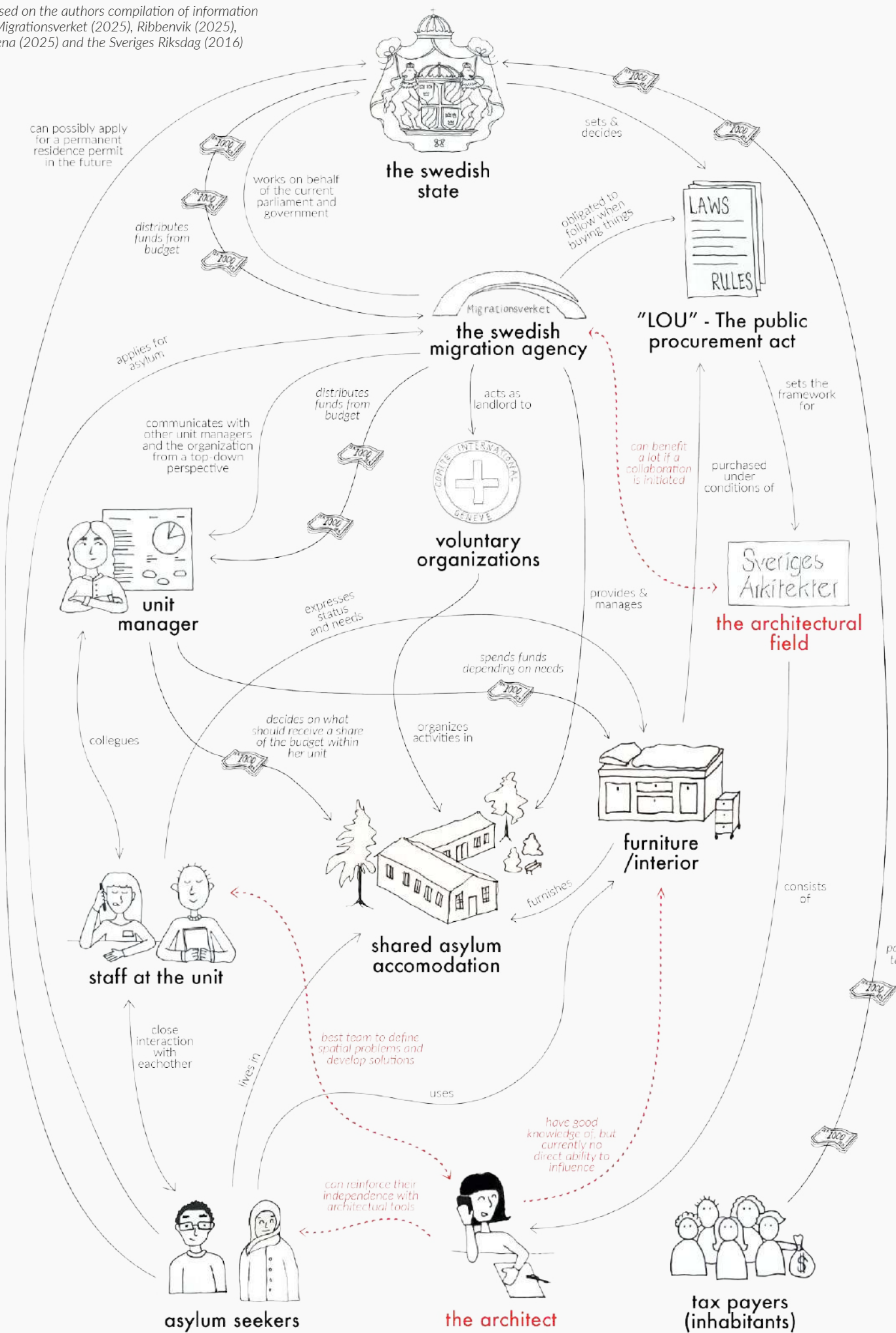
fig. Based on the authors compilation of information from Migrationsverket (2025), Ribbenvik (2025), Mokoena (2025) and the Sveriges Riksdag (2016)

state

organization

unit (building)

individual



2. theory, literature
& projects of interest

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2.2 Literature & references

 Inconsistency, hasard & measurability 25

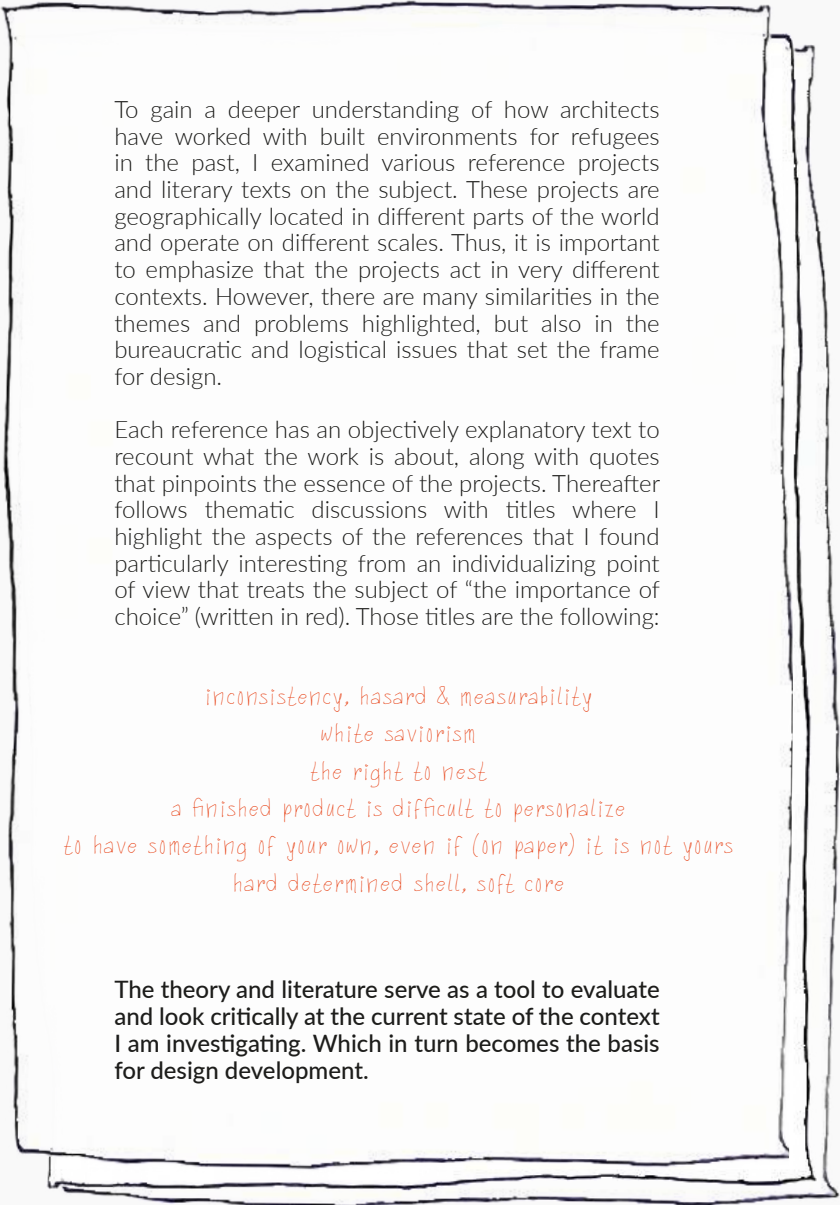
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 The right to nest 27

 A finished product is
 difficult to personalize 29

 To have something of your own,
 even if (on paper) it is not yours 31

 Hard determined shell, soft core 31



To gain a deeper understanding of how architects have worked with built environments for refugees in the past, I examined various reference projects and literary texts on the subject. These projects are geographically located in different parts of the world and operate on different scales. Thus, it is important to emphasize that the projects act in very different contexts. However, there are many similarities in the themes and problems highlighted, but also in the bureaucratic and logistical issues that set the frame for design.

Each reference has an objectively explanatory text to recount what the work is about, along with quotes that pinpoint the essence of the projects. Thereafter follows thematic discussions with titles where I highlight the aspects of the references that I found particularly interesting from an individualizing point of view that treats the subject of "the importance of choice" (written in red). Those titles are the following:

inconsistency, hasard & measurability
white saviorism
the right to nest
a finished product is difficult to personalize
to have something of your own, even if (on paper) it is not yours
hard determined shell, soft core

The theory and literature serve as a tool to evaluate and look critically at the current state of the context I am investigating. Which in turn becomes the basis for design development.

Ingenmansland
Translated title: No mans-land
by ArkDes
several municipalities, Sweden

In 2022, a pre-study called *Ingenmansland - En förstudie om det svenska flyktingmottagandets arkitektur* (2022) was carried out by two architects on behalf of ArkDes Sweden. The purpose of the study was to inventory and map the architecture of Swedish refugee reception. Mainly to see what these environments - unknown to both the public and architects - look like, but also to note the consequences of the turbulent years that followed the refugee crisis in 2015 and Russia's invasion war in Ukraine in 2022. The pre-study examines multiple asylum accommodation, more specifically 4, arrival accommodations, 3 long term accommodations and 2 detention facilities.

Above all, ArkDes highlights that a major difference is the political and legal situation in which Sweden (along with many other European countries) finds itself. It is indeed a system going through changes at all levels, which also makes both research and decision-making on site more complex and difficult to manage. This leads to various kinds of deadlocks but at the same time surprises. The architects describe the "No man's land" as follows:

"I Ingenmanslandet äger staten ingenting, man hyr. I Ingenmanslandet letar staten efter lägenheter som ingen annan vill ha eller sanatorier som slutat vara sanatorier. I Ingenmanslandet är en kris en total överraskning varje gång. I Ingenmanslandet kan man styra det man kan mäta – energihalten i maten och brandsäkerheten i husen – men inte det som skapar verklig mening i människors liv."
(ArkDes, 2022, p. 125)

Quote translated by the author:
In No Man's Land, the state doesn't own anything, it rents. In No Man's Land, the state is looking for apartments that no one else wants or sanatoriums that have stopped being sanatoriums. In No Man's Land, a crisis is a total surprise every time. In No Man's Land, you can control what you can measure - the calorie content of food and the fire safety of the houses - but not what creates real meaning in people's lives.

inconsistency,
hasard & measurability

"No Man's Land" strongly demonstrates how much of the architectural and spatial experience for asylum seekers in Sweden that is actually determined by chance, and not by choice. This is mainly because all the different accommodation facilities have incredibly different conditions and issues to deal with. For example, the report shows how different an arrival accommodation can look, by looking at both large facilities where the Migration Agency daily operates, but also at accommodation barracks that have been built to house refugees.

There is a tangible complexity in the dispersed context when the Swedish Migration Agency is a tenant, and this places limitations especially when it comes to soft values and things that are not as measurable. The focus, as addressed in the work, is on things like fire safety and ventilation. Things that are very important but treat all refugees as a large group. Since there is a high turnover of residents, it is also possible to understand the problem of reaching the individual. Working in a way that is based on measurability and questionnaires or surveys can result in the individual and their uniqueness being lost in the process of looking for common denominators and needs. This, together with the Migration Agency's need to have control over its residents, becomes a difficult nut to crack if one assumes that control is best achieved in collaboration with standardization and overview - something that I think can be rethought when looking at the small scale.

