Making Home(s) in Displacement

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CHAPTER 11

Mediating between Formality and Informality

Refugee Housing as City-Making Activity in Refugee Crisis Athens

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Re-thinking urban informality

A place of just over 130,000 inhabitants at the end of the 19th Century (Biris, 1966, p. 246), Athens expanded in size and took the form of a modern European city in the interwar period and was densely built after World War II (WWII). It is very often described as a “modern” city due to the apparent formal similarities of its typical buildings to the modern architecture of the early 20th Century: re-inforced concrete frames, white façades, horizontal openings and flat roofs. Yet, this building activity of the first half of the 20th Century carries within it a wide variety of informal actions such that the city could equally be described as an “un-planned” city. None of the masterplans composed since the constitution of the Greek state and the transfer of the Greek capital to Athens in 1834 was fully implemented, and it appears that the citizens have intervened to a great extent in all stages of planning by supporting, resisting or ignoring state decisions (Bastea, 2000, p. 5). In the introduction to the Greek translation of his book Modern Architecture: A Critical History, Kenneth Frampton (2009) describes Athens as a modern city “par excellence”, focusing on the extent to which the language of modernism was appropriated in the city both formally and programmatically in the 20th Century and manifested itself through the city’s urban growth. This manifestation of the modern, argues Frampton, owes itself to the endless repetition and widespread of the – individually – uninteresting typical multiple-dwelling building, the polykatoikia (p. 14). Continuing a very long tradition of “architecture without architects” (ibid., p. 15) in pre-modern Greece, the city
has taken its shape not from the vision of a single architect, but instead from the spontaneous and almost autonomous expression of a popular culture.\textsuperscript{2}

Ioanna Theocharopoulou (2017) situates urban informality in Athens within the wider social, cultural and economic context of 19\textsuperscript{th} Century Greece. She understands informal activity as an expression of Greek culture that has prompted the modernisation and the urbanisation of Athens, and has enabled small-scale developers and builders, but also non-professionals (such as “housewives”), to take agency in them. Informality is traced in the longstanding divide between the “East and the West” that characterised Greek society in the years after independence – though it may be argued that features of this can still be identified today. The East was reflected in the popular culture that linked to the local Mediterranean traditions and the region’s Ottoman past, whereas the West referred to an “educated elite” that made its appearance in the newly constructed state and promoted a rational, ordered and central management of the city and the country in a more general sense. These fundamental class distinctions were, as elsewhere in Europe, supported and extended by access to higher education. This produced “European style professionals”, architects and planners (who would then populate the ruling institutions and the private sector), on the one hand, and a large body of on-site, self-taught builders who would “continue to rely on orally transmitted, craft-based trade education” (Theocharopoulou, 2017, p. 60), on the other, very often in direct conflict with each other. Planning was also imported from the West, hence the endless problems in the implementation of any master plan ever composed (Bastea, 2000, p. 44). As Greece progressed into the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, the discrepancies between the popular and the elite, the private and the public, the formal and the informal never ceased to exist and played out in the rapid urbanisation of Athens post-war (Fig. 1.).

\textbf{Figure 1.} Athens, Gyzı, photo by Yiorgis Yerolympos.
The concept of *urban informality* is traditionally understood as a “state of exception from the formal order of urbanisation” (Roy, 2005, p. 147) and therefore linked to the urbanisation of the developing world, the spread of slums and squatter settlements in the global south (Davis, 2006), the enforced transfer of underprivileged urban residents to peri-urban areas and to conditions of extreme poverty and precarity. However, the dichotomy between the formal and the informal has increasingly been contested in recent times. Urban informality is regarded as a form of urbanisation by itself and as a system of norms that drive urban transformation and connect different forms of economies and spaces to one another (Roy, 2005, p. 148). Then the formal and the informal are both at play in the theorisation of the contemporary city; in effect, it is the intersection of the two that creates tensions between capital and identity (Gaffkin et al., 2011, p. 309). This intersection also allows for more forms of agency to arise: when small-scale developers and builders, permanent and temporary residents take part in shaping their environment, new visions about the city can emerge. If formality and informality are both considered as forms of practice in a complex, multiple, contingent and ever-changing interrelationship (McFarlane, 2012, p. 103), they can also challenge the established classifications, leading to new understandings and alternative productions of urban space.

