



# Spatial manifestations of collective refugee housing – the case of City Plaza

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## Abstract

Within times of social, economic, and environmental crises, shelter and housing become intertwined with issues of forced migration and nomadic living. Since 2015, hundreds of thousands of people from Africa and the Middle East have risked their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea attempting to evade conflict and exploitation, while searching for safety and stability. European governments have framed this movement through the lens of 'crisis', with different approaches evolving as a response. Some have been paternalistic in nature, some hostile, while others solidary. This article investigates City Plaza, a solidary approach to refugees, which proposes radical housing solutions for migrant populations through the occupation of vacant urban spaces. City Plaza is a self-organized housing collective hosting both refugees and activists squatting in a vacant hotel in downtown Athens, Greece. It offers a housing solution in the urban center as a counterexample to state and NGO approaches using remote camps. The goal of the article is not only to present this case study as a story in solidarity with current refugee narratives, but to investigate the critical spatial characteristics influencing the initiative. The case presented is part of a series of ethnographic case studies that investigate spatial patterns of collective sharing culture practices as everyday alternatives to capitalism and uncover ways through which space can enable and support them. The case studies follow an interdisciplinary research framework for studying spatial patterns of sharing culture, drawing concepts and methods from social sciences and theories of practice, architecture, urban design, and planning. Data are collected through interviews, document review, spatial documentation, and mapping. Qualitative data analysis offers insights into the initiative's history, structure, challenges, context, and value, but most prominently offers findings on key spatial characteristics that have shaped it.

## Keywords

commons, collective housing, sharing culture, space, refugees

## **Introduction**

### **Migration & Shelter**

In a recent talk about refugee spaces, Camillo Boano (2019) suggested that ‘if we are to interrogate migration, we need to interrogate inhabitation in itself’. He was referring to Hannah Arendt’s question about who decides who should be inhabiting this planet and who should not (Arendt, 2006). In reverse, if we are to investigate inhabitation and modes of sheltering, we need to investigate migration as well. As Tony Fry (2008) highlights in his book *Design Futuring*, for thousands of years humankind’s way of living and inhabiting has been nomadic. In constant migration, people only settled in certain areas where food and climate were hospitable. Certain intense climatic changes about 15,000 years ago led humankind to start settling more permanently in specific areas. This eventually gave rise to civilization (Fry, 2008; Fagan, 2004), as well as to settlement and inhabitation as we know it today. Although we feel that settlement is now our main and only way of living, global migration trends tell a different story.

In contemporary times, migration happens under terms not all that unfamiliar to those in prehistoric times: people migrate to find better living conditions. In 2018, 258 million of people had migrated from their birthplace; a number that constitutes 3.4 per cent of the global population. Of them, 10 ten per cent of the people migrating are registered refugees, fleeing their homeland under difficult situations (Mosler et al., 2018). Despite migration having been a constant global phenomenon, the movement of refugees from 2015 until today (2019), has been presented around the world through very specific narratives (Boano et al., 2018). Initially, refugees coming to EU over the Mediterranean Sea or from Southeast Europe were treated as part of a humanitarian crisis, fleeing war and persecution or economic and natural crises. However, the framing of the global economic crisis combined with the rise of neonationalist parties globally has altered the narrative regarding the refugee influx in Europe to a narrative of a security threat demanding extreme measures (Boano et al. 2018; Bieber 2018). This narrative has been used as a ‘security apparatus’ to influence the policies implemented by European countries (Figgou et al., 2018), allowing for the detention of refugees in poor and inhumane conditions.

### **The Greek Context & Refugees**

In 2015 an influx of migrant population travelled through the Mediterranean Sea and Greece towards Western Europe, partly attributed to the hundreds of thousands of people escaping the war in Syria. They followed what is historically known as the ‘Balkan route’, through a formalized corridor in Macedonia (Beznec et al., 2016). Towards the end of 2015, several European countries set up border controls, and in 2016 the formalized corridor gradually closed. At the same time, a swap policy was signed between Turkey and the EU: for each ‘irregular migrant’ returning to Turkey from Greece, the EU would accommodate and settle one Syrian refugee (Karakoulaki, 2018). The framing of this agreement was to stop sea crossings in the Mediterranean Sea and prevent deaths. Even though the deal managed

to lower the number of arrivals in Greece, it also led to a geographical restriction of immigrants on the Greek islands (Karakoulaki, 2018).

The EU-Turkey deal in combination with the closing of the formalized corridor effectively entrapped more than 50,000 people on Greece's mainland, while the Aegean islands turned into a buffer between Turkey and Greece (Lafazani, 2017a). Thus, housing became an urgent requirement. As a response, refugee camps and 'hotspots' were created all over Greece with high concentrations of people due to the slow bureaucratic processes for asylum (Lafazani, 2017a; Pallister-Wilkins, 2016). Hot-spots became instrumentalized as 'flexible chokepoints of mobility disruption' (Tazzioli and Garelli, 2018). This created dire conditions of containment, characterized by overcrowding, segregation, and poor living standards (Karakoulaki, 2018). These conditions combined with the increased insecurity regarding their status led to serious mental health and well-being issues for most refugees.

Refugee-solidarity organizations, activists, and other actors called out the EU border regime for the inhuman conditions it had created (Karakoulaki, 2018). Alongside such critique, some developed initiatives that showcased different ways of hosting refugees through activism and direct action. In doing so, they demonstrated the EU approach of hotspots and camps was not an option of last resort, but rather an intentional and instrumental decision reducing people to numbers and thus stripping them of their identity, their humanity, and their individuality (Boochani, 2019). One such initiative was City Plaza, a self-organized refugee shelter and center occupying a previously abandoned hotel in downtown Athens. Although City Plaza was not the only refugee squat, it has become the most visible counterexample of what solidarity looks like in everyday life (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019).

## **A Spatial Approach to Collective Sharing Practices**

### **Sharing, Self-organization, and Space**

This article provides an ethnographic study of City Plaza, as part of a wider research investigating spatial patterns of sharing culture. Sharing culture has been coined as a term by Light and Miskelly (2015), and further defined by Katrini (2018, p. 430) as: 'social networks that grow informally within a region between diverse stakeholders and have as their main goal to co-produce, co-manage, and share resources, time, services, knowledge, information, and support based on solidarity and reciprocity rather than economic profit. The goal of sharing culture is to create an alternative pathway for people to serve daily needs in a more sustainable, resourceful, and socially engaging manner by tapping into resources within their region'. Sharing culture thus contrasts itself to other sharing and collective practices appropriated by the market (i.e. sharing economy etc.), and includes processes of commoning, openness, and inclusion. Sharing culture practices form an essential part of everyday life, and propose a 'less alienated, more meaningful' urban life (Harvey, 2013, p. x; Lefebvre, 1968). They can expand across different daily activities, from housing, care, and food, to work, knowledge, and leisure. City Plaza is studied as a paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg,

2006) of sharing culture; one of many cases of self-organized practices of refugee shelter that goes beyond institutional accommodation (Dadusc et al., 2019).

