

***Housing refugees in Athens before City Plaza: the case study of the abandoned houses in the southern neighborhoods of Nea Smyrni and Asyrmatos, squatted by Kurdish refugees (1999-2003) and some parallels with the squatted housing for refugees today***

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The banner announces another squat in Methonis Str. in Exarchia. (Photo taken in June 2016)

I am happy to be here today anticipating an interesting discussion on the most central and urgent matter of this Biennale: the so-called “migratory crisis” and more specifically the new conditions that arise in European cities from the arrival of migrants/refugees.

Right now, in Exarchia, the most politicized neighborhood in the center of Athens, where I live, every day brings news about another squat in one of the numerous abandoned houses that will house refugees and activists alike, the latter often of Western and Central-European origin. It’s safe to say that a different landscape is being formed within a city where until very recently housing squats were rare, especially when involving refugees.

And yet there is a precedent and I plan to talk about it today. In doing so I will draw from my experience as a member of an NGO, the now defunct *Voluntary Work of Athens*, back in the late ‘90s, when I met with Kurdish refugees who had squatted empty and abandoned houses in the southern neighborhoods of Asyrmatos and Nea Smyrni (where I lived at the time).

In the beginning of the '90s Greece had already met with the massive influx of Albanian "economy refugees" who dispersed all over the country taking every unclaimed hard job in agriculture and construction business. The Albanians, predominantly young males, didn't squat but managed to assimilate and towards the end of the decade to bring their families and benefit from the new legislation procedure.

Tracing the route the Kurdish refugees followed at the time in order to settle in the low-income area of Asyrmatos and its affluent neighbor of Nea Smyrni (1), is revealing.

But, where did this route begin and in which political context?

Since the mid '90s there have been Kurdish refugees, mostly from Iraq, predominantly young men, at the camps of Ayios Andreas and Palaia Penteli, 35 km and 20 km respectively north of Athens, living in bad conditions, invisible to the city except for the comparatively few immediate neighbors who protested sporadically against their presence but also helped materially somehow.

As you may not know Greece maintained for many years an ambiguous, to say the least, policy towards migrants and refugees. So as a result, with the exception of one formal reception center in Lavrio, some 60 km south from Athens, the aforementioned camps were tolerated but not acknowledged. Even to PASOK, the social democratic ruling party, that had expressed solidarity with the Kurdish struggle for freedom, the camps were eventually an embarrassment and were closed or under-operating starting from 1998. A growing number of these now homeless refugees came to the center of Athens and squatted Koumoundourou Sq. near the City Hall where a municipal soup-kitchen was operating.

All of a sudden the refugees became visible and their camp a must-visit attraction for the locals before heading to Psyri, a nearby old neighborhood under gentrification, and center of the booming "leisure industry" at the time of the pre-Olympic euphoria. Surely there were many organizations and volunteers who helped in many ways but as the Christmas season of 1998 was approaching it became obvious that a police sweeping operation was to be expected.

At this point I can't help but recall the Syrian families who squatted Syntagma Sq. on Nov. 2014, highlighted the Syrian drama and were removed by mid December just in time for the festive season to kick off.

So in the beginning of 1999 the Kurds moved from the center of the city to somehow less conspicuous areas. Asyrmatos is near Dafni, also a low-income neighborhood where since the '70s Asian migrants have found affordable housing. Both areas, as well as the upper part of Nea Smyrni that adjoins them, were at the time characterized by small, therefore not-worthy-to-develop plots, with architecturally insignificant houses up to two floors, most of them quite old and neglected – and often empty.

In the beginning some twenty Kurds squatted the abandoned containers that were in the empty building plot adjacent to a school complex in Asyrmatos. The plot was owned by the state-owned OSK (School Buildings Organization) and despite the constant demands of the residents, instead of hosting a much needed new school, had become a

construction debris and garbage site. Soon the number of the refugees was approaching two hundred and the local papers were on fire reporting complaints: the refugees allegedly spread disease, scared school children and harassed young girls.

When the residents started blocking the street in front of the makeshift camp it was time for the 3 involved mayors (of Dafni, Nea Smyrni and Ayios Dimitrios where Asyrmatos belonged to) to cooperate with the Deputy Minister of Public Order.

Miraculously at the same time OSK announced the construction of the school complex that had been claimed for twenty years. In the beginning of 2000 the excavations for the new buildings began while the refugees were still on the premises. In the end the camp was dismantled when the riot police was called and the refugees left without protest to disperse over the wider area.

