

BROWNBOOK

AN URBAN GUIDE TO THE MIDDLE EAST

الدليل الحصري للشرق الأوسط NO. 47

الشقق

APARTMENTS



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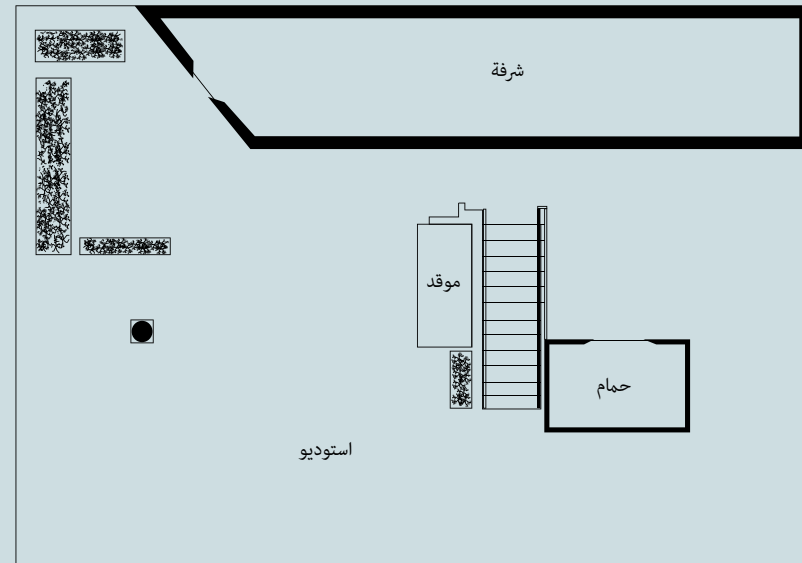
SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER 2014

Fem Güçlütürk

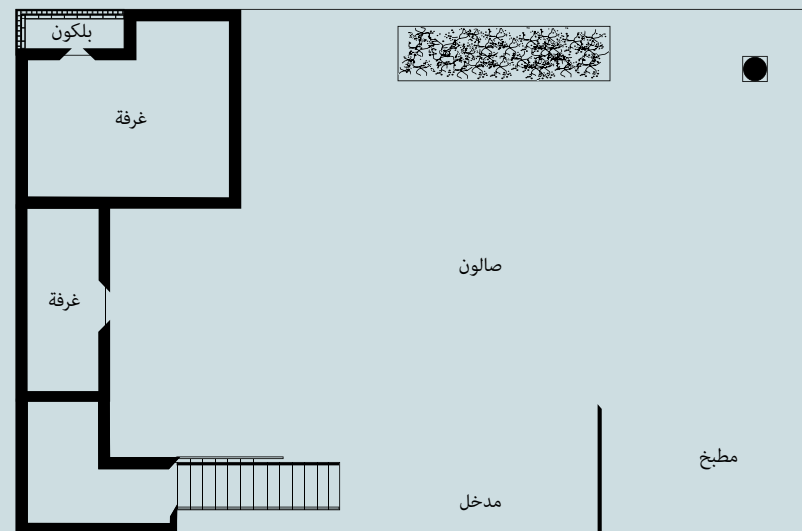
'In the past, I was not a fan of insects. Now I'm talking to them'

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الطابق العلوي



الطابق السفلي



'Before we had a space to live in – now the plants live here and we're fugitives,' says Fem Güçlütürk, who turned her Istanbul apartment into a greenhouse this winter. 'The fireplace upstairs can't be used, we don't have a dining table, the plants take up the shelves and all the books are on the floor.'