Within the fields of urban commons and sharing, the relationship between space and collective sharing practices is always present; from the city being the field of sharing interactions (McLaren and Agyeman, 2015; Shareable, 2017), the city as a commons in itself (Harvey, 2013; Stavrides, 2016), to space as a ‘shareable good’ (Chan and Zhang, 2018; Benkler, 2004), or an enabling infrastructure (Manzini, 2015) and a key condition that can facilitate sharing (Widlok, 2016). Thus, the relationship between sharing and space has been identified as important through different sociological, anthropological, and geographical perspectives, but there is still room for further investigation from an architectural and urban design lens (Katrini, 2018; Chan and Zhang, 2018). The research presented in this article contributes to the investigation of the relationship between sharing practices and space. City Plaza is part of a series of ethnographic case studies aiming to identify spatial patterns that enable collective sharing practices. The research objective is to distill those spatial patterns to actionable, easy-to-communicate tools, which can help other sharing initiatives to use space as a catalyst for their practice.

### **Sharing Practices & Space through Social Practice Theory**

City Plaza is a squat and as such, it has a dual character that involves political activities on one hand—such as protests, direct action, campaigning—and on the other, ‘practical development of collective self-management’ in many aspects of everyday life’ (Martínez, 2011). This article focuses more on understanding the latter—the practice of everyday sharing, collaboration, and self-organization—and investigating the practice’s interactions with physical space. This investigation is realized through the lens of social practice theory (SPT) (Katrini, 2018, p. 438).

SPT posits that everyday life consists of social practices, which come to existence by creating connections among different elements: meanings, competences, and materials (Shove et al., 2012). Materials are things and tangible infrastructure needed for a practice, competences are necessary skills or know-how one must have for a certain practice, while meanings refer to ideas and aspirations around the practice (Shove et al., 2012). Practices, and the connections between the elements that bring them to existence, can be sustained only through ongoing reproduction (Shove et al., 2012). Occasionally, practices also create bundles by creating interlinkages and co-dependence with other practices, through co-location and time alignment. SPT provides a useful lens for understanding sharing practices as social practices and examining their relationship with space. Based on SPT, three main notions are highlighted of how we can start to comprehend the relationship between sharing practices and space. These notions provide initial research questions that frame the article’s investigation.

First, co-location and proximity—along with temporal synchronization—can allow for cross-fertilization among seemingly unrelated practices and create synergies and loose connections to potentially support the sustainability and reinforcement of a practice (Amin

and Thrift, 2007; Shove et al., 2012). Hence, creating networks and interdependencies with other practices within a wider local context can be highly beneficial to the sustainability of the practice. In the case of sharing culture practices, what other practices or networks are co-located within the wider urban context that help support their sustainability?

Second, Shove et al. describe that space and time are not equivalent to the elements of meaning, competences, and materiality, from which social practices are made (2012, p. 130). Nevertheless, they argue that specific spatial arrangements can help form the evolution and diffusion of a practice. Regarding diffusion, spatial arrangements that exist or are developed around the practice can convey meanings that enable or inhibit the adoption of the practice by others. What are the spatial arrangements and conditions around a sharing practice that influence its diffusion and integration within a context?

Finally, certain spatial arrangements can become necessary materials for the reproduction and sustainability of any practice (Shove et al., 2012, p. 130). Thus, spatial arrangements can provide affordances; they provide spatial properties that enable people to use and interact within a space in a specific manner that supports the practice (Gibson, 1979; Lang, 1987). What elements of the space the practices are operating from allow for their reproduction and sustainability?

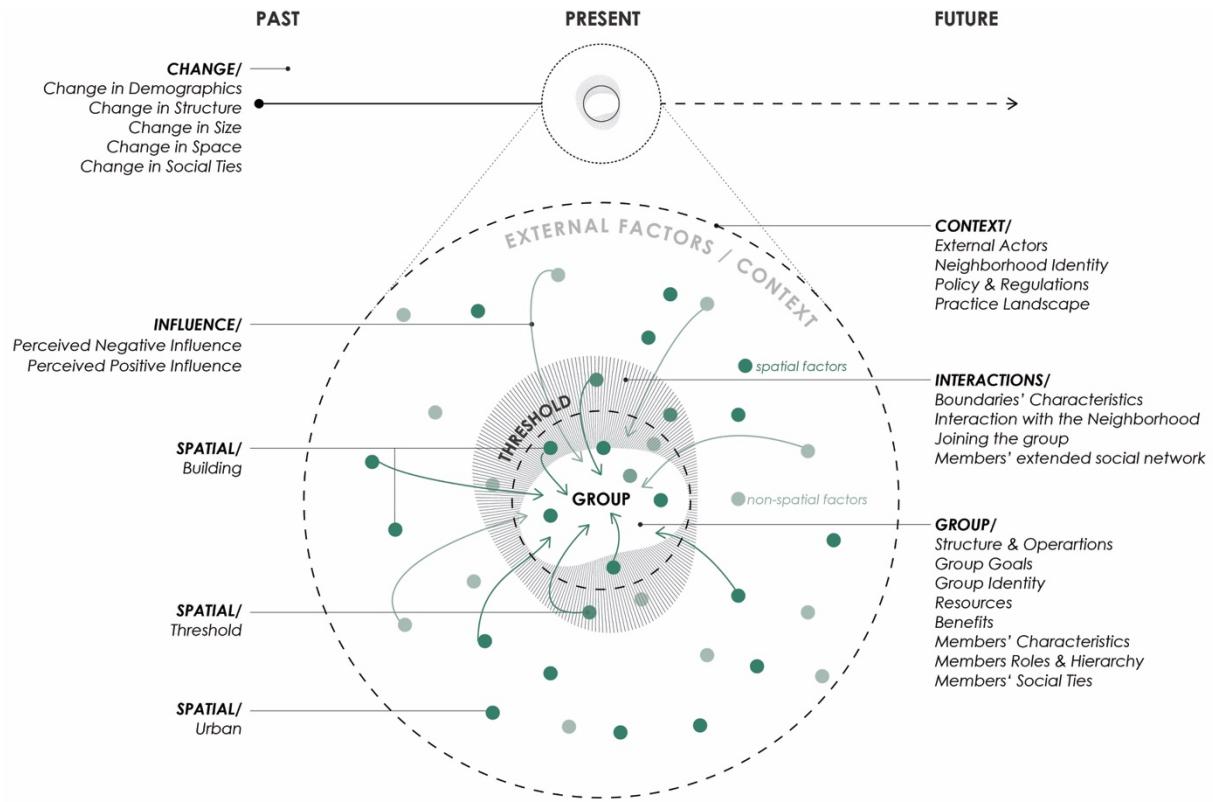
These three notions, with their research questions, provide the basis for the spatial investigation of sharing culture practices, and are framed through different scales based on proximity to the practice. The first one relates to the general urban context, the second relates to the diffusion of the practice within its context, and the last one relates to the reproduction of the practice within the space it operates from. Below, these three notions are further developed.