Since 1999 the Social Services of the Municipality of Nea Smyrni were trying to locate the owners of the abandoned houses that the refugees had already started to squat, in order to rent them. The VWA worked with the only social worker of the local KAPE (Open Centers for the Protection of Senior Citizens) in order to compile a catalogue of the abandoned houses and organized weekly visits. Usually the visiting team consisted of a social worker, a health worker (both employed by the VWA), one or two volunteer members and an immigrant translator (also a volunteer). The idea was to meet with the refugees, write down their problems and facilitate their interaction with the neighborhood. Generally neighbors were tolerant with some of them even volunteering to share electricity, bring clothes or food. There have been a few violent incidents mostly with Albanians who were by then the established majority among the immigrants.

The refugees were usually open and eager to make contact with our teams although they lived in very bad conditions, crammed up from 8 to 22 people in 3 rooms and with very little money since only 4 or 5, who could find heavy and unskilled work, supported the rest. The most common problem was sanitation because the houses were used as collective dumpsters particularly for bulky items, before the refugees came. Social Services reconnected the water, provided the houses with cleaning supplies and removed the garbage, something critical, mostly during the hot summer months. Almost everybody was suffering from skin diseases while those with chronic health problems were referred to the Doctors of the World, usually accompanied by a volunteer or translator.

In reality though the biggest frustration among refugees was being stuck in Greece and not being able to continue their travel to Western Europe. As long as they couldn't obtain residence permits they would remain marginalized and at the mercy of police in the event of identification, also at the hands of their employers.

Our teams were trying to assist in many practical ways but after all there were few things we could do and often the feeling of inability to help was overwhelming. Furthermore the mobility of refugees made the maintenance of contact almost impossible and this had a serious impact to any lasting improvement of their living arrangements.

Not all squatted houses were open to our teams' visits. A few had a reputation of being under the control of traffickers and for reasons of safety were "off-limits". Possibly the same people controlled the access of refugees to work by establishing an informal job

market along a specific street where employers would pick up workers among the refugees who waited in line.

All in all the limited efforts of the “center-left” Municipality of Nea Smirni, although strictly within the humanitarian scope, provoked the ultra conservative local papers just before local elections.

In the end the Kurdish “problem” got “solved” almost by accident. As the mayor of Nea Smyrni proposed restrictive measures regarding new building licences, his effort to curb the appetite for residential hi-rises up to 12 floors, backfired. Even landlords who until then were indifferent or unwilling to “develop”, rushed to build and soon almost all the abandoned houses were demolished while apartment buildings sprouted in their place.

At this point I’ll try to focus on certain aspects outlining the few similarities as well as the many more differences between the squats of Kurdish refugees and the squats now.

Recently the demand for refugee housing within the urban fabric found its place on posters propagating demonstration marches, actions and events for refugees, next to other mainstay demands. This is crucial indeed. In both cases the location of the squatted houses was proved and is essential in order to include refugees in the daily routine of the city and thus achieve a minimum of normalcy. In order to do so the positive interaction with the immediate environment is very important otherwise the squatted houses will end segregated from, or even worse, targeted by their neighborhoods.

This takes time though and that’s what the young and easy to move Kurds couldn’t or wouldn’t afford on their way to their countries of destination. On the other hand extended refugee families today find it increasingly difficult and expensive to travel. They have risked everything so far and now they may be forced to stay in Greece indefinitely. This restriction of movement though, abhorrent as it is, it may allow for a prolonged period of adjustment for both sides.

Attitudes towards both groups also differ significantly: the group of young Kurds was perceived as “tough” to deal with, while the refugee families are more easily accepted mainly because of the children. One can never stress enough how crucial it is to provide a safe environment, health care and education for children refugees. The City Plaza Hotel squat for example hosts approximately four hundred people and almost half of them are children. A couple of weeks ago it was announced that forty children were enrolled to elementary schools in the vicinity of the hotel, a first step in the right direction (2). Still, until recently the deprived area was regarded as a hotbed for racism and the neo-Nazis of the Golden Dawn party.

The defining difference lies in my opinion in the political approach: while the Kurdish refugees were addressed institutionally (through the Social Services of the Municipality) or from a humanitarian point of view (the VWA), today’s activism, often radical, has risen to the challenge, tackling the emergencies and at the same time offering an operative model which is clearly anti-hierarchical and mutually emancipatory, in principle at least (3).

