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Chapter 3

Shared heterotopias: learning from the history of a social housing complex in Athens

Commoning may characterize communities which, especially in periods in which their very existence is threatened, tend to become closed common worlds: in such worlds some people may even lose their previously established privileges when practices of community survival tend to make all share the same fate. This happens, for example, during a natural or man-made disaster that creates forms of sharing and togetherness between those who suffer (Solnit 2009).

However, although communities under such circumstances may appear to be almost naturally inclined to enclose themselves for collective self-protection, in some cases crisis conditions encourage practices of community opening and create spaces of osmotic sharing.

Rebecca Solnit describes the cases of the San Francisco and Mexico City earthquakes in which existing urban communities did not aggressively try to survive by fighting with other communities or individuals who also claimed the same scarce (due to the disaster) resources but actually opened their boundaries and organized their participation in new networks of encounter and mutual support (ibid.: 148). ‘The quake marked the rebirth of what Mexicans call civil society’ (ibid.: 143). This term was used to include all those networks of sharing that were created ‘from below’ in the absence of government support for the

quake victims and included 'relief brigades' and 'cleanup crews' in the first days after the disaster (ibid.: 143). Soon housing rights movements and neighbourhood initiatives for feeding and sheltering the new homeless were to follow. The organized Zapatista communities which slowly emerged after the 1994 uprising adapted a slogan that had been created in those days of the 1985 earthquake: 'We are the civil society.'

Maybe we can learn something important about the practices of expanding commoning if we study more closely the history of a social housing complex in Athens which was constructed in 1935 in order to accommodate refugees from Asia Minor after a devastating war. Inhabitants of this complex belonged to specific uprooted urban communities and arrived in Athens economically and emotionally ruined. Their communities had been dismantled and their common worlds shattered. But they remained attached to their shared cultural habits and values while in search of a new urban collective identity in a 'foreign' city. As we will see, those refugees neither simply adapted to their new housing environment, nor did they choose to barricade themselves in a poor but seemingly secure enclave meant to contain a culturally and socially homogeneous urban community. In their everyday practices they developed osmotic relations with adjacent neighbourhoods and the city and became catalysts of expanding commoning: their habits and open sociality influenced a lot of their neighbours. In crucial periods of this complex's history, rich exchanges and encounters created an expanding shared world.

The inhabitants of these buildings were stigmatized as 'others', coming into Athens as refugees from Asia Minor. How were they able to perforate the borders of their seclusion? How could they

invent spaces of negotiation, spaces that mediated between differing cultural traditions?

The concept of heterotopia can describe a collective experience of otherness, not as a stigmatizing spatial seclusion but rather as the practice of diffusing new forms of urban collective life. In search of potentially emancipating urban practices, we may thus find heterotopic moments in the history of specific urban sites. Can we locate such moments? And can we describe them as thresholds, in social time as well as in social space, opening towards an alternative culture of space-commoning?

Urban thresholds and heterotopias

The porous rocks of Naples offered Walter Benjamin an image for a city's public life: 'As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways' (Benjamin 1985: 169). Porosity seems to describe, in this passage, the way in which urban space is performed in the process of being appropriated (Sennett 1995: 56). It is not that action is contained in space. Rather, a rich network of practices transforms every available space into a potential theatre of expressive acts of encounter. A 'passion for improvisation', as Benjamin describes this public behaviour, penetrates and articulates urban space, loosening socially programmed correspondences between function and place. Porosity is thus an essential characteristic of space in Naples because life in the city is full of acts that overflow into each other. Defying any clear demarcation, spaces are separated and simultaneously connected by porous boundaries, through which everyday life takes form in mutually dependent public performances. Thus, 'just as the living room reappears on the street, with chairs, hearth and altar,

so, only much more loudly, the street migrates into the living room' (Benjamin 1985: 174). Porosity characterizes above all the relationship between private and public space, as well as the relationship between indoor and outdoor space.

For Benjamin, porosity is not limited to spatial experience. Urban life is not only located in spaces that communicate through passages ('pores'), but life is performed at a tempo that fails to completely separate acts or events. A temporal porosity is experienced while eating in the street, taking a nap in a shady corner or drinking a quick espresso standing in a Neapolitan café. It is as if acts are both separated and connected through temporal passages that represent the precarious, fleeting experience of occasion. Everyday occasions thus seem to shift and rearrange rhythms and itineraries of use (De Certeau 1984: xix).