This chapter mediates between the formal and informal practices that have shaped contemporary Athens. It juxtaposes two very different approaches to housing for refugees – one pre-1945 and a recent one – and examines the relationship between architecture and the city that each one represents. Built between 1934 and 1935, the *Alexandras Avenue refugee building complex (prosfygika)* is a housing project designed to respond to the massive population exchange between Greece and Turkey in and after 1922. The complex proposed a model of housing for refugees that materialised the objectives of the Modern Movement. It was built to set a precedent for the future development of social housing during the rapid urbanisation of Athens and other urban areas in Greece in the coming decades, and to respond to the imminent commercialisation of housing (Stavrides, 2007). The example was never widely followed, however, and eventually the complex itself fell into a state of disrepair. *City Plaza*, conversely, was a squatted former hotel in Athens’ city centre which housed an average of 350 refugees per day during the 39 months of its operation from April 2016 to June 2019 in response to the European refugee crisis. The occupied building operated as a cooperative and stood against the formal refugee camps system that has been set up in Greece, and that continues to run at the time of writing, under appalling conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Donaldio, 2019; Kitsantonis, 2019). Between the top-down practice of the *prosfygika* that reflects the social system Greece once sought to develop (but never fully accomplished) and the
bottom-up structure of City Plaza, which demonstrates the potential of Athens’ much-contested urban informality, this chapter looks at the architecture of the displaced as a city-making activity, which not only makes space for emergency situations but also tests alternative forms of living and working together even in challenging contexts and at the intersections of crises. It focuses on key representations of both housing projects (photographic representation of the prosfygika and online and photographic representation of City Plaza) which, combined with archival research, become drivers to unpack two contradictory visions of Athens.

**Prosfygika**

In 1922 a failed Greek Army expedition into Asia Minor that aimed at liberating the Greek-origin population living in Turkey led to what in Greece is commonly referred to as the “Asia Minor Disaster”, that is, the destruction of Smyrna and the massacre of its Greek and Armenian residents. Following this, a treaty was signed (Lausanne, July 1923) which set out a compulsory, large-scale population exchange and resulted in the relocation of 1,200,000 Turkish nationals of Greek origin (and of the Greek Orthodox religion) from Turkey’s Aegean coast to Greece,\(^3\) except for those living in Istanbul, as well as 355,000 Greek nationals (of Muslim religion) from Greece to Turkey (Motta, 2013, p. 365), except for those living in Thrace.

Although the incoming people were of Greek Christian origin and they were granted Greek citizenship upon their arrival (and vice versa), it is important to highlight that this was by no means a repatriation for either group. Asia Minor has hosted Hellenic settlements since antiquity. For the Orthodox Christians, therefore, the exchange was received as a “harsh exile” (Hirschon, 2008, p. 8) and a displacement. For many decades these people were regarded and referred to as refugees and as “mikrasiates” (meaning coming from Asia Minor), which emphasised their cultural differences. Native Greeks depicted them as “Orientals” and attached several stereotypes to them (Gatrell, 2013, p. 67). This was evident in the terminology used by both official agencies (Refugee Relief Fund, Refugee Settlement Commission), local politicians, and less formal references, such as newspaper articles (Gatrell, 2013, p. 64), as well as in the popular place names, many of which are still in use today. The very name of the housing project examined here, *prosfygika* (adjective), means “of refugees” in Greek.

