Chapter 2
Visual Privacy

'Why do refugees keep their window shutters down, even during the day!?' a student asked suspiciously after a field visit to one of Berlin's refugee camps (Tempohomes). Despite being relatively small compared with Zaatari camp, it was obvious that the lack of privacy was one of the main issues that refugees struggled with while being accommodated in shelters. Textiles were added to the front doors, and curtains were used to cover windows. Some porches were even entirely wrapped with textile, creating what looked like a semi-private room utilized as an additional space during the day. Therefore, the need for privacy was not only a matter of visually separating spaces, but also of introducing a social hierarchy within space. Similarly, in Zaatari camp, one of the main social dynamics of reassembling was related to the need for visual privacy. In order to provide a further explanation of the process, I detail one of the case studies, illustrating how dwelling occurred in one of the densest areas in Zaatari camp: the 'old camp'.

Dwelling in density

Density, both physical and social, can impose various challenges to the process of dwelling. The construction of space becomes not only one's own decision, but a collective one with regard to the use of space, the nature of social activities taking place around the dwellings, the installing of infrastructures, and the utilization of the available resources and materials. Density renders dwelling contested, as it implies the need to negotiate and incorporate the ways in which other nearby individuals and groups also want to dwell. When people attempt to secure their need to dwell in a context characterized by density, the competition over resources may lead to frustrations and conflicts, especially in the absence of coordination and collaborative efforts. One example is a refugee family that was settled in close proximity to two other families in the old camp. Once the tents had been replaced with caravans, the two families closer to the street built bathing and toilet areas next to their caravans, and the third family further back was soon left surrounded

by toilets and with no access to the street. 'We felt as if we were trapped. Imagine being surrounded by toilets. One of the families was raising chickens as well, so imagine the smell. We had to leave immediately, as soon as we had the opportunity', the family explained. Yet while some families struggled due to density, others benefited from it, as it eased and accelerated their process of settlement.

I now turn to the case of Sami, a 32-year-old man who, at the time of the research, was living with his wife and four children in the 'old camp'—the first area in Zaatari to be populated. Sami came from a small village in Daraa called As-Sawara (which, according to him, had a population of around 5000). He fled the village in August 2012 when it came under attack by the Syrian regime. Accompanied by other residents, he reached a border village called Al-Tayybeh, four kilometres from the Syrian-Jordanian border. Here, they were guided by the Syrian Free Army to the *Sheek* (fence), referring to the informal check point that played a major role in providing access for Syrians to Jordan in 2012. The group was then received by the Jordanian military and transferred to Zaatari camp. Sami recalled, 'I entered Zaatari on 20 August 2012', so one month after it had been officially opened. At that time, the camp was still in its emergency phase.

A photograph of a street view in the old camp, taken in May 2016

Sami initially settled with his family in the southern part of the 'old camp'. In line with the humanitarian regulations of aid distribution, he was given a tent, in which he would live with his family for about a month. A few days later, he realized the need for a private washing area; thus, he promptly installed one, explaining,

'I installed a washing area between the tent and the adjacent street because my wife wasn't comfortable going back and forth to the shared toilets'. Based on his description, the washing area would have resembled a small roofless room, made out of plastic sheets or *Baṭṭanīyh* (the underlying textile of the tent) and light metal poles. It functioned as a semi-private room, or a buffer zone, between the street and the private space of the tent. It also managed to accommodate activities such as washing dishes and bathing, which require high levels of privacy for women — highlighting the gendered nature of the domestic space and its functions.

Despite the relatively small size of the space, Sami created a grey water system that reflected the earliest forms of urban infrastructures in the camp. He dug a small basin in the ground, reinforced its sides with blocks and cemented its surface so the water was not absorbed into the ground. The basin was then connected from one corner to an open channel leading to a larger reservoir. The walls of the reservoir were also cemented. At the bottom, this reservoir was then connected to an end-destination reservoir, located outside the dwelling area and made out of a perforated plastic barrel. The final reservoir and the preceding one were connected by a water pipe obtained from the humanitarian workers. Sami recalled, 'the engineers were building the toilets [WASH], so I asked one of them if I could take the pipe, and he gave it to me'.

