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The Newcomers' Right to the Common Space: The case of Athens during the refugee crisis

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Abstract

The ongoing refugee streams that derive from the recent conflict in the Middle East are a central issue to the growing socio-political debate about the different facets of contemporary crisis. While borders, in the era of globalization, constitute porous passages for capital goods and labor market, at the same time they function as new enclosures for migrant and refugee populations. Nevertheless, these human flows contest border regimes and exclusionary urban policies and create a nexus of emerging common spaces.

Following the recent spatial approaches on "commons" and "enclosures" (Dellenbaugh et al., 2015; Harvey, 2012; Stavrides, 2016) this paper focuses on the dialectic between the refugees' solidarity housing commons and the State-run refugee camps. Particularly, I examine the case of Greece, a country that is situated in the South-East-End of the European Union close to Asia and Africa; hence it is in the epicenter of the current refugee crisis and I pinpoint in the case of Athens, the capital of Greece and the main refugee transit city.

Il diritto allo spazio comune dei nuovi arrivati: il caso di Atene durante la crisi dei rifugiati

L'aumento dei flussi di migranti derivante dal recente conflitto in Medio Oriente rappresenta un tema centrale nel crescente dibattito socio-politico sulle diverse

sfaccettature della crisi attuale. Se i confini nell'epoca della globalizzazione rappresentano dei passaggi porosi per beni e mercato del lavoro, allo stesso tempo essi funzionano come nuove enclosures per le popolazioni migranti e i rifugiati. Ciononostante questi flussi umani contestano i regimi dei confini e le politiche urbane che li escludono, dando vita a reti di spazi comuni. Sulla base di recenti approcci spaziali ai beni comuni e le enclosures (Dellenbaugh et al., 2015; Harvey, 2012; Stavrides, 2016), il contributo si focalizza sulla dialettica tra gli spazi comuni di rifugiati nel settore della casa sorti dalla solidarietà e i campi per rifugiati gestiti dallo Stato. In particolare l'analisi riguarda il caso della Grecia, paese situato all'estremità sudorientale dell'Unione Europea, vicino a Africa e Asia e per questo epicentro dell'attuale crisi dei rifugiati, e la città di Atene, capitale della Grecia e principale città di transito per i rifugiati.

Keywords

Common space; newcomers; squats; Athens

Introduction

The so-called migration crisis in Greece has been a major issue during 2015-2016. According to the United Nations (U.N., 2016a), in one year 851,319 people have entered and crossed the country. On March 8, 2016, following a gradual restriction of access to the Balkan route since February 2016 based on ethnic origin criteria, the border between Greece and F.Y.R.O.M. was closed for all third-country migrants. In the aftermath of this closure, and following the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal on the 20th of March 2016 (European Commission, 2016), over 57,000 refugees are suddenly trapped in Greece, one third of which are in Athens (Coordination Centre for the Management of Refugee Crisis in Greece, 2016). More than 15,000 refugees are settled in fourteen State-run camps-reception centers in the outskirts of the city and about 1,500 are in self-organized occupied buildings in the urban core. Focused on this context, this paper examines the right to refugees' adequate housing as it is expressed by the Greek State housing policies and the solidarity housing practices of newly arrived refugees.

Specifically in this paper I aim to examine the emerging spatial commoning practices of migrants and refugees. Although there is a vast literature (Bulley, 2014; Gabiam, 2012; Ihlen et al., 2015; Mountz et al., 2013; Reimann, 2006) on social philanthropy, humanitarianism, NGOs' activities and State immigration policies, there have been few attempts to research the ongoing refugees' self-organized actions that produce seemingly anonymous, however highly personal and collective housing common spaces.

In the above context my basic argument is that despite the vivid and increasingly popular discussion on commons (De Angelis, 2017; Federici, 2011; Springer, 2016; Stavrides, 2016), there have been few attempts to think it together with the ongoing migrant crisis. In recent years, the discussion on urban commons has revolved mainly around critical geographers' approaches that focus on "accumulation by dispossession" (Glassman, 2006; Harvey, 2012; Hodkinson, 2012) and conceptualize commons as a new version of the "right to the city" (Brenner et al., 2009; Kuymulu, 2013; Mayer, 2009). At the same time, during the current migrants' crisis, the newcomers are settled in inadequate housing facilities on the outskirts of cities, which gradually become ghettoized, and face discriminatory access to facilities essential for health, security, comfort and nutrition. However, the previously described migrant urban policies do not stay uncontested. In the case of Athens, the newcomers claim spatial justice and visibility as well as the right to the city and to adequate housing; and in collaboration with solidarity groups they occupy abandoned buildings in the urban core and tend to transform them into common housing spaces. Moreover, in their effort to survive, migrants not only challenge the State-run camps, but also seek to negotiate and go beyond cultural, class, gender, religious and political identities. Furthermore, the newcomers, through praxes of "relocation" and "reinscription" (Bhabha, 1994), produce hybrid housing spaces and collectively reinvent a culture of coexistence. Consequently, the newcomers are transformed into an unpredictable (Stavrides, 2014) and misfitted (Holloway, 2010) multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2009) that produces unique and porous housing common spaces, spaces in movement and threshold spaces. In parallel, State housing policies tend to appropriate the migrants' common spaces with several methods like forced evictions, criminalization of solidarity groups, and enclosing them in dilapidated factories and old military bases (Christodoulou et al., 2016; Karyotis, 2016; No Border Camp, 2016; Simit, 2016).