The Greek State’s intentions were to keep about half of the refugees around the cities so as to integrate them into the local economy (Stavrides, 2007).\(^4\) Greece was in the middle of a significant financial crisis and in a disorganised state (Biris, 1966, p. 247), lacking both order and social policy. Therefore, the influx
of refugees into the country was seen as an opportunity: as low-paid workers in abundance, they would contribute to the development of Greek industry, which was still in its early stages. With most of the industrial production concentrated around the main urban areas of the country, 643,025 people (53 per cent of the total influx) were distributed throughout those city centres and this prompted their further urbanisation (Vlachos et al., 1978, p. 117). Athens, in particular, as the main commercial centre and the place where state decisions were made, offered fertile ground for an extensive manufacturing and industrial zone. Its adjacent Piraeus (the harbour) also offered a prime location for industrial growth. In this context, Athens, a place of 300,000 inhabitants, received 129,380 refugees (a population increase of 40 per cent) and Piraeus received another 101,185 refugees, which increased its population by 74 per cent (Polyzos, 1973, p. 80).

These 129,380 refugees arrived in Athens distressed and deprived of most of their belongings. Without much infrastructure to receive them, the refugees were initially accommodated in every possible public building such as schools, churches and railway stations, and eventually they built informal settlements in the periphery of the city using salvaged insubstantial materials. Architectural historian Kostas Biris describes the Athens of 1925 as a filthy, disordered and crowded space to such an extent that the municipality itself built market stalls all around the central market square to accommodate the refugees’ commer-
cial activities (1966, pp. 291-2). A photo from September 1923 (Fig. 2.) becomes emblematic of that period: it shows the municipal theatre of Athens, a neoclassic building designed by Ernst Ziller (completed in 1888) and housing 150 refugee families on its balconies. The temporary residents have raised impromptu curtains to create privacy, while trunks – presumably carrying their few belongings – can be seen piled up everywhere.

Although in 1923 Greece received funds from England and the US to set up the Committee for the Rehabilitation of the Refugees and significant additional support from the League of Nations, it was not until ten years later that these funds were used to clear out the informal settlements and to develop social housing in order to re-house the refugees. Between 1923 and 1930 the efforts and funds of a number of public agencies and committees that were established to deal with the pressing conditions concentrated their immediate reaction to the crisis initially on providing tents and temporary shelters, and later on funding the construction of residential buildings, yet in an equally unplanned manner, which focused on quickly providing shelter rather than a thought-through and designed response. Vlachos et al. (1978) argue that there was no research or any careful consideration of the building process, which resulted in Athens’ uncontrolled and undesigned expansion and its monstrous appearance (p. 118).

From 1930 onwards, however, the government of Eleftherios Venizelos began to develop a political agenda with a particular focus on social care, in which the accommodation of the refugees and the clearing of the city from the informal temporary shelters played a central role (Vlachos et al., 1978, p. 118). The prosfygika was built in Alexandras Avenue in this context between 1934 and 1935 to provide an alternative model of housing against the incubating commercialisation of residential development in Greece at the time (Stavrides, 2007). Indeed, the privately-funded medium-scale multi-storey residential buildings that Frampton wrote about had already begun to emerge and would predominate in the city after WWII. The complex was designed by architects Kimon Laskaris (1905-1978) and Dimitrios Kyriakos (1881-1971), appointed by the Technical Department of the Ministry of Welfare, which had been founded in pursuit of a more organised response to the refugee housing crisis. Kyriakos had significant experience in designing public and infrastructural projects in Greece, while Laskaris had just returned to Greece from Paris, where he had worked in Le Corbusier’s office. In a rational layout, the housing developed in eight blocks consisting of a total of 228 apartments of two types and reflected the objectives of the Modern Movement as expressed at the 4th International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM), which had arrived in Athens in August 1933: set at a distance from each other to ensure adequate exposure to sunlight, the blocks were uniform and featured no decoration or any other formal or stylis-
tic concessions in an attempt to impose order on an otherwise unorderly and chaotic city (Fig. 3). The refugee housing prompted research on mass housing and the development of the minimal dwelling that would accommodate the low-income urban resident in a more general sense (Herscher, 2017, p. 64). Testing the minimum essential housing standards, the apartments were of 30.2 or 34.8 square metres and consisted of two rooms, a kitchen and a toilet (Stavrides, 2007). A stairwell would service two apartments per floor. The apartments ran the width of the building and featured a balcony offering outdoor space. Built at the time at the edge of the city centre, the complex marked the city’s potential extensions and expressions. Pristine and unpretentious, modern and efficient, it was designed as an example to follow and as an opportunity to impose order and to control the impending urbanisation of Athens (Fig. 4.).