One month later, in September 2012, Sami decided to move in order to settle next to his relatives from As-Sawara, yet remaining within the 'old camp'. According to him, it felt more comfortable and secure to be next to relatives from the same village. 'Life in the camp is hard, but is made easier through friends and relatives', he explained. Shortly after he had moved to the new site, caravans were distributed in the area, and he received one in exchange for his tent. It is important to keep in mind that the allocation of caravans was on a somewhat random basis, especially in the old camp. Satellite images show caravans placed between the sandy streets in no discernible order. 'The donors put the caravans here and left. We thought there will be an ordering process soon [*Ṭanẓīm*], but this never happened. Until today we live on top of each other!' exclaimed one of the refugees. By distributing the caravans adjacent to each other, not only did they become almost impossible to move and relocate, but families were also forced to live right next to one another. Families, however, still chose the security of these caravans — their physical durability and privacy — over having to wait in tents in more spacious areas for an unspecified amount of time until they were given a caravan. Negotiating the conditions of each context played a significant role in how dwelling was spatialized and how it materialized.

Sami began to live with his family in the newly acquired caravan. He was surrounded by two other caravans: one to one side of his, and one in front. One month later, he again added a bathing area, attached to his caravan and closer to the road leading to what was gradually becoming a cluster. The location of the bathing area

helped Sami to create an entrance to his dwelling and to establish a buffer zone between the street leading to the inside of the cluster (semi-public) and his caravan (private). He referred to this space as a 'salon', using it as a living room or an area in which to receive guests. It was nevertheless not entirely private, but semi-private. 'My aunt's caravan is here bordering the salon, but its window is looking into our salon. Thank God she is a relative, so it wasn't as uncomfortable as if she had been a total stranger', explained Sami. The construction of dwellings in Zaatari camp, especially within dense areas, was multifaceted. Refugees had to negotiate social relations, different degrees of social space, the physical characteristics of the caravans and the way they were placed — sometimes all at once.

To go back to the design, the bathing area that Sami constructed resembled again a roofless room made out of zinco (metal sheets), which had been distributed by NGOs as part of a winterization kit. Its ground was cemented, with a hole dug on one side. However, in contrast to the previous one, this time Sami did not construct his own sewage system. Instead, he connected the hole to a water pipe that was found near the camp. He explained, 'The neighbours wanted us to connect all the houses to one pipe so the area does not get dirty. We found one, unused and lying on the ground in the farms next to the camp so we brought it here, put it in the middle so all houses can connect to it ... and then we let it pour into the big pipe in the street'. The large pipe to which the sewage water was connected in this cluster was part of the rainwater collectors installed by the UNHCR in 2012. Interestingly, this shows two contrasting logics: relief actors engaged in constructing a camp composed of communal infrastructures and shelter units vis-à-vis refugees constructing dwellings out of the shelter and the dismantled infrastructures. The refugees' need to dwell was manifesting itself against all odds.

Five months later, Sami's neighbour decided to leave the area. This turned out to be a transformative and festive event. 'When I heard that my neighbour was leaving, I told him, "Stop! Please sell me your caravan. I am your neighbour and deserve it more than anyone else", and so he did!' explained Sami with great satisfaction. Being able to own this adjacent caravan was very important for Sami, as it made it possible for him to expand his dwelling on the site, increasing its size in a dense area where every inch counted. Eventually, he managed to buy the caravan for 135 JDs (equal to approximately 150 euros), but there was an issue: the caravan's door was facing towards the other side. In order to include the newly bought caravan into his dwelling, and in particular to connect it to the 'salon', Sami had to call on the help of a technician. The caravan was *dismantled* in place, and its parts were *reassembled*. An entire section of the caravan was removed, creating an extension for the living room, and the door was replaced with a normal caravan panel. While the refugees' ability to appropriate and build with caravans rapidly developed into what can be described as a reservoir of local knowledge that helped them to overcome the challenges of density, the process of dwelling also required imagination