Better shelter by IKEA (together with UNHCR) Globally spread

In 2017, the IKEA “Better shelter” was declared the worldwide design of the year-award by the London design museum. It is a standardized shelter mainly made of plastic and metal, that just like any other IKEA furniture is space-efficiently packaged and can be assembled with no complex tools, following a pedagogic manual. It is today managed by an organisation with the same name, Better Shelter, who describes their initiative with the following: “We started developing shelters in 2010 to provide displaced persons with safety, dignity, and hope on their path towards a more stable life in a permanent home” (Better Shelter, 2023)

The tent is currently being used in multiple refugee camps managed by the UNHCR.

Tom Scott-Smith, who is an associate Professor of Refugee Studies and Forced Migration at the University of Oxford, has addressed the project in his critical article published in Limn press (2017).

The announcement of it winning the design of the year woke criticism from both architects and humanitarians. Scott-Smith explains how the better shelter is both doing too much and too little at the same time; too much in the sense of trying to tackle a ‘refugee camp solution’ in a global setting that doesn’t take into consideration either site, the individual, as well as administrative and logistic limitations; too little in the sense of it being both ugly and lacking profound spatial needs as daylight and proper flooring. The name reveals that it is supposed to be a better shelter - than (what everyone can assume is) a tent.

“It was caught between the expansive utopian idealism that so often underpins the announcement of new humanitarian designs and the restricted, mundane implications of their actual implementation”
(Scott-Smith, 2017, p. 72)

Scott-Smith also points out how this concept and shelter is delivered as a “final product” to the refugee camps. Something that initially can appear as generous or even as a “gift” sent from heaven, but does not quite hit the mark.

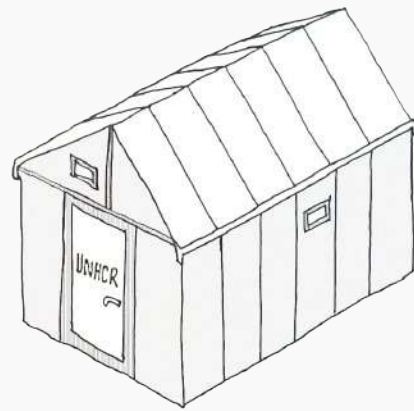


fig. sketch of the Better Shelter

“It is clearly a product rather than a process, so it ends up being overwrought, top-down, and “too much” for aid workers who are skeptical of universal solutions.”

(Scott-Smith, 2017, p. 72)

In his interviews with the designers of Better Shelter, Scott-Smith explains how a central theme for them has been working with dignity. To spatially achieve dignity, one goal has been to enable everyone to stand up in the shelter (which is rarely possible in a tent) but also to have firmer walls in harder materials that can be knocked on. The knocking becomes like a marker for where the individual’s own space begins, as the person outside needs to ask if they can come in. Dignity in this case meant privacy, Scott-Smith continues, referring to the designers’ comments that their Better Shelter also does not show shadow images in the evenings/nights. A tent clearly exposes what is happening inside if there is any kind of light source there while it is dark outside.

There are other important insights among the involved in the Better shelter project/product but not only with the hierarchical more influential designers or decision-makers. IKEA’s photographer Björn Wallander states the obvious, yet important to repeat, point after showcasing the Better shelter in his photo exhibition “What makes a home” (New York, 2024)

“What is it that makes a home, when you have to leave everything behind? What touched me most was how the families I met managed to put such a personal stamp on their temporary homes, despite limited resources and terrible conditions. In the media, refugees are often portrayed as a homogenous group. But through this project, we can see that they are unique individuals, with their own stories, personal histories and ways of making their homes a home,”
says Björn Wallander. (Better shelter, 2024)

white saviorism

Initially I find it is important to address that there are many examples of how architects in the western society chose, try or have an urge - to help and intervene in contexts that are a result of refuge. Regardless of what the essential reason was for the birth of the projects, there is a risk of it falling into the category of white saviorism. There is also a tendency with these projects where very complex situations are presented with concepts that are both generic and standardized. **However I find the initial thinking of improving the refugees’ sense of individuality with making them able to have a private space is valuable. Being able to choose whether or not to be private, regardless of how ‘private’ this actually means, generates a choice - a way of controlling your situation.**

This conceptual mass-productive thinking can of course be motivated because of the enormous scale of the refugee crisis, but that does not make these “solutions” less dehumanizing.

The Better shelter, a design made has been described as more or less “successful”; At an instant it is crucial to think about who is considering it successful and why.

This makes me problematize the methods and aims of my thesis. Can my good intentions at the same time in practice act belittling or patronizing? How can I, as an architect, avoid centering the project around my trained inner drives to design generically and standardized in a situation that is so broad like the Swedish asylum reception? The solution I see is to try to find a balance between contributing my design skills - but in a way where the analysis is more important than the design itself. I need to create an acceptance that the people who live and work at the accommodations can further shape what I design. **The design proposal does not necessarily have to look or function a determined way, and can be shaped or tweaked - even if I have an idea of how something should appear or be used.**

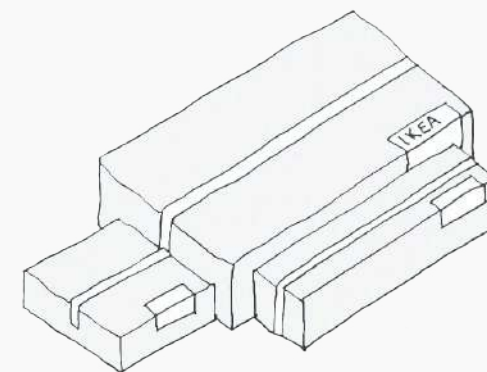


fig. sketch of the packaging containing the Better Shelter



fig. sketch of an furnished better shelter
(drawn to look like a photo taken by Björn Wallander)

the right to nest

Better Shelter made me think about human nature and its profound behaviors related to homemaking. Not because of the design - which is harsh, lacks daylight and is impossible to adapt or tweak to suit the place or person in question - but because of the strong will of the refugees to make their personal mark on the shelter. How **in situations of vulnerability, grief, crisis and fear we tend to ‘nest’ and create a safe environment around us**, often small scaled. We are not the only species to build and maintain our nests, but we have also created values in how these nests should reflect ourselves and who we are. This is arguably an inner drive for our kind and could be something we can value as a human right.

The quote of the photographer Björn Wallander (who has documented the Better Shelter out in the field) also emphasizes **the value, importance and even human behaviour to be able to shape our own living environment** in a way that reflects and expresses our personality. Furthermore how **this can be considered as a fundamental act of safetymaking and homemaking for our species, even - or should it be especially - in contexts where individuals are threatened or processing trauma.**

With that said I found it as a profound right to at least provide the opportunity for refugees to be able to make some kind of impact on their spatial surroundings, even if this space is only a few square meters.



Architecture of migration by Anooradha Siddiqi Dadaab, Kenya

In her book *Architecture of migration* (2024) Anooradha Siddiqi writes about her analysis and outtakes of the world's oldest and still operating refugee camp: Dadaab in Kenya. She discusses topics such as placelessness and belonging - but above all she criticizes how refugee camps are often considered "historyless" and instead highlights how these environments are historical archives created by people who actually lived there. She equates how migration and people fleeing from home experience a contemporary sedentarization (i.e. the shift when a nomadic group becomes settled)

Due to the fact that the Dadaab refugee camp has existed since 1991, there are people who have spent the majority of their lives here, and especially several generations who were also born in the camp. Siddiqi explains. This generates a different relationship to the site because it is no longer a question of temporary architecture or temporary structures, but undoubtedly permanent forms of housing and in the case of Dadaab, permanent cities.

"A refugee camp is a spatial response to armed conflict, indeed. However, we often find ourselves glossing over the larger forces that normalize armed conflict, which either cast the camp as the abject remnant of war that people have somehow brought upon themselves, or dismiss it as lacking aesthetic and historical significance."

(Anooradha Siddiqi for Columbia news, 2024)



fig. sketch of Farah's self built store

Refugee camps, Siddiqi explains, are also not something that emerges from a vacuum in a random place. They are the result of different histories, laws, site conditions, international relations and sometimes international NGOs. An example of this in Dadaab was when UNHCR initiated a "Shelter research and prototype development program" in Geneva in 2006. A contract was signed with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NCR), which specialized in shelter aid. Once in Kenya, the initiative faced problems involving land ownership, rules on transportation in and out of the camp, and prohibitions on economically profitable labor linked to the project. The whole thing attracted a lot of criticism and opposition from residents of Dadaab, and testimonies spoke of how the materials transported there had long been lying in piles like garbage.

Siddiqi's book puts a strong focus on one woman living in the camp, Farah, who took a different approach to the NCR project. Instead of building exactly the kind of shelter that the instructions and components suggested, she constructed a personalized shop. In this shop she could then make it possible to untie many logistical knots that existed in the local community. In this way, Farah managed to: 1. earn money, 2. create a meeting place and node for the local community, 3. make contacts in the logistics that went in and out of the camp, and 4. gain many new skills in the art of building.

a finished product is difficult to personalize

In Siddiqi's *Architecture of migration*, the author describes how the building elements that were imported by the architectural initiative from Norway were not used at all as "intended" once on site in the refugee camp in Dabaab. Instead, many refugees built according to local and historical building techniques that were more adapted to the location and climate - something that is really a fundamental principle of architecture.

Therefore, it becomes highly contradictory when many architect- and volunteer-driven initiatives in these scenarios produce standardized "ready-made solutions" to the complex contexts of refugee housing. First, because **there is a misconception that Western cultural practices and traditions (e.g. building traditions) are superior to others and considered "more modern", "streamlined" and "better".**

There also seems to be an absurd misconception that refugees are so helpless or lacking in ideas and aspirations that they cannot be left with any responsibility to actually create something themselves with the assets they have.

Connecting this with the Better Shelter also makes me wonder why many architects seem to think that refugee housing can be improved with a perfect and ultimately developed product. **This determined focus on the -product- indicates that the object should be a finished result, i.e. something that does not allow further development or to be reshaped. Standardization limits the possibility to personalize. In particular, a finished product does not allow for a process where the people in question can shape it themselves within the framework set by the architect.** As the photographer Wallander noted, there is incredible variation within the four walls that are the shelter, something that I think is possible within four walls in a Swedish asylum accommodation as well.

Al-Madhafah / The living room by Sandi Hilal

Boden, Sweden

Outside of Luleå in the urban area of Boden, the architect, artist and pedagog Sandi Hilal have conducted a research project on the theme of hospitality and the concept of "the right to host". Via Hilal's own firm DAAR (2019), decolonizing architecture art research, together with Konstnärsnämnden (2019) one can read about the project.

Hilal explains how many asylum seekers from different countries and cultures live in shared apartments where they all have limited opportunities to influence their living space. In Boden she also found that there was also **lack of ownership** and own space because of the collective situation. At the same time, the common form of housing can be essential for the social life and context of the individuals, something that Hilal took advantage of in her project Al-Madhafah. Al-Madhafah, or The living room in English, is a straightforward spatial idea that explores complex connections between private and public, the state of "permanent coincidence" and the shift from guest to host.

With the involvement of local actors under the auspices of Hilal, a living room was created on the ground floor of the building where the refugees live. It is a simple room with a kitchen nook on one side and an open space facing a big window on the other. The objects filling the space are for example a big circular rug, various sizes of cushions and pillows, seating "poufs" as well as some lower round tables and table lamps.

In this place the asylum seekers can meet people to talk, cook, learn and exchange knowledge and skills. But foremost, they are challenged not only to embody the role as guest, but to **take command and invite**. They occasionally "own" the living room, and are the person setting the rules. In this way the room and the chosen activity also activates the sense of belonging to the home country and individual traditions. (Decolonizing, 2019; Konstnärsnämnden, 2019)

Hilal addresses how many asylum seekers come to Sweden with a dream that later becomes shaken up when they arrive in Boden. Everything is different from their home, and some wonder how they should raise their children in a place where the traditions they know are difficult to practise. Initially this can be interpreted as a result of the different climate or norms in Sweden, but the outtakes from Al Madhafah gives Hilal another view.