Although a number of such complexes were constructed in Athens to respond to the Asia Minor crisis (Vlachos et al., 1978, pp. 120-124), such housing prototypes were never assimilated into the life or the morphology of the city. For alongside these housing schemes, in the 1920s and 1930s, privately funded multi-storey residential buildings made their appearance, also referring to the Western European modernist examples of the time and accommodating the wealthy urban classes. In its smaller scale and following the street block patterns (as opposed to the prosygika, which implemented a totally different urban figure), the polykatoikia was endlessly imitated and reproduced after WWII to give Athens its very unique appearance. The polykatoikias attracted the higher classes by presenting them with yet an extra level of technological comforts (such as central heating

Figure 3. Prosygika, aerial view; image sourced from Google Earth and adapted by author.
and elevators) and, most generally, a modern lifestyle. The modest and economical prosfygika, conversely, represented the poor and pitiful living conditions of refugees, who continued to be regarded as “others” in the city (Theocharopoulou, 2017, p. 71; Stavrides 2007). Mass housing – and perhaps the fact that its design had not taken into account the refugees’ former lifestyle and their abrupt transition to urban contexts⁵ – brought with it memories of a sad past and came to symbolise the crisis itself, whereas polykatoikias promised a bright future.

Post-war, the privately-funded polykatoikia transformed into a scheme that would accommodate the middle and even the lower classes, and eventually they composed a dense and increasingly chaotic environment around the prosfygika. New forms of legislation also played an important role in this development. Since 1929, the Law of Horizontal Ownership has allowed the ownership by individuals of a floor (in full or in part) of a multi-storey building and therefore partial ownership of the underlying plot. To this, a “part-exchange” (anti-paroche) system was established, which allowed a small plot-owner to turn their land over to a developer in exchange for a few new modern apartments in the final built volume. The two schemes together boosted construction and gave the opportunity, on the one hand, to small and medium scale developers to avoid (partly or entirely) the involvement of banks and other funding institutions and, on the other, to owners of old and badly-maintained properties to renew their housing

Figure 4. Prosfygika: ‘view of the residential building complex constructed for the housing of refugees in Alexandras Avenue,’ 1936, Archive of E.R.T., A. E, Petros Poulidis collection.
and profit from it. Theocharopoulou (2017, p. 142) and Vaiou (2002, pp. 219-220) argue that this informal financing structure facilitated greater class mobility as well as assisting the shift from the rural to the urban and the movement of the population to the city centre. This system, in its scale and operation, has not changed significantly to this day, making the construction industry a key factor in activating (or slowing down in times of crisis) the Greek economy.

In December 1944 the prosfygika actively participated in the city’s recent history, with its residents forming a solidarity network around the adjacent prisons during the German occupation and the buildings being attacked during the so-called “Battle of Athens”, which was a predecessor to the Greek civil war (Stavrides, 2007); however, the project was never seen as an example to be followed. Since the 1960s, the complex has become the site of a long dispute between successive governments and local activists, with the former proposing its demolition and its transformation into a public park and the latter, joined by the local community, protesting for its protection. Eventually it fell into decay (Fig. 5.), providing accommodation – apart from a small number of activists who fought for their preservation – to several marginal subjectivities such as drug addicts and immigrants without papers. In an attempt to efface both the buildings and their occupiers from the image of the city, during the Athens 2004 Olympics, and at a time when Athens had to present an image of glory and cleanliness throughout, the front block was entirely covered by a screen featuring an image of the Acropolis (Fig. 6.). In another attempt to clear out its “otherness” from Alexandras Avenue by means of political privatisation, in the context
of the recent financial crisis, the complex was included in the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund. In 2003, the two front buildings were declared listed by the Greek Ministry of Culture as representative examples of social housing (Greek Government, 2003), and, in 2009, the entire complex was declared listed. In its latter decision the Ministry recognised the complex’s social and historical significance in the integration of the refugees from Asia Minor in the productive and social life of the city as well its key role in the urban history of Athens as one of the few examples of modernist social housing in the interwar period (Greek Government, 2009). Although today the Municipality of Athens has plans to restore the buildings and use them for contemporary social housing, no budget ever became available, and so they stand today taken over by time and roughly repaired by makeshift constructions and salvaged materials.