For the purposes of the paper the social data was obtained through both qualitative and quantitative processes. The methodological tools applied to the determination of these dynamic characteristics came through participatory action research, ethnographic analysis, semi-structured interviews and the collection of articles of local press and web pages. It should be noted that refugee research participants are a relatively vulnerable research population due to their legal status. Taking this vulnerability into account means implementing precautions to minimize potential risks of research participation like scapegoating, denunciation by the subjects' peer group, or wider societal and enforcement actions. Some participants felt uncomfortable discussing and reflecting on the conditions of their shelter and how they relate to it. The anonymization of data ensured that any potential uneasiness that may have arisen was addressed so that no physical, psychological, or social adversities could have affected the participants as a result of taking part in the study. To curb inconvenience to participants, the time, date and location of the participant's involvement in the study were carefully discussed and approved by both parties. Finally it is necessary to mention that the names of most

interviewed individuals have been changed with culturally appropriate names to protect their identity.

The paper is structured as follows. The following section engages with the theoretical discussion on open dialectics and postcolonial approaches to the production of the common space. The subsequent section explores the features of the refugees' right to the city and to adequate housing vis–à–vis State-run camps in Athens. I then explore the socio-spatial features of the refugees' common spaces in Athens. The final section draws some concluding remarks on the hybrid social relations and modes of communication, through which the communities of the refugee common space were formed. In this section I also comment on the significance of access to adequate housing, which can be a precondition for the enjoyment of several human rights, including the rights to work, health, social security, privacy, transportation, sexual orientation or education. In this regard, the commoning practices of squatting are not necessarily related only to housing needs and personal space, but are also associated with the reclamation of several aspects of the everyday life.

Open Dialectics and Post-colonial Approach on the Production of the Common Space

Following several critical scholars analyses (Bollier and Helfrich, 2012; Caffentzis, 2010; De Angelis, 2007; Federici, 2011; Hardt and Negri, 2009; Parr, 2015), conceptualizing the commons involves three things at the same time: a common pool of resources, community, and commoning. "Commons" don't exist per se but they are constituted through the social process of commoning. The people who, through commoning, constitute communities that self-organize sharing common resources, in non-commercial ways, are called "commoners". According to Harvey (2012, 73) the common is constructed as an unstable and malleable social relation between "a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment". Furthermore, De Angelis (2010, 955) makes the point that "there are no commons without incessant activities of commoning", it is through (re)production in common that "communities (…) decide for themselves the norms, values and measures of things" (Ibid, 955). Moreover, several scholars (Caffentzis, 2010; Federici, 2011; Hardt and Negri, 2009; Mattei, 2011) make the point that the commons have to be separated from the dipole of private or state management. In this brief review on the commons a point worth mentioning is Blomley's (2008, 320) proposal that "the commons, (…), is not so much found as produced, (...) the commons is a form of place-making." Finally, Stavrides (2014, 548) suggests that the spaces of common emerge as "thresholds", which are "open to usage, open to newcomers".

In order to contribute to a fuller understanding and accurate connection between the concepts of "commons" and the "space", I draw on Lefebvre's open dialectic spatial approach. Lefebvre (1991b[1974]) argues that space is not an empty container that is filled with actions, images, relationships and ideologies, but

it constitutes a social product or a complex social construction based on social values and the social production of meanings, which affects spatial practices and perceptions. Lefebvre's main method is based on trialectic analysis, i.e. space is diversified into the physical-mental-social space, spatial practice-representations of space-representational space and finally the perceived-conceived-lived space.

In this theoretical framework, I propose to connect the Lefebvrian approach with the aforementioned analysis on commons, in order to conceptualize the concept of the "common space". In the common space the physical-perceived space is the spatial practice of collective sharing of the means of (re)production and existence. The physical space of common pool resources is constituted, generated or reclaimed each time by the social-commoning practises. Finally, commoners, through commoning practices, establish their communities.

Moreover, in order to conceptualize the various and complex power relations in the production of the common space, I build on postcolonial urban theory approaches, which seek to highlight the various "subaltern" agents while surpassing the dichotomies West-East or North-South and to focus on the examinations of the hybrid intermediate forms of production of space (Jeffrey et al., 2012; McFarlane, 2006, 2008; Robinson, 2011; Roy, 2011). Within this framework, several scholars (De Genova et al. 2015; Mezzadra 2004; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013, Nyers, 2003; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013; Pickles, 2015) suggest the so-called "autonomy of migration", which refers to a rapidly developing series of ideas that reflect a kind of "Copernican turn in migration studies" (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015, 895). According to the "autonomy of migration" the focus has to be shifted from the apparatuses of control to the multiple and diverse ways in which migration responds to, operates independently from, and in turn shapes those apparatuses and their corresponding institutions and practices.

From this point of view, contemporary refugee housing common spaces could be seen as open communities of commoners, which through their spatial practices of commoning destabilize the State-led policies and seek to (re)claim both the physical and the social space producing unique collective common spaces. Such a framework seems adequate to analyse the newcomers' right to the city and to explain the hybrid spatialities of recent refugee common spaces.

The Refugees' Right to the City and to Adequate Housing vis–à–vis State-run Camps in Athens

In order to explore the refugees' right to the city I draw attention on Lefebvre's work "The Right to the City" (1996/1968). One of the basic theses and point of departure of Lefebvre was that "the city [is] a projection of society on the ground that is, not only on the actual site, but at a specific level, perceived and conceived by thought, […] the city [is] the place of confrontations and of (conflictual) relations (…), the city [is] the 'site of desire' (…) and site of

revolutions" (Ibid., 109). For Lefebvre the right to the city embodies and goes beyond "the rights of ages and sexes (the woman, the child and the elderly), rights of conditions (the proletarian, the peasant), rights to training and education, to work, to culture, to rest, to health, to housing" (Ibid., 157). Furthermore, Lefebvre argues that the right to the city is not a typical right but it "is like a cry and a demand" (Ibid., 173). Indeed, in this paper it will be shown the refugee despair upon arrival to Athens and their demand to right to city. Finally Lefebvre's concept of "the right to the city" challenges the notion of the citizen. In his thought, citizenship is not defined by membership in the nation-state, but is based on membership in inhabitance. As Purcell (2003, 577) notes "everyday life is the central pivot of the right to the city: those who go about their daily routines in the city, both living in and creating space, are those who possess a legitimate right to the city (Lefebvre, 1991a)."

