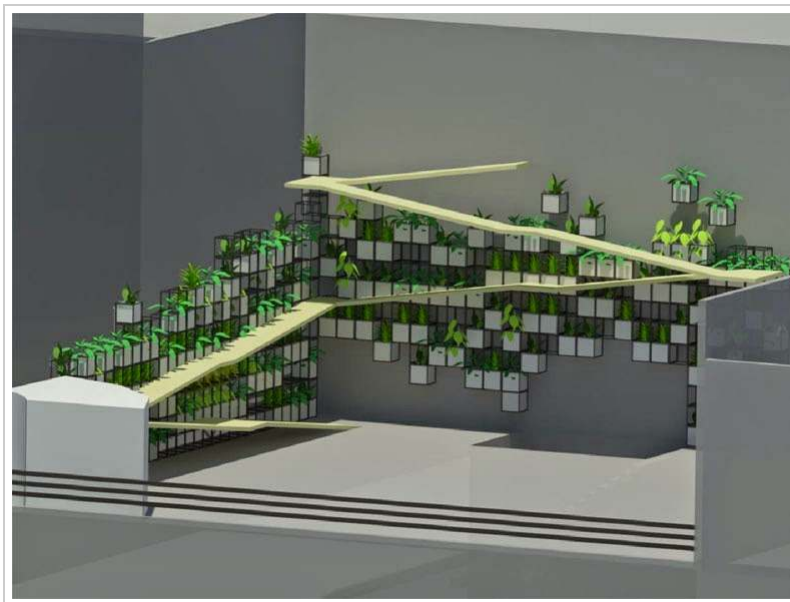
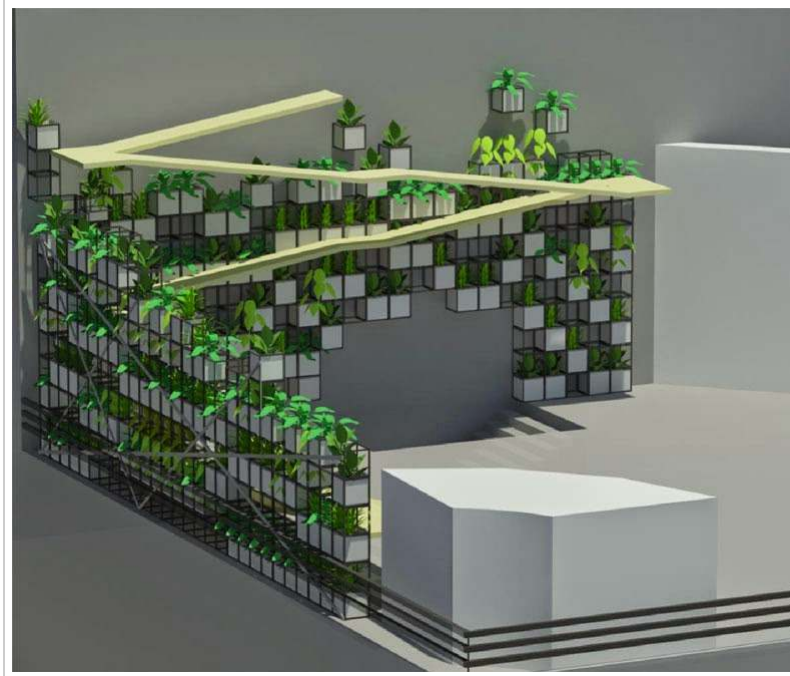


How can we organize for alternative social,
economic, and ecological balance?



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**Self-managed neighborhood centers in times of crisis:
K*VOX (K*BOΞ) squat social center in Exarchia, Athens**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Historically urban public space designated as common has sustained a variety of trans-formations as well as a lively on-going discussion also in Athens, a city notorious for the lack of such space. Nevertheless, no matter how these transformations were applied –when applied– either through spatial (re)arrangements of urban landscapes or appropriation of city voids, the necessity to fulfill a vital need for the people remained: Public space is where people go to meet and communicate with each other. Within the current context of globalized capitalism though, public space proved an easy victim of commercialization resulting in unsatisfactory spaces, hardly functional and totally meaningless.

The crisis that came to stay in 2008, even when dubbed “temporary depression of the economy”, has only deepened and turned into a full-blown crisis in every aspect of the Greek society. Unemployment and suicides are on a constant rise and as a result people’s psychological well being is on a downward spiral.