### **The framing of the Scales**

To bound the investigation on sharing practices and space, the research is framed by the above three notions identified at three main scales: building, threshold, and urban. Following Christopher Alexander's general model of spatial patterns (1978), the framing of spatial findings through scales, with different research questions for each, becomes a useful structural heuristic that makes the research findings easier to communicate to a wider audience outside design practice and academia.

It is important to mention that within this research framework, these scales are not considered more important than other dimensions and principles of socio-spatial relations, such as places, territories, and networks. As posited by Jessop et al. territories ( $T$ ), places ( $P$ ), scales ( $S$ ), and networks ( $N$ ) are mutually integral and interconnected dimensions of the relations between the social and the spatial (2008). Rather the framing of the scales provides a 'structured field' through which the notions of place, territory, and network are also explored (Jessop et al., 2008). Moreover, the scales are not hierarchical; no scale is deemed more dominant than another. The scales are used to develop questions about the impact of spatial arrangements on the sharing practice and are framed based on proximity to the practice from the day to day arrangements of the building across the threshold and outwards

towards the urban. Below, each scale is explained one by one, while Figure 01 showcases the coding structure used to analyze qualitative data, highlighting the relationships between the sharing practices and the scales.



**Figure 1**

Coding structure: understanding the single case within its context. **Source: Katrini 2019**

At the level of the building scale, the relationship between the practice and the space it occupies can be investigated. The building scale frames the territory within which the sharing practice mainly operates and identifies the spatial arrangements that influence the reproduction of the practice. How does the space the practice occupies influence its self-organization and collective activities? How is the space in return adapted by the practice over time? In the specific case of City Plaza, the collective practice of the group and its relationship with the occupied hotel is explored.

I use Stavrides' concept of the threshold (2010) to investigate the spatial conditions of diffusion, which 'open' the practice to its context. As Stavrides argues, collective practices should not operate in an inward manner referring only to a secluded, enclosed group, but should aspire to continuously open sharing to a broader audience (2016). This process of continuously connecting the 'inside' of the group of a sharing practice to their 'outside' context, is what creates a threshold spatiality (Stavrides, 2016). The socio-spatial dimensions of 'place' within which the sharing practice is embedded thus become important at this threshold scale, marking boundaries between two different 'territories': the inside within which the practice operates, and its peripheral outside. This allows the spatial arrangements

that influence the interactions between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of the contextual neighborhood to be studied. How does the building and surrounding urban space influence the diffusion of the sharing practice to its wider neighborhood? How does space influence the relationships formed between those involved in the practice and their neighbors? In the case of City Plaza, the occupied building and its surrounding urban space were studied, investigating if and how they influenced the relationship between the initiative and its neighbors.

Finally, on the wider urban scale, spatial arrangements and elements co-located within the greater area and their influence on the sharing practice are investigated. Land use, regulations, accessibility, and ideas of interconnectivity and local social networks are explored as potential influencing factors on sharing practices. In the case of City Plaza, the wider urban area of Athens around the occupied hotel is explored.

### **Research Methods**

The City Plaza initiative and its struggle to propose new models for refugee accommodation and integration is documented by other academics and activists, who have been part of this unique initiative (Lafazani, 2017a; 2017b; Kotronaki et al., 2018; Velegrakis, 2017). To complement the documentation realized by participants, this paper offers an ethnographic approach, focusing on the spatial aspects of the everyday life of the initiative and their impact on its trajectory. The main research methods were qualitative data analysis, spatial documentation, and mapping. The data collected included in-depth interviews with three people involved in the initiative, 20 online public documents (including interviews and articles), photographs and sketches of the space. Interview transcripts and online documents were coded to develop themes regarding the relationship between the initiative and space. Figure 01 shows a diagram of the analytical coding structure divided into six main families: group and structure, context, change, interactions, influence, and space, with subcategories for building, threshold, and urban. These coding families were further supplemented with additional coding sub-categories that arose from the open coding of the data. The themes from the coding of verbal data were triangulated with observations from the spatial documentation and mappings. Finally, themes were documented on the three scales of the investigation: building, threshold, and urban.

One limitation of the case study was the lack of opportunity to spend more time in the hotel and interview a larger group of people living in City Plaza. Nevertheless, this limitation was partly overcome by the wide coverage of the initiative through Greek and international media, scholars’ and participants’ publications. The extensive review of different experiences and documentations of City Plaza gave access to diverse perspectives, impossible to be accessed by a single researcher.

The case study is structured in three main sections. The first provides an overview of the case of City Plaza, the second presents findings on its value as reported by participants. The last section discusses the key spatial findings influencing this sharing practice of collective refugee housing.

## **The case of City Plaza**

### **Background**

City Plaza's story begins in February 2016, when several initiatives supporting refugees came together under the name of '*Solidarity Initiative to Economic and Political Refugees*'. The main event that brought them together was the initiation of action by the municipality of Athens to move refugees settled in Victoria square. The initiative argued that refugees be integrated back into society by being located within the city rather than in remote camps. After the EU-Turkey deal in April 2016, the initiative decided to squat an abandoned hotel near Victoria square, previously known as City Plaza. This led to the initiative as it is known today: '*City Plaza, a refugee accommodation and solidarity space*'. The hotel had been empty since 2010, when the company managing it went bankrupt leaving the property entangled with many interested parties, including the property's owner and the hotel's employees (Reuben-Shemia, 2017). After the bankruptcy, the hotel's employees were granted ownership of the hotels' mobile equipment as compensation for unpaid wages.

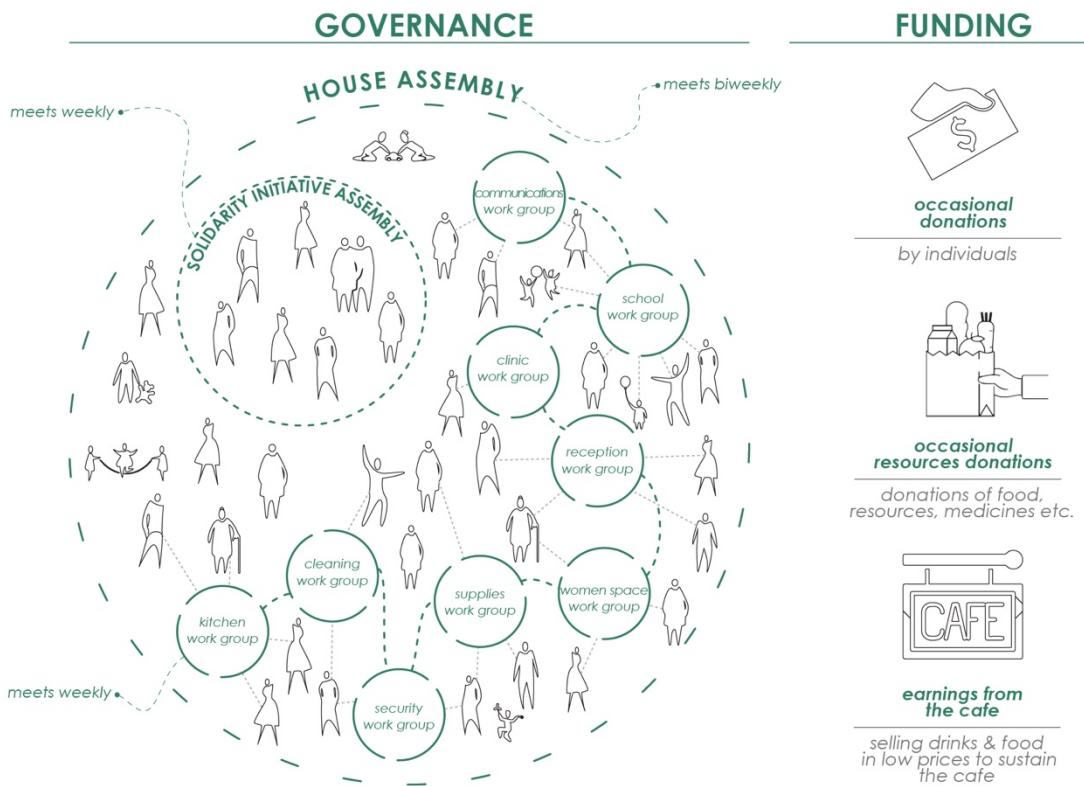
About 150 refugees were hosted in City Plaza within the first few days, reaching a body of 400 people after three years. Of course, many more had stayed in City Plaza over time, before moving towards other destinations. Unlike refugee accommodation provided by the state or NGOs, City Plaza did not discriminate against refugees based on their nationality, and people from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Iran lived together in the hotel. This fact, combined with numerous activists coming from around the world to support the initiative, made City Plaza a truly diverse space.

