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From Crisis to Crisis: Emergencies and Uncertainties
in Large Metropolitan Areas and Cities
of Southern Europe

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Multiple spatial practices and scales within and beyond City Plaza, Athens

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ABSTRACT

City Plaza was an abandoned hotel in the center of Athens, squatted in April 2016, in the midst of what was named a “refugee crisis”. In the 39 months that it operated, it became a home to more than 2.500 refugees from more than 10 different countries. Still, what was achieved in City Plaza was beyond that: a community of solidarity and struggle was ‘manufactured’, and City Plaza gradually became a symbol of resistance to the dominant policies of control and repression of migration. This paper focuses on the analysis of the multiple practices and scales of space. The aim is to think around the manifold and interrelated spatial scales, structures, relations and practices that dialectically constructed and were constructed within and beyond City Plaza.

Keywords: migration; solidarity; squats; refugees; Athens.

1. INTRODUCTION

The discussion among the “Initiative of Solidarity to Economic and Political Refugees” – a grassroots coalition of groups of the radical Left in Athens – to create a large-scale housing squat for refugees started in September 2015. It was a period when thousands of refugees were gradually arriving to the mainland of Greece from the Aegean islands. At the time, the European authorities named it a “refugee crisis”, while for refugees themselves and also for the antiracist movements all over Europe it was

the “summer of migration” (Kasperek and Speer 2015). During these first months, refugees were in transit through Athens, as they would stop there for a few nights and then would continue their travel through Eidomeni to the Balkan route in order to arrive in one of the Northern European countries to settle. This transit movement was transforming different public urban spaces into informal and temporary shelters, so the assembly of the Initiative decided not to focus on one building but to extend the solidarity throughout the city. For these first months there were daily *ad hoc* interventions in temporary spaces – from Victoria to Omonoia and Pedio Areos – where food, basic items like tents, blankets and clothes, but also medical care were offered to those in need.



*Figure 1. – City Plaza Hotel.
Source: City Plaza Collective Archive.*

The decision to squat City Plaza (*Fig. 1*) was taken a few months later in the 18th of March 2016, when the EU-Turkey deal was signed: a deal that marked the definite end of the “summer of migration” and the final closing of the Balkan route, leaving more than 60.000 migrants trapped in mainland Greece (Mezzadra 2018). It was this moment when hundreds of people were homeless in the center of Athens or living in

remote refugee camps in harsh conditions, while borders were reinforced once more. It was also the moment, when the solidarity movements were increasingly illegalized in dominant policies and discourses. It was this moment when we decided to create a large-scale housing squat in the center of the city; a squat that would not just be a housing project but a continuous political struggle claiming co-habitation in the center of the city against the migration policies that promote the social and spatial exclusion of the “camp”, a counter example of solidarity against the multiple borders and institutional racism that proliferate in Europe. After a month of intensive preparations and assemblies, on the 22nd of April 2016, City Plaza was squatted.

Many researchers and academics visited City Plaza within the three and a half years it was operating: a fact that led in many cases to publications about the squat (Mitchell and Sparke 2018; Squire 2018; Tsavdaroglou 2018; Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Raimondi 2019; Chioventa 2020; Kiddey 2020; Fischer and Jørgensen 2021; Turam 2021). A common way of approaching City Plaza among these papers is a scheme that contrasts solidarity squats with the state-run spaces, like the camps. Within these papers, City Plaza is approached as a local solidarity housing project. In this piece, however, my aim is to analyze the multiple spatialities of City Plaza, the multiple ways it produced, and it was produced, in relation to different spatial scales. When I refer to space, following the work of Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1990; 1991) and other critical geographers (Harvey 1990; Soja 1996; Massey 2005) I refer to the social construction of space, to the “trialectics” of perceived, conceived and lived spaces. As it will be outlined in what follows, City Plaza was chosen by the solidarity group as a space to squat for its concrete characteristics and the morphology of the building, as a perceived space. Still, in the decision to squat, an important parameter was how the neighborhood was conceived by the solidarity group; the wish to intervene and transform the socio-spatial relations within the particular neighborhood. In parallel, City Plaza was conceived in many different and often contradictory ways: as a space of struggle by the solidarity group; as a safe shelter for migrants; as a romanticized utopia by some researchers and reporters; as a space of illegality and a threat to private property by the state and its institutions. Nonetheless, what ‘manufactured’ City Plaza was its day-to-day life, the ways it was lived by the different people who were inhabiting it, by the people who were participating in the project, by the neighbors.