As I mentioned in the beginning more and more squats for housing refugees in Athens accept gracefully the physical presence and especially the material support of the so-

called “voluntourists” and/or “holidayarians” (4). These activist tourists arriving from their Western and Central European countries mean well and provide short-term relief for the stressed solidarity structures they came to help, even when occasionally overzealous: there have been at least two squats initiated by foreign activists in Exarchia, in old houses deemed possibly unsafe for both activists and refugees. On top of that, one of them attracted the riot police’s attention.

On another level the “revolutionary” buzz that is generated in the city brings more conventional tourists who want to experience the excitement from a safety distance, benefits the economy/state, and paves the way for more gentrification.

Among all squats City Plaza -by no means the first; it started on the 22/4, that is less than three months ago- got so much publicity worldwide that while this may shield it from attacks, one wonders how all people involved can handle the pressure. There is no way to compare the lucky guests of City Plaza to the Kurdish and Syrian refugees at their makeshift camps, and yet there is a degree of exposure as so much is at stake.

Although it may seem risky I reckon that in the current state of “Fortress Europe” these efforts of the solidarity movement could serve as a new paradigm. It may look fragile, teetering on the verge of collapse, but every day that it holds on, makes its cohesive action stronger, its immediate and greater influence more prevalent.

I guess we could consider this paradigm the glue that holds together the shredded fabric of a society in a state of ongoing crisis, sealing the cracks where racism and fascism could spring from anytime.

That said I’ll try now to sum up my talk going back to those thirteen-year conclusions and expand on them. I must confess that it’s somehow unsettling to revisit one’s proposals, and realize that they seem more than ever up-to-date, which of course means that they remained a wish-list whereas the political landscape got much bleaker.

The introduction of a self-organized Housing Network of reclaimed abandoned houses for homeless and refugees owes its inception to the VWA and personally to Spyros Psychas.

Since the ‘80s the center of Athens had been quietly emptying from the inside only to gain momentum after the Olympics. When the crisis hit the country, a whole trove of deserted state buildings, closed stores and business spaces was added to those empty residences. The fading to black was counterbalanced only by the spreading of self-organized open spaces, rented or squatted, downtown as well as in the neighborhoods. After the Squares’ movement retreated it was the collectives behind such initiatives who defended the public character of the city against degradation and “development”.

Among the abandoned houses in the center of Athens, often of considerable architectural merit, a special reference needs to be made regarding the impressive residential complex of Alexandras Av., built in 1936 in order to house in eight units and two hundred and twenty eight apartments, refugees of that lost Greek war of 1922. Although it is a mature work of Modern Movement and witness of the city’s historic memory, lack of maintenance and neglect made of it a perfect candidate for demolition. Specifically six out of eight units would have been flattened long ago to make way for

more profitable investments if not for a residents' petition that was supported by the Architectural school of Athens. Finally in 2000 the whole complex was registered as a listed monument. Nevertheless only fifty one apartments were occupied when the "displaced of the city", the refugees (from Afghanistan, Syria, African countries) the homeless and the unemployed moved in. In 2011 the Assembly of Squatted Refugee Settlements started operating a collective kitchen, a bakery and a health structure. Since 2014 one hundred and thirty eight apartments have been transferred to TAIPED (Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund SA) and put up for sale. The integrity of the settlement complex is once more in danger and soon residents and activists may have to join forces in protest (5).

The state of decay that characterizes almost all of the abandoned buildings would be motive enough for the architects and engineers to step-in and offer their expertise. The architectural profession is still in shock due to the free fall of the building sector since the crisis and unemployment is rampant. What better way to rehabilitate ourselves than expressing solidarity to refugees by undertaking collectively the initiative to transform those empty shells into homes, create open and functional social spaces, and benefit our city?



#### NOTES

1. Interestingly enough Nea Smyrni originated as a garden-city plan catering to wealthy migrants from Smyrna (today the Turkish Izmir), after the Greeks lost the war against the Turks back in 1922
2. <http://solidarity2refugees.gr/ζούμε-μαζί-μαθαίνουμε-μαζί/>, 18/6/2016
3. That is simply because even the most disadvantaged Greek activist is considered privileged compared to the refugees
4. I am indebted to the ReflActionist Collective for both terms. For more see their excellent analysis on: <https://reflactionistcollective.noblogs.org/post/2016/06/18/beyond-voluntourism-and-holidarity/>, 18/6/2016
5. Tzirtzilaki, E., "The Refugee Settlements of Alexandras Av., an urban void is transformed into squatted housing", in Greek, <http://nomadikiarxitektoniki.net/texts/without-a-proper-noun/>, 1/11/2014