Porosity may therefore be considered as an experience of habitation, which articulates urban life while it also loosens the borders which are erected to preserve a strict spatial and temporal social order. In our need to suppose a founding act for architecture, we usually imagine humans delimiting a territory by marking boundaries. In the rich complexity of city life, however, architecture becomes above all the art of creating passages. Georg Simmel, the well-known dissector of early modern metropolitan experience, points out that 'the human being is the bordering creature who has no border' (Simmel 1997: 69). For Simmel, the bridge and the door become the archetypal artefacts that concretize an essentially human act, the act of separating and connecting simultaneously. As the door presupposes a separation between inner and outer space only to transcend it, so the bridge defines the banks of a river as separated and not merely apart in order to concretize the possibility of crossing.

This interconnectedness of an act and a will of separation with an act and a will of connection can be taken to epitomize the double nature of a porous border: a borderline, transformed to a porous membrane, separates while connecting bordering areas (as well as bordering acts or events).

Thresholds both symbolize and concretize the socially meaningful act of connecting while separating and separating while connecting, the act that Simmel considers to be a characteristic human ability (*ibid.*: 66). Thresholds are constructions that are present both mentally and materially. This is why thresholds not only ensure the act of passage, but also serve as representations of the act of passage (we say we are on the threshold of a new era, etc.). And these representations, as we know from anthropological research, are explicitly involved in crucial ritual acts (Van Genepp 1960).

We can include in the category of social artefacts that symbolically and literally regulate the act of passage all those spatial arrangements that perforate boundaries. We may also include all those areas marked by human crossings that attribute to space characteristics of passage. All such spatial artefacts that are either materialized in constructions that endure time (gates, stairs, squares) or temporarily created through use (such as the route of a pilgrimage or a quest, or the ephemeral appropriation of a street by a feast or a demonstration) can be considered thresholds. Either created by stones or bodies in action, these arrangements exist to indicate the importance of the act of passing from one condition to another. Thresholds separate while connecting areas that are distinct but also interdependent. The social meaning of a crossing act is indeed to leave a condition that is familiar and to enter a condition that is essentially 'other'.

By regulating passages, thresholds indicate a potential movement towards otherness.

Otherness is, after all, a relational term. Approaching otherness is therefore an act involving both spatial and temporal passages. This can give new meaning to Harvey's assessment: 'The relations between "self" and the "other" from which a certain kind of cognition of social affairs emanates is always ... a spatiotemporal construction' (Harvey 1996: 264).

In contemporary metropolitan experiences, urban thresholds define the quality and meaning of spatial as well as social borderlines. In today's partitioned cities (Marcuse 1995, Marcuse and Van Kempen 2002), thresholds are rapidly being replaced by checkpoints, control areas that regulate encounters and discriminate between users. Residential enclaves can define recognizable urban identities. The suburban areas of American cities, the shanty towns in Latin America or Asia, the gentrified residential areas of many European cities or the immigrant ghettos all over the world all possess visible urban identities. Public space contained in these areas is eventually separated from the rest of the city, and its use is essentially restricted to the members of the corresponding community of residents. If this may be considered as common space, regarding its use rather than its production, then it is enclosed common space or common space deprived of its inherent dynamism of expanding. It can even be described as 'corrupted common space', to borrow a relevant term from Hardt and Negri (2009: 171).

Urban identities are exhibited in spaces where a common feeling of belonging dominates every experience of being in public (Sennett 1993). Spatially and conceptually framed identities therefore correspond to the experience of partitioned urban

space. Inside homogenized urban enclaves, potentially shared space becomes trapped in the form of an '*identity based commons*' (De Angelis 2012b) which prevents it from expanding to include 'outsiders'.

Benjamin, seeking to redeem the emancipating potential of modernity, offered a way to reclaim the power that thresholds possess to mediate actions that open spatially (as well as socially) fixed identities and encourage chance encounters. According to his reasoning, threshold awareness could have provided opportunities to defy the dominating myths of progress that had re-enchanted modern urban experience. Such awareness characterized the *flâneur*, this ambiguous hero of modernity, who 'stands on the threshold of the metropolis as of the middle class' (Benjamin 1999: 8).