Nevertheless, my view and my experience of the project is not mainly academic. Although I am a post-doctoral researcher of social geography

my involvement in the project derived from my political engagement in social struggles. So, I am writing this piece as a member of the solidarity assembly, as a member of City Plaza community with daily commitment to the project from the moment it was conceived as an idea to its very last day. I use the pronoun 'we' when I refer to the processes and the decisions within the project as a way to underline the community and the collective decision making. This view and the dynamics and contradictions it entails, this perspective of multiple aspects and scales are what I attempt to bring to light with this paper. A view that I do not wish to neutralize and contextualize within a more abstract academic discourse.

2. THE MORPHOLOGY OF THE BUILDING

The squat aimed at creating a safe shelter that would function as a counterexample in the city space, offering dignified conditions of housing to those that it could host. In this perspective, we rejected public buildings that used to work as offices or schools and could not offer any kind of privacy to people that would inhabit them. In the case of City Plaza, the hotel structure could offer a more appropriate shelter: with rooms that had a door that closed, a bathroom, a wardrobe, a small balcony and such simple things that are taken for granted to those of us who live in a house, but which are not at all granted to people who have been on the road for months or even years. City Plaza is an eight-storied building with 126 rooms. Around 100 of these rooms were transformed into small homes that would host a family or shared by either single men or women. About 20 rooms were shared between people from the solidarity group, mainly those coming from abroad to support the project and also some locals. The remaining rooms were transformed into classrooms, storages and a woman space. At each period around 350-400 refugees and 30-40 solidarity activists would share the rooms of City Plaza, transforming the space not into a shelter for migrants but into a space of co-habitation and sharing. In the 39 months that City Plaza was open and active, it hosted more than 2.500 refugees.

Furthermore, the morphology of the hotel also included common spaces. On the ground floor there was the reception and some smaller office spaces that were converted into a clinic, a room with computers, meeting spaces, and a room that was used ad hoc as a makeshift barber shop, dentist clinic, clothe bazaar, ping pong room or space for meet-

ings of thematic groups. There was also a small yard that was used as a children space, where bicycle workshops took place, and which served as a meeting space.

On the first floor there was a bar, a meeting space that was transformed into a playing room for children, a kitchen where the food was prepared three times per day and a dining room which was also used as a space for the house assemblies and a space for celebrations and parties.

Through everyday uses, the morphology of the hotel was transformed into a peculiar village. With houses and neighborhoods on every floor, a makeshift café, a restaurant, a clinic, classrooms, assembly spaces etc. This village was peculiar not only because of its vertical structure in an eight-storied hotel but also because of its residents: refugees coming from more or less 10 different countries, not speaking the same language, having different social, cultural, economic and political backgrounds and also different plans and aspirations for their future. In addition, the solidarity group was not only from Athens but also from many other countries around the world, had similarly different backgrounds, motives and practices.

3. NEIGHBORHOOD

The second parameter that played a crucial role in selecting City Plaza was its location. On the one hand, City Plaza was located next to Victoria Square, one of the squares of the city that became a hub for transit migrants and that after the summer of 2015 has been transformed many times into an informal shelter. It is also located next to Agios Panteleimonas Square and a neighbourhood where during 2008-2013, the fascist group of Golden Dawn was systematically attacking everyone who looked like a “stranger” (Kandylis and Kavoulakos 2011). In this neighborhood, the electoral percentages of Golden Dawn were much higher in relation to other Athenian neighborhoods, indicating a social acceptance of the fascist discourse and practices. Thus, in this neighborhood we decided that it was really crucial to intervene with an organized political space; since the aim of the squat was not only to create a safe house for refugees but also a hub of political intervention, from the smallest scale of the neighbourhood and the city to the national and transnational policies and strategies that illegalize migration and construct deadly borders for the poor residents of the Global South.

The first contact with the neighbourhood was really challenging. The first day of the squat, in the narrow Katrivanou Street (where the entrance of the hotel was located) most of the neighbors had initially a really aggressive attitude: they were shouting, throwing water from the balconies, threatening to call the police and the Golden Dawn to evict the squat. As time passed by, this aggressive attitude shifted. In the first days of the squat some work was done to improve the outdoor space. The broken flower boxes were repaired, and plants were seeded, while we changed the broken bulbs so there was light in the street. For the safety of the squat, we installed 24-hour protection shifts from the first day to the last. If, in the first days of the squat, the neighbors thought of City Plaza as a space that would create problems and further insecurity in an already degraded part of the city, it gradually became evident that the squat brought livelihood and also increased the feeling of safety as a result of its daily presence and the organization of the space.