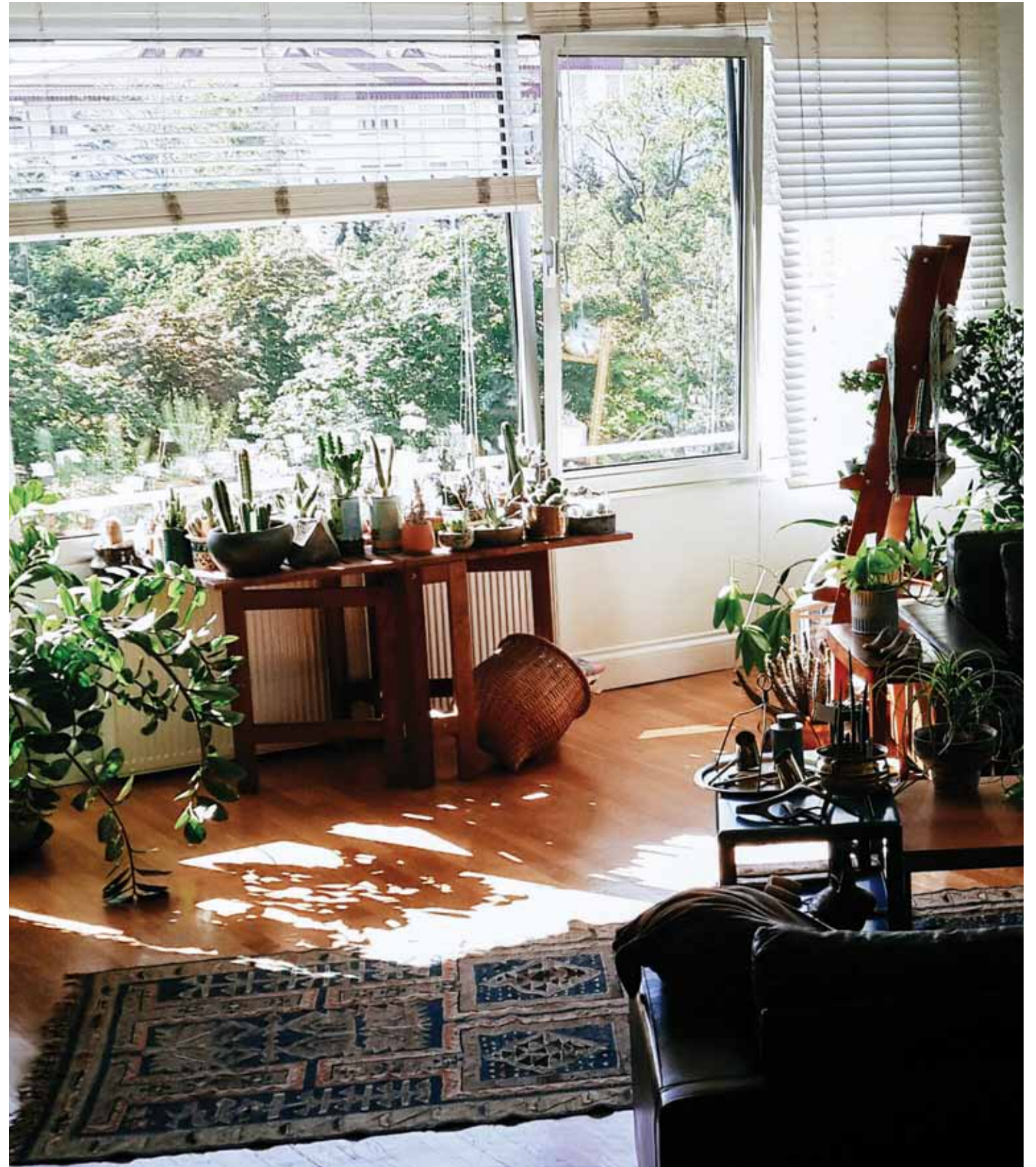
Indeed, tropical plants – ferns, hoyas and aeschynanthus that require regular misting – have taken over one corner, and work tables laden with trowels and handwritten cards citing Latin botanical names have taken over another. Coiffed with an Afro-like succulent called rhipsalis, a ceramic frog sits not far from a Cat's Tail so furry that it begs petting. Miniature jungles steam up terrariums nestled in old-fashioned candy jars, aloe bristles from raku pottery salt-fired in Uşak and asparagus balance on an old street vendor's scale. Plants inhabit vessels of every sort – from coarse pinch pots to translucent porcelain, triangular pots and pots in hollowed-out logs – or no pots at all: pot-less airplants including platyceriums, orchids and tillandsia hang in thin air too, a reminder that plants don't have to live in planters at all.

Fem's apartment has always been populated with personal objects: she collects brooms, dolls and slippers on motorcycle trips across countries such as Bolivia, South Africa, Cuba and Bhutan. At the front door is a carpenter's work bench used by her uncle, an architect, until his death; upstairs, a drinks trolley that is a shopping cart and a water cooler dressed in a sweater. But as her home has become her workshop, Fem's personal way of seeing the world has become her way of living in it too. Formerly a partner at one of Istanbul's premier brand communications firms, Fem transitioned to consulting last October to launch Labofem, selling plants in unique vessels and compositions. Though she will move into a shed-like shop this September, the house, with its generous downstairs light and the cool intimacy of the gabled upstairs, will remain densely colonised.

