

# CITY: STATE-RUN CAMPS VS. COMMONING PRACTICES IN ATHENS, THESSALONIKI AND MYTILENE

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## **Abstract**

A noticeable body of literature since the 1980s has been exploring aspects of social philanthropy, NGOs' activities and State immigration policies. However, little research is available on how the refugees themselves self-organize, claim the right to the city and enact the production of collective housing common spaces. This paper aims to discuss such issues and contribute to this gap.

Following the recent spatial approaches on "commons" and "enclosures" the paper compares and contrasts refugee led solidarity housing commons with State-run refugee camps. According to the critical thinkers of "autonomy of migration" the focus has to be shifted from the apparatuses of control to the multiple and diverse ways in which migration responds to, operates independently from, and in turn shapes those apparatuses and their corresponding institutions and practices. Moreover the paper is inspired by the Lefebvrian "right to the city" which embodies the rights to housing, work, education, health and culture and challenges the notion of the citizen. In Lefebvrian thought, citizenship is not defined by membership in the nation-state, but is based on membership in inhabitation. Consequently the newcomers' mobile commons contest State immigration policies and claim spatial justice.

The paper focuses empirically on Greece, which is situated at the epicentre of the refugee crisis, and in Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene in particular. Mytilene is the capital of Lesbos Island i.e. the main refugee entrance point in the East, close to the Turkish coastline. Athens is the capital of Greece where more than ten State-run camps in the outskirts of the city and several refugee squatted buildings in the center of the city establish a dialectic contrast. Finally, Thessaloniki was the city with the highest ratio of refugees per residents across the EU during 2016.

For the purposes of the paper social data were collected from both qualitative and quantitative processes; a methodological tool, which is applied for the determination of these dynamic characteristics approved by

participatory research, ethnographic analysis, semi-structured interviews, discourse analysis and collection of articles of local press and web pages.

The main findings are that the moving populations, in their effort to survive, do not only challenge the State-run camps but seek to negotiate and go beyond cultural, class, gender, religious and political identities. Consequently, the newcomers are transformed into an unpredictable and misfitted multitude that claim the right to the city and produce unique and porous housing common spaces, spaces in movement and threshold spaces. In parallel, State housing policies tend to appropriate the refugees' common spaces with several methods like forced evictions, criminalization of solidarity groups and enclose them in isolated camps, hot spots and detention centers.

**Keywords:** refugees, right to the city, communing, camps

## INTRODUCTION

The so-called migration crisis in Greece has been a major issue during 2015-2016. According to the United Nations (U.N., 2016a), during 2015 851,319 entered and crossed the country. On March 8, 2016, following a gradual restriction of access to the Balkan route based on ethnic origin criteria that started in February 2016, the border between Greece and F.Y.R.O.M. was closed for all third-country citizens. In the aftermath of this closure, and following the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal on the 20th of March 2016 (European Commission, 2016), over 57,000 refugees found themselves suddenly trapped in Greece, most of them in Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene (Coordination Centre for the Management of Refugee Crisis in Greece, 2016). While the vast majority of them are settled in State-run camps-reception centers in the outskirts of the cities, about 2,000 reside in self-organized occupied buildings in the urban core. Focused on this context, this paper examines the right to refugees' adequate housing as it is expressed by the Greek State housing policies and the solidarity housing practices of newly arrived refugees.

More specifically with this paper we aim to examine the emerging spatial commoning practices of migrants and refugees. Although there is a vast literature (Gabiam, 2012; Ihlen et al., 2015; Harrell-Bond, 1986; Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005, Rajaram 2002) on social philanthropy, humanitarianism, NGOs' activities and State immigration policies, there have been few attempts to research the ongoing refugees' self-organized actions that produce seemingly anonymous, however highly personal and collective housing common spaces.