Now more than ever before the demand for a re-appropriation of open public space is strongly felt. And while there’s hardly any more “public” discussion of urban renewal, except for a barrage of “impressive” competitions privately funded, it is at this point precisely that urban commons as D. Harvey defined them (1) are sorely needed, in order to:

- act as the meeting platform that will disentangle people from their individual loneliness,
- embody the outlet for emotional, political and artistic expression of ideas
- facilitate and empower collective participation
- communicate the outcome of peoples’ activities
- and in the end, turn despair into action.

These public spaces may not be literally outdoors or open but must be free and accessible to all. Within this framework and in the aftermath of the Syntagma Square movement, a proliferation of impromptu social centers is quietly taking place. Squatted, rented or given for free, these places reach out to their besieged communities and by doing so create an impressive network of hope spreading all over the country.

2. ANALYSIS

Taking into account the current dire circumstances we now aim to revisit the idea of a self-managed neighborhood center and acknowledge it as a meeting place for “the materially deprived and the culturally oppressed” that may or not overlap. (2)

For this reason, and with such an initiative in mind, we will examine:

- who the initiators are
- in what way the initiative operates
- why similar initiatives empower citizens

Regarding the initiators, their profile is made up by organized citizens involved in recent (social or political) collectives and neighbourhood assemblies or existent groups, unions and clubs. At this point it is worth mentioning that the recent more radical initiatives are breathing new life into the older more traditional ones even through limited

interaction.

The operational model fosters unmediated participation regardless of origin, gender, age or expertise. In this way citizens hone their democratic skills, boost their self-esteem and escape the vicious cycle of depression. Furthermore the successful initiatives generate good publicity thus helping disseminate the concept through the city.

3. PROPOSAL: The case of K*VOX

3.1. Genius loci

Since we have chosen K*VOX squat space in Exarchia (**Fig. 1**) as the most representative example of a neighborhood center, we better refer at this point to a brief history of Exarchia. The neighborhood of Exarchia is the most lively and heavily politicized place in Athens. Its iconic square is the meeting point for young people and various groups of urban cultures, some of them with distinct radical left or anarchist profiles. It acquired international fame after the Griots (Greek riots) of 2008 when a 15-old student, Alexis Gregoropoulos, was shot dead by a police special guard in the vicinity. Exarchia is home to the National Technical University of Athens (Polytechnion) where in November 1973 the students' uprising against the junta who suppressed the country from 1967, harbingered the fall of the dictatorship a year later. Since the 80s Exarchia has been confronting an on-off drug problem despite the efforts of involved citizens and groups to fight against it.

Following are some of the most active groups in the area:

- *Steki Metanaston (Migrants' Social Center)*
(<http://tsamadou13-15.espivblogs.net/>; in Greek) since 1997,
- *Aftonomo Steki (Autonomous Social Center)*
(<http://autonomosteki.espivblogs.net/>; in Greek) since 1998,
- *Nosotros free community space* (<http://www.nosotros.gr>) since 2005,
- *Parko Navarinou*, a "liberated" parking lot-turned-public park,
(<http://parkingparko.espivblogs.net/englishfrench/about-the-park/>) since 2009,
- *Anarchists' open assembly*
(<http://anoixthsynelefsianarxikwn.squat.gr/>; in Greek) since 2009,
- *Skoros (Moth)*, free bazaar (http://skoros.espiv.net/about_en) since 2010



Figure 1 Site map

3.2. K*VOX squat social center

The K* VOX squat commands a prime location on a corner facing Exarchia square and has been open since early 2012 (**Fig. 2**). It is housed in an approximately 380 m² ground-level building (+ basement), property of the Social Security Organization (IKA), and during the summer its terrace doubles as an open-air movie theater VOX (BOE)(**Fig. 3, 4**). The building had been empty after a bookstore/café moved out. Just before the announced opening the police in the presence of a public attorney sealed the place but it was re-opened two days after by the squatters and remains open in the face of escalating suppression. (**Fig. 5**)



Figure 2 General view of K*VOX

K*VOX's managing assembly consists of 20 to 30 people who identify themselves as anarchists and/or anti-authoritarians. Their group had been already active in supporting political prisoners and was looking for a way to consolidate their efforts. The squat offered a chance to run a self-managed coffee house and use the returns to hire lawyers, pay bails etc. At the same time, it helped create a venue where low prices attracted a wider public, such as young people who seek alternative ways out of the crisis, socially and politically, even some elderly residents whose pensions have been cut in half after the latest austerity measures.