"I don't think it's the weather, or the cold, or the isolation. I believe that what refugees misses the most is finally somebody, without expecting it, coming and knocking their door."

(Hilal, 2018, Boden living room 7:54)

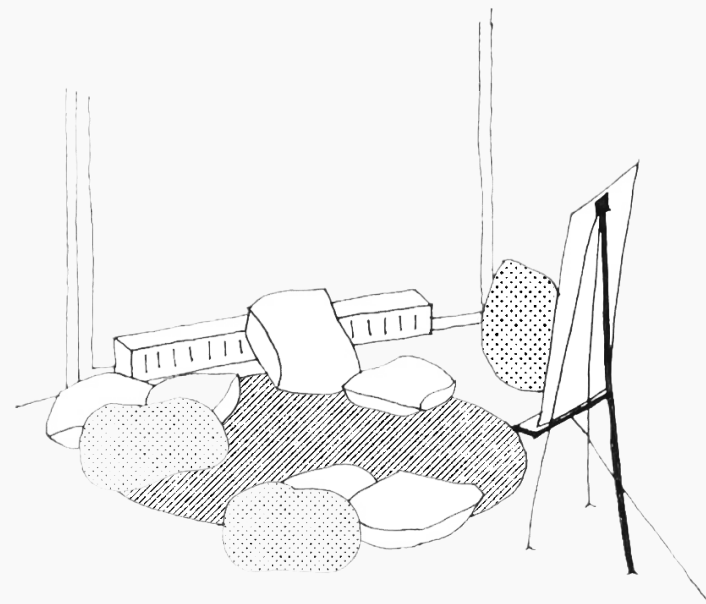


fig. sketch of a corner in the living room showing cushions and a board

After the project is done, Statens Konstråd asks Hilal if she has any advice to give to someone interested in doing a similar project. Her answer is as follows:

"I ett projekt som det här handlar en lärandeprocess om vardagliga saker, om förhandlingar, konflikter och om att skapa möjligheter. En sådan process låter sig inte generaliseras."

(Hilal to Statens konstråd, 2018)

Quote translated by the author:

In a project like this, a learning process is about everyday things, about negotiations, conflicts and about creating opportunities. Such a process cannot be generalized.

to have something of your
own, even if (on paper)
it is not yours

This context is most similar to what I look at in my thesis, not only because it takes place in Sweden and within the framework of the Migration Agency, but also in terms of the scale it explores. The project in Boden confirms the picture I have gained of the accommodation offered by the Migration Agency; that it can look very different and that any social or creative initiatives organized for the refugees depend on the volunteers that exist locally (either private or the red cross for example)

In my opinion, Hilal's project raises several important themes that can be applied to the refugee phenomenon in general. It starts from the spatial framework that the refugees have left behind - their home, and then takes a closer look at the characteristics that are lost as a result of the spatial loss.

More specifically, she addresses the concept of hosting, and more complexly: the relation between hosting, space and tradition. This is interesting because it can be argued that an individual's traditions are their home which is not spatial but spiritual, the home they always carry with them. But that there are spatial conditions required to practice these traditions in the way they want or are used to.

The theme of hosting itself is well thought out, as in many ways it reinforces the individualism and ownership of the individual - because of the possibility to personalize and choose.

Even if it is only a temporary hosting, it still becomes very real and generates both the joy and responsibility that hosting has.

The project can be considered small and simple, but oh so precise in how it works to great outcome.

The living room itself is a shared space, but the great effect is that it is possible to create a hierarchy and ownership with the help of the rotation of hosting that is possible. That is, borrowing something, in the sense that it feels like ownership, even though it is not really yours.

hard determined shell,
soft core

In Hilal's Living room, we see how the furnishings consist of rugs, cushions of different sizes together with poufs. These objects can be layered on top of each other, taking on shapes and volumes that are not strict but rather different each time. Hard objects tend to have edges that are repulsive in terms of volume, while **malleable soft objects can act enveloping**. It is often the soft objects that are closest to the body, creating a strong relationship with the individual that can provide feelings of security.

Hilal's project takes place in a common room close to the residents' own rooms, but I think it can be implemented in shared living spaces like my context as well - since they are also shared. Soft elements can work both to create softness but also to create different zones in the shared space that can serve different purposes.

The Better Shelter is not taking place in the same settings as the accommodations of the Migration agency in Sweden, but one can draw similarities between the limited, rectangular, single room that has a fixed shell and an empty core. The focus tends to quickly fall on furniture, interior and small scale because **all the scenarios take place on surfaces and in rooms where the architectural framework is very set**.

In both the Better Shelter and Sandi Hilal projects, it is the soft elements that make it possible for residents to influence the space. **Soft furnishings gives the possibility of moving, folding and taking the objects with them - but of course also offer physical comfort**. This is an important insight because the connection between humans and architecture is essentially imagined to be elements of hard structures and materials. Furniture or objects made of soft materials are often classified as 'textiles' instead.

3. site visits
& spatial analysis

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3.1 sagåsen arrival
asylum accomodation

 Site visit monday 24th of february 2025

Sagåsen (roughly translated to "fairytale ridge") is a former nursing home for disabled people built in the 1960s. The facility is located in eastern Kållerød, about 20 minutes drive from central Gothenburg. Today it is one of the Migration agency's (few) arrival accommodations. I had the opportunity to spend three hours at the facility and be shown around by the administrator Marcus Mokoena.

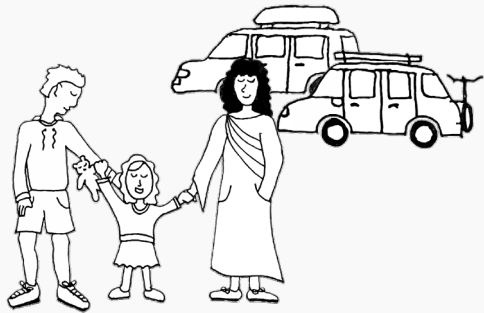
Refugees stay between 3 days and 3 months before they:

- are relocated to a new shared accommodation (most likely Restad Gård)
- or get their own accommodation (EBO)
- or are quickly deemed to have their asylum application rejected and are therefore kept at Sagåsen as it also has a department that is a Return center.

At Sagåsen, people apply for asylum on site and have to do paperwork, interviews and take photos and fingerprints for their LMA card.



fig. collage made by the author

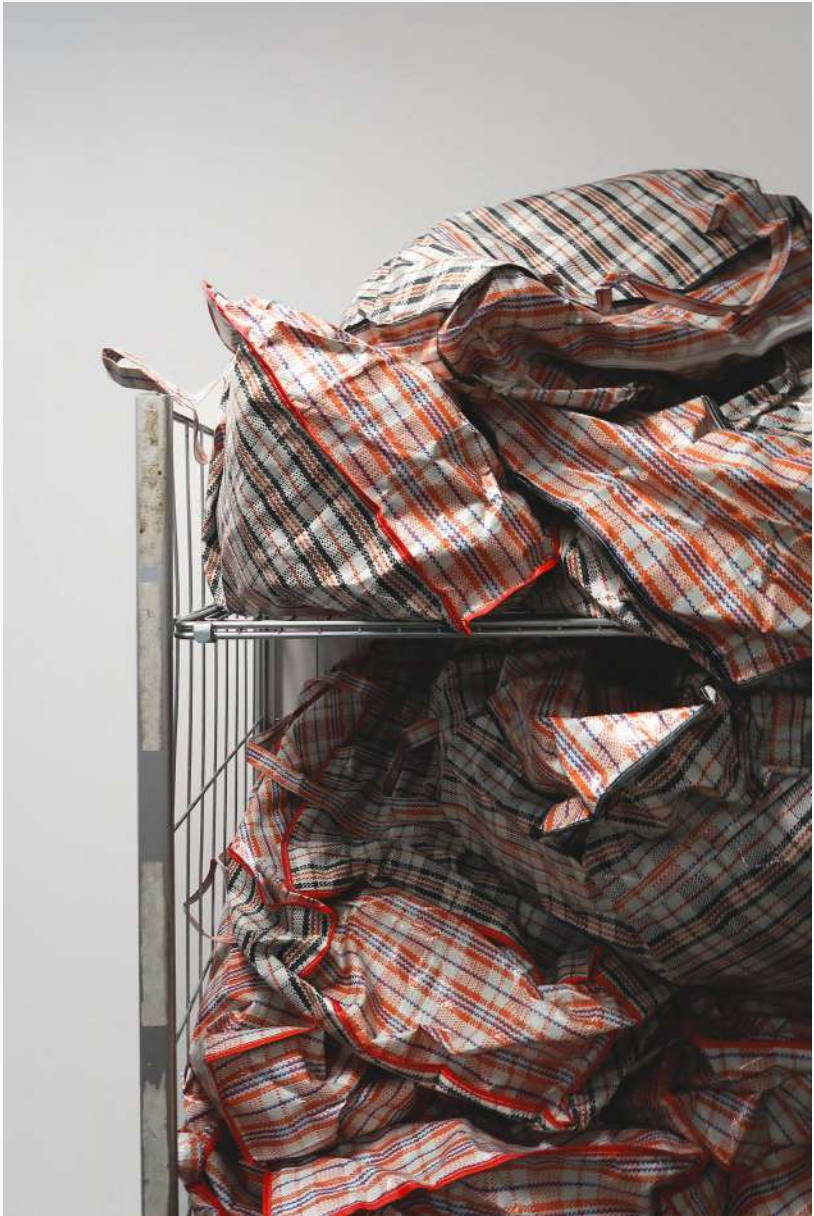


Mokoena (2025) describes the difference in belongings between those arriving. Here comes people who have been on the move for years, or just driving for 24 hours. Their luggage can range from multiple cars packed to the brim ...



... to a single plastic bag.

After registration, each individual is given a so-called "start kit"; a woven plastic bag (very similar to an IKEA bag) containing bedding and a towel. The asylum seeker is responsible for the bag and its contents, and are also expected to bring it to the next accommodation if you are sent to one Mokoena explains.



picture of a trolley holding start kits

the common rooms

The public indoor areas in the accommodation are very limited, and it is in these areas the residents can spend time when they are not in their individual rooms or eating in the diner. The rooms are sparsely furnished and give the impression of randomness, or that someone has managed to “scrape together” the objects that are there.

A janitor walks by and grabs two of the chairs. I ask him where the chairs are being taken.



Good idea, i reply. Thinking it was a clear situation that pinpointed the gap between administrative processed purchases and problem solving on site.



common area



common area

One of the buildings is rented out by the Migration Agency to the 15 voluntary organizations that arranges activities for the refugees. **As voluntary organizations are not subject to procurement or legal requirements as the migration agency is - the spatial design and furnishing here is completely free.** The only limiting factor is, of course, the budget and resources available for the organizations. It is clear that this results in a more vibrant environment that becomes the heart of the entire asylum accommodation. Here, the residents are taught "social information" and simple language lessons, crops are grown and cakes are baked. There is also a room for children to play in.