In the above context our basic argument is that despite the vivid and increasingly popular discussion on commons (De Angelis, 2017; Federici, 2011; Stavrides, 2016), few attempts have been made to connect it with the ongoing refugee crisis. In recent years, the discussion on urban commons has revolved mainly around critical geographers' approaches that focus on "accumulation by dispossession" (Glassman, 2006; Harvey, 2012; Hodgkinson, 2012) and conceptualize commons as a new version of the "right to the city" (Brenner et al., 2009; Kuymulu, 2013; Mayer, 2009). At the same time, during the current refugee crisis, the newcomers are settled in inadequate housing facilities on the outskirts of cities, which gradually become ghettoized, and face discriminatory access to facilities and services essential for health, security, comfort and nutrition. However, the previously described refugee and migrant urban policies do not stay uncontested. In the case of Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene the newcomers claim spatial justice and visibility as well as the right to the city and to adequate housing; and in collaboration with activists and solidarity groups they occupy abandoned buildings in the urban core and tend to transform them into common housing spaces. Moreover, in their effort to survive, refugees not only challenge the State-run camps, but also seek to negotiate and go beyond cultural, class, gender, religious and political identities. Furthermore, the newcomers, through praxes of "relocation" and "reinscription" (Bhabha, 1994), produce hybrid housing spaces and collectively aim to reinvent a culture of coexistence and cohabitation. Consequently, the newcomers are transformed into an unpredictable (Stavrides, 2014) and misfitted (Holloway, 2010) multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2009) that produces unique and porous housing common spaces, spaces in movement and threshold spaces. In parallel, State housing policies tend to appropriate the refugee common spaces and prevent their rights to the city with several methods like forced evictions, criminalization of solidarity groups, and enclosing them in dilapidated factories and old military bases (Christodoulou et al., 2016; Karyotis, 2016).

For the purposes of the paper the social data was obtained through both qualitative and quantitative processes. The methodological tools applied to the determination of these dynamic characteristics came through participatory action research, ethnographic analysis, semi-structured interviews and the collection of articles of local press and web pages. It should be noted that refugee research participants are a relatively difficult to access as research population due to the variety of their legal status. Some participants felt uncomfortable discussing and reflecting on the conditions of their shelter and how they relate to it. The anonymization of data and the voluntary participation ensured that any potential uneasiness that may have arisen as a result of their participation in the research was addressed so that no physical, psychological, or social adversities could have affected the participants. Thus, the names of most interviewed individuals have been changed with culturally appropriate names to protect their identity.

The paper is structured as follows. The following section engages with the theoretical discussion on decolonial and intersectional approaches on the right to the city and mobile common spaces. The subsequent section explores and deconstructs the features of the refugees' right to the city and to adequate housing in the State-run camps in Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene. We then examine the socio-spatial features of the refugees' common spaces in

the forementioned cities. The final section draws some concluding remarks on the ongoing conflict between the refugee common space and the State run camps.

### 1. Decolonial and intersectional approach on the Right to the city and mobile common spaces

In order to explore the refugees' right to the city we draw attention on Henri Lefebvre's work "The Right to the City" (1996[1968]). In the late 60's Lefebvre wrote his famous book the "The Right To The City". The publication of the book in 1968 coincided with the 100th anniversary of the publication of Marx's Capital, and came just before the revolutionary outbreaks in Paris, Prague, the rest of Europe and the US. The right to the city was influential for several radical scholars and urban social movements. One of the basic theses and point of departure of Lefebvre was that "the city [is] a projection of society on the ground that is, not only on the actual site, but at a specific level, perceived and conceived by thought, [...] the city is the place of confrontations and of (conflictual) relations (...), the city [is] the 'site of desire' (...) and site of revolutions" (Ibid., 109). In the previous quote Lefebvre demonstrated the trialectical character of space as conceived, perceived and lived, or physical-mental-social space, spatial practice-representations of space-representational space, which he farther analyzed in his later work "The Production of Space" (Lefebvre, 1991b[1974]). By verbalizing imaginary spaces, which are crucial to every process of space alteration he widened not only the notion of space but also the possibilities to imagine and produce different spatialities. By introducing social relations as a mean of space production he questioned vividly both the hierarchical perception of city space in terms of production, according to which space was formed by the expertised authorities, and the perception of space as two dimensional or box container of life. In addition, for Lefebvre the right to the city embodies an intersectional way of thinking as it goes beyond "the rights of ages and sexes (the woman, the child and the elderly), rights of conditions, rights to training and education, to work, to culture, to rest, to health, to housing" (Lefebvre, 1996[1968], 157). Furthermore, Lefebvre argues that the right to the city is not a typical right but it "is like a cry and a demand" (Ibid., 173). Indeed, in this paper it will be shown the refugee despair upon arrival to Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene and their demand to right to city. Finally Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city challenges the notion of the citizen. By bringing to surface people as protagonists of the production of city space he gave a new meaning to citizenship. In his thought, citizenship is not defined by membership in the nation-State but is based on membership in inhabitation, thus on the everyday production of city space. As Purcell (2003: 577) notes "everyday life (...) is the central pivot of the right tot the city: those who go about their daily routines in the city, both living in and creating space, are those who possess a legitimate right to the city (Lefebvre, 1991a[1947])".