It is worth mentioning here that several international organizations and governments during the last decades adopt the rhetoric on the refugee right to the city and to housing. After the WWII the refugees' right to adequate housing was recognized as part of the "right to an adequate standard of living" in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (U.N., 1948) and in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (U.N., 1966). Moreover the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has underlined that the right to adequate housing should not be interpreted narrowly (U.N., 2009). Rather, it should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity. Furthermore the European Council (ECRE, 2007) recognizes that the living environment and conditions in terms of housing are key to the integration of refugees and migrants. Only by making housing equally accessible to refugees, migrants and national citizens, as well as stimulating multicultural living environments integration will succeed (ECRE, 2007). Since 2007 Greece has adapted the Council Directive for the minimum standards for the reception of refugees (Presidential Decree, 220/2007). According to the above statements the characteristics of the right to adequate housing must meet the following criteria: security of tenure, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, affordability, habitability, accessibility and cultural adequacy. Finally it is emphasized that housing is not adequate if it is cut off from employment opportunities, health-care services, schools, childcare centers and other social facilities, or if it is located in polluted or dangerous areas.

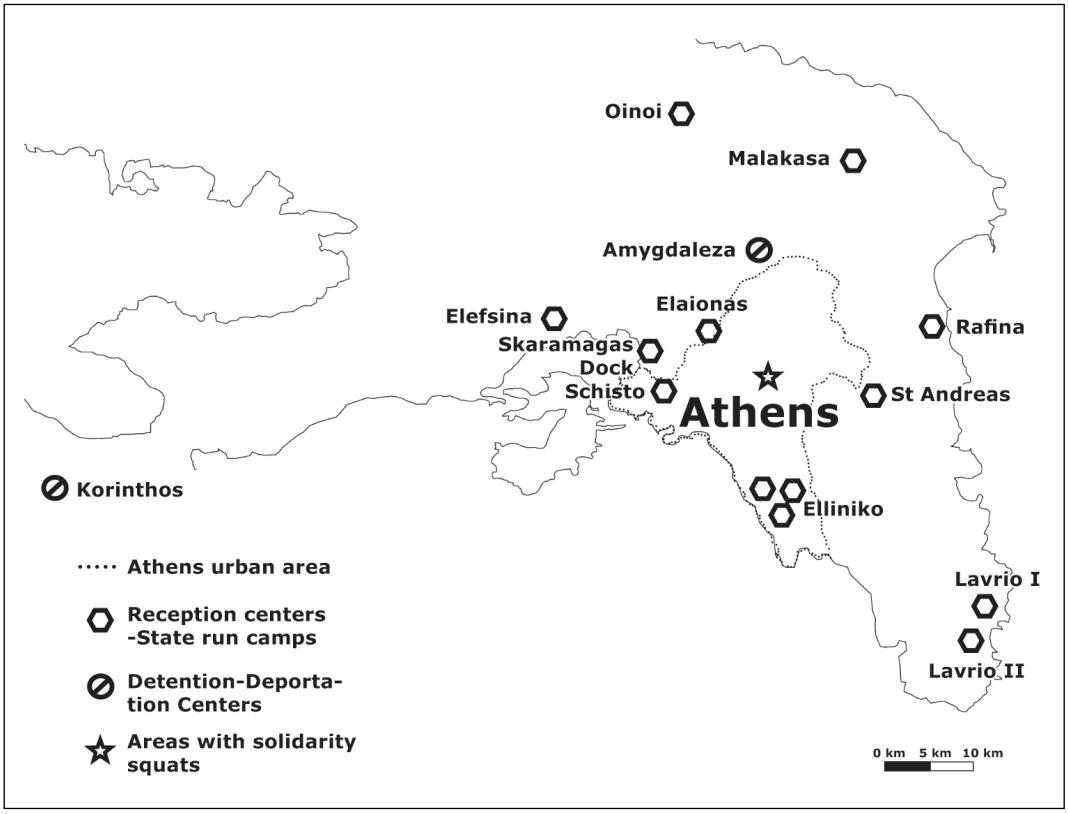

Figure 1. State-run refugees' camps and solidarity refugee squats in Athens (source: the author)

In contrast to the above criteria, the State-run refugee camps in the case of Athens are overcrowded dilapidated factories, old military bases and an abandoned airport (see Figure 1), where a dire lack of amenities has prevailed such as running water, and derelict warehouses in filthy conditions that appear unfit for habitation. In most of the cases there is no access to health and security services and facilities. According to several NGOs' reports (Amnesty International, 2016; International Rescue Committee, 2016; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2016), the report of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2016) and the report of U.N. (2016b) the camps do not meet international standards. They are located in extremely polluted and dangerous environments, close to or inside industrial zones, oil refineries, gaseous fuel depots, and pesticides facilities (General Plan for Major Chemical Accidents Response, 2009). According to the Regulatory Urban Plan of Athens Metropolitan Area (2014), the majority of the State-run refugee camps are located in areas where the permitted land uses are "medium or high disturbance productive activities", and there is no provision for residential areas. Infrastructures, schools, supermarkets and social life are remote and most of the camps are not connected with public transportation. The reports reveal dirt-strewn warehouses lined with tents pitched on filthy concrete floors. The tents have been placed too tightly together, the air circulation is poor, and supplies of food, water,

toilets, showers, and electricity are insufficient. Furthermore, camps were usually either full or host to a range of problems: scabies, knife fights, food poisoning, inadequate facilities, snakes and scorpions. Thus, the refugees have to survive in inhuman, appalling and precarious housing conditions, against the cold or hot weather, the illnesses, the psychosocial distress, the lack of food, energy and water supplies.