Especially the presence of paintings, illustrations and crafts is strong and has a great impact on the rooms in which the voluntary organizations operate. It doesn't really matter what the motifs on the walls are (because here it's a great mix of work of art made by both adults and children) **but it's the fact that there's something on the walls that creates a much more familiar feeling.**



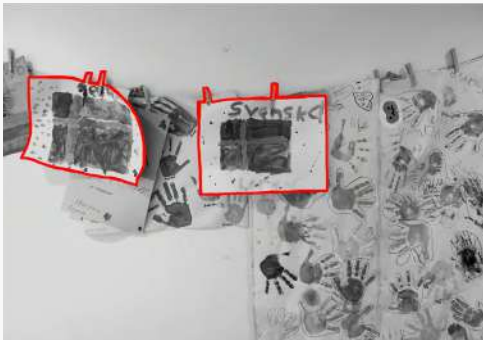
pantry/kitchen area
(in the building rented by voluntary organizations)



kids room (in the building rented by voluntary organizations)



teaching room where the "social information" is held
(in the building rented by voluntary organizations)



crafts & paintings (in the building rented by voluntary organizations)



corridor



close up of a bunk bed



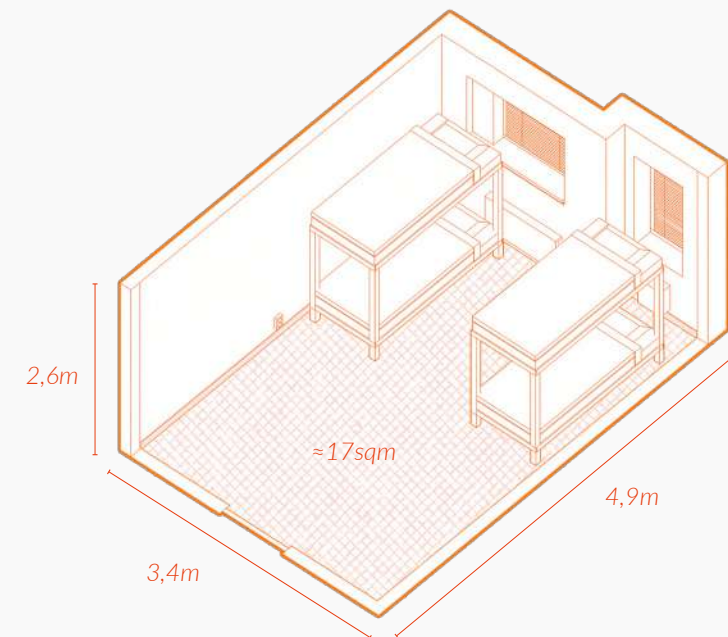
the door to room 103
(a heavy fire cell door)



bunk beds in a standard room, room 103
(4 people)

the "private" rooms

The individual rooms are accessed via corridors that are zoned in different wings of the buildings. Residents only have access to their own wing. The rooms are furnished with 2 bunk beds and usually house 2 residents at a time. Families get their own room. If the pressure on the number of asylum seekers is higher, as it can be overnight (for example, if a busload of refugees arrives at the same time), four people may have to share a room. This will fill all the bunks in the bunk beds. The rooms are worn down, empty and things like electrical sockets and blinds are broken.

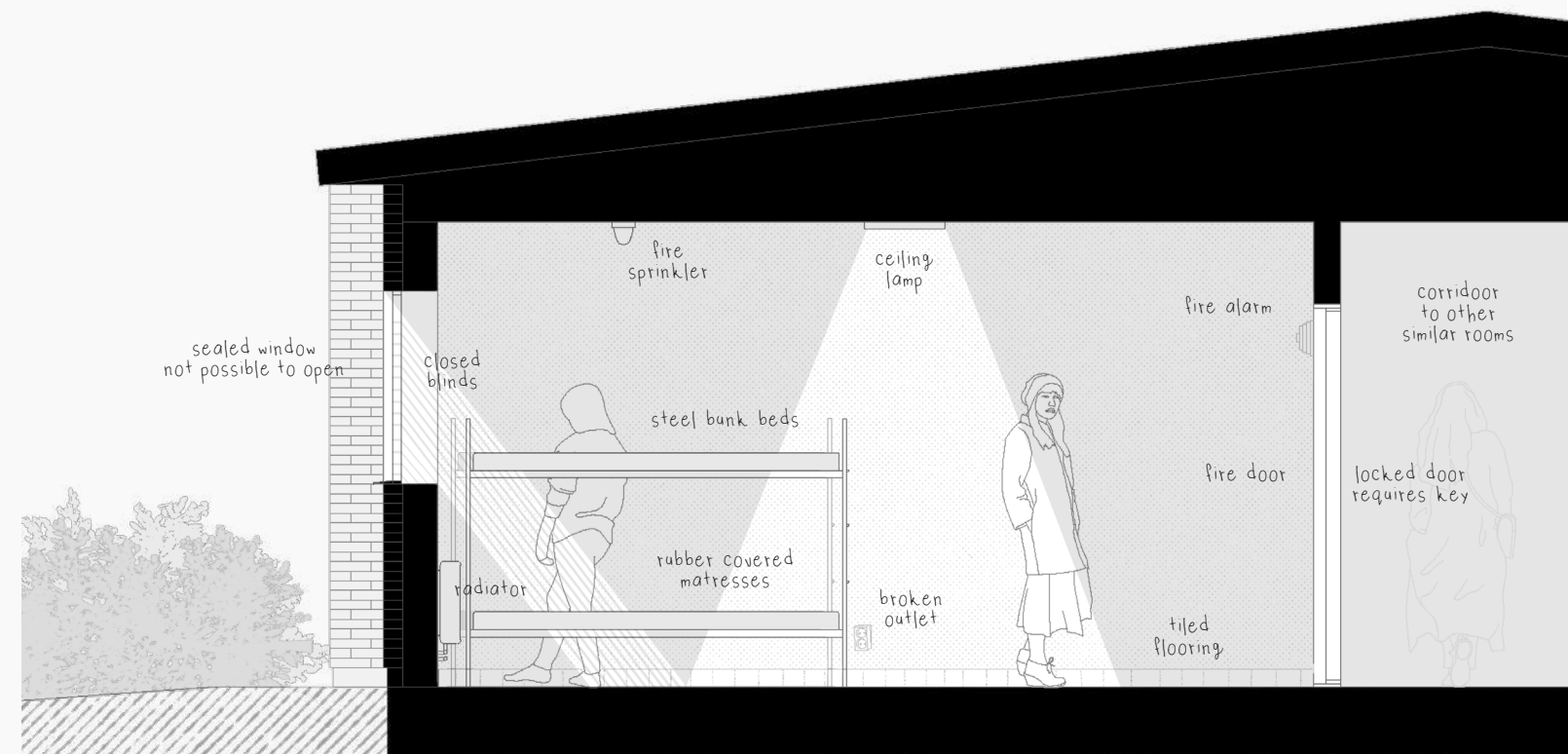


bunk beds, overcrowding & aggressive atmosphere

Mokoena explains how **there is a direct correlation between the level of crowdedness with people sleeping on the top bunks, and the atmosphere of the accommodation.** He describes that as soon as there is something to "have" that is better/worse than something else - the mood becomes more aggressive between individuals. This leads to many getting the top bunk (which is considered the worse alternative) choosing to put the mattress directly on the floor instead. (M. Mokoena, 2025-02-24)

Current scenario

- Medium sized rectangular room
- 2 bunk beds
- 2 rows
- Beds block windows
- Steel & plastic
- Possible to sleep "in private" if facing walls
- Distance between bodies ≈ 1,5 m



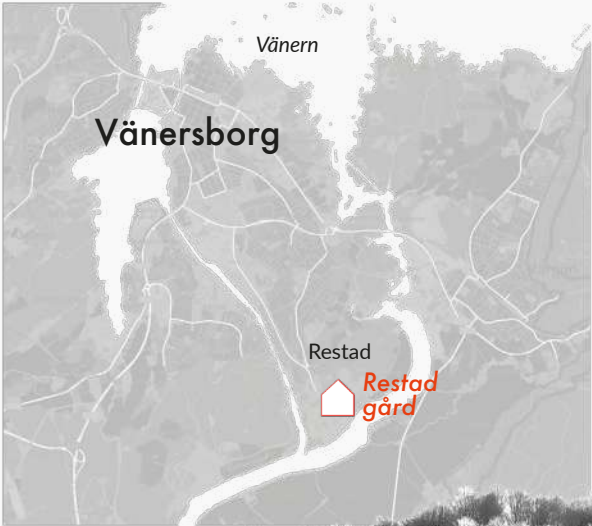
3.2 restad gård
asylum accomodation

 Site visit tuesday 1st of april 2025

Restad Gård is an area southeast of central Vänersborg where there are several businesses operating in the many buildings there. Visit Restad (2025) writes that the area dates all the way back to the 17th century and that it had premises that contained a hospital and asylum reception from 1905. Bengtsson (2025) explains to me how the migration agency has been here since 2013 and it was at that time the largest asylum accommodation in Europe. Today Restad Gård is still the largest in Scandinavia.

Their facilities in Restad Gård I've been told is called "the castle" in Migration agency-lingo (M. Mokoena, 2025-02-24); this I found out to be true. The old brick buildings have battlements and towers, standing in a beautiful landscape mixed with a modern sculpture park where you also can see the water of Göta älv. I am shown around by Tommy Bengtsson, team leader and one of the key people responsible for the living environments at the facility.

Refugees from (among other places) Sagåsen are sent here while their asylum application is being processed, explains T. Bengtsson (2025-04-01). He says that in practice this is often processed quickly, but that the reason people stay here for so long is that many appeal their negative decisions. **If there is no appeal, refugees stay here for about 4 months, but if the appeal process is drawn out, the time spent in the accommodation can be endless. "You can live here from one day - till the end of time"** Bengtsson tells me, explaining that today it is possible for a child to be born into an asylum accommodation center but also die there a lifetime later.



From Gothenburg central, the whole way to Restad Gård is smooth. The train is waiting on track 11 long before departure, final station Vänersborg Central. Once in Vänersborg, I take bus 68 which is also pedagogically named with final destination "Restad Gård" on the bus display.

Bringing two suitcases and a starter kit would not have been a problem as the walking distance between each vehicle is short.

capacity

Bengtsson shows me the facilities and explains that they currently fill about 33% of the capacity. Much is empty and they have a good margin if the asylum pressure increases. In addition, the Migration Agency has several agreements with mixed property owners around the country that apply in the event of a more acute situation with a sudden very high pressure, he says.



picture of a half-painted wall in line with the top bunk of a bunk bed, which was not intended according to Bengtsson



private lockers with blip-locks



table for 4 people,
bunk bed in the background

the door to room 2001
(a locked fire cell door)



the "private" rooms

Then we make our way to the new rooms located in one of the old brick "castles". These rooms, which Bengtson explains are "top of the line" are completely renovated and have not even had any residents yet. Bengtson says that these rooms are representative of the Migration Agency's future living visions and that Restad Gård is the first to have some ready.

Here the ceiling height is 3.5 meters and the windows are huge. The sun shines in and puts shadows on the brand new kitchenette and the table in the middle. Here the residents (just like at Sagåsen) share toilets and showers, but since the long-term accommodation does not have a dining room system where you get food, the kitchenettes provide the appliances the residents need for preparing food.

In the "top of the line" rooms, the aim is clear: fresh, brand new furniture, lockers that can be locked with a blipp-key and, if possible. The lockers with blipp-key are unique to Restad gård and, from what I understand, very desirable in facilities.