Recently the notion of the right to the city is enriched with the concept of the common space. Following several critical scholars analyses (Caffentzis, 2010; De Angelis, 2007; Dellenbaugh, et al., 2015), conceptualizing the commons involves three things at the same time: a common pool of resources, community, and commoning. "Commons" don't exist per se but they are constituted through the social process of commoning. The people who, through commoning, constitute communities that self-organize sharing common resources, in non-commercial ways, are called "commoners". According to Harvey (2012, 73) the common is constructed as an unstable and malleable social relation between "a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment". In addition, several scholars (De Angelis, 2016; Federici, 2011; Hardt and Negri, 2009) make the point that the commons have to be separated from the dipole of private or state management. In this brief review on the commons a point worth mentioning is Blomley's (2008, 320) proposal that "the commons, (...), is not so much found as produced, (...) the commons is a form of place-making." Finally, Stavrides (2014, 548) suggests that the spaces of common emerge as "thresholds", which are "open to usage, open to newcomers".

Moreover, in order to conceptualize the various and complex power relations in the production of the common space, we build on postcolonial urban theory approaches, which seek to highlight the various "subaltern" agents while surpassing the dichotomies West-East or North-South and to focus on the examinations of the hybrid intermediate forms of production of space (McFarlane, 2006; Robinson, 2011; Roy, 2011). Within this framework, several scholars (Alexiou et al., 2016; De Genova et al., 2015; Nyers, 2015; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013) suggest the so-called "autonomy of migration", which refers to a rapidly developing series of ideas that reflect a kind of "Copernican turn in migration studies" (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015, 895). According to the "autonomy of migration" the focus has to be shifted from the apparatuses of control to the multiple and diverse ways in which migration responds to, operates independently from, and in turn shapes those apparatuses and their corresponding institutions and practices. Moreover the approaches of "migration autonomy", examines how the migrant populations often develop survival strategies, activate subjective capabilities, share information and knowledge, engage in social relations with other migrants, and rely on emerging networks of solidarity that they encounter on their journey. In addition, the approach of "autonomy of immigration" in conversation with the postpositivism approaches of critical and human geography is removed from the homogenization and victimization of the refugee figure that are prevailing in State or NGO policies (Squire et al., 2017). Instead, it approaches the moving populations in an interdisciplinary and intersectional way and focuses on their particular cultural practices, individual and collective aspirations, survival strategies, relativity and identity troubling, on issues of class, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, as well as in the social movements of solidarity with refugees and immigrants. At this point, mobile commons are

emerging as those collective forms of communication of moving populations based on selforganization, mutual help and the negotiation of their various identities. It is these forms of social organization and action that may destabilize State-immigration policies (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) and acquire a character of spatial disobedience (Garelli, and Tazzioli, 2017) in their move to claim and create common spaces (Trimikliniotis, et al., 2015).

Finally, we propose to enrich the discussion on the mobile commons with the intersectional approaches (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2009[1990]; Lykke, 2010) that examine the crossings, interferences and diffractions of the multiple systems of domination, oppression and discrimination in the fields of ethnicity, class, gender, age, (dis)ability, religion and culture, which produce its' time unique oppressions. The theory of intersectionality claims that the subjects are situated in frameworks of multiple, interacting forms of oppression and privilege through socially constructed categories. Rather than being conceptualized as an additive model, intersectionality offers a lens through which the aforementioned categories are seen as constituting processes; that is, these categories do not exist independently from one another; rather, they mutually reinforce one another. Rather than emphasizing in distinct categories, intersectionality theorizes social positions as overlapping, complex, interacting, intersecting, and often contradictory configurations.

From this point of view, contemporary refugee housing common spaces could be seen as open communities of commoners, which through their spatial practices of commoning destabilize the State-led policies as well as the multiply and intersected power relations and seek to (re)claim both the physical and the social space producing unique collective common spaces. Such a framework seems adequate to analyse the newcomers' right to the city and to explain the hybrid spatialities of recent refugee common spaces.

## **2. Deconstructing the institutional refugees' right to the city. State-run refugee camps in Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene**