*Figure 2. – Celebration with the neighbors in the street outside City Plaza.
Source: City Plaza Collective Archive.*

Gradually, some of the neighbors started bringing donations to cover the needs of the residents of City Plaza and participated in the open events and celebrations (*Fig. 2*) that we held in the squat or in the neighborhood. On many occasions, people from the squat also provided for the neighbors when it was possible: a small technical assistance in a house in need, helping older neighbors, or providing medication from the clinic to someone in need. Of course, there were also tensions – mainly due to the noise from the squat – however these were inscribed in the context of neighborhood relations.

4. CREATING A COMMON SPACE

If the initial choice of City Plaza was based mainly on the built environment (such as the morphology of the building) and the social and political characteristics of the neighborhood surrounding it, City Plaza was then shaped by the social relations ‘manufactured’ within it and surrounding it. And these relations were not created automatically, just because 400 people were living in one building which met certain requirements. These relations were created gradually, through hard daily collective work, through hours of assemblies and meetings, with a lot of disagreements and conflicts, through a lot of thinking and critical reflection, always in respect to the experiences and needs of different people. Far from romanticizing solidarity projects, at City Plaza it was proven once more that self-organization presupposes structures, collectivity and planning.

	CLEANING (stairs, entrance, reception, dining room, living room) تعمير كازي: (زاد بليا ورودى راهوييا سانان غذا خورى و هال) التنظيف: (البرج، المدخل، الاستقبال، غرف الطعام، المصالون)		KITCHEN (Preparing food, cooking, serving, washing dishes, collecting garbage) آشبخانه: (آماده نمودن غذا آشپزی توضیع غذا شستن ظرفها و بیرون آنداختن آشغال) المطبخ: (تحضير الطعام، طبخ، تغيير تعبیر، غسل الصحون، نقل الصمامة.)		
	After Lunch (15:00)/ After Dinner (22:00) بعد از ظهر ساعت ۳ و بعد از شام ساعت ۱۰ بعد العشاء (3) بعد العشاء (10)	Breakfast 8:00 صبحانه ساعت ۸:00 الطور	Lunch 11:00 ظهر سات ۱۱:00 الغداء	Dinner 17:00 شام ساعت ۵ العشاء 5:00	
SATURDAY شنبه السبت	206(1), 208(1), 227(2), 307(1)	201(3)	207(2), 209(1), 215(1), 217(2), 303(2)	202(2), 203(1), 205(1), 213(3), 225(1)	
SUNDAY يكشنبه الأحد	229(2), 301(1), 302(2)	212(1), 219(1), 305(2)	309(2), 311(3), 312(3)	224(2), 226(2), 317(3)	
MONDAY دوشنبه الاثنين	304(1), 306(1), 313(1), 412(1)	308(1), 402(1), 406(1)	404(1), 409(1), 413(1), 429(3), 502(2)	326(2), 327(2), 415(3), 417(1)	
TUESDAY سه شنبه الثلاثاء	324(2), 407(1), 411(2), 424(1)	419(2), 505(1)	427(1), 513(2), 517(2), 524(1)	425(5), 426(3)	
WEDNESDAY چهارشنبه الأربعاء	428(2), 503(2), 504(1)	523(2), 529(1)	526(2), 509(1), 517(2), 527(2)	602(5), 627(3)	
THURSDAY پنج شنبه الخميس	506(1), 508(2), 512(1)	601(1), 612(1), 617(2)	605(2), 613(3), 624(2)	525(2), 625(2), 708(3)	
FRIDAY جمعه الجمعة	621(1), 626(3), 717(1)	628(2), 705 (3)	702(5), 707(1)	701(5-), 711(1), 712(1)	

Figure 3. – The weekly schedule of the daily chores per shift and room number.
Source: City Plaza Collective Archive.

One of the main decisions taken in the frame of the project was that everyone had to participate in order to make the space work. Through trial and error and after several long discussions we came up with a system according to which the adults of each room had to undertake one shift per week for 3-4 hours for cooking, washing dishes or cleaning the building (Fig. 3). These shifts were internally distributed not following

the principle that “we are all equal” but “each according to their needs, each according to their abilities”. For example, cleaning and building maintenance was a heavier task, and thus it was mainly undertaken by single men, while the breakfast shift, which was relatively quick and easy to do was taken up by single mothers. Certain elderly people or people with serious health problems were excluded from shifts.