Structures & Hosting Facilities	**Guests**
Schisto	1.530
Elaionas	2.415
St Andreas	174
Rafina	101
Malakasa	1.296
Lavrio I	370
Lavrio II	489
Skaramagas Dock	3.200
Merchant Marine Academy (Elefsina)	325
Oinoi (Oinofyta)-Voiotia	680
Total State Official Settlements	10.580
Non Official Settlements	
Baseball Field (Elliniko I)	820
Hockey Field (Elliniko II)	1.009
Arrivals Area (Elliniko III)	920
Piraeus Port	0
Non Official Settlements Total	2.749
Self-Settled (Est.)	3.600
Total Attiki (Greater Athens)	16.929

Table 1. Structures and hosting facilities in Athens wider area (Source: Coordination Centre for the Management of Refugee Crisis in Greece, 2016).

Consequently, although the EU Commission, the Greek State, the UNHCR and several local and international NGOs run and finance the official camps with a large amount of money[1], it is obvious that there is a huge gap between the official statements, directives, rhetoric and principles on the refugees' right to adequate housing and the daily reality in refugee camps. Moreover questions are rising about the top-down policies with respect to implementation, mismanagement, efficacy and responsibility, and also about corruption (Howden, 2017; Howden and Fotiadis 2017; Malichoudis, 2017). Thus it can be argued that the assimilation of radical

1 Some $803 million flowed into Greece from the beginning of 2015, according to an investigation by Refugees Deeply (Howden, 2017; Howden and Fotiadis 2017). The bulk of these funds were meant to be spent on services for the 57,000 refugees and migrants stranded in Greece when the borders shut down. That translates to a rough cost per beneficiary of $14,000.

contexts on behalf of the authorities does not lead to emancipatory policies but aim to cover up sovereignty.

Refugee Common Spaces

In recent years Athens has been hit by an unprecedented turmoil that is expressed socially, economically and spatially (Hadjimichalis, 2011; Kaika, 2012; Kapsali and Tsavdaroglou, 2016; Koutrolikou, 2016). One of the main consequences of the socio-spatial crisis was that several public (schools, hospitals) and private buildings (houses, hotels) were abandoned in the center of the city (Vatavali and Siatitsa, 2011; Ministry of Enviroment & Energy, 2014). From autumn 2015 to the summer of 2016 refugees' solidarity groups occupied several of these empty buildings and turned them into housing projects for hundreds of newcomers. According to Moving Europe (2016) about 1,500 refugees are hosted in squats, which are run by both refugees and solidarity groups.

The solidarity groups were created as an intervention in aiding the approximately 800 refugee people that were living in an informal settlement at Pedion toy Areos, a central park in Athens, from July to August 2015. After an open call, hundreds of people were mobilized, cooperating on the basis of self-organization and anti-hierarchy. Different working groups were created to meet the daily needs: healthcare, food supplies, kitchen, distribution, warehouse, clothing, counter-information, cleaning, creative activities for kids. Then in September 2015 an abandoned government building was occupied on Notara 26 (Housing Squat for Refugees and Immigrants Notara 26) and a building on Dervenion 56 in Exarcheia. Notara 26 was transformed into a self-organized housing structure that accommodated approximately 3500 people until the summer 2016. Dervenion 56 functions as a hub for various activities, such as the kitchen, food, clothes, hygiene and medicine supplies warehouse and plans to expand its project to offer the space for workshops and skill-shares. During the winter and spring of 2016, following the increase of refugees located in Athens, new housing squats popped up on the map. Some of them are the following: Gini building in Politehnio (on the university campus), Acharnon squat, Refugee Accommodation Center City Plaza Hotel, School 2 – 2o Filoxenio Prosfigon, Themistokleus 58, Themistokleus 96, Strephi Squat, School-5th Likio, Hotel Oniro, Cat's Spirit, Refugee housing squat Kanniggos 22, Steki Metastanon and General Hospital Patision.