Figure 3 K*VOX open-air movie theater



Figure 4 K*VOX terrace from above

Since the last owner had left the place in shambles it was necessary to restore services (**Fig. 6**). Electricity proved trickier because of the new property tax imposed on the electricity bills. As in more than a million Greek households who didn't pay, the electricity company's sub-contractor one early Sunday morning managed to cut the power. But after neighbours called members of the squat he was forced to reconnect it.



Figure 5 The sealing of K*VOX by the police



Figure 6 K*VOX before repairs

As regards the operational mode: the managing assembly meets once a week and decides horizontally on matters such as allocation of funds, maintenance, organisation of activities/events or on hosting the activities/events of other groups (i.e. dance lessons, theatre rehearsals, discussions, film projections, concerts, performances).

The inviting glass facades of the building worked somehow symbolically as well. For a while K*VOX brought together most of the aforementioned Social Centers when common problems arose (i.e. drug related violence and petty crime). This is no small feat given the typical lack of trust that is often met within political groups due to ideological differences and self-preservation.

A self-organized Health structure was added in September 2013. In their own words: “[It] is an undertaking created through a general assembly of residents, social projects and collectives that live and act in the district of Exarchia. It’s addressed to the local community of Exarchia, doctors, psychologists, nurses, pharmacists, but also to any other resident who would like to help. Basic activity of the Exarchia Self-organized Health Structure is to offer free primary healthcare,

immediate help and psychological support as well as to promote the concept of health for all, without any discrimination for reasons of race, skin color, origin, sexual identity or religion.” (3)

On a different front elimination of the intermediaries within the production-consumption cycle has proved a popular demand bringing together people who may not be involved otherwise in public activities of any kind. Acknowledging that the food issue is by definition of crucial importance to all, the Zekos assembly (4) organises a mostly organic produce fair the first Sunday of the month, maintaining their network of producers and at the same time searching for ways to inform and empower consumers. As a final goal they aspire to establish a permanent basis (shop) in the vicinity in the near future.

3. 3. A Vertical Farming System

The idea that is being outlined in this paper is based on the need to explore new solutions regarding production and distribution of food, especially within cities. (5) The food issue is the common ground where many groups coming from very different starting points meet.

Environmental concerns about quality as well as a growing detachment from the origins of their food have increasingly worried consumers.

Lately though many consumers have started to wonder if they will be able to afford food expenses... Self-management of food is becoming an issue of intense debate not only because it is a matter of survival but because it may be the only valid way to control the food production procedures.

On this basis we introduce "Vertical Farming System" (V.F.S.) that applies to the quite common “blind” facade of a typical hi-rise apartment building in Athens. The system shows great transformative power, functionally and aesthetically, and it may work as a pilot-project self-replicating through the city’s neighborhoods. Depending on scale V.F.S. may be used to grow herbs or vegetables and at the same time turn the ugly grey facades into green oxygen-fueled sanctuaries to biodiversity, long lost in Athens. **(Fig. 7)**

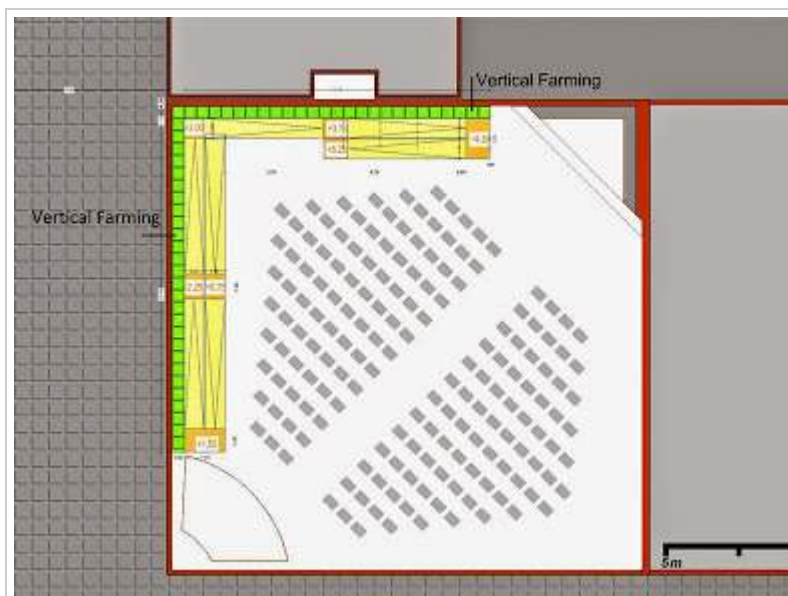


Figure 7 General plan of the intervention

V.F.S. works as a modular system with elements of 50x50 cm building a metal structure akin to a scaffold. It may be either attached or self-

supported according to the site of implementation. In the second case when load bearing is a problem and/or there is no consensus from the involved owners, it can be self-supported and apply to neglected unpleasant lots. In case though where there is an agreement it can be attached to a blind facade and provide ground for collaboration to people willing to participate.