The initiative did not offer only accommodation. It created self-organized structures and frameworks that provided three meals per day, medical and pharmaceutical services, legal and mental support, cultural and children's activities, a lending library, and different types of classes from languages to dance, photography, etc. Beyond the activities related to City Plaza as an accommodation space, the group also organized actions in support of refugees on a national and international level.

### **Group Structure & Governance**

City Plaza is more usefully understood as an open human network rather than a specific group of people. It involved those who were there from the beginning, those who were resident at any given moment, and those who had moved on, but still called it home. In 2017, 400 people were living in City Plaza—half of them children—and many others had come from across Europe to support the initiative (Camilli, 2017). To accommodate the constant transition of people and change within the group, the self-governance structure aimed at allowing everyone to participate in different ways.

Squatting as an urban movement always balances between organization relating to wider political struggles and the self-organization of everyday life within the squatted space (Martínez, 2011). As a squat, City Plaza's governance structure also balanced between the diverse political activities defending refugees' rights on one hand, and the collective self-

**Figure 2**

City Plaza's governance and funding structure. **Source:** Author

organization of everyday life in the hotel on the other. That led to a governance based on two main decision-making assemblies, along with smaller group meetings (Figure 02). The 'House Assembly' took place every two weeks and discussed issues related to the space's management (Lafazani, 2017a). It was open to all residents of City Plaza and was complemented by smaller 'work groups' taking place on a weekly basis to coordinate meal preparation, cleaning, security, clinic, school, communications, welcoming and reception etc.

A smaller coordination assembly took place each week, usually attended by people who had been involved with City Plaza for a longer period of time. It coordinated decisions beyond the daily issues of the house assembly. It discussed the sociopolitical context around the refugee crisis, organized solidarity activities and political action. All assemblies used a discursive, consensus-based decision making process, leading to decisions everyone could accept.

Participation in the assemblies and work groups was required of everyone to make such a large-scale initiative work. Refugees arriving at City Plaza were specifically informed on how the initiative differed from the camps or any other state and NGO accommodation, and that they needed to be actively involved in running the space. The main objective of self-organization was to remove the aspect of dependency created through institutional services, allowing people to stand on their own feet. Communications among people involved in City Plaza were taking place through the assemblies, smaller group meetings, word of mouth, and

visual communication in the space. As a result, the initiative involved a spectrum of relationships, from strong social ties within the group, to weaker ones that expanded throughout the neighborhood, supporters, and sympathizers.

### **Neighborhood Context**

City Plaza is located close to Victoria square in the municipality of Athens, home to 664,046 people (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2011). The radical increase in building activity and car use between 1950-1980, without the necessary urban planning and infrastructure that would support it, led to poor living conditions in downtown Athens (Souliotis and Maloutas, 2013). The resulting population flow towards suburban areas and drop in housing prices in the center, created affordable conditions for settlement to immigrants coming in Greece in the 1990s (Kolokotronis, 2018). Hence, although the population of Athens consists predominantly of Greek nationals, it is comparatively more diverse in the center where a larger percentage of first-generation immigrants makes up a quarter of the total population (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2011). House vacancy is quite high at 31 per cent, and one third of the total house-stock is rented (30 per cent), leaving owner-occupied properties at 39 per cent (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2011).

The location was critical to the City Plaza initiative, as the goal was to reintegrate refugees back into the city both socially and geographically. Most refugee camps in Greece are on remote land previously used for industrial or military purposes (Tsavdaroglou, 2018). Hence, the initiative intentionally placed itself within a central neighborhood of Athens. Moreover, the high levels of vacancy in the city offer an opportunity for refugees settling at the urban center rather than far away.

Initially, the neighborhood reacted negatively to the squatting of the abandoned hotel (Louka and Katsis, 2018). The owner of the building put significant pressure on the squat through the media, creating a negative image of the initiative. Beyond the local context, however, City Plaza has been widely supported by local social movements and other refugee-solidarity initiatives in Greece, such as Notara 26, Likio in Exarcheia, Oniro, and many more (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019), as well as academics.

### **Challenges & Sustainability**

The initiative managed to stay active for three years, despite the challenges it faced. When City Plaza closed its doors in July 2019, it handed the keys to the hotel's former employees, who owned the mobile equipment still left in the property yet had fully supported the initiative since its initiation (City Plaza, 2019). Given the nature and scale of the project, it faced both external and internal challenges during its existence. Externally, there was a general sense of hostility towards solidarity initiatives in the media, and more specifically from the building owner herself towards City Plaza. The lack of legal ownership or right of occupation of the building created a precarious situation for the initiative, with a constant fear of eviction. Another major challenge was the pushback by groups and political parties

advocating against the introduction of refugees into Greece, which significantly influenced public opinion on the issue. One of the most important points of opposition against refugees has been Golden Dawn, the Greek far-right ultranationalist political party (Zafiroopoulos, 2016; Smith and Kingsley, 2016). City Plaza's location ten minutes away from the central offices of Golden Dawn in combination with the constant fear of eviction required constant vigilance to avoid potential attacks both from opposition groups and the police.

Beyond such external challenges, there were also a number of internal—mainly organizational—challenges that stemmed from the initiative's scale and complexity. As City Plaza involved a large group of people, different levels of engagement between those involved were inevitable. Moreover, a large percentage of its inhabitants were transient and moving into City Plaza from more service-based setups, which meant they did not necessarily understand solidarity work and self-organization (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019). This further exacerbated gaps in levels of engagement, as people coming into City Plaza from camps needed time to adapt to its collective, self-organized model. The turnover of participants in the group was also quite high, both refugees and international activists coming to support City Plaza created a constant change in group dynamics. The quick turnover was challenging in the process of coming to a common understanding and collective vision for the initiative. Although power was shared among all those involved, a larger weight was carried by those who had been part of the initiative since the beginning, leading to further issues of capacity. Despite the challenges of keeping such a large-scale initiative alive, City Plaza managed to run for three years. While its longevity is mainly attributed to its political nature and the determination of the people involved (Camilli, 2017; Grewal, 2018), space also played a critical role in its sustainability.