Several international organizations and governments during the last decades adopt the rhetoric on the refugee right to the city and to housing. After the WWII, refugees' right to adequate housing was recognized as part of the "right to an adequate standard of living" in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (U.N., 1948) and in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (U.N., 1966). Furthermore, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has underlined that the right to adequate housing should not be interpreted narrowly (U.N., 2009b). Rather, it should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity. Moreover, the European Council (ECRE, 2007) recognizes that the living environment and conditions in terms of housing are key to the integration of refugees and migrants. Only by making housing equally accessible to refugees, migrants and national citizens, as well as stimulating multicultural living environments integration will succeed (ECRE, 2007). Since 2007 Greece has adapted the Council Directive for the minimum standards for the reception of refugees (Presidential Decree, 220/2007). Finally according to the UNHCR policy on refugee protection and solutions in urban areas the refugees right to the city can be assessed on the basis of certain indicators which include the extent to which refugees are threatened (or not) by refoulement, eviction, arbitrary detention, deportation, harassment or extortion by the security services and other actors; enjoy freedom of movement and association and expression, and protection of their family unity; have access to livelihoods and the labour market and are protected from exploitative treatment by employers, landlords and traders; enjoy adequate shelter and living conditions; are able to gain legal and secure residency rights and are provided with documentation; have access to public and private services such as healthcare and education; enjoy harmonious relationships with the host population, other refugees and migrant communities; and, are able to benefit from the solutions of voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement (U.N., 2009a).

According to the above statements the characteristics of the refugee right to adequate housing must meet the following criteria: security of tenure, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, affordability, habitability, accessibility and cultural adequacy. Finally, it is emphasized that housing is not adequate if it is cut off from employment opportunities, health-care services, schools, childcare centers and other social facilities, or if it is located in polluted or dangerous areas.

In contrast to the above criteria, a large number of refugees, in the cases of Athens and Thessaloniki are forced to live in camps that are located in abandoned industrial sites and military camps far from the urban area and thus the refugees, exposed to inadequate and undignified housing and harsh weather conditions. In Mytilene, the vast majority of refugees resides in the camp settings in similar and/or even worst conditions.

According to the Syrian refugee Ahmet who lived in the Skaramagas camp in the outskirts of Athens:

"The situation in the camps is extremely difficult, the rights of the refugees have been totally violated. Camps are full of germs and diseases, very cold in the winter and unbearable heat in the summer. All the camps are out of town, no camp is in the city. The bus traffic with the city is very poor and the auditors are constantly intimidating us on buses, and taxi drivers are asking for double rates", (personal interview, February 10, 2018).

The Kurdish refugee Kava, who lost his two legs in Syrian bombing and he is in a wheelchair, he lived for a year at the Oreokastro camp in Thessaloniki. He describes the conditions in the camp as follow:

"For me, the situation is extremely difficult, the nine months I am in the camp I have never been bathing because there is no infrastructure in the showers for a person with mobility difficulties. Inside the tent it is impossible. Also, there is no light in the night in the whole camp, how am I supposed to reach the toilet? Actually, I just sit in the tent

24 hours a day”, (personal interview, January 11, 2018).

In the words of Ibrahim from Iraq who lived six months at the Vasilika camp in Thessaloniki:

“The camp is in the middle of nowhere, it is far from the city. This place is not for people, when we arrived it was like leaving us in the middle of the hell. We were very afraid because there were villages around us who were against the refugees, they had been organized and they were gathering against us. We were 1500 people and the authorities behaved us like animals. In fact the camp was a former poultry farm and we were stacked by so many people in a very small part, as if we were chickens. In the beginning for all the people there were only three toilets, one could not eat the food and the portions were too small. There was no provision either for infants, babies or young children had to drink milk for many days”, (personal interview, March 19, 2018).

According to the Afghan refugee Abdul who lived in the Malakasa camp in the outskirts of Athens:

“It seems to me extremely strange and unfair to put people to stay out of the cities. If an elderly person has a heart attack, he has to go from the camp to the hospital, thus an ambulance is needed. Usually, the ambulance arrives in the camp after 3 hours when the man is most likely to have already died. There is no reason to get people to live outside of the city in former military camps. It is a matter of dignity, refugees have suffered so much from the war and their journey to Greece and what they find is the misery of the camps”, (personal interview, 30 April 2018).

Also Bahar an Afghan refugee who lived in the Moria camp in the outskirts of Mytilene says:

“When I saw the wall in Moria camp, how big and tall it is, double fences, barbed wire, cameras, I said that this case is not a good case, that was my first impression. The words “Welcome to prison” are spray-painted at the entrance. Then the bus put us in the camp, and I saw people frustrated and angry. Trash spills out of overflowing garbage bins and piles up on the ground. At night, bonfires light up the faces of children and adults who try to stay warm. All sorts of prisoners are in the camp of Moria. People who are going to be deported, people who are trapped and wait more than 6 months to get papers and to leave for Athens, people staying in tents, people who are sick, actually, all refugees in Moria are mentally ill. The situation of endless waiting in Moria camp metaphorically and literally kills you, because all the time you compare the rest moments of your life with what you live in the camp and you become crazy. Smile and dignity are unknown words in Moria”, (personal interview, 25 October 2017).