and creativity. The result of opening up one caravan to the 'salon' was a new, larger space, in which the kitchen was merged with the living space, and the worktop was equipped with a washing basin and a water tap linked to a water tank. When describing the new set up, Sami recounted, 'I always wanted to have an American kitchen ... half open to the salon; I had this idea in mind when I was about to build my own house in As-Sawara. But since I couldn't do it there due to the war, I did it here'. Although Sami had never been to the US, he had no hesitation in borrowing an idea of how dwelling was practiced there. This accentuates the point that refugees do not necessarily seek to reproduce dwellings similar to those in which they once lived, but instead embark on a process of appropriation in which imagination and creativity are used against the limitations of the camp and the shelter. Knowledge of space, whether local, translocal or transnational, becomes a valuable asset in negotiating the complexities and challenges of the physical and social space they are faced with.

The introduction of a second caravan to Sami's dwelling resulted in a shift in functions. Specifically, the bathing area was moved to a more discreet part of the dwelling, located in a corner, thereby giving more space to the guest/living room, which was then furnished with two mattresses and a TV in the corner. The door that had been removed from the newly acquired caravan was placed between the old and the new caravan to create a door to the bathroom. The bathing area was equipped with a washing machine and a squat toilet, which was connected to the collective sewage system built by the dwellers in the cluster. The ground under the salon and the bathing area was cemented.

The final step was to solidify the boundaries of the dwelling, thereby *enclosing* it. The word used to describe this process in Arabic is *Sakkar*, which literally means 'close', but in the context of this narrative, it meant that something was put together and finally sealed. This moment captures the establishment of the internal cosmos of the dwelling, while also firmly establishing connections to the outside world. The division between the inside and outside of the dwelling space thus contradicted the humanitarian logic of open or covered space. In Sami's case, this process involved constructing a wall out of caravan panels that stretched from the kitchen to the main door. For the entrance, Sami added a window and a door with an extra layer (made out of net fencing) so it could be left open during the summer. An additional wall was constructed to separate the 'salon' from the adjacent caravan belonging to Sami's relatives. The wall was constructed parallel to the caravan, about 10 centimetres away, so they could get some air by opening the window of their caravan. In doing so, Sami ensured the privacy of the dwelling, given that the window of his relatives' caravan was looking directly into the salon.

These changes did not take place all at once, but were made gradually over the course of two years, according to Sami. One of the most important factors that affected the process was the availability of the financial means to implement the

changes. Certain steps, such as dismantling and reassembling caravan parts, were particularly expensive, since they could not be implemented individually, but required the help of a professional (in contrast to work completed in previous phases). One caravan panel cost between 10 and 17.50 JDs (about 20 euros), with construction costs of 75 JDs. This *emergent* economic value of caravan panels was something that needed to be negotiated while dwelling, as will be explained more extensively in the following chapter. The transition from shelter to dwelling in Sami's case included a series of appropriations in which density — that is, the scarcity of space, the limitations of the material (the caravan) and the proximity to other refugees — had to be negotiated. The result was not an individual dwelling, but a cluster in which dwelling occurred simultaneously and collectively. To understand the collective nature of dwelling in the old camp, the next segment will provide a closer look into its dynamics and structure.