Engaging everyone in the project was not just a practical choice in order to get the work done. It was first and foremost a political choice. It was a choice against the relationships of dependency created in most official structures where refugees were simply left to queue for food, for clothes or expect services. Taking part in the everyday work of City Plaza meant that refugees were not just treated as vulnerable or as victims, but as members of an active community with certain responsibilities and obligations. This meaningful participation and cooperation created conditions in which people gradually stopped feeling helpless or victimized; they were the ones to support others, to undertake various responsibilities, to provide care for their community and their space. Henri Lefebvre was writing in 1968 that everyday life is not only about tedious tasks and preoccupations with bare necessities, but also a realm of emancipation (Lefebvre 1990; 2008). Furthermore, the role of the local solidarity group and the commitment to making City Plaza work was also fundamental. Against the impersonal and distancing relations among refugees and the employees of a state structure or an NGO, both local and international activists who participated in City Plaza were committed, many were living inside the building, devoting a lot of time and energy, taking responsibilities and risks. As Arundhati Roy wrote: “The NGO-ization of politics threatens to turn resistance into a well-mannered, reasonable, salaried, 9-to-5 job. With a few perks thrown in. Real resistance has real consequences. And no salary” (Roy 2016, 335). For all of the people living in City Plaza this process of participation and sharing responsibility – often a very big one – was a process of political and social emancipation. Relationships of dependency were, in a way, transformed into relationships of interdependency, care and cooperation within a community.

Nonetheless participation was not limited to sharing the everyday chores but also to decision making. House assemblies, coordination meetings, working meetings of the different groups (e.g., reception, kitchen, woman space, children’s activities, etc.) were taking place daily in City Plaza. Ensuring the participation of everyone was certainly a critical stake and at the same time quite a difficult and complicated process (Lafazani 2018). In the first House Assemblies certain ground rules were

decided. These rules were actually coded in three axes. The first one was that we solve our problems with dialogue and common understanding and not with fighting or violence. The second one was that we don't drink alcohol inside the building as everyone can go out whenever they want to have a beer in a square or a bar – a rule that also aimed at avoiding fights. The third one was that we respect the building and all the other people who live there. The crucial question, however, is: why did all these different people who lived for shorter or longer periods in City Plaza, from refugees to solidarity activists (a total of more than 3.000 in the 39 months the squat operated), abide to these rules? In the refugee camps or other institutional shelters, for example, similar rules are in place but still there are serious fights and incidents of violence. It seems that the reason people respected the rules was a sense of community, of respect and trust, a sense of participating in the creation of a common space, a sense of belonging to this peculiar village. And these relations that were built in the common everyday life were built through the ways in which we cooperated and spoke to each other, through the ways in which we cared for each other's needs and wishes.

5. FROM THE BUILDING BACK TO THE CITY: THE STREETS BELONG TO US

Plaza was not an enclave and a community looking only on the inside. On the contrary, it was an active part of several social and political movements in the city and beyond. Plaza entailed a “double movement”. On the one hand, it produced rights inside the community for people socially and politically categorized as undeserving: it provided housing, food, medical care, education to people that could not access those rights through institutional structures. On the other hand, wider claims were articulated around the right to have rights.

First and foremost, our struggles were focused on freedom of movement and the right to stay, the right to the city. Through exemplary struggles, the City Plaza community attempted to create ‘cracks’ in the institutional spaces for the participation of refugees. An example of such a struggle was the attempt, together with radical teacher unions, to enroll all children of City Plaza in public schools, although according to the Ministry of Education the refugee children should only get schooling in the camps or in separate afternoon classes. From the first year until the last, all the children were participating in the classes together

with the local children, a fact that opened up this possibility to many more child refugees.



Figure 4. – Protest organized by City Plaza in Acropolis, against the EU border policies.
Source: City Plaza Collective Archive.

Moreover, City Plaza community called for and participated in many actions and demonstrations, both local and transnational, during all those years (Fig. 4). Whether it was contesting the policies of closed borders or protesting against the EU Turkey deal, or demanding the closing of refugee camps and the opening of empty buildings in the city for refugee accommodation, City Plaza community articulated numerous different claims around freedom of movement and the right to settle (Kotronaki 2018).