It is designed to accommodate four people, although there are many empty rooms in the building. I understand that the priority is for residents to have a so-called "good room" rather than their own room.

bunk beds, furniture & bed bugs

Even though capacity far exceeds the number of residents at Restad Gård, many live in shared rooms with bunk beds. These are the same steel beds found at Sagåsen. Bengtsson explains how the beds are very important to them because they have replaced previous wooden bunk beds. The wooden beds were vulnerable to pests and more specifically bed bugs, which has been a big problem at Restad Gård. He explains how residents somehow brought bedbugs in, which then led to a cleanup job that took up to 2 years to do.

In other words, fewer wooden objects means less risk of pests.



the largest "top of the line"-room
(4 people)



kitchenette in the largest "top of the line"-room
(4 people)

3.3 a shiny worktop will not solve the issue

Current scenario

Medium sized room

2 bunk beds

2 rows

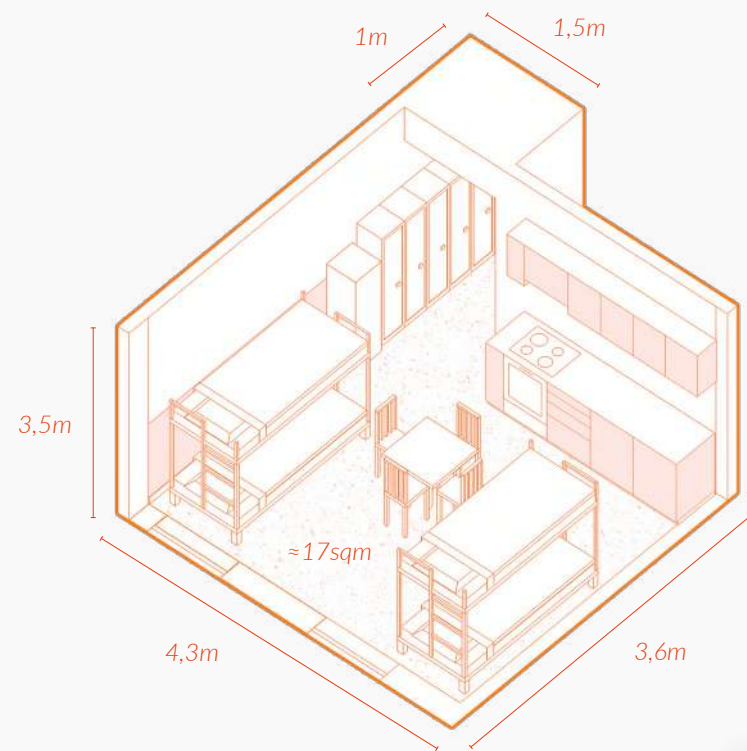
Feels relative spacious because of ceiling height

Has facilities like kitchenette, lockers, table etc

Steel, plastic, wood, laminate, textile

Possible to sleep "in private" if facing walls

Distance between bodies $\approx 2,5$ m



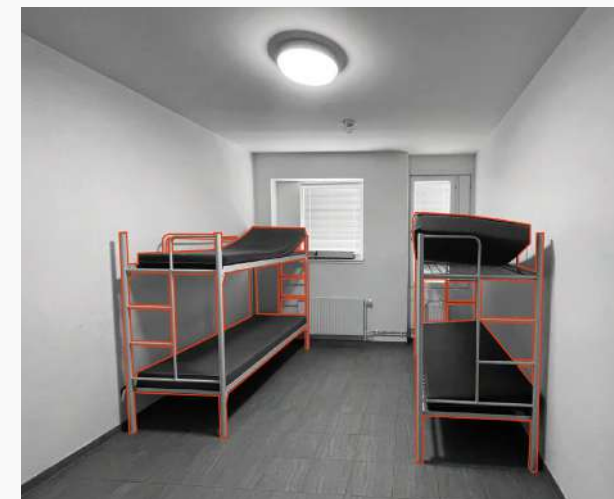
The work was not intended to compare the two accommodations and their conditions with each other, nor to evaluate which accommodation is better or worse. However, I had the opportunity to see two strong representations of how different the individual rooms can look. It is inevitable to point out that the architectural differences are enormous.

At one end, Sagåsen's worn-out room, in terms of, for example, finishes and electricity. Which, moreover, Mokoena (2025) was careful to point out himself as not optimal or what the Migration Agency wants to offer. At the other end, the "top of the line" rooms at Restad Gård literally shine, something I perceived Bengtsson was very proud of. Freshly polished and unused even.

Looking at the new "top of the line"-rooms, one who jumps to conclusions may say that all improvements that can be made architecturally - have been made; The surface layers have been replaced, a kitchenette has been installed, electricity is updated, locks are modernized, new furniture has been purchased and the walls are painted.

Yet the same fact remains. Despite the high ceilings, beautiful windows and new finishes, the scope for individualization is limited.

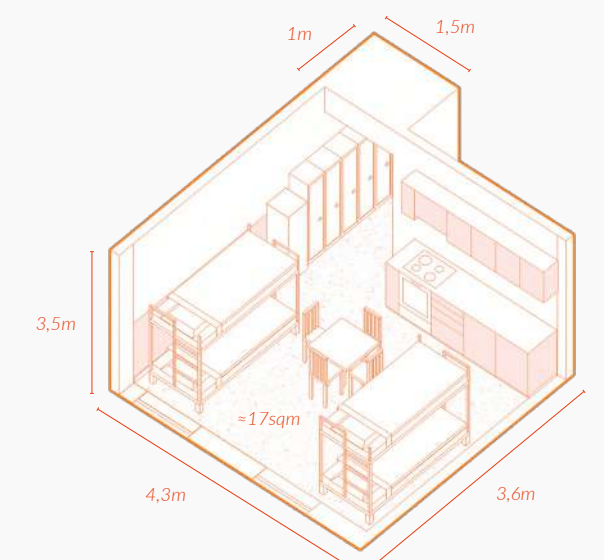
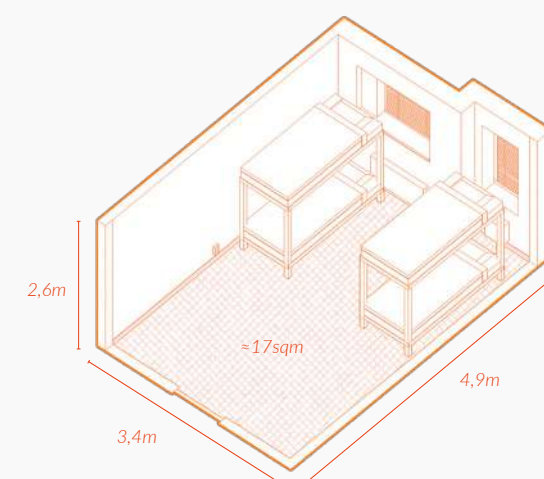
The focus lies on "gear" as I see it, that makes administration easier - but I do not see the benefits for the people living there having a blip key rather than a regular key. However, what I find most positive about the "top of the line" rooms is that they offer more objects; not only blinds but also curtains and a table with chairs.



Sagåsen arrival accommodation

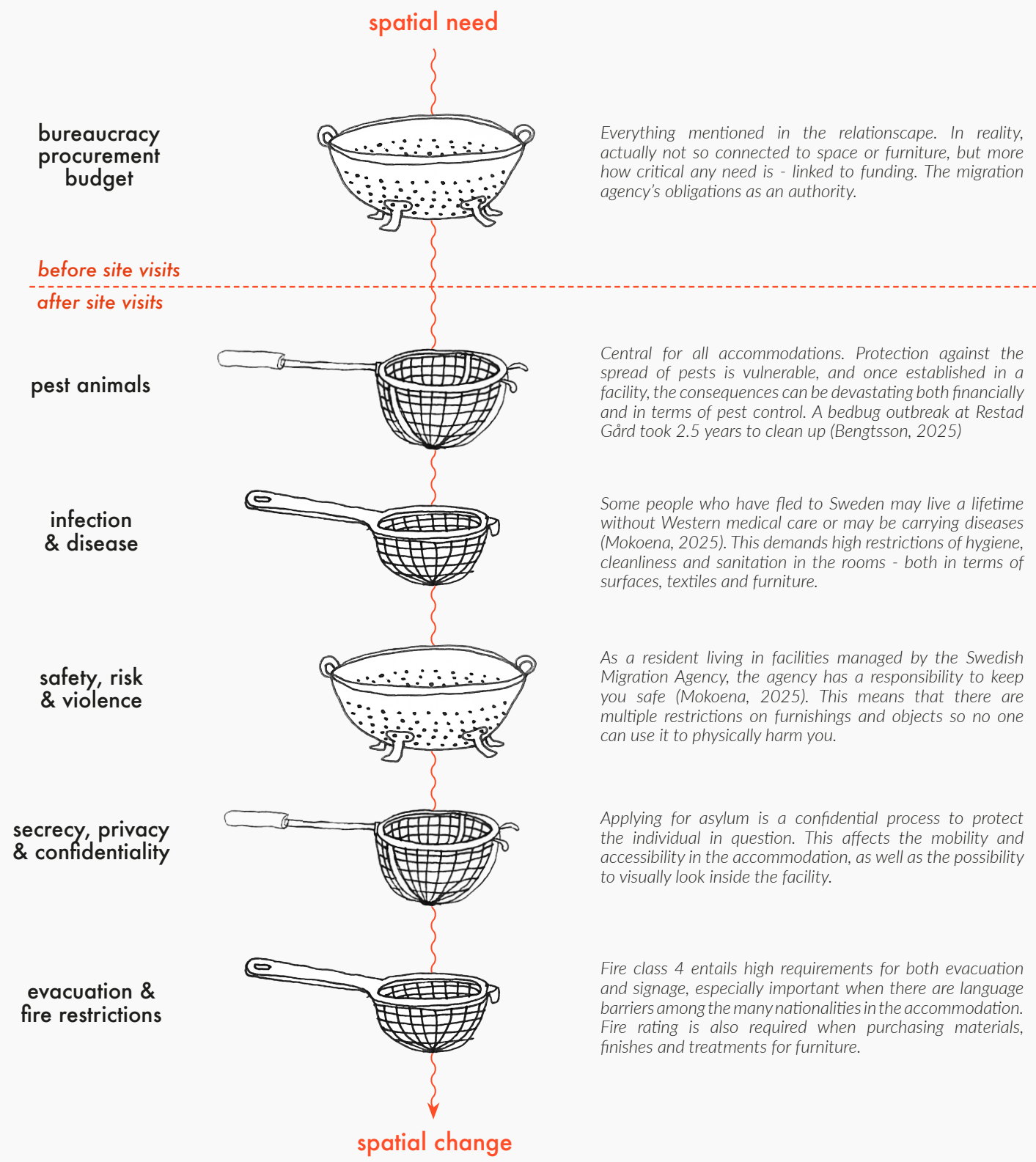


Restad Gård long-term accommodation, aka "top of the line"



3.4 spatial outtakes & limitations at organizational level

What was most clear after the site visits was how the processes of spatial change that I already saw as complicated and difficult to navigate - were even more complex, narrow and limited. The distance between spatial need and spatial change is long, and need to pass through many administrative sils to become reality. In other words, **these accommodations are not under ideal conditions to make interventions in.**



Boverkets byggregler (2011:6) - föreskrifter och allmänna råd - avsnitt 5:214

5:214 Verksamhetsklass 4 - Hotel m.m.
Verksamhetsklassen omfattar utrymmen där det vistas personer som inte kan förväntas ha god lokalkännedom, som har förutsättningar att själva sätta sig i säkerhet och som inte kan förväntas vara vakna. (BFS 2011:26)