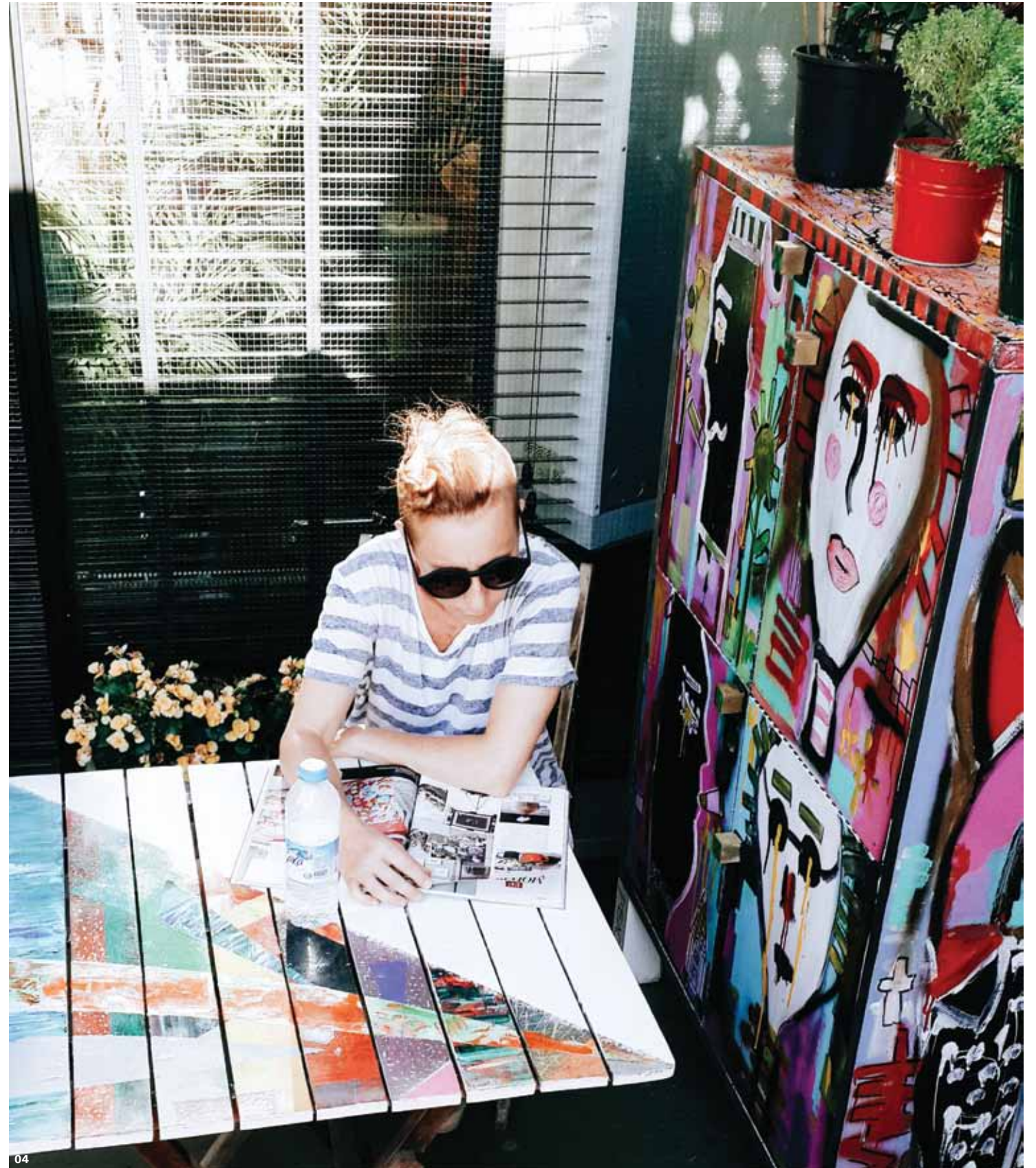
The effect of the space on visitors, on clients and on Fem has been remarkable. While visiting, Fem says, people discover a renewed sense of agency in their own lives: one woman resumed making mosaics, another began to design ceramics and a jazz singer hoping to



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leave a desk job came by at noon on a Saturday and stayed almost three hours, talking about making a change.

As for Fem, there is a new easy calm about her, as of someone coming fully into her own. She changes the positions of the plants constantly to follow the sun, which means that she changes the space daily and herself with it, much the way that a forest canopy shifts with the elements, while something in her has simultaneously taken root. She is petite but strong, wearing white şalwar and androgynous, close-cropped blonde hair with a long lock bound in a topknot. Everything about her is sharply-defined, from her cheekbones to her character, her dark brown eyes looking out at the world from some place where even uncertainty has its roots in conviction.

Fem moved to Etiler in 2009, where she lives with her boyfriend and 13-year-old son, after nearly being sued for keeping more than 100 plants on the terrace of her previous apartment ('The judge came and laughed'). Only 30 years ago, the Etiler district was only known for its pig farm, but as the bridges across the Bosphorus opened in 1973 and then 1988, it became more central and affluent. Today, there is little to mark the apartment as particularly İstanbullu aside from the tavla and a cezve on the coffee table, and the fact that it's upstairs from Fem's parents, which even at 46 is typically Turkish. (Fem's mother knits pot cosies and weaves the macramé for hanging planters.)

'I look at pictures I took of the apartment before and it looks empty and meaningless,' she says. For years, Fem had been living somewhat less with plants than with books about plants, until over one winter she threw herself into potting soil and clay.

Improvising furnishings, she started with items already at hand and not designed for the purpose – a garment rack on casters, wooden produce crates rescued from a restaurant up the street – to create a workspace as easily reconfigurable as possible (her shop will share this same spirit). And after learning the habits of the plants, she began to live with, instead of beside, them: some plants are air purifiers, which she places in the bedrooms; others are feng shui plants that bring luck or money. She also eats them – marjoram, bay and strawberries – while species like nepenthes and Venus flytrap eat the insects. 'I never realised in detail where the sun comes up and where it goes down, but now I know. In the past too, I was not a fan of insects. Now I'm talking to them,' she laughs. 'That's a big change.'