

Photo essay



Homeplace City Plaza

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Issue: Evictability- Displacement as a systemic condition and an everyday lived experience

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The “Refugee Accommodation and Solidarity Space City Plaza” – or, simply, “City Plaza” – was a migrant housing occupation and political project located in central Athens, Greece. The squat ran from April 2016 to July 2019 and was self-managed by both migrants and activists. On one hand, City Plaza originated from the necessity to provide people in motion with a safe shelter as an alternative to living in the streets or in refugee camps. On the other, it aimed at countering and expressing dissent towards EU migration policies. Soon after its opening, City Plaza turned into a centre of struggle whose impact went far beyond the borders of Greece, establishing a transnational network and gaining support from different solidarity groups from all over Europe.

Originally, the building hosted a hotel which had been closed and left abandoned due to the effects of the 2008 Greek financial crisis. However, following 2015 long “summer of migration”, the exacerbation of the condition of migrants due to the EU-Turkey deal, and the consequent closure of the Balkan route, a collective of Greek activists decided to occupy its premises. Together with them joined a hundred migrants who had been living in tents for weeks in the nearby Viktoria square.

During its three and a half years of activity, the seven-storey building on Acharnon Street turned into a home for more than 2,000 people who found there a shelter on their journey from Athens to other European countries. City Plaza guaranteed a safe and dignified reception, a place where people could rest and recover a sense of “normality” in a daily life otherwise troubled by the journey and the uncertainties related to their precarious circumstances. Therefore, over time the squat became much more than a mere refuge.

Based on principles of solidarity and sharing, City Plaza created new social bonds and possibilities of encounter aimed at dismantling the dominant discourses around migrants and refugees, while fostering a sense of belonging to the place and between its inhabitants. In City Plaza, these concepts were embodied by the project’s constitutive slogan – ζούμε μαζί, αγωνιζόμαστε μαζί, “we live together, we struggle together”. Indeed, City Plaza represented a “homeplace” for its residents, which proved effective in countering evictability. Through cohabitation, City Plaza managed to sweep away concerns and insecurities caused by rejection and exclusion, which accompanied many migrants in their everyday life in Athens. At the same time, it contributed to building a sense of home-like safety and confidence in such a difficult context. Homeplace is intended here as a political space and “shelter of sameness” (hooks, Eizenberg and Koning, 1994, p. 22), where everyday life creates bonds among the occupiers while transcending notions of race, class, gender, and nationality. Homeplace is, therefore, an “inner space”, a “site of resistance and liberation struggle” (hooks, 1990, p. 385), which originates and develops in contrast to a hostile and repressive “outer space”, building a sense of entitlement and empowerment.

The squatted hotel’s bar, kitchen, dining room, courtyard, rooftop, Women and Kids Spaces, all contributed to creating a sense of togetherness. For instance, people gathered in the bar to chat, drink coffee, play cards, as well as to participate in the weekly assemblies and take decisions regarding the squat’s management. Residents spent between three and four hours per shift in the kitchen cooking and preparing meals while

getting to know each other and creating bonds. Similarly, corridors were not just passageways but also meeting places, where City Plaza's residents interacted and kept up to date regarding daily life. Finally, children, who represented forty per cent of the squat's population, had plenty of space at their disposal to play under the watchful gaze of the adults, who took care of them just like in an "extended family".

Furthermore, City Plaza's rooms were multifaceted spaces, able to serve a variety of purposes: classrooms, playrooms for children, exclusive meeting places for women, workshop areas, and warehouses. Above all, they were "homes" for the people living in the squat and an intimate place which provided people with privacy. In this regard, the possibility of having a space for one's own often encouraged City Plaza's residents to furnish and decorate their private rooms, so as to recreate a unique environment which resembled that of their original home. Yet again, this custom reinforced the concept of the individual's struggle through cultural practice against the imposition of blueprint and sterile spaces enforced in the shape of domination structures (hooks, Eizenberg and Koning, 1994, p. 25) such as refugee camps and hotspots. Thus, despite their small size, City Plaza's rooms provided a friendly and safe environment where migrants were able to carve out a private space for themselves. City Plaza represented an experiment of coexistence that went beyond meeting the need for temporary accommodation. City Plaza's residents came together as a family that, from below and not without difficulty, challenged the powers of the state and institutions while also trying to overcome the divide between them and us. We too were part of that family, living for more than a year or a few months at City Plaza, to do field research for a doctoral thesis and to carry out a photographic project on life inside the squatted hotel. During the time we spent at City Plaza, we had the privilege of getting to know its residents, sharing thoughts and life stories. The photos part of this essay comes from that experience¹¹. They were taken at different times in the life of City Plaza, and depict various aspects of its daily life and struggle. As introduced above, they aspire to show how people who lived there managed to create and evolve a sense of homeplace by transforming, adapting and re-adapting the occupied hotel's spatialities. In particular, they illustrate the production, through cohabitation, of the intimate and "inner space" built in response to the "outer space" represented by a foreign urban environment, discrimination, institutional hegemony, and seemingly interminable bureaucracy.

