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Collective homemaking in transit

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The daily activities of the residents and volunteers of the City Plaza Refugee Accommodation Centre in Athens and the organisation of the space help to construct a positive notion of ‘home’.

Activists and supporters in the Greek capital, Athens, have occupied vacant city buildings in solidarity with the thousands of refugees trapped in the country by border closures. They have transformed buildings into squats to house refugees, in resistance to the government’s authoritarian policies and as alternatives to detention centres and camps.

A self-organised housing space, ‘City Plaza’ in the centre of Athens, is one example. This is a former hotel that had been closed for seven years and was taken over in April 2016 by the Economic and Political Refugee Solidarity initiative, together with volunteers and refugees, and re-organised into an accommodation centre.¹ It offers permanent housing to families that are facing difficulty in finding a place to stay in the city after being relocated from camps on the Greek islands. The residents get three meals a day, there is a clinic, and the children are able to study at local schools. The underlying principles of the running of City Plaza are solidarity and collective participation of residents and volunteers in daily activities. The motto and the philosophy of this space are based on the principle of unity: “We live together. We work together. We struggle together.”²

I had expected to find residents having little or no respect for each other and living separately because of their diverse backgrounds – there are Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians, Syrians, Kurds, Palestinians and Pakistanis living together on the seven floors of the building. However, what I found were that the notions of ‘one big family’ and ‘second home after the motherland’ were shared by nearly everyone. The friendly environment of the squat, with its unwritten rule to respect others despite national or religious differences and conflicts back home, aims to create the concept of a shared space, recreating the feeling of home.

But what is the meaning of ‘home’ and what are the practices that ‘make home’ while being on the move?

The organisation of the space

External factors, such as the location of the squat close to the city centre and the nature of the occupied building itself, play important roles in the positive adaptation processes of forced migrants. Greeks and volunteers often express the view that those who are living at City Plaza are ‘lucky’ and that this is a ‘five-star squat’. Compared with camps where people are staying in tents despite the cold weather, the conditions at City Plaza are indeed luxurious. Family members are put together in individual rooms, which have bathrooms, cupboards, tables and balconies. Thus, privacy – one of the main components of the concept of home – is created for the residents; they no longer have to stand in long queues waiting to take a shower, sharing it with unknown people:

“It is better here than in a camp, where you don’t have your privacy and relatives are separated in different tents. Also, there were fights in the camp where we stayed, and the police didn’t do anything as long as it was inside the camp.” (Pakistani male, 20 years old, came to City Plaza in April 2016)

The day and night security makes refugees feel safe. The notion of safety was expressed not only regarding the building itself but also the country in general:

“At least here I am not afraid to walk in a park with my kids and send them to school.” (Father of two children, from Quetta, Pakistan)

The attempts to create the feeling of shared belonging can be seen in the formal philosophy of the place, with an official description presenting the squat as one home: “400 refugees, 7 floors, 1 home”.



The pronoun 'we' was often used during interviews, for example, "We live together", and pictures of former and current residents are on the walls in the hall and in the bar, which are the two most frequented public spaces. The notion of 'one big family' is created by these visual factors.

Individual rooms also look like small homes within the bigger home: there are family pictures on the walls, blankets or carpets on the floor, and children's toys. Some people, in describing their current rooms, talked of spaces where they can relax after being outside or helping someone from the squat. The ability of family members to live together in one room helps to create the feeling of belonging.

There are also a few people without relatives, who are put together in a couple of rooms in the centre. Typically, there are up to five residents living in one room and, in these cases, the feeling of privacy is limited to one's own bed and a small space around it:

"There are three of us in one room. My bed is my home. I like lying down and watching movies after the shift in the kitchen." (Iranian male, 26 years old, came to City Plaza in April 2016)

The daily performance of familiar acts

Since refugees are officially not allowed to work while they are waiting for the decision on their asylum application, those who, for example, do not go to school or to Greek language lessons have a lot of free time. There

are mandatory activities for every family to be involved in. For instance, shifts in the kitchen: residents cook food together for everyone living in the squat. The preparation of a meal, serving the food and then washing up and cleaning the floor takes on average four to five hours. Another obligation is the cleaning of the corridors and stairs, which is done weekly. 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. Informal activities organised by residents or volunteers include film screenings, day trips to the historic city centre, football matches and parties inside the squat or in one of the bars. Through these formal and informal activities, the residents and volunteers attempt to maintain positive homemaking practices.

"When families are leaving (because they are relocated), residents organise goodbye-parties for them. Some people cry because they don't want to go; some try to stay in touch even when they have moved out." (Volunteer at City Plaza since July 2016)

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1. <http://solidarity2refugees.gr/>
2. <http://bit.ly/YouCaring-KeepCityPlazaOpen>