The reasons for City Plaza's closure remain unclear. In July 2019, the initiative published an announcement on its social media informing its network that they had resettled all refugees remaining in the hotel before closing (City Plaza, 2019). Looking at the wider context, we can only speculate that the shift in Greece's political landscape, both on a municipal and national level, might have contributed to the initiative's increasing fears of eviction. Evictions of squats across Athens and beyond were common throughout City Plaza's lifespan. However, under the new local and national government, many evictions seemed to be specifically targeting squats occupied by refugees, suggesting a stricter stance not just towards squats in general, but refugee solidarity initiatives (King and Manousaki-Adamopoulou, 2019; Speed, 2019; Psaropoulos, 2019).

### **The space**

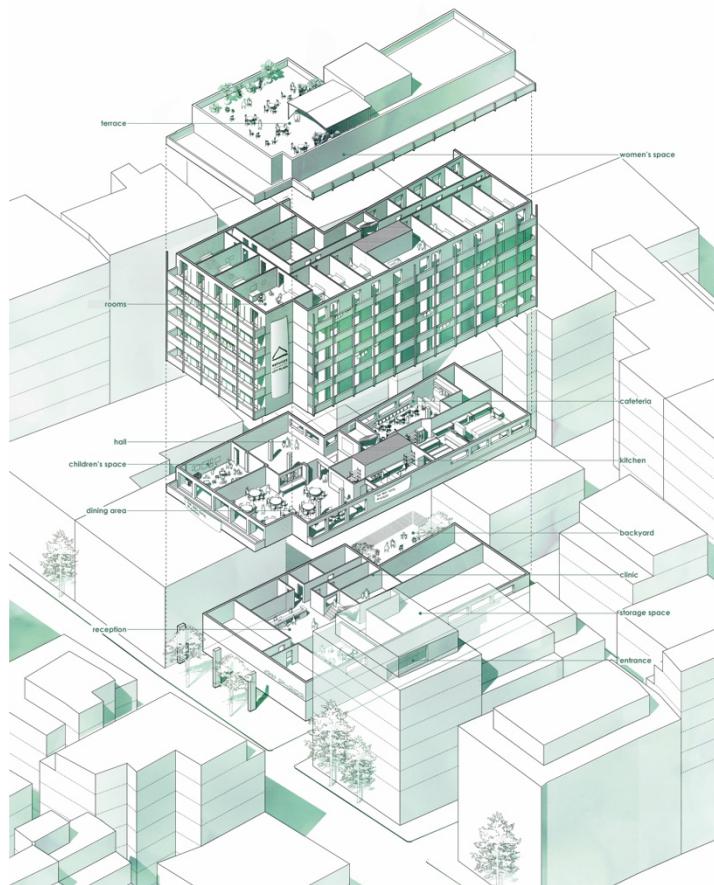
The occupied hotel had seven floors totaling approximately 4,900 m<sup>2</sup>. The ground floor, mezzanine, first, and seventh floor consisted primarily of collective spaces, while hotel rooms filled the second through the sixth floors. The first floor consisted of an entrance leading up to the mezzanine, with the reception, a hall, a collective meeting room, storage space for material donations, and two small offices. A corridor at the back led to a series of spaces set up by the initiative: a media room; a small clinic; a pharmacy. Local social

pharmacies in Athens provided medicines, and several doctors offered their services pro bono.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the corridor a door led to a small backyard.

**Figure 3**

City Plaza, Axonometric View.

Source: Author



Additional communal spaces could be found on the first floor: the dining room next to the large industrial kitchen; the cafeteria; a large hall. The initiative closed off part of the dining room to create a space for children's activities. Meals were prepared and people gathered to eat in the dining room, while occasionally retreating to their rooms to eat with family. The dining room and adjacent hall hosted events, lectures or gatherings, and movies.

The cafeteria on the first floor was where people relaxed or met during the day and where assemblies took place. During assemblies, chairs were set in a circle for everyone to participate. Female residents of City Plaza established a women's space on the seventh floor to socialize. Between the second and sixth floor, there were about 90-100 rooms. Each room hosted one family. Individuals shared a room with one or two more people, depending on capacity. The rooftop was an accessible terrace with a bar area that looked out over Athens and was used occasionally for events.

<sup>1</sup> Social pharmacies and clinics have become common across Greece during the economic crisis. They are part of a solidarity network of doctors and pharmacies that offer time and resources for those who are in need and without insurance. In a recent documentation effort, about 500 solidarity initiatives were counted in the health sector, out of which 20 are in downtown Athens. (Enallaktikos.gr 2019).

Located on a medium to high traffic road, the hotel was accessed from a narrow side street. Around it stood housing and a couple of small apartment hotels. The initiative was quite visible from the main street, with large banners and photos hung from the building's walls. Visibility analysis was realized in Space Syntax, to investigate how visible the building's façades were and from how far away. The analysis highlighted the high visibility of the building's main façade due to its prominent location on a street with high traffic, in contrast to the low visibility of its entrance located on the side street.

### **Self-reported Value of City Plaza**

This section presents the value of City Plaza on a collective and individual level, as reported by the people who participated in the interviews. The mission of City Plaza was to create a self-organized and inclusive space for refugees and people who supported them, regardless of their nationality or background. Those involved recognized different levels of individual and collective value through their participation. Interviewees were asked to identify what kind of needs they satisfied through their participation in the initiative, the results of which are summarized below:

*A haven with dignity, safety & privacy:* As a refugee shelter, City Plaza managed to provide a safe place to live. It allowed people to satisfy basic human needs, and obtain access to medical and pharmaceutical services, learning, and cultural activities. In some cases, City Plaza was the first place after long travels and poor living conditions to provide not only a higher standard of living, but dignity, safety, and privacy. Families found having a private room and bathroom of their own a blessing, making them feel independent again after a long time in the camps.

*Learning:* There was a lot of learning taking place in City Plaza, from children's education, to language classes, music and photography lessons, yoga, football etc. Moreover, the initiative organized visits to cultural spaces in Athens to increase the sense of belonging and build relationships with the city (Aggeli, 2018). The initiative also managed to enroll the kids living in City Plaza into public schools, despite several challenges. Finally, City Plaza can be considered as a big school for collective processes and self-organization. Everyone was learning how to collaborate with others all the time.

'Surely, I can say that through the experience of Plaza, I have become better in understanding other people different from me, perceiving diversity and communicating with others to do things collectively. Finally, I have learned to live within this diversity and recognize my own otherness next to others.'