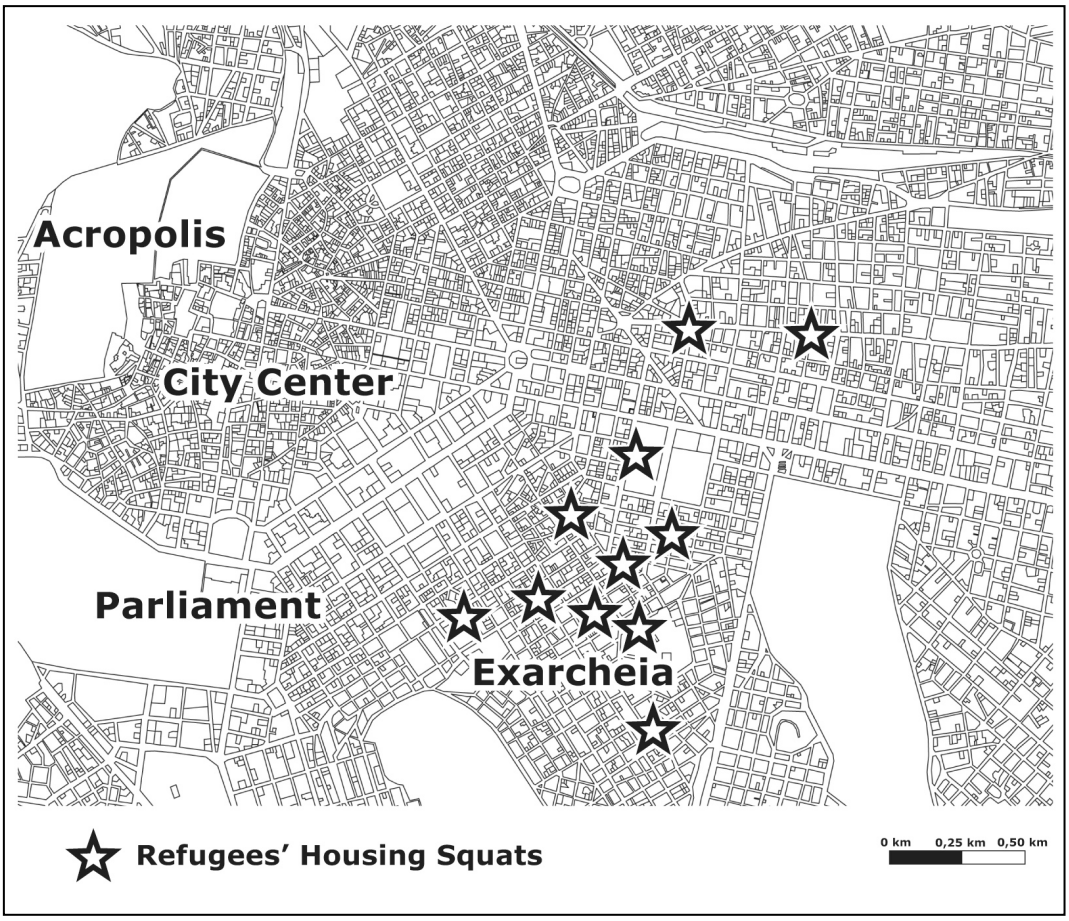

Figure 2. Housing Squats for Refugees in Athens (source: the author)

The location of most refugee squats is inside or near the borders of Exarcheia, which is an inner city neighbourhood with many peculiarities and contradictions. Exarcheia is situated in the city center, its distance from the Parliament and the Acropolis is almost 2km (see Figure 2), it is characterized by mixed land uses (housing, culture, education, commercial use), high-rise blocks, the streets are extremely narrow and it has high population density (Tsavdaroglou and Makrygianni, 2013). Exarcheia is most known as the student area of Athens, owing to its vicinity to the Polytechnic school. Its main features are the many bohemian, party bars and alternative culture hangouts and also the many bookshops and publishing houses. Moreover it is the historic home of Greek anarchists and radical lefts, as well as the youth of the government party SYRIZA, the Communist party, the party of PASOK (the so-called socialist party and ex-government party), the far-right newspaper Stochos, the bookstore of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, and many Christian organisations are based in Exarcheia. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the majority of people voting in Exarcheia, during the 2015 Greek bailout referendum, voted for "Yes" (more than 57%), while the rest of the country

voted for "No" (Vertigo, 2015). In this conflictual neighbourhood several urban social movements emerged during the last decades (Arampatzi, 2012; Leontidou, 2012; Vradis, 2009). Here were born the most of the Athenian squats and social centers, which date back to the late '80s, when anarchists began setting up communal homes and social centers in abandoned buildings and turned them into spaces for subcultural activity, collective living, and dissident action (c/krümel, 2005; Makrygianni and Tsavdaroglou, 2011). They have become something of a Greek tradition, accompanied by a community of people who know which building you can occupy without getting kicked out and how to set up electricity and plumbing. However, the physical space of the refugee commons is not only in the occupied buildings in Exarcheia neighborhood but it has temporarily expanded with demonstrations in the city center. Yet, it is also clear that the refugee common space is not demarcated in the physical space of the occupied buildings but concerns the representational space of radio waves, telephone and social media. Indeed, each squat has a Facebook, Twitter or Internet webpage.

Moreover it should be acknowledged that each refugee squat has a different level of political influence and a distinct character according to the political and social background of the support groups and participants. Thus the occupied buildings can be categorized into four groups. The first category concerns the squats that are running by anarchist solidarity groups, like Gini building in Politehnio (on the university campus) whose assembly has affirmed a strict anarchist position and the project rejects any co-operation with the state or NGO actors. Themistokleus 58 is a self-declared non-volunteer squat and its politics are similar to the Politehnio, by firmly rejecting both state agencies as well as NGOs. Notara 26 operates on the basis of anti-authoritarian autonomy, and refuses any co-operation with NGOs. The second category is the self-organized squats that are run mainly by refugees without a strictly political statement like Acharnon squat and School-5th Likio, which is currently housing 400 people and regularly hosts activities for the large number of children living there. Also School Squat 2 evokes boisterous, family-style living. The tiny Hotel Oniro is defined by its homey lobby. The third category is that of the Strephi Squat, which is run by feminist groups and is only for women and their children. Finally the fourth category concerns the City Plaza, which is the most publicized of the bunch and is billed as the "Best Hotel in Europe". It currently houses 400 people and was opened by leftist political groups shortly after the borders were closed. It is well-networked and receives support from several solidarity groups across Europe.

Beyond the above categorization, most of the refugee squats are based on the principals of antiracism, unmediated selforganization, direct democracy, non-hierarchy and co-habitation. According to the Housing Squat for Refugees and Immigrants Notara 26, (2016, 2):

> We are squatting an empty public building in Athens, 26 Notara Str., in order to territorialize our solidarity towards refugees/immigrants to cover their immediate needs (shelter, food, medical help). This project doesn't stand for philanthropy, state or private, but rather for a self-organized solidarity project, wherein locals and refugees-immigrants decide together. The decisive body is the squat's open assembly where everyone is welcome to participate with no exclusions.