Dwelling as a collective act and the semiotics of space

Sami's dwelling is in a vibrant and complex urban cluster that was collectively shaped out of the randomly placed caravans in the old camp. One of the first implications of the dwelling process was to transform the humanitarian binary of covered/open space into a gradient of social space. In line with Lefebvre (1991), social space is perceived here as 'waves' of space, with different intensities and boundaries that are fluid, dynamic and contested in nature. Yet these spaces were carved out an empty metal 'body' — a set of 16 caravans that were placed randomly on site and turned into a space that would end up being reminiscent of the fabric of an old Arab city, or Medina. As one woman from rural Damascus described the 'old camp', 'This place reminds me of a Palestinian camp, or even the old city of Damascus. Have you been there?' Density alone is not the only reason these spaces were likened to Arab old cities or informal areas. Instead, the way space is being used and structured follows particular social norms. In her exploration of the Arabo-Islamic city, Janet Abu-Lughod (1987, 167) noted that, 'The creation of male and female turf is perhaps the most important element of the structure of the city contributed by Islam. It is important to remember, however, that the rules of turf were not only to establish physically distinctive regions; more important, they were to establish visually distinctive or insulated regions. The object was not only to prevent physical contact but to protect visual privacy'. Therefore, the placement of windows, the height of adjacent buildings and the locations of doors were all orchestrated in ways that would ensure the privacy of the dwellers. In fact, the placement of curtains in many of Berlin's refugee camps (Tempohomes) — in front of main doors and windows — is a clear sign of the same need to protect privacy. However, according to Abu-Lughod, this results in the production of *semi-private* spaces, as an
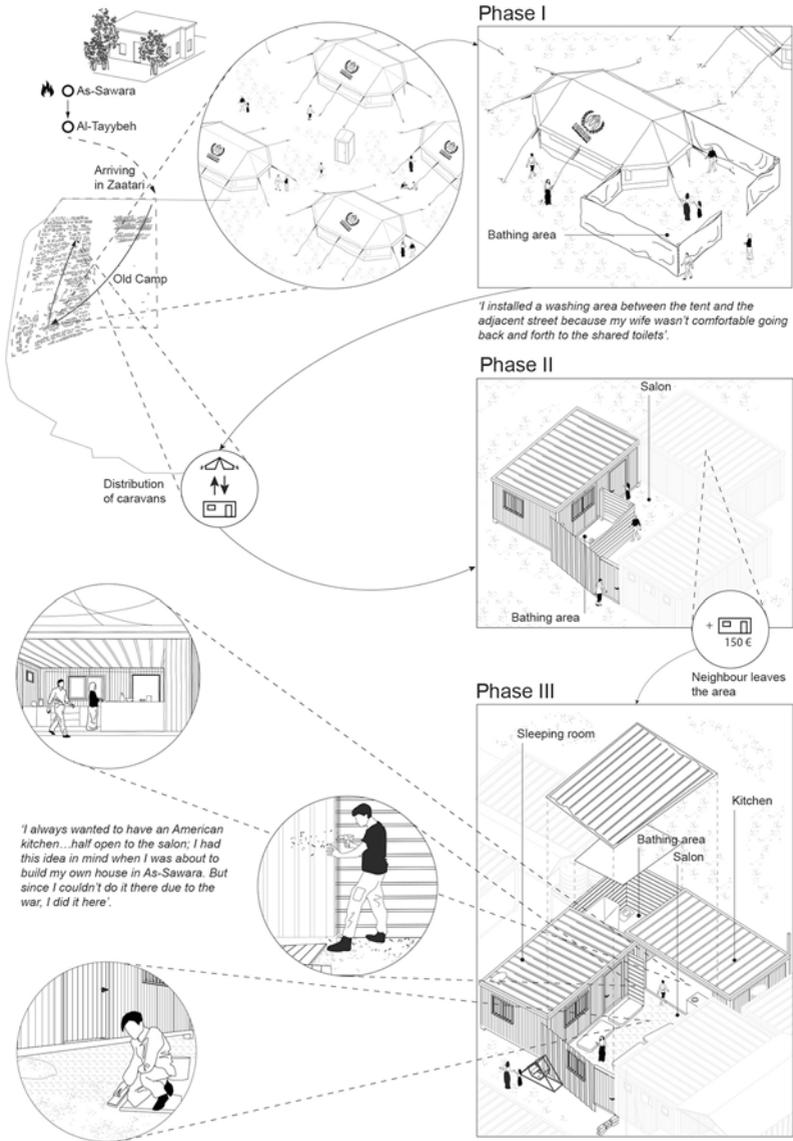
intermediate category that may be lacking in other cultures. Such spaces are not entirely closed, but create a sense of privacy. As she explained:

> I am often struck, as I wander around Arab cities, with how easy it is to tell whether I am in public space or have blundered into semi-private space. I have often tried to identify the markers that indicate this. A sudden narrowing of the path, particularly if that narrowing has been exaggerated by the implanting of low stone posts or even a pile of bricks, is a sign of the shift, especially when the road widens again soon afterwards. (J. Abu-Lughod 1987, 169)
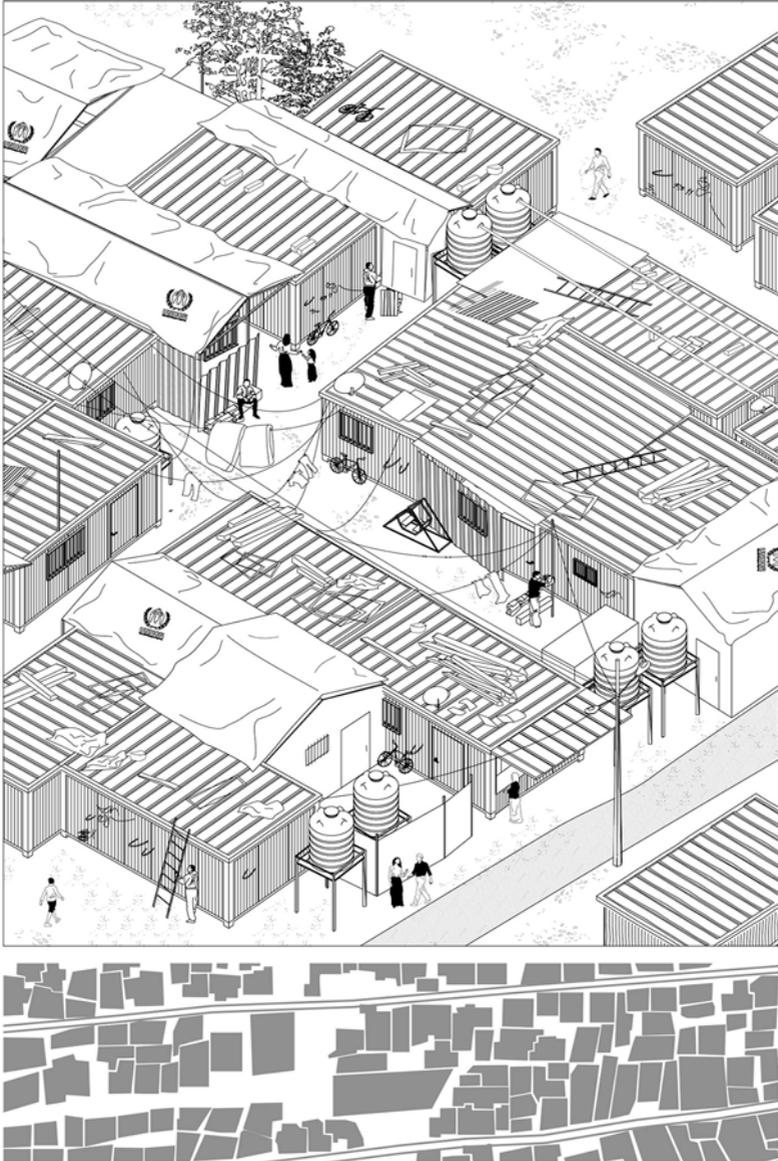
These *semiotics of space* are very important when attempting to understand dwelling as a process that is at its core simultaneously social and spatial. In the resulting cluster where Sami lived at the time of this research, I was able to sense the semi-private nature of the cul-de-sac leading to the different dwellings within the cluster. The entrance of this branching cul-de-sac was marked by two large water tanks, raised above the ground on a metal structure. Due to this construction, every person who passed by needed to make the effort to bend their head in order to pass underneath the water tanks. Additionally, the space was furnished with clothes lines that created a strong and immediate impression of *stepping into* a more private part of the space near the dwelling. At the end of the cul-de-sac, a threshold or *ʿAtabeh* was also constructed for an elderly woman (living in dwelling number 4), where she could sit outside to socialize with the neighbours. 'These young brats! They keep playing football here and destroying it. But she keeps rebuilding it', said her son, who happened to be also the son of the Mukhtar (the village chief) back in Syria. In the camp, and within the cluster, he tried to maintain this role by keeping one of the caravans open as a guest house for men from the same village, where they would meet regularly to talk and to enjoy food together. While visiting the cluster, I had the opportunity to join them for a lunch, at which a special dish of bulgur, lamb and cooked yoghurt (*Mleḥy*) was served. The space is called the *Maḍāfa*, and literally translates as the 'guest house'. It plays an important role in maintaining and regulating social relations, and can vary in its use according to the different groups in the camp. For instance, well-known clans and tribes established a few *Maḍāfa* spaces across the camp, where these groups could talk to their chief. The *Maḍāfa* is especially important in village settings, featuring as a part of almost every rural dwelling. It was explained to me that: 'People in cities are used to receiving guests in their houses. But for us [villagers from the Houran plain], we need the *Maḍāfa* because it is the place where we can receive guests ... not inside the house.'