*Participation & self-organization:* Participation and democratic processes of self-organization were a critical part of City Plaza, as they are to any of collectively organized living. Decision-making by consensus allowed for everyone to participate. The organizational processes of City Plaza were quite open and transparent in themselves as assemblies took place in the common spaces of the building.

*Empowerment, agency & feeling of achievement:* One of the main objectives of City Plaza by design was the collective organization of the space and everyday living to empower refugees and help them stand on their feet. Recognizing that many people had had no control over their lives for too long, City Plaza gave residents a unique opportunity for agency. Everyone could be involved in the decision-making and management of the house, from what meals to cook to what activities to hold. This was a substantial difference from the state and NGO-run refugee accommodation solutions requiring dependency, empowering people to once again take control of their lives.

*Collective Identity, Uniqueness & feeling of belonging:* City Plaza formed a unique collective identity amalgamated from many individual stories, identities, and the participatory interactions between them. This identity was strengthened by the contrast to the general sociopolitical landscape. The initiative considered itself as a unique counterexample to the maltreatment that Europe had shown to the refugees. The collective identity of City Plaza was highly internalized by those who participated in it, even after they left. City Plaza became for people who stayed there a home away from home, creating an increased sense of belonging.

*Solidarity & defending human rights:* Finally, one of the great contributions of City Plaza far transcends the limits of the hotel through the active role it has played in Greece's social movements towards refugee-solidarity. The initiative provided support to refugees beyond the hotel's residents and helped frame a different kind of political discussion around the refugee crisis. In this, it played an active role in defending refugees' human rights and engaged the wider society into a conversation about what it meant to be a refugee in Greece.

## **Self-organized Collective Housing and Space**

City Plaza was a valuable inspiration not because it provided a definitive solution to the struggles of refugees, but because it showed a way to find solutions collectively and in solidarity if we try (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019; Baker, 2016). Millions of vacant buildings across the EU provide opportunities for similar self-organized alternatives based on solidarity (Strickland, 2016). This makes an understanding of how space can enable collective, self-organized, sharing practices highly relevant. The findings highlight spatial conditions of the initiative and how they influenced its materialization and evolution at the scales of the building, the threshold, and the urban.

### **The Building**

#### *01. Granular Privacy–Collectiveness Spectrum:*

Designed as a hotel, the spaces of City Plaza allowed for a variety of activities to take place: eating together, holding large events, creating places for children's play, and teaching classes. It was also a spatial design easily turned into collective housing. Beyond the obvious benefits that a large hotel space offers; what allowed this kind of sharing culture initiative involving collective housing to flourish was its ability to host activities demanding different

levels of privacy and collectiveness. As illustrated by Studio Weave with the concept of '*spheres of sharing*', a variance in levels of sharing is necessary in any type of collective housing (Ahn et al., 2018). Accordingly, in City Plaza a variety of spaces of different type, size, and exposure, allowed for occupants to decide the level of privacy they required for each activity. A small gathering in the classroom of the seventh floor, chatting at the cafeteria, eating with the whole group at the dining room, being with your family at your room, or playing in the main hall were all evidence of activities taking place simultaneously across different spaces. Depending on people's personality, mood, background, and culture, privacy and levels of engagement could be defined according to their individual preferences at any given time. Concurrently, this variance in spaces occasionally allowed some to take advantage of the privacy offered, and thus avoid the needed participation in the collective organization of everyday life in the hotel.

## *02. Food preparation & eating together:*

One of the many advantages of the hotel was the large industrial kitchen, allowing for many people to prepare meals together three times a day. The spacious dining room, located right next to the kitchen, was where people met and socialized over food. Places to meet out of the scope of assemblies was important in bringing people together and creating thick social ties. Given the large size of the initiative, both in terms of the size of the hotel and the hundreds of people living there, time spent eating together was also a unique opportunity to meet most of the residents of the hotel in one place. Apart from opportunities for collectiveness offered by eating together, cooking together was also integral. Residents' agency to cook for themselves allowed them to celebrate their cultures by cooking meals from their own countries. Being able to cook recipes from one's home country helped build people's confidence and came to great contrast with previous experiences in the camps. As a TIME article reported about a mother of three working at City Plaza's kitchen preparing meals (Baker, 2016):

'She cooks alongside Kurds, Afghans and Iraqis in the kitchen, and they all say that it's one of the best things about living at City Plaza. In the camps the military and catering companies provide meals for the refugees, but they are often poor quality, or made from unfamiliar ingredients. At City Plaza, says Reema, "We can cook our favorite foods. A taste of home helps with missing it so much."

However, the available kitchen was not equally used by everyone. The weekly schedule with kitchen shifts was not always followed, leading to some residents being involved more in meal preparation compared to others. Moreover, the kitchen's spatial layout was designed as separate from the dining area—following the service specifications of a hotel—and was not altered by the new occupants. The combination of the cooking being always done by some and the service-based design between the kitchen and dining area might have also contributed to the proliferation of a service-based notion by some residents, contrary to the initiative's mission.

### **03. Constant Appropriation:**

For the hotel to meet the needs of City Plaza's large community, small but necessary spatial adaptations were made. Spatial appropriation can be ongoing and necessary in any collective initiative, as the group changes over time, and needs are constantly negotiated. An example was the emerging need of women to socialize in a protected space, which led to the creation of the women's space (Camilli, 2017). This allowed for the unique ability to have a safe space of their own, after having lived in reception facilities often 'susceptible to gender-based and sexual-based violence' (McMunn, 2019; Kofman, 2019). This is one example of how space was renegotiated and appropriated to meet the needs of a dynamic group.

The residents changed spatial arrangements not only to meet emerging needs, but also to make it feel like home. The hotel's service-like atmosphere was altered by decorating the walls with artwork, photos from their home countries, solidarity statements, and photos of current and past residents. Such an ongoing material appropriation of the hotel went beyond just a superficial act making an abandoned hotel look 'nice'. It became a meaningful act enabling residents to change their surroundings, establishing an emancipatory agency they did not have before. Such spatial appropriation by residents changed the levels of agency mediated through space, turning a previously service-based hotel towards a collectively managed housing.

### **04. Governance through space:**

As a political project, City Plaza tried to keep its governing processes transparent and open for everyone to join. Assemblies took place in the cafeteria, a space without doors, located right next to the stairs leading to the rooms of the upper floors. The location and set-up of the assemblies tried to lower the threshold of participation and engage with as many residents as possible. No assemblies took place behind closed doors. The material appropriation of the hotel, thus created a system of meanings and intentions of how people should behave and interact (De Haan, 2005), ensuring transparency in the initiative's governing processes through its management of space. Of course, as one can imagine, the fact that people can participate does not mean they always do. The initiative experienced challenges in coordination, participation, and care of the space, as well as the different levels of engagement to be expected in such a large group with a transient population. People who started the initiative and had been there from the beginning felt more entitled, younger volunteers probably felt left-out, while refugees arriving at City Plaza might have experienced it as just an in-between stop before moving on towards their destination.