Allmänt råd
Verksamheter som omfattas av föreskriften är hotell, vandrarhem, bed and breakfast, och andra typer av tillfälligt boende.
Regler om brandskydd i hotell, pensionat, vandrarhem och liknande anläggningar ges även ut av Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap (BFS 2014:3)

3.5 the elephant in the room

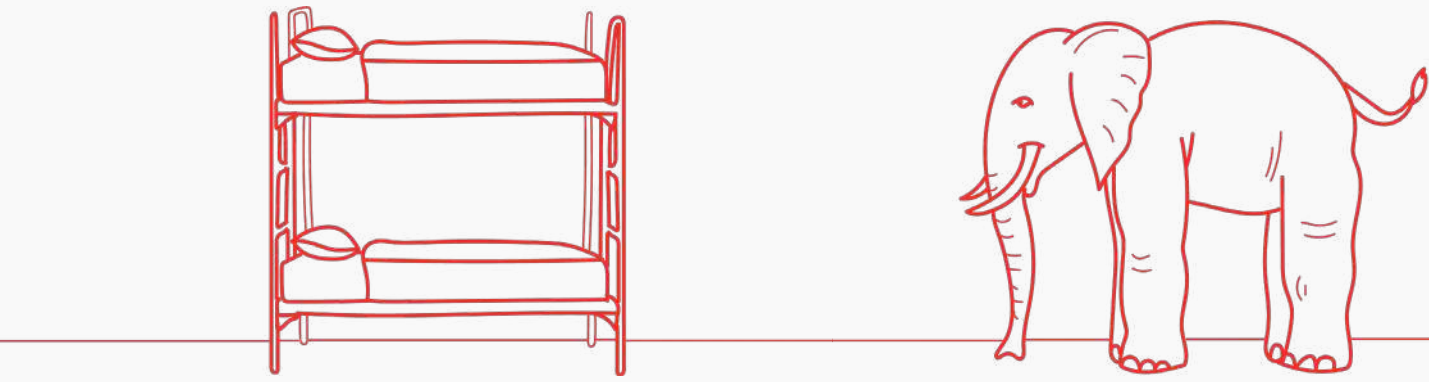
The fact that people preferred to sleep on a mattress on the floor instead of the top of the bunk bed is a **clear emotional reaction to a furniture-related limitation**. I read this situation as follows: **As soon as there is a possibility of choice, (bottom or top bunk) and the individual does not have the opportunity to choose, the situation becomes charged.**

But things are more or less possible, and I see the bunk bed being an object that appears very set in the system of the Migration Agency. Both the steel material is highly valued among the administration and staff because of the fear of bed bugs in a wooden bed, but they also see the bunk beds as a solution to the variation in pressure and capacity. Even though I see this piece of furniture as problematic from an individualistic and human value - perspective, I start from what I can improve if the bunk bed remains in the equation.

Newly renovated room or not, it is there with its tangible presence. **Once again, I am surprised that the constant in the complicated equation that is Swedish asylum accommodations - is the bunk bed.**

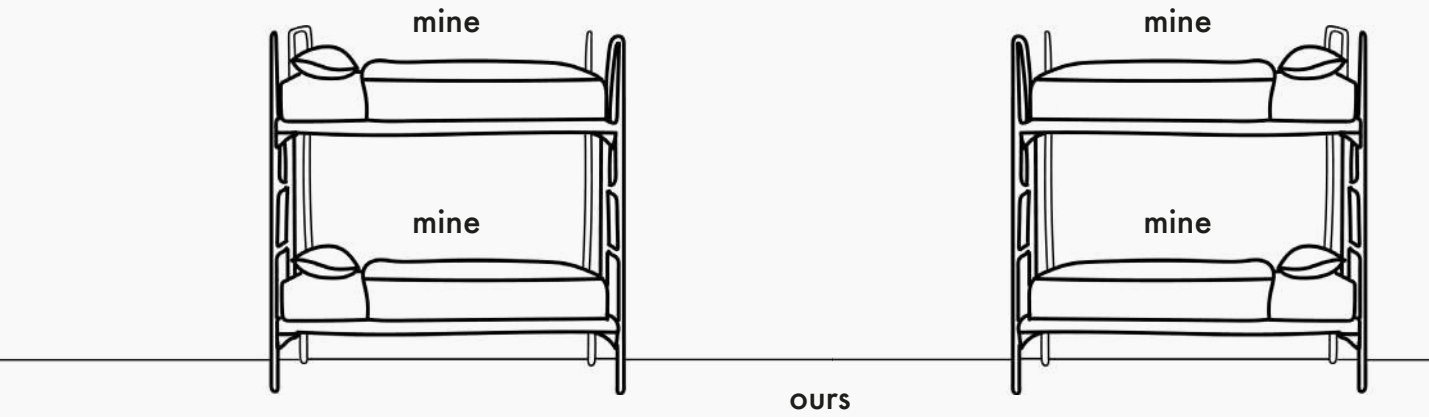
It is now clear to me that the problem is not in the aesthetics or necessarily the condition of the room itself, but (again) the possibility for the individual to choose and influence the space.

This is evident in how the staff at Sagåsen described the direct bad atmosphere created in the accommodation when the rooms are filled with 4 people instead of 2, and people needed to sleep on the top bunk.



The bunk bed has small strengths that I can work with when improving the rooms. For example, it clearly marks what each person's space is: the bunk. This generates that all floor space becomes common, something that both Bengtsson (2025) and Mokoena (2025) described is the situation in the accommodations.

Therefore, I see that it is possible to use the beds as a starting point to build a more qualitative and private space, while at the same time zoning and improving the common floorspace that is for everyone.



4. interventions,
discussion & conclusion

4.1 Spatial parameters and
their strength of improvement 50

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4.1 spatial parameters & their strength of improvement

After the site visits and my architectural documentation, I was able to **define the spatial parameters that influenced the individual rooms negatively in terms of personalisation and humanization**. I put these spatial relationships into words and problematize them from a design perspective.

To the right I have placed the various spatial conditions on a graph with two axes: The vertical one marking the opportunity for change within the administrative framework, and the horizontal one marking the level of de-personalization and de-individualisation. **With this method I can determine what parameters that are more malleable for spatial change and improvement.**



By looking at the graph, I see that there is development potential in **lighting and light**, both by adding artificial light sources but also by being able to control and adapt daylight.

The **bunk bed** is very set in the migration agency's system, and difficult to change when you look at the axe showing change within the administrative framework. So I have to reconcile with its presence and work with it.



The **fire related objects** are impossible to remove, but them being the only wall motives can easily be changed by adding other elements.

The same applies to the **lack of furniture**, a matter of addition, but which can be achieved most easily through the initiative of the residents rather than the migration authorities.

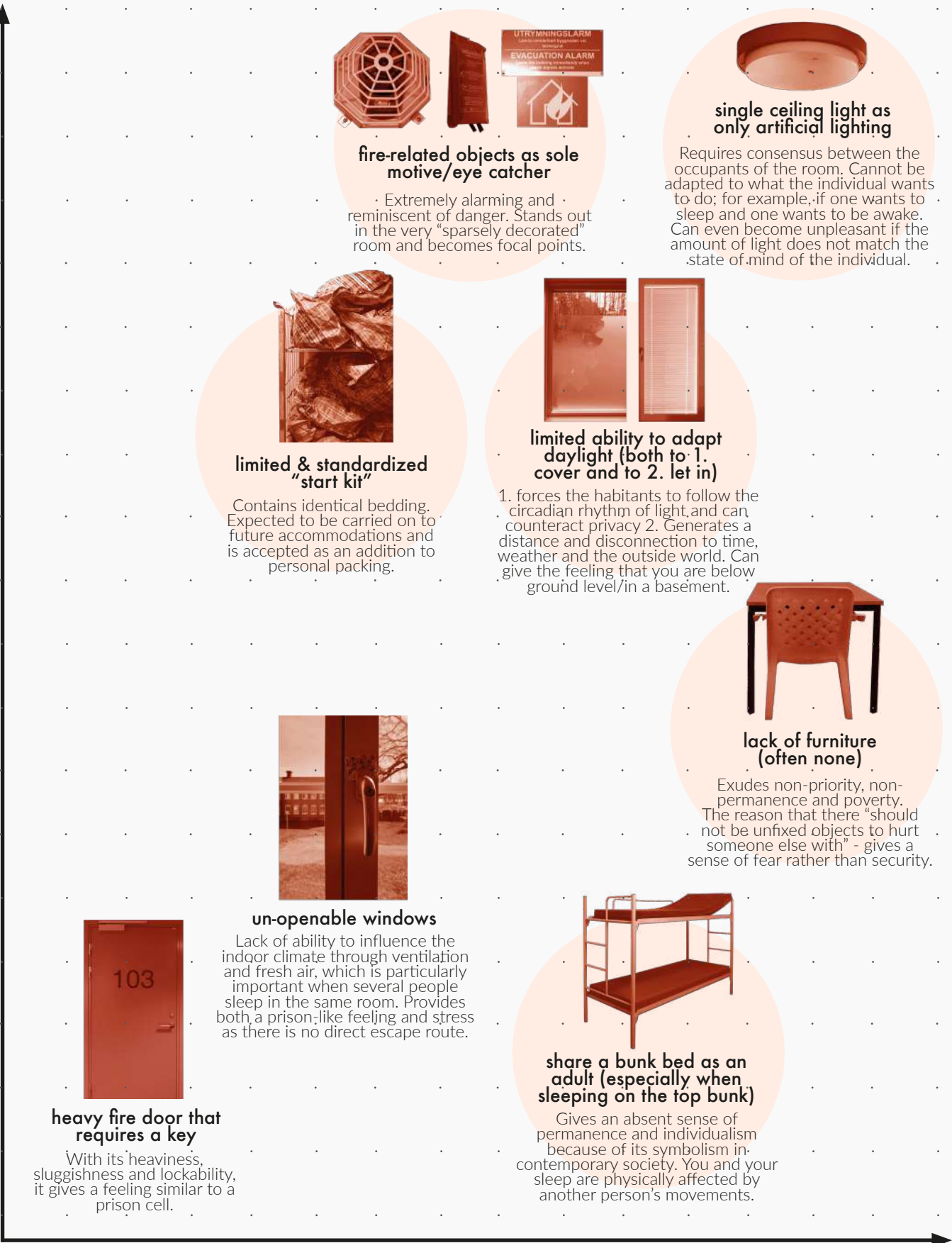


The **start kit** has limitations in that the volume cannot be much larger due to transportation and logistical reasons. However, it can be tweaked to improve.