¹¹ For what concerns the usage consent from the subjects represented in the pictures, we did not use written agreement forms during our research. Nonetheless, permission of use for all the images presented here was always verbally granted by the subjects at the moment the pictures were taken (in the case of minors, by their parents). For situations where many people are framed in the same shot and was not feasible to ask every single person (i.e. the party on the hotel's rooftop or the assemblies), our presence was evident at all times, and the scope of our activity clear to everyone, both the subjects represented and the organisations involved.

Captions



Figure 1 – The entrance to City Plaza (August 2017). The entrance door of City Plaza functioned as a threshold defining the border between an “inner” and safe space, and the “outer” and hostile urban environment. Entry to the building was only granted to residents and their guests (although the latter were not allowed to stay overnight). Immediately in front of the main door was the “security” table with activists who were in charge of checking-in people 24 hours a day in order to guarantee the safety of the hotel’s residents. It was also the task of the “security shift” to register the requests of the dozens of migrants who came to City Plaza every day with the hope of finding a place to stay.



Figure 2 – The City Plaza building (March 2017). The former hotel faces the busy Acharnon street and the smaller Katrivanou street, where the only entrance is located. On the other side, the façade looks onto a quieter internal courtyard. In addition to the communal areas, there are a total of one hundred and ten rooms in the hotel, each featuring a private bathroom and a balcony. On the top floor, a large terrace overlooks the whole city, including the



Figure 3 – A “solidarity meeting” in the inner courtyard of City Plaza (August 2017). Decisions regarding the organisation and general management of City Plaza were made through a system of three levels of assemblies. Two assemblies were held weekly: the “coordination meeting” and the “solidarity meeting”. The first was generally attended by a small group of Greek and international activists and it mainly concentrated on the political activities concerning the occupation. Instead, the second focussed on the daily planning of City Plaza’s life: its activities (such as workshops, language courses, trips), and spaces (Women Space, Kids Space, and the various shifts).



Figure 4 – The “house assembly” in the dining room (May 2018). About once or twice a month, the residents of City Plaza would gather in the dining room for the “house assembly.” On this occasion the most relevant problems within the occupation were discussed (with simultaneous translation in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu), which very often concerned the

different level of participation of the inhabitants in the hotel “shifts”, especially with regards to cleaning and cooking.



Figure 5 – Pictures and poster documenting City Plaza’s life (August 2017). City Plaza’s activities did not take place only inside the hotel, but often went beyond the building’s walls. In addition to outdoor activities, especially for the younger ones, and excursions to the seaside or to the mountains, the residents of the hotel also organised political rallies and demonstrations in solidarity of and supporting the claims for the rights of migrants.



Figure 6 – The bar (August 2017). The bar was the main meeting point of the hotel. It was run by shifts of residents and volunteers, and only coffee, juice, and water were served (consumption of alcohol was not permitted inside City Plaza). Residents spent hours in this space chatting, reading, or playing cards or backgammon. In general, if you wanted to meet someone at City Plaza, you just had to sit at the bar and wait – sooner or later they would pass by.

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
10-12	LORDES + Miquel	Rail	Maia + Iñaki	Andrés + R. L.	Francine + Rail	SARCO + [unclear]	obriane + Gata
12-14	Elisavete + W.C.	Andrés + FRANCISCO	Lorea + Aina	[unclear] + [unclear]	Thelma + Zino	[unclear] + [unclear]	Maia + Lorea
14-16	[unclear] + [unclear]	[unclear] + Aina	Holena + [unclear]	Fabio + [unclear]	Luis + ELIA	[unclear] + [unclear]	Andrés + Hun
16-18	Hugo + [unclear]	[unclear] + [unclear]	[unclear] + [unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
18-20	Lorea + [unclear]	Lorea + [unclear]	[unclear] + [unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
20-22	[unclear] + FRANCISCO	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
22-24	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
24-26	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
26-28	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
28-30	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
30-1	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
1-3	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
3-5	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
5-7	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
7-9	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
9-11	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
11-13	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
13-15	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
15-17	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
17-19	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
19-21	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
21-23	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
23-25	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
25-27	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
27-29	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]
29-31	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]	[unclear]

Figure 7 – The “bar shift” schedule (September 2017). The wall directly opposite to the bar counter was usually covered with the shifts’ schedules on which one could indicate their availability to take part in the management of the different spaces – from cleaning the common areas or cooking, to the Kids Space and “security shift”, among others.