City Plaza

At the extension of Alexandras Avenue, a couple of kilometres to the west, in Victoria Square City Plaza takes the form of a typical polykatoikia built in the 1970s (Fig. 7.). City Plaza was a hotel that ceased operation in 2010 due to the financial recession, and had remained empty since then, alongside other retail, residential and hospitality-related buildings in the city centre. In April 2016, shortly after the agreement between the EU and Turkey that trapped thousands of refugees between Turkey and Greece (March 2016), Solidarity Initiative for Economic and Political Refugees, a leftist activist group, occupied the hotel’s empty building, re-connected the utilities and set up community-based refugee accommodation as a response to the European refugee crisis, which had begun in early 2015 (Fig. 8.). Similar movements that actively opposed Europe’s formal migration politics and the power relations connected to them had emerged in many European cities at the time; among others, in Brussels, Rome and Berlin squats offered communal living to refugees as an alternative to the official camps system. In its local context, City Plaza also participated in a network of occupied spaces in Athens (Coordination of Refugee Squats) which aimed to accommodate the increasing number of asylum seekers who arrived in Athens from the Greek islands.

In the 39 months of its operation, from April 2016 to July 2019, City Plaza gave space to more than 2,500 refugees from 13 different countries (City Plaza, 2019) until their documentation was complete and they were allowed to continue on their way further into Europe. The building operated in the form of a cooperative, with refugees and solidarity activists living together and participating in both the decision-making and its basic maintenance. About 100 of the 126 rooms of the hotel hosted an average of 350 refugees at any time.
(among them an average of 120 children), while the remaining 26 functioned as communal or other support spaces, as storage, and to accommodate volunteers who visited the site (City Plaza, 2019). Volunteers also contributed to the medical and administration needs of the squat and organised Greek, English and German classes. City Plaza did not use any state or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) funding, but ran only on individuals’ donations – with fundraising campaigns active in Greece and in Germany – and on items and products donated either by local merchants or people residing in the wider area. Its operation critiqued the inhumane and appalling living conditions in the formally organised refugee camps in Greece, as well as their seclusion from the urban centres. City Plaza, conversely, aimed to integrate the refugees into the city centre of Athens and promote their living within the larger community. For as long as their families stayed in the hotel, the children were enrolled in the
local schools and were further integrated into the local community. In response to increased pressure from the newly elected conservative government via the Greek police towards the vacation of a number of squats in Athens, in July 2019 the collective decided to hand the building to the hotel’s former employees, to whom all the mobile equipment of the building belonged according to a court order that had followed from the hotel’s bankruptcy (Fig. 9.).

Throughout its operation, City Plaza maintained an active, albeit with very low means, online presence which communicated and complemented its physical action in the city. It maintained a simply made webpage, entitled “the best hotel in Europe”, which advertised its fundraisers in English and in German, and a blog which publicised its needs and actions. Facebook and Twitter kept it connected to its supporters as well as to its networks in the context of which it organised events and protests. Currently, the blog and Facebook page both document City Plaza’s daily life and its broader scope until the closure, in the form of an uncurated archive. The webpage hosts the collective’s report on the 39 months of its operation and its political position. In its statement, it describes its twofold objective: to provide migrants with appropriate housing in the city centre of Athens and in collaboration with the locals, and to create a political hub of struggle for migrants and locals together (City Plaza, 2019).