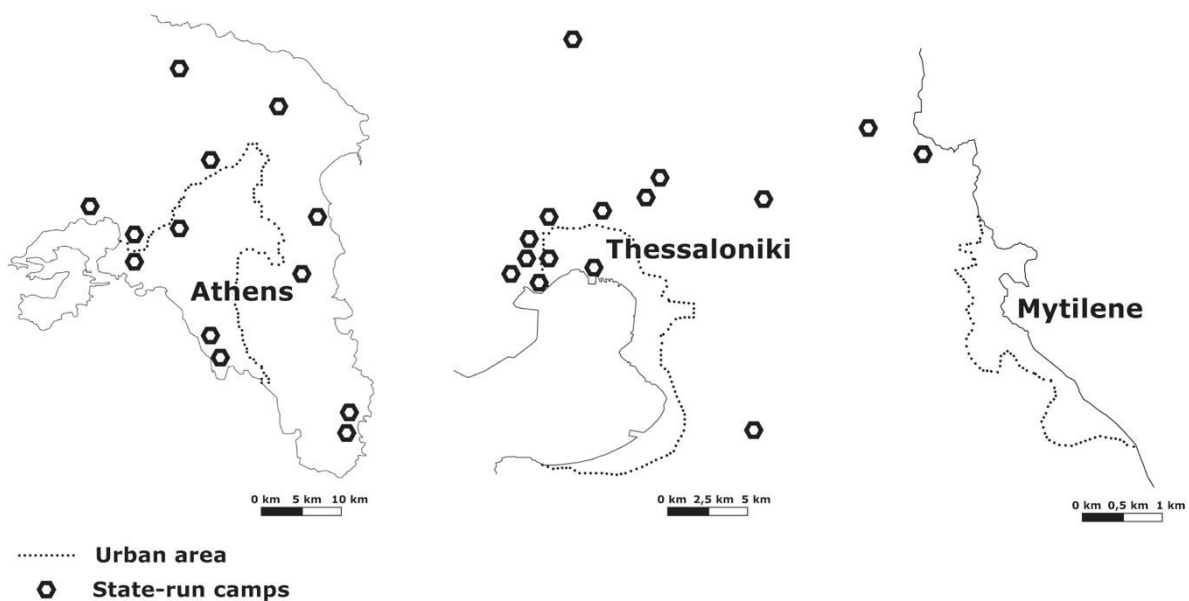


Figure 1. State-run refugees' camps in Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene 2016-2017 (source: the authors)

The State-run refugee camps in the case of Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene are mostly overcrowded dilapidated factories and old military bases (see Figure 1), where a dire lack of amenities has prevailed such as running water, and derelict warehouses in filthy conditions that appear unfit for habitation. In most of the cases there is no access to health and security services and facilities. According to several NGOs' reports (Amnesty International, 2016; International Rescue Committee, 2016; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2016), the report of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2016) and the report of U.N. (2016b) the camps do not meet international standards. They are located in extremely polluted and dangerous environments, close to or inside industrial zones, oil refineries, gaseous fuel depots, and pesticides facilities (General Plan for Major Chemical Accidents Response, 2009). According to the Regulatory Urban Plan of Athens and Thessaloniki Metropolitan Areas (2014), the majority of the State-run refugee camps in Athens and Thessaloniki are located in areas where the permitted land uses are “medium or high disturbance productive activities”, and there is no provision for residential areas. In most of the State-run camps in Athens and Thessaloniki infrastructures, schools, supermarkets and social life are remote and



most of the camps are not connected with public transportation. The reports reveal dirt-strewn warehouses lined with tents pitched on filthy concrete floors. The tents have been placed too tightly together, the air circulation is poor, and supplies of food, water, toilets, showers, and electricity are insufficient. During the winter hundreds live in tents or without heating while struggling with snow, heavy rains and strong winds. Furthermore, camps were usually either full or host to a range of problems: scabies, knife fights, food poisoning, inadequate facilities, snakes and scorpions. Thus, the refugees have to survive in inhuman, appalling and precarious housing conditions, against the cold or hot weather, the illnesses, the psychosocial distress, the lack of food, energy and water supplies.

