

THE PROSFYGIKA HOUSING COMPLEX ON ALEXANDRAS AVENUE

One of the few specimens of city planning in Athens during the mid war period is the complex of refugee housing, otherwise known as Prosfygika, on Alexandras Av. which was built in 1933. The aim was to house some of the refugees who had arrived in 1922 and who had until then been living in slums, as was the largest part of the Athenian population. These newly constructed residences, which were bought either with loans or through payment plans, became a vibrant neighbourhood and in contrast to most “monuments of architecture” from that period, the buildings glorify neither the grandeur of the bourgeoisie nor the “immortal ancient Greek spirit”. On the contrary, they encapsulate the everyday life of the working class and have since become burdened with memory from the resistance during WWII, from the December 1944 uprising and the civil war.

Today, 79 years later, Prosfygika seem out of place to any passersby, and indeed they are. They comprise a complex of cheap, low rise housing and free space amongst huge government buildings and densely built high rise flat blocks. The complex of Prosfygika is one of the few remaining pieces of real estate in the local area and in the centre of Athens -a city which has been totally pillaged by construction companies- that hasn't yet been exploited for profit.

These buildings, which on the one hand are of no value to the “history” written by the ones who rule us, and on the other hand occupy 14 unexploited acres of land right in the centre of the city, were integrated very early on into the speculative plans of the state and of big construction companies. In the name of “development” and of so called gentrification there have been at times, various attempts to implement different business plans in the area. As early as 1986 and since Alexandras av. had turned from a peripheral to a central route of the city, the first attempts were made to exchange the flats of Prosfygika with other residencies. However, these plans did not meet with the approval of the flat owners. In 2001, in view of the 2004 Olympic games, the Public Real Estate Company initiates the predatory expropriation of Prosfygika with the ultimate aim to tear down 6 out of the 8 blocks and build instead a “free green space” (see parking lot and shopping mall).

Within the following two years over half the flats were expropriated. However, an appeal made to the Council of the State, by a group of owners as well as caring “intellectuals” succeeds in getting all of 8 blocks listed as architectural monuments to be preserved and as such puts a stop to their demolition. Through the years though, the expropriated flats are abandoned and left to decay. This adversely affected everyday life in the neighbourhood and provided state propaganda with an excuse to create scenarios about “downgrading” and “lack of safety” in the greater area.

Alongside the state's central planning, there have been other attempts to partially exploit the complex of Prosfygika. Various organizations, NGOs and political party agents claim part of Prosfygika in order to show off their philanthropic and cultural side, turning a blind eye to the fact that these flats are occupied by dozens of people, most of whom face severe problems with mere survival.

So for a short period, Prosfygika stood almost deserted. However, they steadily became occupied by various social groups such as migrants, refugees, homeless, unemployed and precariously employed. All of us, albeit from different origins, countries and cultures, came together on the basis of our choice to answer in this way our need for housing, creating along the way a squatted neighbourhood.

ON THE QUESTION OF SQUATTING HOUSING AND THE ASSEMBLY OF OCCUPIED PROSFYGIKA AS A SELF ORGANISED SOCIAL PROJECT

The choice to squat forms part of the practice of re-appropriating social wealth. It is a choice that opposes the extortion of paying rent, a condition that forces us to sell our time through work in order to secure a roof over our heads. Especially today, when the range of our enslavement is ever-growing, with a modern kind of dark age being imposed on the conditions of labour and with indebtedness a grim reality for many, the commercialization of housing condemns the lower classes to poor housing and young people to permanent dependence on the family.

This extortionate condition seems all the more absurd if we consider the numerous abandoned buildings that exist throughout the city. These buildings remain empty and forbidden to those who could live in them and revive them. This clearly demonstrates the rationale of profit seeking, which underlies the practice of locking up social wealth for potential future exploitation, with complete disregard for the immediate vital social needs. The criminalization of any attempt towards self housing, outside the institution of property and its commercial alternatives, reveals the hostile stance of the system against open autonomous structures and means of survival. A large part of society espouses -essentially albeit unconsciously- this stance, through the work ethic, respect to law and order and the consumption of virtual happiness, thus defending the dominant model despite the fact that this model works against society.