In the same line the Refugee Accommodation Center City Plaza Hotel (2016) declares:

> The initiative is an experiment in the selforganization of refugees and locals, centered on the weekly general assembly and on the thematic working groups. The aim is to realize a conception of everyday life which will empower "from below", ultimately leading to the creation of a "space of freedom", which will serve as proof of our vision for society.

As outlined by the Solidarity Initiative to Economic and Political Refugees (2016) refugee families from different nationalities are working collectively and in solidarity with other on the cleaning, repairing, and organization of several occupied spaces. They can be seen therefore as projects of self-organization and solidarity, as centers of struggle against racism and exclusion, for the right to free movement, decent living conditions and equal rights. Collective kitchens, kindergartens, medicine and clothes stores are set up in the self-managed and self-financed structures. Furthermore according to Theodorou, lawyer and member of the Solidarity Initiative for Political and Economic Refugees, "we wanted to demand this public space because the mayor tried to throw all of the refugees out of [Victoria Square]" (cited in Strickland 2016, 3). Theodorou tells Al Jazeera, referring to the occupied City Plaza Hotel, "It was a gesture to reclaim the right of the visibility of refugees because we feel that [the Greek government] is trying to hide them on the outskirts of the city" (Ibid.).

According to several reports, scholars, and interviews (Christodoulou, et al. 2016; Haddad, 2016; Karyotis, 2016; Labaree, 2016; Rubin and Nieva, 2016; Vicki, 2016) the occupied refugee shelters are managed as commons through participatory processes. Locals and refugees cook together and eat around the same table; they take decisions together in horizontal assemblies; they recognize each other's culture and customs and overcome preconceptions and stereotypes. In the words of Hassan and Gamal, two Palestinians in Notara squat: "Here, we are free. We decide on common matters together. It's better than being locked up in military camps"[2]. Each squat is run by its own assembly, which usually make decisions by consensus. According to Murad, "squats are run without government or major

[2] Personal interview, 15 June 2016.

nongovernmental-organization influence and rely on donations and manpower from independent volunteers. Responsibility is divided among the residents."[3] As Strickland (2016, 3) states "sculpted on principles of self-organising and democracy, decisions about the squat's operations and activities are taken when a general consensus is reached through discussion and debate between the residents and activists".

Against the enforced segregation, solidarity initiatives create a common language and common spaces of action for locals and refugees. This reflects a broader ethos within the squatted buildings, recognizing that people are facing precarious situations but trying to avoid defining their existence according to their vulnerability. In contrast with the charitable and sometimes victim-centric ethos of many organizations working in the State-run camps, the aim is to build a culture of mutual respect. Hassan worked in information technology in Syria and is now working to set up the Wi-Fi network in School-5th Likio squat, Fatima was an Arabic teacher in Syria and she now teaches class every day from 5 to 7pm in School-5th Likio squat, while Hamd from Damascus has a degree in hotel management and now works in the kitchen in School-5th Likio squat (Labaree, 2016). Ahmed from Afghanistan started giving language classes to the other residents and commented:

> I like so much giving classes and it is very good to have something to do that makes sense. I would like to do more than this. It is a good place for me to effectively spent my time and for us all to learn something new. Until now I was just surviving in Greece. Now I can say I am living (cited in Welcome to Europe, 2016).

Thus it can be argued that in the emerging "common spaces" the refugees shape the sense of belonging, security, and personal wellbeing, and along with the support of volunteers they have access to food, health care, education and employment. For this to occur the mode of communication, the characteristics and identities of the participants, both locals and refugees, are confronted with their limits, modified and troubled. The process of setting up the housing common spaces is based on collective practices, mutual aid and respect, horizontal organization, and emotional, communicative and aesthetic interactions. In the words of Samir:

> I had never seen such an effort before, nor been in a political squat, which impressed me very positively. At the squat the rules are: no violence to anyone, no sexist behaviors are allowed, there is equality between men and women, drugs are prohibited, plus we also created mixed shifts for cleaning and cooking.[4]

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[3] Personal interview, 17 June 2016.
[4] Personal interview, 22 June 2016.

The transformation of the physical space of the occupied buildings into a common space took place as the buildings started to acquire characteristics of the "threshold". According to Stavrides (2012, 589): "Common spaces emerge as threshold spaces, spaces not demarcated by a defining perimeter. Whereas public space bears the mark of a prevailing authority that defines it, common space is opened space, space in a process of opening toward newcomers." Thus common spaces are "porous, spaces in movement, space passages" (Ibid). The mode of communication and the social relations of the participants, both locals and refugees, give the occupied buildings their porous and hybrid character. The following features form this character: modification of the boundaries between the private and the political space; and praxes of "relocation" and "reinscription", which allowed the presence, identification and sharing expectation among participants. All these gave birth to the troubling of identities and the emergence of the squatters community, a community open to newcomers and constantly in motion.

Until the day of the occupation the forementioned buildings had the typical characteristics of "enclosed" spaces, with clear borders between private and public space. Specifically, the majority of the buildings are state-public spaces (i.e. schools or hospitals) or private hotels, where the government and the municipal authorities ordered the permitted uses and functions. Conversely, the days of the occupation, the squatted buildings acquire the features of common space. The social relations and the commoning practices of the participants have destabilized and altered the boundaries between private and public, personal and political. The occupied buildings combine elements of collective space and personal space. For this reason, the multitude of participants who "take the buildings in their hands", passionately and consistently take care and defend them, as if they are their personal space, and simultaneously in collective ways protect them both from state power and the varied and constantly reproducing systems of domination.