The whole system is very flexible and can be easily transported. Since the metal scaffold forms the basis, residents' groups working together can decide what and where to plant. Recycled or other available material that comes handy may be used to form pots that can be filled with soil and placed drawer-like in selected parts of the grid.

The structure is accessed by ramps that apart from their obvious functional use define an architectural promenade by offering new sights and unexpected viewing points all over the city.

We consider the terrace of K*VOX an excellent place in order to test the system's applicability because it provides great visibility and has intense symbolical power. Since it is very possible that due to the bad economy the open-air movie theater may remain closed, the terrace could host the squat's summer events expanding the present social center's activities. At the same time the installation of a part attached, part self-supported V.F.S. may go ahead without obstructing the rest of activities (**Fig. 8, 9, 10**).

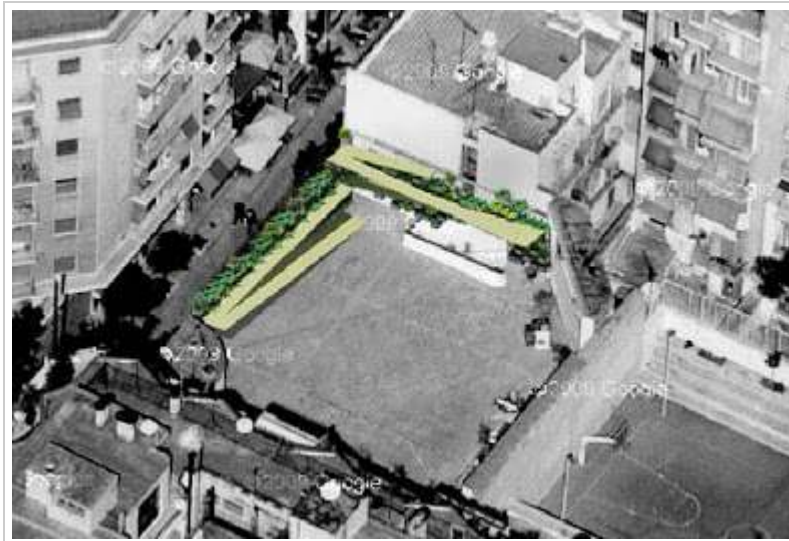
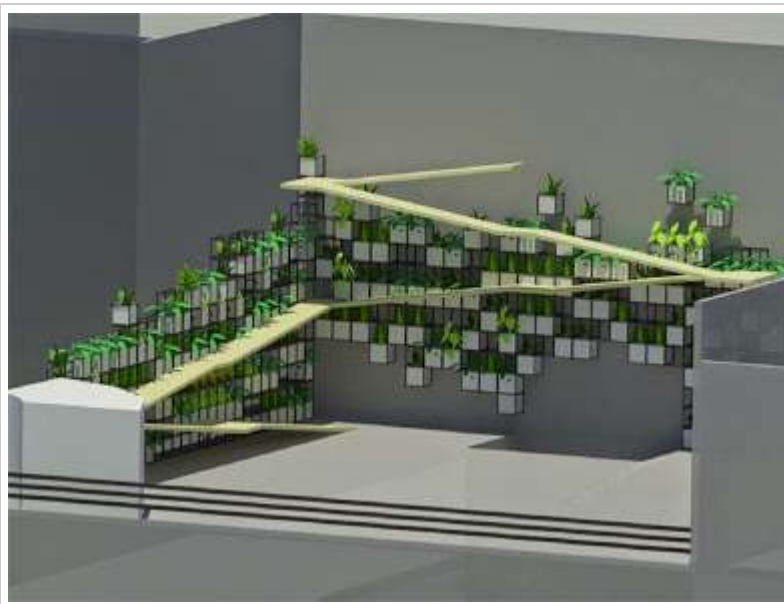
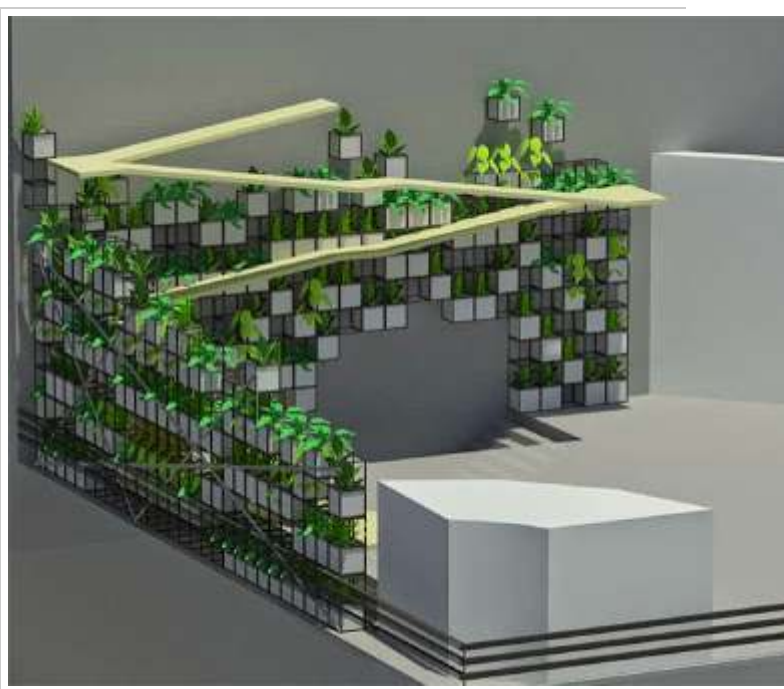


