

## Squatting, solidarity and support in Athens

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Athens offers an interesting case of alternative housing for migrants and refugees because it is a city that has faced multiple forms of social, political, and financial crisis in its recent history, whilst also being located at the heart of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe. As routes into northern Europe were closed to refugees throughout 2015 and 2016, many found themselves stranded in the towns and cities of Greece and Italy, unable to move onwards through the continent (Darling 2020; Trilling 2017). As a result, cities like Athens saw the growth of informal settlements of refugees on the streets, leading the Greek government to adopt a policy of housing all refugees in camps on the outskirts of cities (Koptyaeva 2017). As Tsavdaroglou (2018:382) notes, in the Athenian context, these state-run refugee camps included 'overcrowded dilapidated factories, old military bases and an abandoned airport'.

Yet at the same time, as a result of the socio-spatial crises to have affected Athens, a range of public and private buildings, including schools, hospitals, and hotels, were abandoned and able to be occupied by diverse groups of activists (Kaika 2012; Tsavdaroglou 2018), who employed occupation as a means of political resistance to the exclusions of austerity policies. From late 2015 onwards, by transforming buildings into squats, these activists were able to house refugees and offer an informal alternative to the state's policy of housing refugees in camps (Koptyaeva 2017). As a result, Athens has seen the emergence of squats that combine solidarity activism between migrant groups and other marginalised populations, with a desire to reclaim the visibility of refugees as present in the city. One effect of this collective form of urban occupation, has been a cycle of displacement and reoccupation, as police evictions seek to encourage refugees to move to the camps, but instead see



the formation of new squats in response (Tsavdaroglou 2018:392). The most high profile, and most widely studied, example of this intersection between squatting and migrants' rights to housing in the city was the case of City Plaza.

City Plaza was a disused hotel that was been occupied from April 2016 until July 2019. In May 2016, 380 refugees were living in the hotel, supported by a range of local and visiting activists from across Europe (Squire 2018:120). City Plaza did not include people on the basis of vulnerability, as was often the case in forms of humanitarian accommodation and camp spaces, but 'rather in terms of the diversity that they bring to the collective', with reasons for migration not considered but 'attention is paid to ensuring a mix of nationalities, a gender balance, and a combination of religious beliefs' (Squire 2018:121). Whilst inclusion was not based on categories of vulnerability, an expectation of involvement in the collective life of the squat was present. Residents were assigned activities, including cleaning public spaces, shifts in the communal kitchen, and the upkeep of the squat more generally, reflecting a collective ethos that is indicative of many forms of collective or communal housing. As Koptyaeva (2017:38) emphasises, for families in particular, these 'activities may be seen as part of the attempt to create the feeling of shared space or, in other words, the understanding of 'being at home', a home that should be kept clean and comfortable'. The significance of such activities is partly in offering some means of occupying the time spent waiting for a decision from the state on one's asylum application, but also in creating the sense of a shared space of collective investment and belonging.

The significance of City Plaza was argued to lie in the forms of solidarity that its approach to accommodating the displaced developed. Squire (2018) argues that City Plaza was a space that allowed refugees to reject the status of the vulnerable or the victim often conferred upon them through more formal processes of encampment. In part this is because unlike other refugee squats, City Plaza had a range of residents, thus 'as more than simply a refugee squat



it [City Plaza] is occupied by a collective of refugee, student, and solidarity activists, and involves a relatively sophisticated approach to communal living and community decision-making' (ibid:120). The upshot of which is a shared sense of collective life not confined to assignments of immigration status, vulnerability, or migratory history. The precariousness of City Plaza as a squat always at risk of being dismantled by the state, was in these terms a precarity that cut across identifications and was experienced through a form of communal living that rejects the choice between a refugee camp and a humanitarian model of assistance (Squire 2018). In this sense, City Plaza, and the other refugee squats that continue to be precariously maintained throughout Athens, speak to not just survival in the city, but an assertion of agency through the rejection of a choice between enclosure or victimhood. This assertiveness draws on the longer history of squatting as a practice that mobilises the act of occupation as a critique of existing social and political relations (Vasudevan 2017).

### **Find out more**

To find out more explore the following range of discussions of City Plaza and consider what sets this case apart from others you have learned about. You might consider the following questions: What does City Plaza offer that other forms of accommodation do not? Can projects such as City Plaza ever be sustainable? How do projects such as City Plaza offer a platform for the claiming of other rights in the city?

[Intervention – “1.5 year City Plaza: A Project on the Antipodes of Bordering and Control Policies” - Antipode Online](#)

[City Plaza – The Best Hotel in Europe \(best-hotel-in-europe.eu\)](#)

[This refugee squat represents the best and worst of humanity | Molly Crabapple | The Guardian](#)

## References

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