I consider both the **fire door** and the situation with **non-openable windows** to be parameters that are too fixed to change, both administratively and legally. I limit myself to the previously named parameters.

graph of parameters that work against individuality & personalization, and their ability to change within the administrative framework

easier to change within the administrative framework



level of de-personalization & de-individualization

4.2 from issues to possibilities



Now that I have defined what I consider to be problematic spatial parameters, and sorted out how limited they are in terms of change - **it is possible to start seeing the issues instead as opportunities to improve and turn them into strengths.**

I link this with the spatial outtakes and analysis I made in the theory section, which were the titles as followed:

- the right to nest
- a finished product is difficult to personalize
- to have something of your own, even if (on paper) it is not yours
- hard determined shell, soft core

It is important that all asylum seekers gets the same fixed assets to avoid inequality and conflict. But within these fixed assets flexibility can exist. **I focus the design interventions on improving two aspects of individualization:**

the first one being

interventions that can enable personalization and choice

(but which belongs to the room that the Migration Agency administrates)

and the second one being

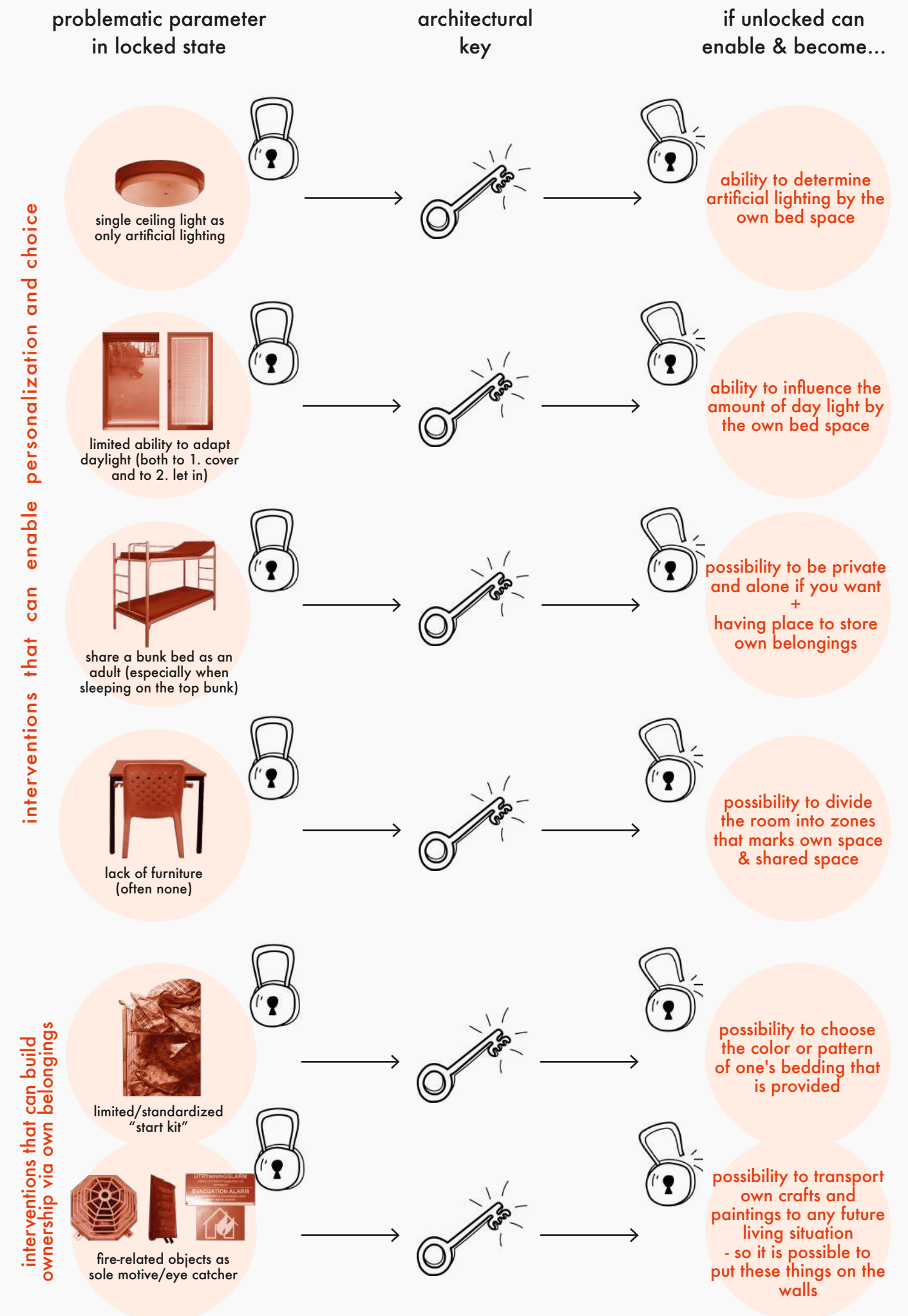
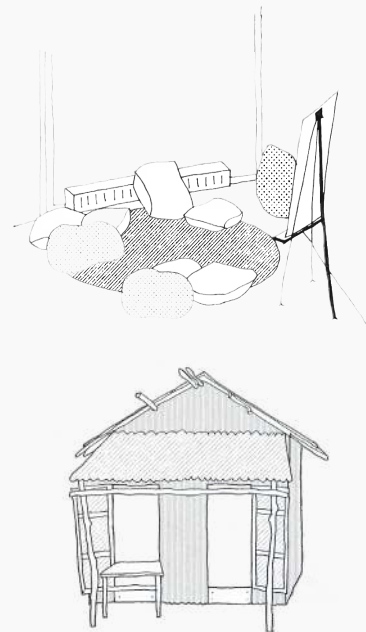
interventions that can build ownership via own belongings

(that the asylum seekers can bring to future accommodations/living situations)

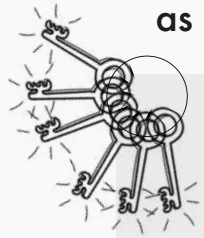


unlocking problematics with architectural keys

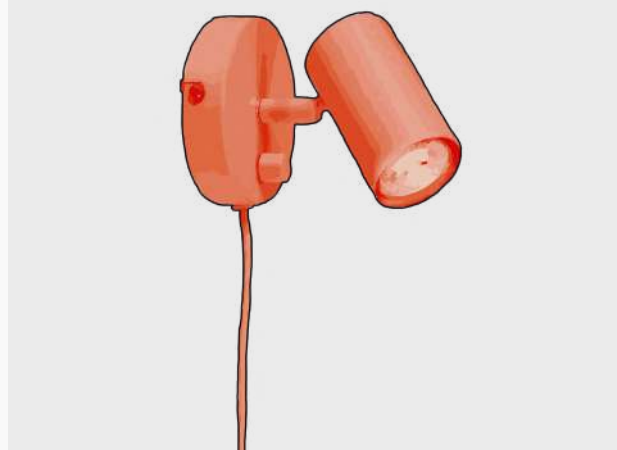
I have chosen to refer to my design interventions as "architectural keys" because they are small, precise and fit into the complex lock that is my context.



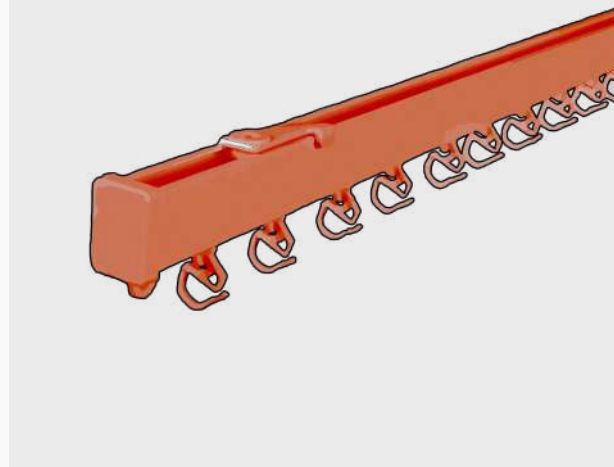
4.3 design proposal as architectural keys