Consequently, the common space emerges as a hybrid space, where the boundaries between private and public, personal and political are constantly modified. As pointed out by Bhabha (1994, 227) "hybridization" characterizes that way of formation of actors, which emerges as "relocation" and "reinscription", and according to Stavrides (2011, 170) "we can ascribe these two features, (…) in a number of practices in the city focusing on collective reinvention of public space". The refugee-occupied buildings carried out exactly in the same terms. The participants, locals and newcomers, "relocate" and "reinscribe" their personal space in the squatted space, they transform the occupied buildings into their "new home" and their collective space as they set up various self-organized collective projects.

Exemplary, *inter alia*, are the practices of improvisations and experimental modes of communication as expressed by several groups. In each squat there is a reception group, a kitchen-cooking group, a cleaning group, a technical support

group, an education and childcare group, a multimedia-communication-radio group, a legal group, a medical care group, a guard-security group and a translation group. Moreover, art groups, library groups and "composure" groups have been established. In addition, lectures are organized as well as poetry, music, and theater events. At the same time, the participants' action repertoires, mode of communication, and commoning practices included, among others, dance fests, piano nights, yoga training, vegetable gardens, collective sleeping places, and many more components of a self-sufficient commune life. Finally, the paintings, the photographs, the handmade t-shirts, the makeshift placards, the anti-government, anti-racist, and anti-fascist slogans and the soundscape of the occupied buildings with the voices of the people and their improvised music, form an unpredictable and subversive common space.

According to the report of Kantor (2016, 4) in the School squat 2:

> There is familiarity and freedom. A Syrian flag hangs out of a second-story window. As Mohammad prepares dinner, a cluster of Syrian and Lebanese guys in their 20s debate which music to play on the loudspeaker, finally deciding on an Arabic remix of Adele. A Syrian Kurdish woman peels through a large milk carton of onions, and inside the tiny toolshed, cucumbers are being cut lengthwise twice, then sliced Arabic-salad style. The smell of boiling eggplant carries out of the open door and past children playing obstacle games with Spanish volunteers.

There's a sense of community among residents in the occupied City Plaza Hotel, says Rabi Abu Tarah, a 26-year-old resident and translator from Damascus. "This here, this is a street", he explains, pointing to the hallway that connects the hotel bar, which serves instant coffee to residents and visitors, with the large dining room, which is decorated with photographs of refugees and volunteers. And the rooms are houses. Every room has a story. Open the room, there is a deep story (cited in Kantor 2016: 4).

Furthermore it can be argued that the participants' commoning, the various modes of communication and their social relations have developed a culture of coexistence, in which the multiple identities are troubled and questioned, as the multitude of people is constantly confronted with their political, cultural, class, racial and gender identities. As said by Rima, a young Syrian woman (cited in Welcome to Europe, 2016):

> For the first time since I am in Greece we are living in an atmosphere that makes it possible to speak with our neighbors no matter where they come from. It is the first time that I found friends from Afghanistan and the first time that we start to understand that only united we can be strong.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that in the occupied solidarity common spaces, volunteers and activists work to protect basic dignity of vulnerable groups like women, children and disabled people creating "awareness groups" and "safe places". These spaces represent for many of the refugees the only opportunity to express their cultural practices and gender identities openly. It also allows for people of different faiths, socio-economic backgrounds, ages, abilities, ethnicities, ages and skin color to converge.

When I asked Amena, who fled with her child from the threats of her violent ex-husband, what is most important for her in the occupied hotel City Plaza, she did not need to think one second about it:

> For me the most important is that I found safety. I have for the first time since long ago a room with a door that I can lock if I need this. There is always someone at the entrance of the hotel [City Plaza], checking who is coming and going. And there are a lot of people here I can go to when I get afraid.

The Lefebvrian right to city as "a cry and demand" becomes clear in Rashaa words, a young Afghan woman who lived before in the overcrowded camp of Elliniko, and now she is living in City Plaza: "when I need to cry, I can do it in our room. When I need to take a rest, I can close the door. Here we got back a little bit of privacy (…) Especially in the night when I had to go to toilet I could never go alone as a woman" (cited in Welcome to Europe, 2016).

Uri from Afghanistan suffers from Diabetes. She used to live in an emergency reception center in Greater Athens area, one-hour journey by public transportation from the city center. As the bus connection is poor and she lacks money for taking the bus and the metro, she couldn't regularly get her Insulin from Praksis' offices[5], which are located near Victoria Square. More than that, she had no access to a fridge in order to adequately store the medicine. When she moved to the City Plaza squat, which is opposite to Praksis offices, she found out that her room had a proper place for her medicine: "There is a fridge. That is such a relief,"[6] her daughter said immediately.

Also Qamar from Syria says:

> I have cancer. I was staying in a tent for more than a month. Rain was entering and the floor was wet and humid. Later the sun was creating the feeling of getting boiled inside. I was never examined and I suffered a lot of pain. Here I know there is a doctor and others

[5] Praksis is an NGO whose main goal is the design, application and implementation of humanitarian programs and medical interventions. The beneficiaries are poor, homeless, uninsured, economic immigrants, asylum seekers/ refugees, unaccompanied minors and trafficking victims (Praksis, 2016).

[6] Personal interview, 16 June 2016.

> who take care of me. Also my children now don't get sick anymore like before. They even have a place to play (cited in Welcome to Europe, 2016).