These different perspectives influenced the levels of resident participation and were potentially exacerbated by the spatial design. Even with all the efforts to help create more agency through adjustments to space, living in a hotel might still have been perceived as a service by people constantly on the move. Moreover, the overall design of the building could not have changed radically either way. It was still a hotel with rooms extending throughout five floors, designed to be easy to walk in and out without engaging with the rest of the initiative. The struggle to balance some of the hierarchical and service-based tendencies

created by this physical space was clearly projected onto the building's walls. Governance processes were widely communicated through signs, notice boards, posters, and notes in different languages throughout the building in a possibly hopeless attempt to engage all residents with day-to-day governance and the coordination of responsibilities.

### **Threshold Scale Findings**

#### *01. Lack of porosity on the ground floor & visual identity:*

As a squat hosting a sensitive population, City Plaza needed to be cautious of probable eviction and potential attacks that could be realized against its residents by extremist groups. Consequently, a complete open-door policy was impossible. People stationed at the building's entrance made sure visitors were not hostile towards the initiative. The building's fortress-like spatial design also supported the security of the initiative. The lack of an open-door policy and the necessary scrutiny undergone at the entrance potentially created a sense of hostility or gave caution to visitors, especially those unfamiliar with the initiative beforehand.

The initiative was not warmly welcomed by the neighbors in the beginning. Upon learning that the hotel had been taken over by refugees, anxiety around the unknown nature of the project and xenophobia prevailed rather than support and solidarity. People with different beliefs and no exposure to solidarity movements, had quite hostile reactions to the initiative. The further strong negative messages against solidarity initiatives trumpeted in the Greek media also put the initiative under a negative light. Beyond the social distance, the hotel's spatial arrangement created functional distance as well (Festinger et al., 1950; Hipp and Perrin, 2009), allowing limited opportunities for chance encounters to take place among City Plaza residents and their neighbors. Chance encounters among them might have allowed those initial negative preconceptions held about the initiative to break down faster through neighbors getting to know the people and families that lived in the hotel early on.

#### *02. One-to-one Visibility:*

Beyond the ground floor and moving to the upper floors, the building changes completely; it turns from an enclosed cell to a porous sponge through numerous windows and balconies. Even though these windows did not allow for people on the street level to interact with residents of the initiative, they served a more important role. They allowed neighbors to peak through the windows and see into the everyday lives of the individuals and families who formed City Plaza. Given the surrounding neighborhood's density, some windows were incredibly close to each other at only six meters away (Figure 4). This spatial configuration created opportunities for one-to-one visibility between neighbors and residents of City Plaza. In one case, a neighbor got to know and chat with a mother living in City Plaza through their respective balconies. As a participant described:

'Lots of people have come by to donate things. They've also built relationships with residents from here, especially with how the balconies are here. (...) I remember a

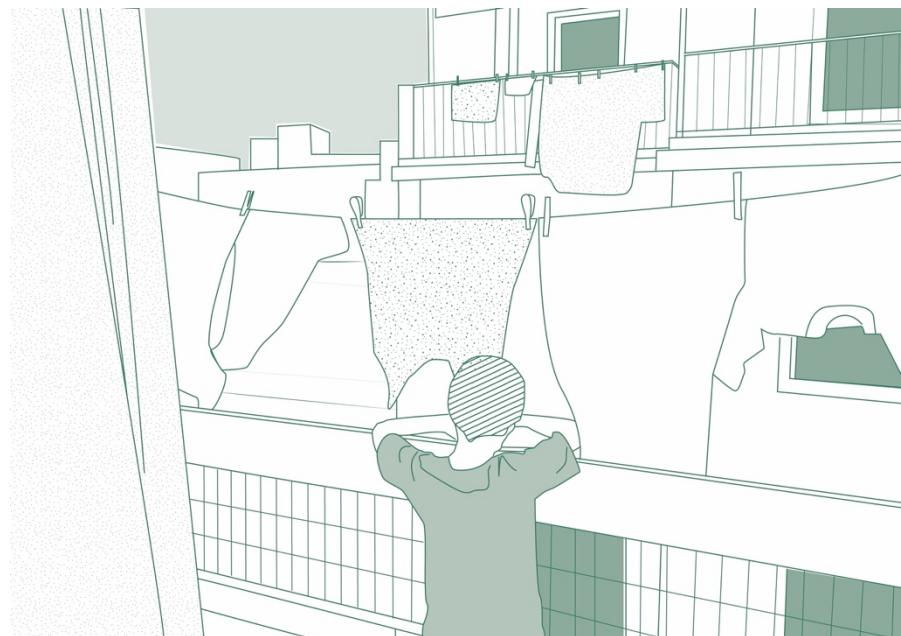
woman having brought toys for a mother who lives here with her children, just because their balconies are across the street from each other. It's a start. And that was from a woman that was complaining the first day we moved in the building. So, it's important, because we see small shifts in perception. I think there's still a way to go, because Plaza can open even more towards society.'

Allowing for these opportunities of one-to-one visibility is important because they help people living close to collective initiatives to see them not as monolithic groups but connect with the individuals that form them. Collective practices emerge and grow by creating both strong and weaker social relationships. Weak social ties enable their diffusion by gaining approval and momentum (Manzini, 2015).

**Figure 4**

Views from the windows.

**Source:** Author, graphic inspired by a photo taken by Kathi Kaizer.



### 03. Being outdoors: a spillover into public space:

The residents of City Plaza always looked for opportunities to be outside and enjoy the sun whenever possible. The small backyard of City Plaza and rooftop terrace with a beautiful view of Athens allowed people to meet outside. The initiative hosted events on the terrace and held informal gatherings in the backyard. Because these opportunities were limited, the group occasionally expanded to the public sphere, taking over the side street with their activities (Figure 5). The street is quite narrow and quiet, allowing for activities to take place without the need for caution about traffic. There have been large gatherings and collective meals on the side street, but it was also used occasionally by younger residents to study outside. By expanding into the side street, City Plaza residents were reclaiming public space, activating it towards collective use, and accessing their right to the city; a city they were denied access to.

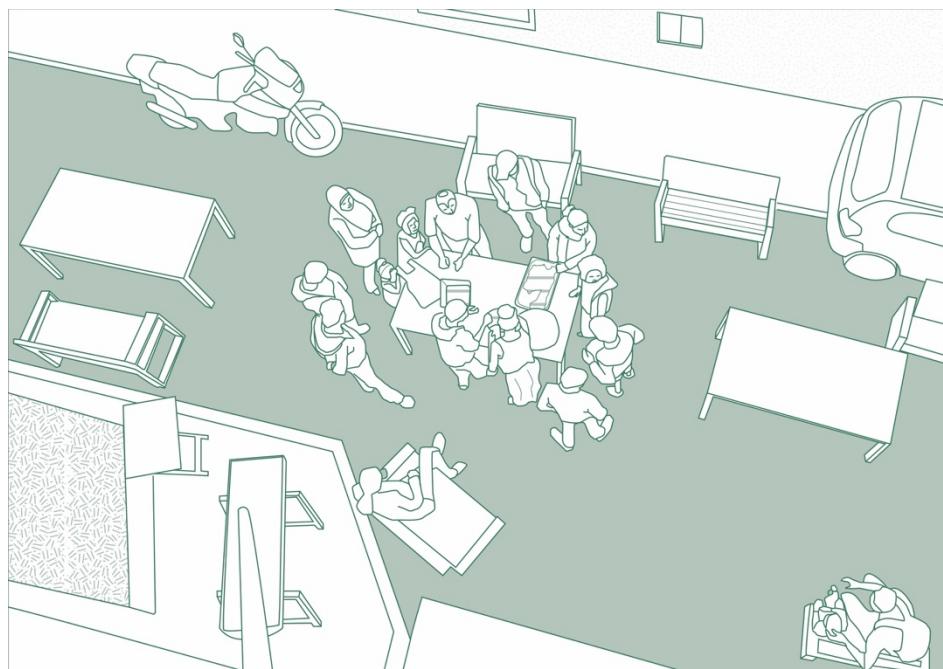
Spilling over into the street also afforded chance encounters while creating a safe and neutral space for the residents of City Plaza and neighbors to meet, potentially minimizing feelings of fear. The open events held in the hotel, on the rooftop or on the side street,