In the case of Moria camp in the outskirts of Mytilene, NGOs (ActionAid et al., 2017, Advocates Abroad et al., 2018) and even UNHCR (2018), through common letters to the Prime Minister of the Greek Government (the first) and press releases (the latter) urge for dignified living conditions and address the issue of overcrowded reception centres in the Aegean islands. In the NGO statements about Moria it is described that: People, including very young children, live in overcrowded tents and containers, (almost 8,500 as of August 2018) with little access to proper shelter, food, water, sanitation, health care, or protection. The living conditions are particularly harsh for pregnant women to endure, and place themselves and their babies' health at risk.. Accessing water, sanitation and food is particularly difficult for the many people with physical disabilities. Single women in the hotspots report harassment by some of the men. (...) These conditions have a devastating impact on the long-term well-being of people trapped there. The Greek authorities cannot meet the basic needs and protect the rights of asylum seekers while they remain on the islands. The containment policy traps people in conditions below EU minimum standards, impedes their access to necessary services, and denies them access to fair and efficient asylum procedures because of the overcrowding on the islands and the lack of basic services'. Finally the NGOs emphasize that the Greek Government 'should rapidly expand safe accommodation and access to services on the mainland and create a system to move people quickly to mainland accommodation that provides for their medical and mental health needs while their asylum application is processed'

Moreover, there is a further analytic point here that must be remarked. On the back of uncertainty and anger over delayed asylum processes, marooned refugees in State-run camps say they have become "sitting ducks" for mafia gangs as they move in. According to several reports (Al Jazeera, 2017; The Observer, 2016; TRT World, 2017) mafia gangs see the entrapped refugees as perfect prey for prostitution, drug trafficking and human smuggling. "I never knew a thing about drugs and now I am doing drugs," (personal interview, 12 July 2017) said a 17-year-old Syrian youth who lived in a camp that stands in the defunct Softex toilet-roll factory on the outskirts of Thessaloniki. "This camp is horrid. We live like animals in tents in burning heat" (Ibid.). Drugs, he ventured, had become the central cause for violence, with brawls erupting frequently. "The Greek and Albanian mafia come here and push the drugs," (Ibid.) he explained conceding that he financed his own habit by illicitly sneaking into Macedonia, where he bought cartons of cigarettes to sell in the camp. "The police are non-existent. They see drugs, stabbing, fighting and do nothing. They do not care. The world does not care" (Ibid.).

In particular, the lives of women, homosexuals, children and unaccompanied minors are extremely difficult. There are no safe spaces and a number of incidents of gender-based violence, harassment, domestic violence, sexual abuse, trafficking and survival sex have been reported (Liapi et al., 2016). In addition a set of reports claim that "youngsters and women are too afraid to leave tents after dark at government-run camps" (The Guardian, 2016). A report from the Center for Health and Human Rights of Harvard University (Digidiki and Bhabha, 2017) on the growing epidemic of sexual exploitation and abuse of migrant children in the refugee camps in Greece reveals that there is insufficient number of specialized facilities for children; risky living conditions inside camps; potentially hazardous and unsupervised commingling of migrant children with the adult migrant population; weak and insufficiently resourced child protection systems and lack of coordination and cooperation among responsible actors. Moreover on February 2018, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (U.N., 2018) collected 622 testimonies from victims of sexual violence among the refugees who arrived in Greece in 2017. One third of the people claim to have been assaulted in Greece in the detention centers. Bathrooms and latrines are no-go zones after dark for women or children, unless they are accompanied. Even bathing during day time can be dangerous. In Mytilene Moria, one woman says that she had not taken a shower in two months from fear. Moreover even though there is a program for transferring children to schools, a very small number is involved because their parents are afraid to let them move away over long distances.

Structures & Hosting Facilities	Guests July 2018	Structures & Hosting Facilities	Guests July 2018
Lesvos	9.896	Central Macedonia (Thessaloniki)	4.527
Moria	8.000 (approx.)	Diavata (Anagnostopoulou)	1.497
Kara Tepe	1.896	Lagadikia - Vogiatzoglou	391
Athens	6.837	Alexandria	657
Schisto	821	Nea Kavala	777
Elaionas	1.519	Serres	590
Malakasa	1.075	Veroia	292
Lavrio I	250	Kato Milia	323
Lavrio II	514		
Skaramagas Dock	2.503		
Elefsina	155		

Table 1. Structures and hosting facilities in Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene (Source: UNHCR, Site Profiles, July 2018).

Although the situation is changed during the last 2 years (2017-2018), especially in Thessaloniki many of the State-run camps were closed during the heavy winter of 2017; however the last year 2018, there is an impressive increased of new arrivals and because of the closer of the borders in the so-called Balkan route, many camps reopened, again with tents and lack of facilities. At the same time in the islands of east Aegean are stacked more than 20.000 migrants. While asylum seekers before the EU-Turkey deal could move to the Greek mainland after typically just a few days on the islands, they now wait on the islands for months. Especially in Lesvos approximately 7.500 people are leaving during the summer of 2018 in Moria camp in Mytilene when the capacity of the camp is only for 3.100 people and in total there are approximately 10.000 refugees in the island (National Coordination Center For Border Control, Immigration And Asylum, 2018).