The intersection with the city and the integration of refugees in its everyday structure was crucial in this operation, yet this integration did not come without further challenges. As mentioned, the empty hotel was not the first occupied building in Athens that was put to the service of the refugee crisis at the time; however, it is one of very few that were located outside Exarcheia, a highly political neighbourhood known for its anti-authoritarian character and its strong sense of community, whose residents always stood in solidarity to those in need and particularly to minorities, migrants and refugees. Although only a few blocks to the West, Victoria Square, where City Plaza is located, and its neighbouring districts present a more complex background. This part of the city once constituted a middle-class residential district densely and chaotically built in
polykatoikias in the 1950s via the part-exchange system described above and as Athens expanded to the north. In the decades to come, many of these residents moved towards the suburbs and they were progressively replaced by immigrant populations who arrived in Athens during the 1990s, mainly from the Balkans. After 2000, the growth of the immigrant population (of increasingly diversified backgrounds, due to the recent refugee crises in the Middle East and Africa) and its presence in the city’s public spaces, in combination with the declining social conditions of the remaining older residents in the context of the economic recession, have led to the development of aggressive, xenophobic and nationalist behaviours. This has provided fertile ground for the growing popularity of Golden Dawn, a neo-Nazi political party which comes after a long tradition of fascist organisations in post-war Greece and which has re-emerged both in the politics and in the streets of Athens and other urban areas in the country (Dalakoglou, 2012 & 2013, Doxiadis & Matsaganis, 2012, Kandylis & Kavoulakos, 2011, Psarras, 2012). Between 2012 and 2019, the party also enjoyed significant parliamentary representation. During this period Golden Dawn kept an active and visible presence in the streets of the city centre, often claiming territorial control over space in specific neighbourhoods (Kandylis, 2013, p. 274). It developed a social programme to support only the ethnic Greek population (organising food banks and soup kitchens) and even offered them protection (Doxiadis & Matsaganis, 2012, p. 34), often acting as if it could replace the authorities by checking the papers of immigrants and claiming to clear urban areas of immigrant crime.

In this context, migrants, among other vulnerable groups, became increasingly absent from the public spaces of the city during the crisis (Vaiou & Kalandides, 2016, p. 460). Then, the refugees’ mere existence in the City Plaza and at the city centre did not automatically provide access to the public sphere, especially due to their close proximity to hubs of xenophobia and racism. The hotel’s presence in both physical and digital terms – as a building block in the city and through its updates on social media – suggested instead a play between visibility and invisibility. It was the visibility of its action that kept attracting popularity, volunteers and funds, especially when it was under constant threat of eviction by the hotel’s owner. The videos regularly posted on City Plaza’s Facebook page give us positive glimpses of the residents’ lives both inside and outside the building, from the private rooms to the communal areas and to the clinic, to the street, the park and the square, in an attempt to prompt public dialogue and a sense of solidarity. One of them, aiming at celebrating the hotel’s two years of occupation, tells the story of the space by following a little girl who lives there in and out of the rooms until she picks up her backpack and departs for school. On another one, the children of City Plaza describe how a crowdfunding campaign was set up to buy bicycles for them, how they organ-
ised a bicycle workshop, and how they used to go cycling in the Pedion Areos Park nearby. This very visibility, however, could also put the refugees in peril as it engendered exposure in the highly contested neighbourhood they were situated in; therefore, City Plaza operated at constant vigilance, with residents taking shifts in looking after the security of the place and making sure that the residents were not exposed to any form of danger. By creating a safe, protected environment for its inhabitants, it was then able to open up to the public and to invite the city to take part in its happenings, from street parties and communal meals to taking to the streets and protesting against the politics of the refugee crisis and against the unliveable conditions of the refugee camps in Greece and elsewhere. Through the highly defended visibility of their actions and everyday activity they established a network of reclaimed and public sites that opposed xenophobic and racist behaviours and instigated new readings of the contemporary city. The adjacent alley, where the street parties were held, the Areos Park, where the kids rode their bicycles, the streets where the protests against the migrational politics took place, as well as the hotel’s communal kitchen, the restaurant that had been turned into a communal living room and the room that had been transformed into a classroom together bring a “geography of publicity” (Staeheli et al., 2009, p. 647) in which people claim their right to take part in the public realm. By occupying a pocket of space at the intersection of many conflicting situations, City Plaza became a tool to reveal exclusion, discrimination and inequality; to re-think established concepts and practices; and to expose the diverse realities and unexplored worlds that underpin them.