Dwelling within such a dense context as that found in the 'old' part of Zaatari camp clearly demonstrates the impact of gender, visual privacy and social relations on space. The bodies of the caravans were carved out to produce a gradient of social spaces: from the very private, to the semi-private, to the semi-public (the alleys of the old camp), to the public (the main street of the camp with the *souk* or market).

The transition from shelters to dwellings (the case of Sami)

As-Sawara
Al-Tayybeh
Arriving in Zaatari
Old Camp
Distribution of caravans

Phase I

Bathing area

'I installed a washing area between the tent and the adjacent street because my wife wasn't comfortable going back and forth to the shared toilets'.

Phase II

Salon

Bathing area

+ 150 €

Neighbour leaves the area

'I always wanted to have an American kitchen...half open to the salon; I had this idea in mind when I was about to build my own house in As-Sawara. But since I couldn't do it there due to the war, I did it here'.

Phase III
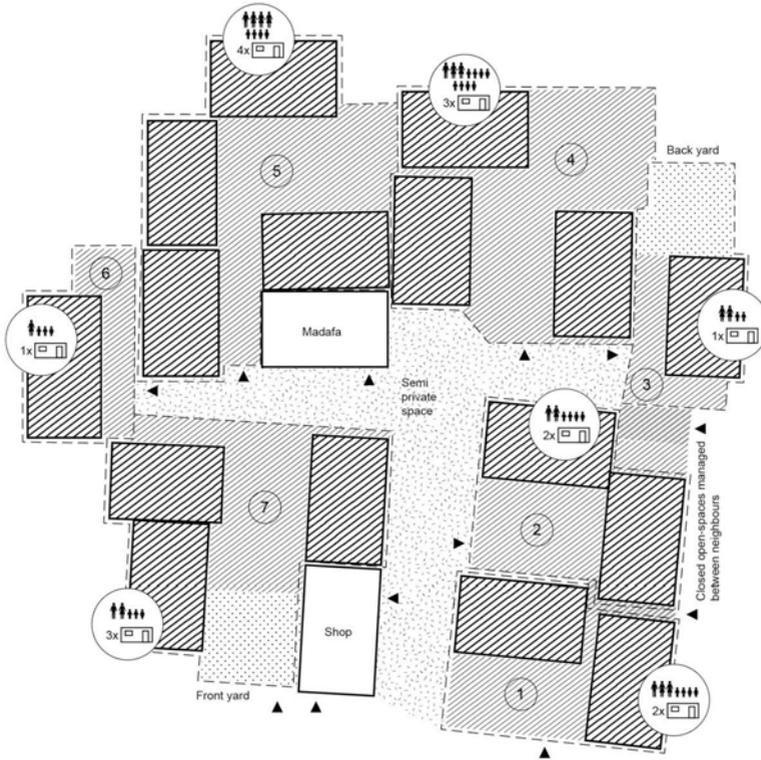
Sleeping room

Kitchen

Bathing area
Salon

A perspective of the resulting cluster and urban fabric (the case of Sami)