Consequently, although the EU Commission, the Greek State, the UNHCR and several local and international NGOs run and finance the official camps with a large amount of money, the online media project Refugees Deeply has calculated that \$803m has come into Greece since 2015 (Howden and Fotiadis, 2017), it is obvious that there is a huge gap between the official statements, directives, rhetoric and principles on the refugees' right to the city and to adequate housing and the daily reality in refugee camps. Moreover questions are rising about the top-down policies with respect to implementation, mismanagement, efficacy and responsibility, and also about corruption (Howden, 2017; Howden and Fotiadis 2017; Malichoudis, 2017). Thus it can be argued that the assimilation of radical contexts like "the refugee right to the city and to adequate housing" on behalf of the authorities does not lead to better human conditions but aim to cover up the daily frustration, exploitation and poverty of entrapped refugees.

### 3. Emerging refugee common spaces. Reimagining the refugees' right to the city

In recent years the greek cities have been hit by an unprecedented turmoil that is expressed socially, economically and spatially (Arampatzi, 2017; Hadjimichalis, 2011; Kaika, 2012). One of the main consequences of the socio-spatial crisis was that several public (schools, hospitals) and private buildings (houses, hotels) were abandoned in the center of the city (Vatavali and Siatitsa, 2011; Ministry of Enviroment & Energy, 2014). During the period of 2015-2018 refugees' solidarity groups occupied several of these empty buildings and turned them into housing projects for hundreds of newcomers. According to the National Coordination Center for Border Control, Immigration and Asylum, (2018) more than 2.000 refugees are hosted in squats, which are run by both refugees and solidarity groups.

The self-managed housing projects, as opposed to the State-run camps, are located in the urban fabric and near or in the center of Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene. Their spatial position is of particular importance to their inhabitants as they have access to the social life, health services, education and more favorable access to employment opportunities. Mahmoud a Syrian refugee who is living in the occupied former hotel building of City Plaza in the center of Athens emphasizes that "some psychotherapists are helping us here and told us that people who have moved from the camp in the outskirts of the city to the City Plaza, in the city center, it has greatly improved their mental health", (personal interview, 30 April 2018).

Collective kitchens, kindergartens, medicine and clothes stores set up in the self-managed structures. The occupied refugee shelters, managed as commons through participatory processes, locals and refugees take decisions together; they recognize each other's culture and customs and they try to overcome preconceptions and stereotypes. Thus new forms of egalitarian intimacy, mutuality, reciprocity and togetherness are emerged, beyond and against the exclusionary State policies or the philanthropical practices of NGOs.

According to the Housing Squat for Refugees and Immigrants Notara 26, (2016, 2):

"We are squatting an empty public building in Athens, 26 Notara Str., in order to territorialize our solidarity towards refugees/immigrants to cover their immediate needs (shelter, food, medical help). This project doesn't

stand for philanthropy, state or private, but rather for a self-organized solidarity project, wherein locals and refugees-immigrants decide together. The decisive body is the squat's open assembly where everyone is welcome to participate with no exclusions."

As outlined by the Solidarity Initiative to Economic and Political Refugees (2016), which supports the refugee accommodation center City Plaza, refugee families from different nationalities are working collectively and in solidarity with other on the cleaning, repairing, and organization of several occupied spaces. They can be seen therefore as projects of self-organization and solidarity, as centers of struggle against racism and exclusion, for the right to free movement, decent living conditions and equal rights. According to the Syrian refugee Ahmed:

"I deeply believe that the reason why the City Plaza has become so popular and it is in the hearts of all of us, it is precisely because there is no private ownership in this place. There is no room for bosses to command the refugees, but on the contrary we all ourselves became responsible for the building and therefore we have felt it in a personal and mostly collective way. Here we felt what it means sharing and collective responsibility", (personal interview, 30 April 2018).

According to our personal interviews and participation as well as several reports and scholars (Christodoulou, et al. 2016; Haddad, 2016; Karyotis, 2016; Squire, 2018) the occupied refugee shelters are managed as commons through participatory processes. Locals and refugees cook together and eat around the same table. In the words of the Afghan activist and researcher Salim in contrast, to the State-run camps: the self-organized project of Pikpa in Mytilene "offers the space and opportunity for refugees to prepare their own meals. Almost, without exception, the residents of Pikpa reply positively about food with the reminder that the possibility of cooking their own meals helps them to eat better, because their culinary tradition has its own specificities", (personal interview, 15 February 2018).

