



Greece

Migrants check-in to abandoned Athens hotel

The City Plaza Hotel, in the centre of Athens, which was abandoned for a number of years, has become a temporary residence for over 400 migrants. The hotel is self-managed and provides a place where refugees can find shelter, food and medical care.

Maria-Christina Makrandreou from Athens (17/10/2016)



From the outside, it looks like any other hotel, but the laundry hanging on the balconies provides a hint as to what's happening behind the scenes. On April 22, 2016, the seven floor hotel, which had been abandoned for several years, was taken over by "[solidarity2refugees](#)", a coalition of citizens and leftist groups to house migrants. On this first day, around 115 people took up residence in the hotel. Since then this number has grown quickly to over 420 (including 180 minors), with four or five people per room. The conditions are not ideal for a long term stay, but are considerably better than in many of the camps that have been set up elsewhere in Greece.

The City Plaza project is part of the multitude of citizen-led initiatives that have emerged in Greece since 2015, to protest against the detention of migrants or their isolation in camps, and to

demand that refugees receive adequate housing in cities, with access to healthcare, education and social services. Members of the coalition at City Plaza describe the initiative as being part of *“the European and international solidarity movement that defies the militarization of borders and the outsourcing of asylum policies. Offering inexpensive solutions for dignified living conditions is also a political response to other initiatives taken by the State and NGOs,”* they insist.

No ghettos

A group of activists stand guard at the ground floor, while others work at the front desk, welcoming volunteers - about 70 are involved on a regular basis - and visitors. Giorgos, who is responsible for logistics, is welcoming a group of French people who have already come several times to [film life at City Plaza](#). Next to them, around a table, another group is preparing a [‘Notebook of Life in the Self-managed City Plaza Hotel’](#).

On the first floor you can find the kitchen, dining room and a multipurpose room used for child care, meetings and friendly gatherings. Around one hundred children, including five new born babies, are staying at the hotel with their families. *“It’s one of our biggest concerns after food: how to control a hundred kids,”* jokes Giorgos. Since the beginning of September, some are attending school and benefit in the evening from the support - mainly linguistic - of volunteers.



The migrants staying here are mainly Syrians, Kurds and Afghans, but some also come from Iran, Iraq, Somalia and Eritrea. Only 11 people have been relocated to other parts of Greece since April. Most have no residence permits and the majority have not applied for asylum because they do not want to stay in Greece. Some of them already have relations abroad and wish to join them. If they stayed in Greece, their chances of finding a job and supporting themselves would be slim. However, crossing the border has become increasingly difficult and expensive, too expensive for the hotel residents.

In addition to different nationalities, there are also notable differences in the social background of those staying at the hotel: before fleeing their country, most Syrians belonged to the middle class, while the Iranians were working class, and the Syrian Kurds were generally peasants. Life together is, therefore, not without its tensions, but thankfully conflicts are limited. To avoid creating ghettos, each floor hosts several nationalities, and the rules are strict: in cases of domestic violence, for example, those responsible are immediately expelled from the hotel.

Rules have also been agreed on relations with the local population. At the main entrance, a large poster in Greek, Arabic and Farsi warns: "Please do not make noise and respect the neighbours".



Self-management

In the lobby of the first floor, an impressive task schedule is posted on the wall, with the slogan: "Everyone is involved in everything." The hotel aims to be a place of collective and self-directed life, with a rotation of tasks and common rules that both migrants and volunteers must respect.

The principles of this "horizontal" self-management are: a coordination team; a weekly "general assembly" open to all, including other participating coalitions; a "refugee assembly" to make decisions regarding the operation of the hotel; and working groups dedicated to logistics (food and various supplies), reception, security, building maintenance, and financial management.

Volunteers also provide translation of information into Arabic and Farsi. Task rotation is per room and those who fail three times or more to meet their responsibilities have to leave the hotel. *"The message we would like to transmit is that this is not welfare, where everything is paid by the State, with public officers providing services,"* said Giorgos, adding: *"I must say that, for cultural reasons, men sometimes have more difficulty understanding the message."*

Several rooms are used by the volunteers, who sleep on site, and by [international visitors](#) – mainly Spanish, French and Germans who come to observe and assist. Activists also dine with migrants, and with more than 1,000 meals to serve every day, this is the most important daily concern for Giorgos - ensuring that there is enough food for everyone.

"At the reception, there is a box for those who want to give money, but that's for immediate needs," said Giorgos. *"In general, we prefer not to deal with money. We leave that to our international partners, who organise crowdfunding in their countries. Here, we rather welcome contributions in goods and services."*

Besides money given to buy food, some market vendors provide their fruit and vegetables at very low prices, and fishmongers and fish auctions give their unsold products for free.

Medical care is also provided: every afternoon, volunteer doctors, psychologists and paediatricians run clinics in the hotel. [Solidarité France-Grèce pour la santé](#) provides medicines. Recently, children at the hotel were vaccinated thanks to a donation.



Solidarity

The project has been discussed at length by the activists involved: engaging in such an operation implies the need to be heavily involved for an indefinite time period and to deal with many problems that are impossible to anticipate (how many migrants will remain? How long can the occupation last?). City Plaza Hotel was abandoned seven years ago, when the owner went bankrupt. The hotel employees were not paid for a year and a half before the hotel closed. Legally, the walls still belong to the owner, but the furniture and equipment belongs to the former workers, to compensate for their loss of wages. When the hotel was first occupied, the owner came and threatened the activists and filed a legal complaint. Former workers also dropped by to declare their solidarity with the migrants and to express satisfaction that the building was being used for a good cause.

Making an example

The hotel is located near Victoria Square, a deprived area of Athens with several other abandoned buildings. Housing migrants in this part of the city has special significance: just a few years ago it was one of the areas of influence of the Golden Dawn neo-Nazi party, which used to lead racist attacks. The climate changed after the assassination of militant rapper Pavlos Fissas and the trials of Golden Dawn leaders, but the hotel volunteers remain vigilant and organise security rounds every night.

Relations between the hotel residents and the locals are good. On the first day the activists entered the hotel, neighbours came to complain and throw insult, but the mood has changed

since and the situation now seems to be more accepted: one local who was particularly virulent on the opening even returned a few days later to apologise and congratulate the volunteers!

During the summer, a festival was held in the district's main square to raise awareness among the local community. The locals now bring clothes and medicine. They usually do not give money, given the crisis and their own disadvantaged situation.

But how long will the City Plaza experience last? It could be dismantled at any time, and will the coalition have enough energy to look for another building and start over? According to Giorgos, the initiative will last as long as the government tolerates it. In the meantime, Solidarity2refugees wants to give it as much publicity as it can: the more the project is known, the less risk there is of it being closed down.

The City Plaza Hotel is more than just a humanitarian action: it offers accommodation, but more than anything it aims to "lead by example", opening a collective place of life, which is self-organised and transparent. On migration, Giorgos summarizes the common position of the volunteers: *"freedom of movement and the right to stay."*



Sources: Field interviews, solidarity2refugees, NPA.

Photos: solidarity2refugees, Patricia Fillat, Nicola Zolin/IRIN.