**Making space within informality**

The integration of refugees in the communities that receive them may have been a consideration when the *prosfygika* was constructed, but this is certainly not a priority in the way the refugee crisis has officially been handled in recent times. In his book *Displacements: Architecture and Refugee*, Andrew Herscher (2017) argues that the refugee as a political subject and a political community has hardly ever been registered in architectural history and, by extension, in the social reproduction of architecture (p. 3). Following the current of global politics, argues Herscher, architectural history has always treated refugees as human surplus and as people out of place upon whom the exclusions of the nation state apply. When the state foresees the refugees as part of its labour force, then the architecture for refugees focuses on cities and their integration in them; when the state aims to incorporate the refugees in its citizenry, architecture focuses on housing programmes; whereas when the state cannot envisage refugees either
as workers or as citizens, then architecture takes the form of the camp, set away from the city and without any interaction with it (Herscher, 2017, p. 8).

Indeed, the first two cases outline the rationale behind the development of the *prosfygika*: although the refugees that it was made for were not integrated in the social and economic life of Athens for many decades, they were envisaged as an opportunity for the development of Greek industry. Then, indirectly, coming from a Greek Christian background, they were also part of a project of homogenisation of the population and therefore they contributed to the formation of the Greek nation-state as a new political community (Gatrell, 2013, p. 80). Conversely, it seems that today the architecture of displacement has been shaped by those who cannot fit into the scheme of nationalities (Gatrell, 2013, p. 53), conceived both as political entities and as systems of representation (Hall, 1992, p. 292). This shift away from the city and from housing solutions to the camp in recent years (Herscher’s third case) has accompanied the full political and spatial exclusion of refugees and their constitution as the “rightless” (Arendt, 1958, p. 281). This has led to the construction of the refugee crisis and even the process of asylum – fundamentally a political issue – as a humanitarian problem and, therefore, as a condition that is temporary and can be resolved by temporary solutions, epitomised by the state-instituted refugee camps. Against this never ending temporality and isolation, City Plaza has attempted an active engagement of the refugees with the city and its infrastructures despite the difficulties this entailed within Athens in crisis.

The two approaches to housing for refugees, as outlined by the *prosfygika* complex and the City Plaza, reflect the positions the buildings hold within their respective urban contexts. Built at what was at the time the edge of the city, the *prosfygika* aimed at framing and shaping the city’s future extensions. Like the intention to unmix the Greek and Turkish populations via the population exchange, the complex represented a top-down effort at urban purity and order. They were to formulate a new, precise, formal system to organise the built and the unbuilt in the city, as well as urban living itself. However, Athens has expanded through the *polykatoikias* which, despite their formal and material similarities to the modern movement, do not share its political and aesthetic considerations; as such, they have not been able to manifest this radical break from Greece’s past and traditions. Biris (1966) argues that the Bauhaus was largely misinterpreted and reduced to a style in Athens (p. 310), while Bastea (2017) writes that “it lacked innovation and precision and shunned any effort towards standardisation […] instead, it relied on a quasi-craft process of construction” (p. 121). Continuing pre-war traditions and conceptions, the *polykatoikia* was easily assimilated in the Athenian lifestyle and culture, yet it failed to become an object of innovation. It is in this anarchic building culture that “modern” Athens was con-
structured, and *polykatoikias* tightly surrounded any ambitious attempt at social housing and through that any vision towards an organised urban environment.