Moreover the residents of the self-organized housing projects take decisions together in direct-democratic assemblies, which usually make decisions by consensus.

In the words of Mohamed, a Moroccan resident in Orfanotrofeio squat in Thessaloniki:

"I had never seen such an effort before, nor been in a political occupation which impressed me very positively. At the occupation the rules are: no violence to anyone, no sexist behaviors are allowed, there is equality between men and women, drugs are prohibited, plus we also created mixed shifts for cleaning and cooking. We have a weekly general meeting, another day a meeting of the inhabitants and we have recently created a third political immigrant meeting", (personal interview, 15 November 2017).

Also according to Ali from Afghanistan who was involved in the occupied beach of Tsamakia next to the center of Mytilene:

"Here I am involved with No Border group and I stay in the self-organized camp in Tsamakia beach because I believe that refugees should be self-organized without the NGO's involvement. There are a lot of problems of course, but at the end of the day the camp works. The most important thing for me is to understand that the problems are not individual but collective. We have an assembly twice a week which is mostly to find out how we will organize the necessary works. Our aim is not only to cover the daily needs but also to deepen political discussions which requires time and clear mind", (personal interview, 22 April 2016).

Finally, it is worth noting that in the housing commons solidarity people with the refugees seek to ensure basic dignity issues of vulnerable groups such as women, homosexuals, children, disabled people, creating "awareness groups" and "safe spaces". These self-organized places are for many of the refugees the only option to openly express their cultural practices and gender identities. Indicatively, according to Soraya, a transgender refugee from Pakistan who lives and participates in the self-organized LGBTQ space Kontrosol in downtown Thessaloniki:

"I want to stress that in contrast to the life in the camps it is the first time that I feel safe in this space, because the people who has set it knows our needs, the people we are in the group are like me transgender and we have become friends, we talk to each other, we share the thoughts. The refugees in the group are coming from different countries, like Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and Maghreb. This is the first experience in my life that I have as many friends like me, homosexuals and transsexuals. The most important thing is that they care about me and I care about them. It is like a dream if one can feel what I am feeling now. Although I am so far from my home in Pakistan, I feel that this is much more of my home here", (personal interview, March 16, 2018).

#### **4. Conclusion: Refugee common spaces vs State-run camp: an ongoing conflict**

This paper focuses on three main implications that are considered of critical political and theoretical importance to the housing policies of refugees in Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene.

Firstly, following intersectional and decolonial spatial approaches on "commons" and "enclosures" as well as the Lefebvrian spatial analysis on the right to the city, we propose the concept of the common space as the unity of the shared physical space with the spatial commoning practices and the communities of the people who direct-democratically co-decide the principles and structures operation. Conversely, the enclosed spaces are territories in which relations of oppression, discrimination and exclusion are expressed in terms of ethnicity, gender, class, age, disability, culture, etc. Through the prism of the dialectic common space-enclosed space we sought to approach the refugee housing conditions in Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene. In the State-run camps it is monitored a considerable deprivation of materials, services, methods and conditions that could not offer to the refugees security,



sense of belonging and ensure their physical and mental health. Conversely, in the self-organized housing structures, the commoning processes are based on the multitude of solidarity gestures, the emotional, communicative, cultural and aesthetic interactions, which seek to overcome the normative dipoles of native-foreign, young-elderly, male-female, homosexual-heterosexual, Greek speakers-Arabic speakers and so forth.

Secondly, refugees' housing commons enrich the concept of the common space with the plethora of human rights, which are inseparable, interconnected and included in the right to the city. Our study shows clearly that the violation or restriction of the right of refugees to an acceptable dwelling as expressed by the housing policies of State-run camps may affect a wider set of rights. Access to accepted housing is a prerequisite for a range of rights related to work, health, privacy, transportation, sexual orientation and education. The right to housing does not simply mean that housing construction should be appropriate but requires non-discriminatory access to facilities that are important for health, safety, nutrition as well as freedom of expression and assembly. The research in the cases of Athens, Thessaloniki and Mytilene reveals that self-organized structures may better meet the above criteria.

Finally, it should be stressed that the refugee commoning practices are not only linked to housing needs and their personal space, but also linked to the claim to the right to the city, meaning the right to the multiple dimensions of everyday life, such as the public and political sphere, the social and cultural relations even in the sphere of imagination and representation. So the idea behind self-organized housing is not only to provide shelter but also to track the possibility of spatial justice as well as the pursuit of political and social rights. Therefore, the emerging housing communities of the migrating populations can be seen as potential hybrid territorial thresholds as open communities in motion that constantly negotiate the various social identities and collectively seek and re-invent the culture of togetherness and coexistence.

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