As a part of this neighbourhood, we believe that the act of squatting an empty building first and foremost aims to cover the need for housing, but it is also an act that can potentially oppose capitalist relations to a great extent. Having an understanding of the consistency of these two aspects and trust in the venture of self organization and collective management of our everyday life, we created a social project which entails characteristics

both of a squat as well as of a neighbourhood and which aims at becoming a community.¹

Our structure is horizontal, based on the principles of self organization, solidarity and equality, far from practices of delegation and representation; its central decision making instrument is the assembly. We know that the success of this project doesn't just depend on the right blend of procedures. Rather, it equally depends on the culture of collectivization, a quality that bears a special political and social meaning, and which for us is not merely another tool for achieving certain goals, nor another plain that can dissolve and reconstitute itself according to a metaphysical concept of contents and situations of urgency. We believe that collectivization can be of value in itself and an end in itself, contrary to an ephemeral and opportunistic approach. Moreover, we believe that collectivization is the only way for people in resistance to organize, with the ultimate aim to manage for ourselves every aspect of our lives, whether of technical or of political nature. We feel that the houses we have occupied and in which we live, cannot become products of "alternative" individual property to be "passed on" or used as hostels or alternative spaces of private ownership. Realizing that the relation that binds us together is political and not geographical, we do not consider every flat as an independent space but as part of the entire project. For this reason, flats that are occupied by the assembly or are given to the assembly by older squatters, become a commons, constituting in this way another point of reference on the map of the social struggle. What ensures this condition is the commitment of each person who resides in the commons to take on an active role in the effort towards the self organization of the neighbourhood of Prosfygika, to participate and support the structures of the neighborhood according to his/her capacity.

We are not and could not be a political group. We are striving to become a living social organism, a neighbourhood organization, given all its

¹ We understand community as a group of people and relations constituted on the basis of a common geographical space. However, this doesn't mean that simply the gathering of people in the same space suffices to create the conditions, the prerequisites and the qualitative characteristics which should constitute a community in the way that we as the assembly of occupied prosfygika understand the term. On the contrary, we define community as the sum of subjects and structures, the relations between them constituted not on the basis of nationality, kinship, religion or race, but on the basis of a common political vision of common ownership, equality and collective decision making. Its aim is to create autonomous political structures and relations which ensure, on the one hand a relative material self sufficiency, and on the other hand its self realization in terms of self regulation and always on the basis of each person's capacities and needs. What in terms of political vision is called *commune*.

unavoidable contradictions and problems, and within which our diversity in beliefs, origins, even language is a valuable resource and the creative composition of difference is a wager we are willing to bet on. Although we do not maintain any delusions about the possibility of a utopian paradise or oases of freedom within the framework of capitalism, we are however called to verify our vision in the here and now.²

From the early stages of shaping the Assembly of Occupied Prosfygika (Sy.Ka.Pro.) we were well aware of the fact that the project we were undertaking would not be easy and oddly, our proximity to the police HQ and the High Court is not the main reason for that. The difficulty lies in the idiosyncrasy and the diversity of a neighbourhood, which consists mainly of housing squats, and as such it differs entirely from all the squatting projects we have known in Greece so far. In Prosfygika there is a mixture of migrants, political refugees, “marginalized” social elements, political activists, property owners and people who rent. It is difficult for this heterogeneous mixture to communicate, due to language, culture, political and social identity. Moreover, there is the pressure of social malaise which reproduces in every aspect stereotypes of competitive behavior, private interest, individualistic autism and even social cannibalism. All this is for us as much an obstacle as it is a challenge.³

Based on all the above, we can determine our character vis a vis the “outside world”. Since we bear no illusions of “uniqueness”, we consider ourselves part of the wider radical movement. Our existence, as a part of it, depends on this movement, as its existence depends on all the collective projects which give it its context and momentum, through their political and social activity, their visions and struggles. For these reasons, we engage as much in the squatting struggles as in the struggles evolving in the neighbourhoods.

The main priority of this assembly is to help make this neighbourhood a vibrant space that can redefine itself as a squatted community. In order for us to put word into meaningful practice, we organize several structures and activities in the neighbourhood, which help give it life and encourage

2 We are convinced that the world of equality and freedom will not come out of the blue, but that its seed exists already in the old world. As this world gets stronger, as it keeps on growing and creating, the more it reinforces the processes and the experiences that will define us as social subjects, mature enough to confront the existing world, to not only inflict wounds but to demolish it and at the same time able to bear the responsibility of creating the new world.

3 Because, we believe it is necessary, wherever there is the opportunity and the foundation for it, to act on a primary social plain, since the social base is the most appropriate field where radical visions and actions can be diffused and tried out.

a sense mutual aid and solidarity that is based on terms of comradeship and self-organization. We operate a weekly collective kitchen, we collectively take on maintenance and cleaning work in a neighbourhood that has been deliberately neglected, we organize skill sharing workshops, we support collective projects for providing food and clothing to people in the neighbourhood with severe survival problems, we stand in solidarity to persecutions of squats and squatters. Alongside this, we confront antisocial and exploitative behavior in the neighbourhood, we oppose practices of profiteering and private interest, and we expect from every one of us who supports this process of collectivization to bear the responsibility of commitment and, inevitably, of our common path towards self organization.

Conscious of our ability to take our lives into our own hands, we defend the squatting movement and prosfygika as a means of challenging domination in deed and as part of the struggle for social liberation.

We propagate use value, taking up collective action, mutual aid for a world of equality, solidarity and freedom.

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