Finally it has to be noticed the spatial, social and political antagonism between State immigration policies and the refugee squats. First of all the State-run camps are situated in the outskirts of the city in extremely polluted and dangerous environments without public transportation while the refugee squats are located in the city core providing access to everyday social life. Furthermore by contrast with the charitable and victim-centric ethos of State and NGOs policies, the aim of the refugee squats is to build a culture of mutual respect. People at refugee squats are not chosen on the basis of their vulnerable status or nationality like in State-run camps. Questions about why people migrated were not a factor in identifying those to be accommodated. Instead, attention is paid to ensuring a mix of nationalities, a gender balance, and a combination of religious beliefs. As a result of the forementioned antagonism the State authorities spread a negative propaganda against refugee squats. For instance the mayor of Athens released a public letter to the citizen protection and migration policy ministers requesting the transfer of all refugees from occupied buildings to State-run camps because squatting "disturbs city life and causes problem to public health" (Kaminis, 2016). Finally at the dawn of 13/03/2017 the police evicted the "Acharnon squat" which was mainly a shelter for families with newborn babies and young children and also it was one of the first examples of direct, autonomous, and unmediated self-organization of refugees with very limited participation of local activists. It is worth mentioned that following the eviction, some 60 people have been moved to other squats, after spending hours in police station and rejecting the offer to be transferred to one of the camps in the outskirts of Athens. Many experienced life in camps before, and they choose no to go back but rather to rely on other squats.

Conclusion: Refugee common spaces vs Sate-run camp: an ongoing conflict

As the current refugee crisis and its fallout vividly demonstrates, the focus on the Athenian refugee common spaces vs State-run camps is of critical political and theoretical importance today. In closing, this paper draws particular attention to four implications of the argument it has been made here for critical scholarship.

Firstly, following the recent spatial approaches on "commons" and "enclosures" (Dellenbaugh et al., 2015; Harvey, 2012; Stavrides, 2016) as well as the Lefebvrian (1991b[1974]) open dialectic spatial approach I proposed a theoretical framework for the conceptualization of the "common space" that is based on the articulation of the physical-perceived space of common pool resources the spatial commoning and the communities of commoners. Through the lenses of the common space I have sought to demonstrate in my analysis that in the case of Athens the refugee occupied buildings can be recognized as the physical-perceived place, i.e. the common pool resource of the commoners', both locals and refugees' community. In fact, it has formed a fluid and open community with no boundaries,

concerning its members, but with specific forms of commoning and communication practices between them; hence a nexus of micro-communities or mini-societies has emerged inside the urban core. At the same time in the emerging common space, the mode of communication, the characteristics and identities of the participants are confronted with their limits, modified, troubled and, even ephemerally, they are pursued to be transformed. Thus the process of setting up the common space is based on the multitude of solidarity gestures, the emotional, communicative, cultural and aesthetic interactions, which seeks to overcome the bipolar contrasts of native-immigrant, young-old, worker-unemployed, male-female, gay-straight, Greek speakers-Arabic speakers and so forth. In doing so, it constitutes intermediate and hybrid commoning social relations and modes of communication, through which the communities of the common space are formed. Consequently, I argue that the study of the Athenian refugees' occupied buildings pushes the boundaries of the symbolic, material and social meanings of the common space.

Secondly, the refugee housing commons enrich the concept of the common space with the plethora of the human rights, which are interdependent, indivisible and interrelated and are included in the right to the city. My research shows that the violation or restriction of the refugees' right to the city and to housing, like the State-run camps, may affect the enjoyment of a wide range of other human rights. Access to adequate housing, can be a precondition for the enjoyment the rights to work, health, social security, privacy, transportation, sexual orientation or education. At the same time, improving housing conditions and protecting against forced evictions are often dependent on claims made by those affected. Where the rights to freedom of expression, assembly or association are not respected, the possibility for individuals and communities to advocate better living conditions is significantly reduced. Equally, activists and refugee rights defenders working to protect the right of refugees to housing and to the city have been subjected to violence and arbitrary arrest. All in all the right to housing does not just mean that the structure of the house itself must be adequate. There must also be sustainable and non-discriminatory access to facilities essential for health, security, comfort and nutrition as well as freedom of expression, assembly, or association. My research on the Athenian case study reveals that the self-organized and occupied refugee common spaces could much better fulfill the above needs rather than the State-run camps.

Thirdly, as I have mentioned although there is a vast literature (Bulley, 2014; Gabiam, 2012; Ihlen et al., 2015; Mountz et al., 2013; Reimann, 2006) on social philanthropy, humanitarianism, NGOs' activities and State immigration policies, there have been few attempts to research the newcomers' self-organized actions that produce housing common spaces. My research shows that the refugee squats are self-organized common spaces of immigrants and refugees by themselves for themselves and this is why they are hit directly by the State authorities, which prefer to enclose refugees in the outskirts of the city in police

controlled camps. Moreover my research enriches the recent literature on the urban solidarity spaces and urban social movements (Arampatzi, 2016; Kapsali and Tsavdaroglou, 2016; Leontidou, 2012; Stavrides, 2016), which have the ability to destabilize State-led policies, upsetting dominant taxonomies of urban spaces and to provide emancipatory spaces and institutions of expanding commoning.

Finally, I want to emphasize how refugees' commoning practices of squatting are not necessarily related only to housing needs and personal space; they are also associated with the (re)claim of right to the city, i.e. the right to the multiple aspects of the everyday life, like the public and political sphere, the social and cultural relations or even the space of imagination and representation. Hence the idea behind the squatting common spaces is not just to provide shelter but also to provide tools for the refugees to help manage their own lives. The overarching aim is to help the newcomers regain their humanity by escaping social marginalization and creating new social bonds. By actively participating in decision-making and everyday commoning tasks regarding the place where they live, migrants and refugees develop avenues to take part in the social and political life of the city.

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