Figure 8 Collage drawing of the applied V.F.S. in the terrace of K*VOX



Figures 9-10 3-D drawings of the applied V.F.S. in the terrace of K*VOX

CONCLUSIONS

Before proceeding we should stress here that given the surge of police suppression in Exarchia the very existence of the squat is at stake. From the beginning K*VOX became the target of extreme-rightwing members of Parliament (6) who called for its immediate termination. Despite a press conference that many organizations and collectives gave on 30/1/2013 and a solidarity march three days later (7), the occasional heavy police presence is felt as a threat. Left alone though, the squat could expand its circle of beneficial influence acting as a stabilizing point of reference in a volatile urban landscape. At worst K*VOX's legacy as a free space for socio-political thought won't be wasted but will become the springboard for new initiatives so much in demand in hard times.

As concerns the introduction of V.F.S. we believe that the system is easily:

- *constructed*

The materials needed can originate from recycled stuff; as for the design/construction, students of the nearby N.T.U.A. School of Architecture may happily turn their ideas into hands-on practice.

- *maintained*

Taking care of plants is a relaxing activity that suits people of all ages and presents tangible material rewards. Especially older people –often in the margins of a hectic urban lifestyle– and young children with limited contact with nature will benefit the most.

- *transferred*

wherever there is left-over, unused or abandoned space within a city that loses more and more “common ground” to neo-liberal schemes.

On the whole the success of the project depends on its scale of applicability and citizens’ participation. Both factors will determine if the spread of a farming network through the city will make a real difference. Only in this case there may be hope that a mobilized society will reclaim its right to the city and take a first small step towards a more sustainable way of life.

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3. source: adye.espivblogs.net (in Greek)
4. named by a beloved Greek movie hero of the 60s, who worked in a grocery and always managed to outsmart his authoritarian boss
5. The idea was referenced in a proposal submitted to competition for the renewal of Theatrou Sq. and Menandrou Str. in downtown Athens by architects Fotini Georgakopoulou, Stelios Minotakis, and 3-D designer K. Vordonarakis (July 2010) (<http://playground4architecture.blogspot.gr/2010/11/blog-post.html>)
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7. <http://left.gr/news/synenteyxi-typoy-gia-tin-yperaspisi-toy-kateilimmenoy-koinonikoy-kentroy-vox-vinteo> (in Greek)

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Photos' sources:

Fig. 1, 4: Google Earth

Fig. 2: Vagelis Ferderigos, photographer/photojournalist, March 2013

Fig. 3: VOX cinema

Fig. 5, 6: K*VOX, 2012

Fig. 7, 8, 9, 10: Fotini Georgakopoulou, Melanie-Maria Siouti, Drawings/Collage of Proposal



Photo of K*VOX, taken at the end of January 2014.

The banner on the right reads: Not a single step back, reacting to a surge of state repression during the last months. The banner on the left calls for a meeting in order to celebrate the fifth anniversary of Parko Navarinou and discuss its future.

“Fins a aconseguir-ho!” (in catalan: Until we prevail!)