Nonetheless, the City Plaza community not only participated or generated struggles around refugee rights but also took part in wider mobilizations of the antagonistic movement. It took part in demonstrations around labor rights, around the rights to public health and housing, and also in antifascist actions. These moments of common struggle also formed different relations among the inhabitants of City Plaza. In such moments, it became even more obvious that we all stand together against the prevailing policies.

Lastly, City Plaza would organize and/or participate in different events in the city: organizing open discussions and celebrations in the neighbourhood or participating in festivals and other political events throughout the city.

In many different ways City Plaza produced the city: either by the very act of occupying the building and transforming it into a different home or by occupying the streets and squares of the city, generating common struggles and creating common spaces.

6. SQUATTING ON PRIVATE PROPERTY

City Plaza has been an empty and unused hotel for at least 6 years prior to the squat and still remained empty since July 2019 when the squat ended. Nonetheless, from the first day we entered to the very last, the fact of squatting and especially of squatting private property, was a point of continuous negative reactions: from the mainstream media, the company that owned City Plaza, city and state institutions. The right to private property – even if it is not used – seems to be within neoliberalism a more sacred right than the right to housing, as social movements and scholars (Hartman 1998; Bratt, Stone, and Hartman 2006; Hohmann 2013) have outlined. In this respect the city and state authorities were not supportive; on the contrary there were many accusations, mainly from the mayor of the city, around the “illegality” and “anomy” of City Plaza and the fact that squats were damaging the “city image”.

The president of the company that owned City Plaza was publicly making allegations against us, accusing us not only of squatting but also of “kicking her on the street” and of profiting from her property by taking money from the refugees, the EU, the German state and NGO’s. These facts were obviously false as City Plaza was based on autonomous solidarity donations and none of the people involved was getting any salary or compensation. At the same time, many MPs of the right and far right wing were bringing the topic of refugee squats – with an emphasis on City Plaza – in the parliament. The governing coalition of Syriza that was newly elected and coming from the Left would keep a more neutral position on the issue of refugee squats, although some were evicted. Within this context, it was really difficult to get access to city utilities, like water and electricity, and many times the electricity was cut off. Still, City Plaza was earning a lot of support among social centers, left wing groups and parties, social clinics and worker unions – especially the union of the ex-workers of the hotel to whom the company still owed money. In a certain way, by squatting City Plaza we posed a crucial question: is the right to own an unused eight-floor hotel more important

than the right to use this property as a house for 400 people who are in dire need of accommodation? Squatting in private property for social purposes challenges the co-relation between what is considered legal within neoliberalism and socio-spatial justice.

7. FROM THE BODY TO THE GLOBE

At the same time, City Plaza also had a global scope. Not only because in one building people from many different countries coexisted, bringing into the everyday life the richness of experiences from all over the world, but mainly because it manufactured a struggle in multiple and interlocking scales: from the body to the globe.

In City Plaza, the most trivial, the most tedious daily tasks became political: how we cook the food, how we clean the building, how we take care of children, how we share resources and responsibilities, how we speak to each other (Lafazani 2021). This scale, the scale of everyday social reproduction – often invisible in political discourses and hidden in the private realm of the house – in City Plaza was overly visible: it not only had to be framed, but became a main theme of discussion in assemblies and meetings, it became a basis for a different starting point of ‘being political’.

On the other end, City Plaza managed to exist due to transnational solidarity. From all over the world, from Germany to China, from the States to Switzerland, from Mexico to Turkey, different autonomous groups and collectives were supporting the maintenance of City Plaza: either by donations, by political support or by physical presence. City Plaza would have never managed to exist without this crucial global support.

From the production of a common space in the everyday life to the global solidarity there was a multi-scale process of creating a transnational community of struggle: against the policies that manage ‘flows’ of people on the one hand and the industry of ‘aid projects’ by NGOs on the other. However, the creation of a community of struggle is not an abstract claim but a result of political action. Certain initiatives and projects take place within conditions of harsh inequality, partitioning of rights, and antagonisms between the oppressed ones. These contradictions cannot be eliminated in a single building – no matter how much willing or effort is put into it. In other words, there are no ‘islands of freedom’ within the wider relations of exploitation and domination, within the world of capital and the state (Lafazani 2017). Against romanticizing on the one hand and victimization or fostering relations

of dependency on the other, in City Plaza, collectivity, cooperation and self-organization were ‘manufactured’ step by step and through many problems and conflicts in the everyday life.

In light of this, the political goal of City Plaza was also global in reach. Not only arguing against racism, sexism, colonialism, exploitation and multiple borders but proving, through a day-to-day struggle, that we can start to dismantle them.

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