allowed not only for the initiative's diffusion to the wider neighborhood, but also created entrance points for others to engage with City Plaza for the first time. The way the initiative used public space allowed for a porosity the building did not have by design.

**Figure 5**

Preparing for the Easter barbecue on the side street.

**Source:** Author, graphics inspired from photos from City Plaza's Facebook page.



### Urban Scale Findings

#### 01. Integration & embeddedness:

The location of City Plaza was the most important aspect mentioned by interviewees. The group intentionally located itself in the heart of the city. This decision can be interpreted through three main lenses; a political lens, a practical lens, and a lens that speaks to the urban imaginary. The political lens relates to the fact that City Plaza is a solidarity-initiative with refugees. By locating itself within the city, the initiative took a stance against the current isolation of refugees in remote camps by the government. City Plaza supported the integration of refugees into the city and society, allowing them their independence. One of the activists mentioned:

'We wanted to oppose this (i.e. the remote camps), we wanted to resist in a more material way and show that this is not the solution, and it should not be that way. We wanted to set a counterexample. That is why we want to locate ourselves in the center of Athens, where people live, in the center, within the city, connected to the urban fabric. (...) So, we chose to be at the city center.'

This political stance, beyond creating a counterexample to the state-funded camps, also revealed a practical lens as well. Collective housing should be located close to amenities and services, close to where other people live, and close to job opportunities. In that way it increases people's potential for social and geographical integration.

'Here people can stand on their feet, they can integrate into society. They are looking for a job, learning languages, sending their children to school, going to social spaces, building their own communities. All this helps a lot in empowerment, anyone who has stayed here cannot go back to a camp. They leave here to start a new life somewhere else.'

The easily accessible location was also beneficial to local activists involved in City Plaza. They could visit daily, integrating the initiative into their everyday life.

Finally, and mostly importantly, the value of the initiative's location in the urban center lies in its presentation of a different urban imaginary (Santamaría, 2008). By urban imaginary, I mean the way the people involved in City Plaza imagined society and the city they lived in, and their actions based on that vision. Their logo '*We live together. We struggle together*' showcases the exact notion of how they imagined the city: a place with space for everyone to live and work together. With that motto, the initiative expanded beyond the limited boundaries of the hotel to urge the whole city to find ways to live together by accepting others.

Thus, location was critical in providing an opportunity for Athenians to interact and find ways to live together with refugees. The media attention on the refugee crisis combined with the physical distance between refugee camps and urban neighborhoods created a mental distance between the two populations, leading to sentiments of 'otherness'. Bringing people closer allowed for opportunities of daily social interaction and exposure that helped dissolve potential feelings of fear. Multiple research studies show that personal experience, interactions, and contact can reduce potential anti-foreigner sentiments (Bieber, 2018; Zamora-Kapoor et al., 2013). The intergroup contact theory also supports that intergroup contact under certain conditions can minimize prejudice between majority and minority groups (Allport, 1979; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011).

## *02. Local Support Network:*

The location of City Plaza was instrumental in integrating refugees in the city both socially and geographically and through its reclamation of public space thickened social ties between the residents of City Plaza and the neighborhood. Nevertheless, City Plaza was not only a collective practice, but a critical part of the wider social movements in Athens. Beyond supporting refugees through the hotel, the initiative attempted a higher level of political change regarding the refugee crisis in Greece. It protested the violence and maltreatment of refugees and supported their integration in Greek society. To do that, a proximity and constant dialogue with the existing thick network of social movements in Athens was important. This highlights a necessity, common among squats, to have both thick social ties within the group, in combination with weaker social ties to wider networks (Moroni et al., 1996; Martínez, 2011).

Charalampos Tsavdaroglou explored Athens during the refugee crisis by mapping both state-run and solidarity accommodation of refugees across the wider metropolitan area (2018). His research highlighted the proximity between different solidarity initiatives. Creating a strong local solidarity network allowed them to support and protect each other,

organize together, and ensure a common front in relation to the solidarity movement with refugees.

### **03. Spatial Precarity:**

The initiative very clearly resisted the dominant narrative that migrants and citizens are competing for access to the city (Mudu and Chattopadhyay, 2016). However, the counterexample it created remained volatile and did not seek to find ways for a more stable presence within the city. It started as a radical initiative, based only on self-organization and solidarity with other similar-minded initiatives, and it retained the same structure until the end. It consciously did not seek more formalized pathways and support from other structures such as local government, NGOs etc. Hence, spatial precarity was part of the initiative's inherent structure, which can be contrasted to the stability it aimed to provide to a population already in a precarious state. Lack of spatial stability is quite common among sharing culture practices, as they occupy spaces in a quite opportunistic manner, making precarity part of their own identity.

## **Conclusions**

The ethnographic study of City Plaza, a self-organized refugee accommodation and solidarity center provides insights on collective housing practices of diverse groups of people. It shows the possibility of people working together despite potential disagreements. More importantly, it points towards the importance of the location of such an initiative in the heart of the city to create a different urban imaginary, provide a source of inspiration, and set a very visible counterexample that shows ways of acting in more collaborative ways.

The spatial findings from the case study provide a better understanding of how space can help support, enable, and diffuse collective practices. At the level of the building, the case study pinpointed the importance of spatial appropriation by the group, the creation of transparency of governance through space, as well as development of the potential granularity of the space in allowing for a spectrum of activities from private to collective. The paper also reflected on the convenience of using a space previously designed as a hotel for collective housing and at the same time commented on the challenges this same design potentially creates for fostering resident agency. Thinking about the threshold, it showed how urban density and porosity can become a catalyst for the diffusion of collective practices, creating opportunities for one-to-one interactions between different people. On the urban scale, the findings were limited, and mainly focused on the importance of spatial stability and the ability of collective initiatives to be in places with a wealth of people, networks, and resources.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank deeply the residents of City Plaza who welcomed me in their space and took the time to chat and answer my questions.

## **Funding Details**

The research presented in this article is part of a wider doctoral research which was financially supported by Alexander S. Onassis Foundation, Gerondelis Foundation, and Carnegie Mellon University's School of Architecture.

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