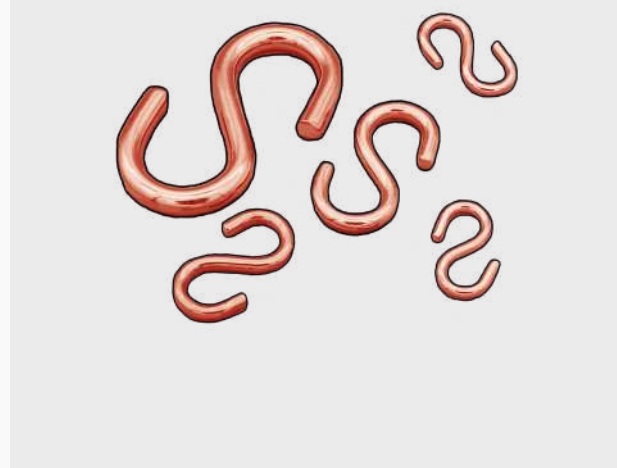
the bedside lamp



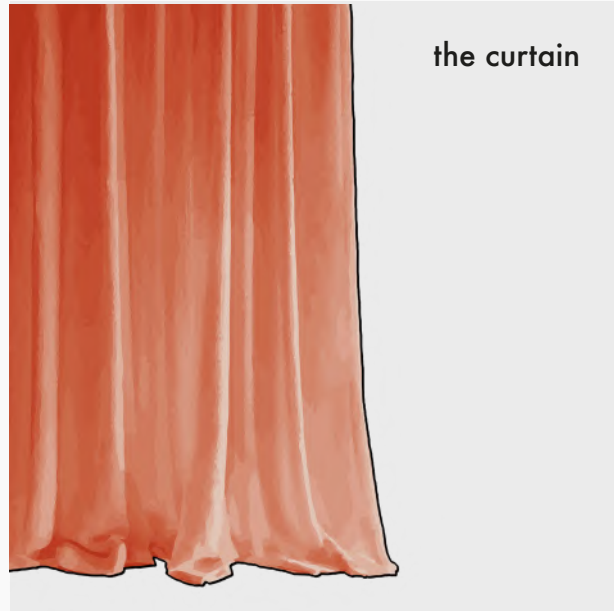
the curtain rod



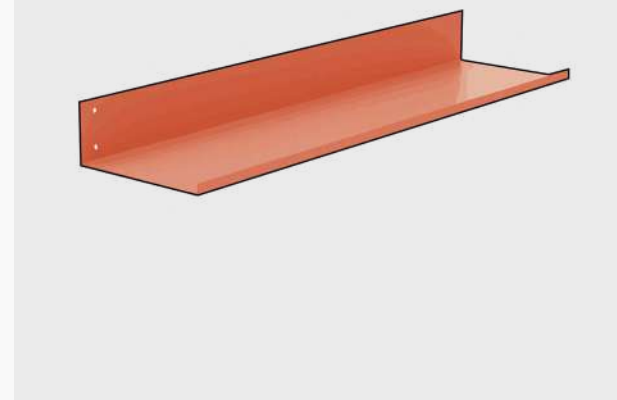
the s - hook



the curtain



the shelf

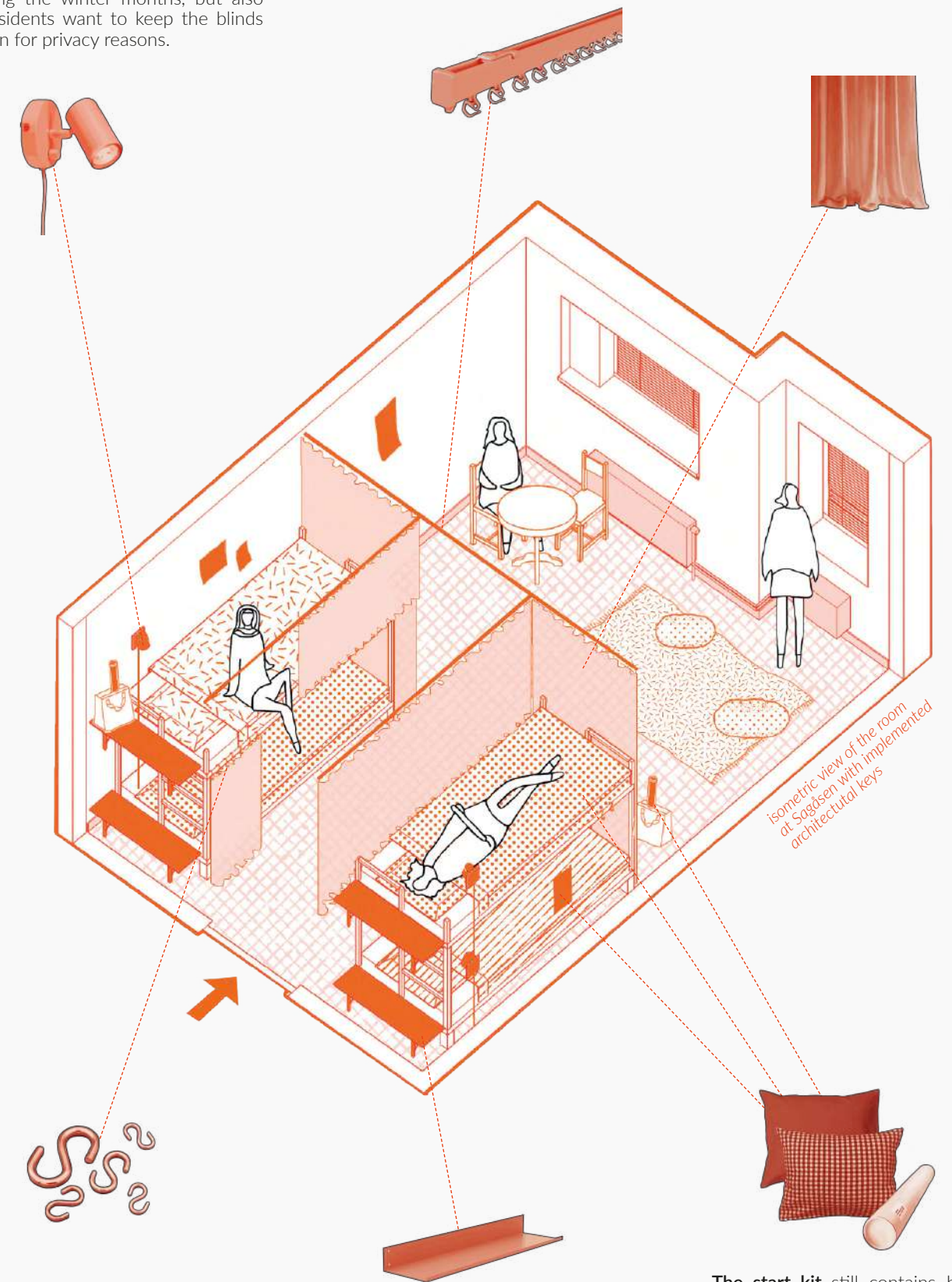


the new start kit



Having access to your own **artificial lighting** allows you to be awake when it is dark without disturbing someone who is sleeping. It is also important to have several light sources in the room during the winter months, but also if residents want to keep the blinds down for privacy reasons.

The curtain rod and curtain promote the possibility of making the bed spaces more private; they enable separation both visually and in terms of daylight. The curtains create zoning that allows the asylum seekers to move in and out of the room without disturbing anyone who wants to be left alone, but above all they mark the common shared space that is now located facing the windows.



Isometric view of the room at Sagdeien with implemented architectural keys

The s-hooks function as a curtain rod for the bottom bunks. They can also be hooked onto the steel grid (that supports the mattress of the top bunk) from underneath, and enable for the person in the bottom bunk to hang belongings in the "roof" of his/ hers bed.

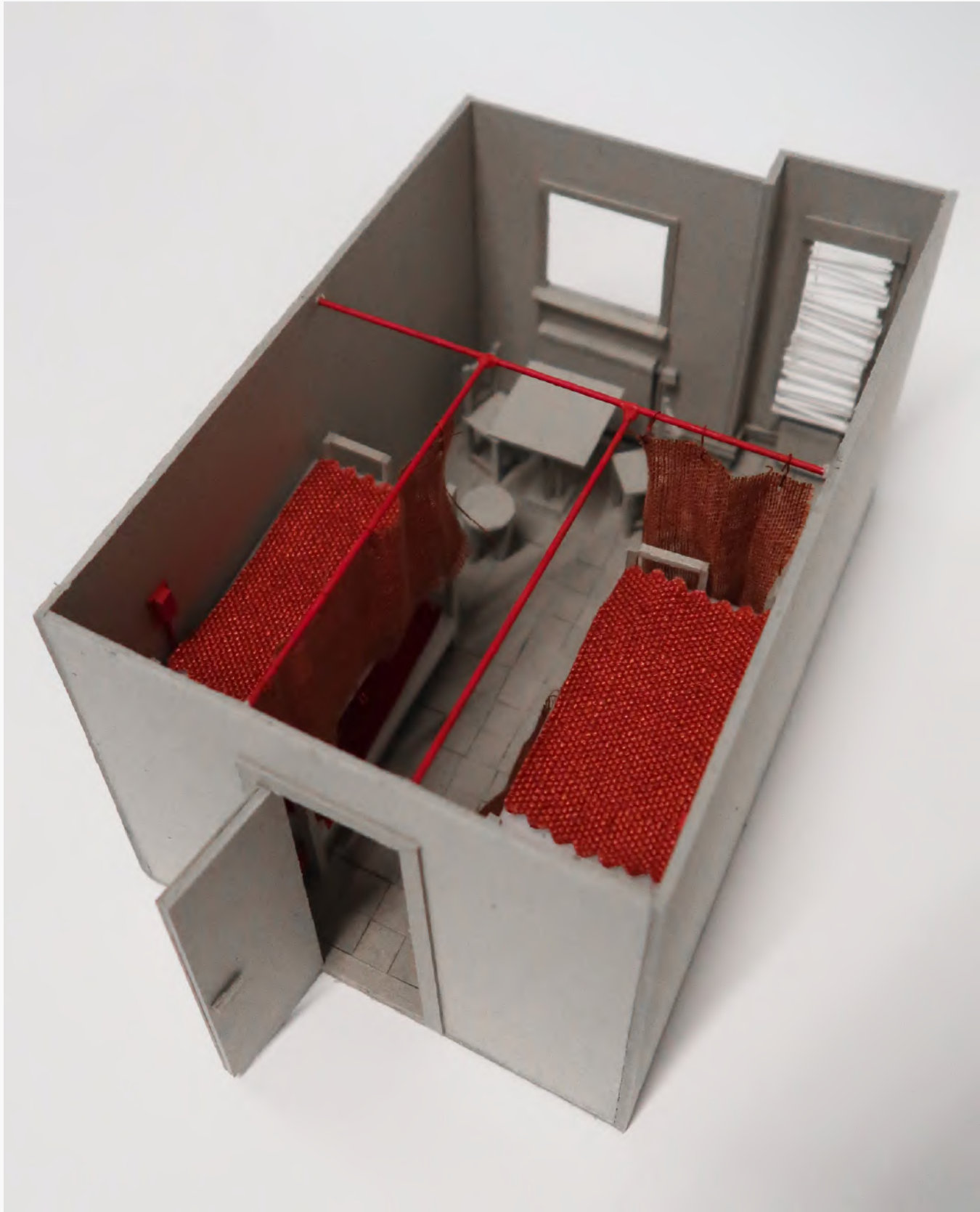
Since the top bunk has no floor space close by, there is no hard surface to put things on when the individual is in bed. **The shelf** functions both as a place to keep personal items, but more importantly, it acts as an extension of the personal space.

The start kit still contains bedding for the residents, the difference is that there are several different patterns/colors to choose from. The bag now also contains a cardboard/poster- roll for the asylum seekers to transport the creative things they do with the voluntary organisations. This enables them to have wall motifs and decorate the wall spaces.

4.4 model photos

The model is made in a scale of 1:25 and is in itself very small (length about 19 cm). It is a hand-cut model of a type room, room 103, at Sagåsen arrival asylum accommodation.

The high level of detail portrayed in a very small size emphasizes the minimal scale of my design implementations. (showcased in red) In comparison to a laser-cut model, the imperfections of the handwork have been intended to reflect the truly non-perfect reality that is a Swedish asylum accommodation.



4.5 discussion & conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to evaluate and critically examine the housing situation of the individual asylum seeker. To then implement design interventions that could facilitate and improve the individual's ability to influence their living environment.

Intertwined with this mapping and investigation, the goal was also to showcase the journey and processes that is Swedish asylum reception through making the spaces connected to these processes visible. (Both for people already working in or with the system - but also to architects who were considered as a group that should be more aware of the spatial environments).

The thesis questions were therefore divided to address the two sides of the work; Interventions and design approach, and visual communication and storytelling.

interventions & design approach

How can spatial interventions counteract the asylum seeker's lack of agency while living in Swedish asylum accommodations?

What are the architectural keyes that can enable personalization within the very set frames of the Swedish Migration Agency's spatial processes?

visual communication & storytelling

How can the architect use her visual abilities to communicate to people working with Swedish migration and asylum reception?

showcasing hidden realities

Neither Swedish asylum reception nor the architecture of asylum reception is well mapped or displayed to either the public or the architectural community.

Written information is there if you want to find it but is complex and difficult to understand, involving a lot of reading and understanding of the law. **Visual or pictorial information about asylum accommodations is in general non-existent.** This, combined with the fact that reality unfolds in a very different way on site - makes the context as a whole challenging to grasp.

I have not found any previous works where these environments and processes are shown, with the single exception of the ArkDes feasibility study. Not many people know about this "world" that exists in parallel with our own.

With this thesis, I have contributed to the dissemination of knowledge by explaining and analyzing scenarios and conditions in a way that hopefully both the general public and architects can take to heart. The methods for producing material have been deliberately chosen to be designed in a way that shows imperfections and imperfectness - precisely because these environments are anything but tidy and perfect.

each group consists of individuals

A major strength of the thesis is how it continues to look at **the asylum seeker as an individual - and not as a group.** This was important because early in the process, and through the theory highlighted, I criticize the approach that architects have previously taken when designing architecture for refugees. **It is this 'group approach' that I believe is a contributing factor to architects proposing standardized and non-malleable products as a design.**

The focus on the individual can of course also be strongly justified given the high turnover of residents in the accommodations. In my work, **the needs of the individual have therefore always been higher valued than the needs of the group,** and this influenced the environments that the thesis work addressed. Spaces where the individuals had to constantly reach consensus with others, only have access to certain hours of the day, or obey someone's rules - felt less relevant. For example, there was not a focus on developing the spaces where the voluntary organisations were housed (which could have been the case because it was most well-functioning in terms of spatial comfort and function). Instead, **the work focuses on the small and very limited spaces that each individual has power over, where I also saw more challenges but at the same time more development potential.**

the outcome is realistic

Since the work strived to take on a very realistic approach and stay within the limited framework that is the reality of the Migration Agency - it has of course affected both the working methods and the result.

The design proposal's set of 6 architectural keys aim to unlock spatial parameters that work against the individual's ability to influence their room and private space. **The scale of these keys shown in the end to be small and can even be argued to be interior design rather than architecture. At the same time it is clear, and also reinforced in the theory section, that individualization and personal choice happens at this small scale, close to the body, able to control and tweak.**

This makes me think about what **architecture has (historically) been characterized as, and how it tends to be defined as big, solid, set and determined.** - the straight opposite of what I have highlighted as important for individualization and personalization.

Despite the reality of the work, the thesis did benefit from testing design methods where factual content met fictional exploration. It could have strengthened the content even more if 'what if' scenarios had been explored that could result in larger or unexpected outcomes. Even if these suggestions had been considered unrealistic, they could have become the basis for a more explorative discussion.

I can see that my design proposal is possible to make real, and that it will **encourage the reader to question whether the square processes that government agencies have to work within - are beneficial to the individual for whom the agency actually exists.**

I hope that my thesis work proves that architecture does not have to be huge to be important, just like the smallest key can sometimes be the one opening the largest door.

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