A detailed floor plan and a section showing the complexity of the resulting cluster (the case of Sami)
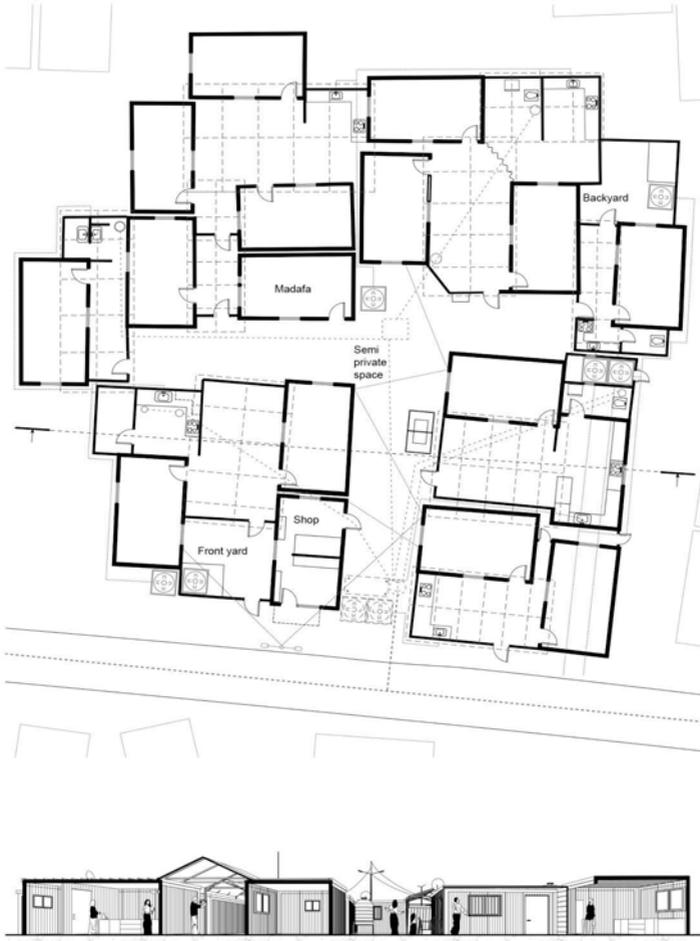
A diagram showing the familial arrangements within the cluster and the relationship between the dwellers (the case of Sami)

House number	Family members	Number of containers	Relationship between dwellers	Relation to Abu Muhammad
1	7	2	Extended family: parents, 4 children and an aunt	Aunt and her relatives (*khale*)
2	6	2	Single family: parents and 4 children (Abu Muhammad)	Abu Muhammad (reference person)
3	4	1	Single family: parents and two kids	First cousin (*Ibn 'Amm*)
4	11	3	Extended family: parents with their mother and 8 children (Abu Nasser – son of the Mukhtar)	First cousin (*Ibn 'Amm*)
5	8	4	Extended family: parents with 4 children and two aunts	Distant cousin of the mother (Ibn 'Amm el Walde)
6	4	1	Single family: widow with 3 children	No direct relation (from the family)
7	5	3	Single family: parents with 3 children	First cousin (*Ibn Khale*)

Yet as Abu-Lughod pointed out, this process involves on the one hand, negoti-
ating and regulating space according to socio-cultural norms that have their roots
in Islam, but on the other hand, it also represents a collective effort. Refugees had
to regulate the use of the resulting in-between spaces that could attract unwanted
visitors. Most of these spaces were closed off using a metal door and a lock. 'The
neighbours agreed to put their water tanks here so they cannot be stolen. We've put
up a door and a lock, and only we have the key', Sami commented while showing
me the space. These collective actions not only included physical and infrastruc-
tural decisions, but also social ones. 'Here there is a widow living with her three
young daughters [dwelling number 6]. She is a distant relative, but she lives with
us since she has no one else in the camp. We take care of her whenever she needs
help', recalled Sami. In that sense, the need to dwell not only implies the use of
imagination, knowledge and solidarity, but also reveals dwelling to be a process of
mediation between various elements and aspects at the same time. The imperative
of dwelling, in a context where it is suspended (such as in a camp), forces refugees
to mitigate and manoeuvre between various needs and constraints as they arise.
Eventually, in an area of about 600 m^2 furnished by 18 caravans, seven dwellings
were constructed hosting 45 refugees. The space was transformed from a random
set of empty caravans into diverse dwellings and a vibrant and collectively man-
aged space. In the following case, these practices will also be explored — this time,
however, among the members of the same family.