Then the city was built from the micro to the macro (i.e. the micro-developer, the micro-owner, the self-funded) and it became a place where decisions at the larger scale were never fully implemented, to take the form of the chaotic and overbuilt environment we encounter today. City Plaza nested within this very same disorderly environment. It occupied an empty building in Athens that was made available by the financial crisis. It stood for long in separation and vigilance, surrounded by centres of xenophobia and racism. Yet through this “crack” its residents promoted new conditions of belonging to the city and they contributed to shaping a political life beyond nation-state citizenship and national identity (Fig. 10.). They set up a communal life in progress, and by that they tested the boundaries of the city and how people can live and work together. But it is perhaps this culture of the “micro”, often identified as counter-productive and responsible for the informal development of the city, which allows such gaps within the urban fabric to exist and to give space to other forms of habituation. Indeed, the innumerable ground-level humanitarian initiatives that took place in Athens during both the financial and the refugee crises, from food banks and social health clinics to emergency shelters and the provision of legal support to those in need, support this proposition. Athens’ much-contested urban informality seems to bring more agents (and more spaces) into the process of city-making – and perhaps also disagreement and conflict – but along with that a greater degree of adaptability and resilience, and tests unexpected cohabitations such as the one brought about by City Plaza in Victoria Square. As cities today strive to become inclusive, to absorb immigration, to protect health as a shared value, to become sustainable, City Plaza, as a temporal urban experiment, represents a city shaped by its occupants and in an incessant process of transformation.

![Figure 10. Street party outside City Plaza, 8 April 2018; photo taken by City Plaza.](image-url)
Notes

1. See also examples of pre-modern Greek vernacular architecture included in Bernard Rudofsky’s (1987) MoMA exhibition “Architecture without Architects”.

2. Dimitris Philippidis argues that the ‘modern’ was adopted in a superficial manner (in relation to the buildings’ external appearance as well as to the choice of modern interior equipment) in 20th century Greece and was not supported by a respective advancement of building technologies of the time as elsewhere in Europe. Therefore, it was reduced to a fashionable style, and as such it was re-appropriated by local designers and builders (Philippidis, 1978, p. 106).


4. Besides, a considerable number of them were of urban origin (Vaiou, 2002, p. 214).

5. In Vlachos et al. (1978), Yannitsaris & Hadjikostas argue that not all of them were prepared for such a form of “urban living”, which meant living in close proximity to each other and with limited space for social interaction; therefore, they began to occupy the open spaces between the blocks for various communal activities (pp. 119-120).

6. Based on their individual capacities and interests, the residents prepared the meals, they cleaned the premises, they worked in shifts for the security of the building on a 24/7 basis, they were responsible for the childcare, and they ran creative and educational activities.


8. 21 seats with 6.97 per cent of the total votes in the national elections of May 2012 (Greek Ministry of Interior Affairs, 2012), 8 seats and 6.99 per cent in the national elections of September 2015 (Greek Ministry of Interior Affairs, 2015) and no seats and 2.93 per cent in the national elections of July 2019 (Greek Ministry of Interior Affairs, 2019).

9. Indeed, there have been instances where the Golden Dawn have been supported by the police as the much higher than average percentage of votes by policemen in the national elections indicates (Elafros, 2015).

10. The district of Aghios Panteleimon, located only a few blocks away from Victoria Square, was central in Golden Dawn’s operations. In January 2009, a so-called ‘residents’ committee’ decreed that a playground in the neighbourhood’s central square should close so that migrant children – and consequently every child in the area – would be unable to use it. The large blue slogan on the pavement of the square that was painted at that time read “foreigners leave Greece” and this led to the space becoming a centre of conflict between anti-fascist groups, who often broke in to make the playground accessible, and Golden Dawn supporters, who re-made the playground’s fencing even stronger. Actions such as this, together with many other op-
pressions that were less visible, have shaped the life of the public spaces surrounding City Plaza in recent years (Antonopoulou, 2018; Kandylis & Kavoulakos, 2011).


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