Figure 8 – Preparing lunch in the kitchen (August 2017). Breakfast, lunch and dinner were collectively prepared in the hotel kitchen. Preparing a meal for about 400 people required the presence of a chef (experienced residents and activists alternated in the task) and at least a dozen helpers. Together with the “security shift”, the “kitchen shift” was one of the most important and crucial in the daily life of City Plaza.



Figure 9 – The distribution of food (August 2017). In City Plaza, each resident was entitled to three daily meals: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In order to be able to collect the food, a card had to be shown and registered on a piece of paper listing all rooms and the number of residents per room.



Figure 10 – A child runs down the stairs of City Plaza (September 2017). In general, children and minors represented almost half of City Plaza's total population. Their presence was immediately noticeable from just entering the hotel's front door: shouts, laughter, and the noise of children playing were the most common sounds that could be heard inside the building.



Figure 11 – Children playing in the corridors (August 2017). Especially at night, when bedtime was drawing closer, children used to gather in the corridors of the hotel to play games or watch movies or cartoons from their parents' smartphones. They were usually also the first ones to populate them again in the morning, marking the beginning of another day.



Figure 12 – The Kids Space (August 2017). Among the many activities that were organised within City Plaza was the Kids Space – a space entirely dedicated to children and their welfare. There, they could find toys and take part in the various recreational activities organised by the activists. While it was made sure that all children of schooling age received a proper education in local schools, they rarely had the chance to enjoy fun activities outside the hotel. Being part of City Plaza, they were able to play and interact freely inside the building throughout the day.



Figure 13 – Children painting on City Plaza’s rooftop (September 2017). While the task of coming up with ideas regarding improving life and spaces in City Plaza was open to anyone, most of the time children were the ones who would compete for participating in carrying out these activities – especially if they were taking place in the shape of “arts and crafts” workshops.



Figure 14 – Karima’s room (August 2017). The rooms of the inhabitants of City Plaza were spaces of privacy where people could somehow feel at home and “furnish” them according to their tastes and needs. Karima was living alone with her two small children, while waiting for the documents which would allow her to reunite with her husband in Germany.



Figure 15 – Karima's brother (August 2017). Karima's room was full of toys belonging to her two young kids but also showing the sides of her as a mother, sister, and wife. A framed print belonging to the hotel's furniture was still hung on the wall, on it a picture of her husband with her brother, Hamed. Beside it, another picture of her brother, also living in the occupation, taken at a demonstration organised by City Plaza.



Figure 16 – A resident reviews his English lesson (August 2017). Several language courses were also organised within the City Plaza for the residents. Learning a European language, first of all English was essential in order to find a job.



Figure 17 – The balconies of the inner facade of City Plaza (May 2017). In addition to the internal spaces of the rooms, the external ones were also essential for the inhabitants of City Plaza. Especially in summer, the balconies were converted to the most diverse uses – sleeping, cooking, reading – and equipped accordingly.



Figure 18 – A rooftop party (August 2017). Every occasion was a reason to celebrate cohabitation and belonging to the City Plaza community. During these parties, residents often collaborated in the organisation of artistic and musical events.

References

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Valeria Raimondi is a political geographer, and she has a PhD in Urban Studies from the Gran Sasso Science Institute in L'Aquila, Italy. The interdisciplinary approach of her work is at the crossroads of urban and political geography, as well as critical border, migration, and citizenship studies. In her PhD research, she addressed the issue of temporary reception of migrants in Europe, focusing on migrant squatting in Greece as experiences of activism, self-organisation and cohabitation.

Valeria currently holds a position as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of History and Cultures, Geography Unit, at the University of Bologna. Her research focuses on the Balkan migration route as part of the ERC project called "The game". In addition, she works as an adjunct professor of Geography and Political and Economic Geography at the University of Bologna.



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Born in Perugia, he lived in London from 2014 to 2021, where he graduated in Popular Music Performance (BMus) at the University of East London (ICMP) and obtained a Master's degree in Ethnomusicology (MMus) from the University of London (SOAS). In 2021 he moved to Berlin, where to this day, he keeps working with photography both for commercial purposes and as a tool in order to raise awareness concerning social issues. In this regard, he has been following the developments of the so-called European Migration Crisis since 2016, which led him to work in Calais (FR), Idomeni (GR), and Athens (GR), where he also spent time as an activist at "Refugee Accommodation and Solidarity Space City Plaza".