Thresholds can perforate the unity of urban myths as well as the unity of history, considered as the site of 'homogeneous empty time' (Benjamin 1992: 252). Thresholds mark occasions and opportunities for change. Thresholds create or symbolically represent passages towards a possible future, already existing in the past. Recognizing such thresholds, the *flâneur*, and the inhabitant as *flâneur*, can appreciate the city as a locus of discontinuities, as a network of crossroads and turning points. In the unexpected connections realized by these thresholds, otherness emerges, not only as a threat but also as a promise.

Today's partitioned city is not of course the nineteenth-century metropolis. Threshold awareness, however, may reveal encounters between differing social groups and also between different life courses. Literally or symbolically perforating the perimeters of enclaves might mean comparing and connecting those separated as others. Threshold experiences actualize the mutual

recognition and interdependence of identities. The prospect of a 'city of thresholds' (Stavrides 2010b) might represent an alternative to the city of enclaves. In such a perspective, becoming aware of the power of thresholds to compare spatially performed identities is already a step towards a culture of mutual involvement and negotiation. Instead of facing otherness as clearly marked in space, one is encouraged to cross boundaries, invent in-between spaces of encounter and appreciate situated identities as open and developing.

When we confront spatial experiences that tend to actualize in time and space this precarious prospect of a city of thresholds, we can speak of heterotopias – places where differences meet. With the notion of heterotopia, Michel Foucault described those 'counter arrangements', those spaces that are absolutely other compared to the normal spaces they 'reflect', representing them, challenging them and overturning them (Foucault 1993: 422). Heterotopias are real places, existing in real societies and inhabited in ways that deviate from what these societies consider and impose as normal. This deviance may, however, be either constitutive of groups of people considered as other (people in prisons, in psychiatric clinics or in rest homes) or characteristic of a temporary period of crisis (usually marking crucial transformations of social identities, as during young people's military service).

According to Foucault, 'heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable at one and the same time' (1993: 425). These 'other places', therefore, are being simultaneously connected to and separated from the places from which they differ. We could consider this characteristic of heterotopias to be an indication of their relational status. And we could name as thresholds those

arrangements that regulate the relationship of heterotopias with their surrounding spaces of normality. Heterotopias can be taken to concretize paradigmatic experiences of otherness, defined by the porous and contested perimeter that separates normality from deviance. Because this perimeter is full of combining/separating thresholds, heterotopias are not simply places of the other, or the deviant as opposed to the normal, but places in which otherness proliferates, potentially spilling over into the neighbouring areas of 'sameness'. Heterotopias thus mark an osmosis between situated identities and experiences that can effectively destroy those strict taxonomies that ensure social reproduction. Through their osmotic boundaries, heterotopias diffuse a virus of change.

'Heterotopias are linked for the most part to bits and pieces of time' (Foucault 1993: 424). We could thus understand their status as historically ambiguous. It is at specific historical conjunctures that specific spatiotemporal experiences can be recognized as heterotopias. Heterotopias can become the places of an emerging new order that will turn the experience of otherness into a new rule of sameness (Hetherington 1997), or they can contain moments of rupture in social and spatial history.

Heterotopias may be reduced to the thresholds that connect them to the rest of social space-time. We can speak then of heterotopic moments, moments of encounter with socially recognizable otherness, that become possible because of acts of perforating normality's perimeter. Heterotopias assume a threshold character, being both present and absent in a different time, existing both as reality and potentiality.

In the diverse histories of urban porosity, heterotopias may represent moments in which otherness manifests itself

in established inhabitation practices in the form of emerging counter-paradigms to urban normalization. These counter-paradigms, always ambiguous and sometimes still bearing the traces of the prevailing culture, may become either demonized (confronted with attempts to delimit and control them) or seductively metastatic, insinuating themselves into different established common worlds.

In a study of commoning practices that tries to explore the emancipating potentialities of sharing, the concept of heterotopia may become unexpectedly useful. Heterotopias, as we have seen, may be understood as sites of osmosis and encounter, as areas in which different identities may meet and become mutually aware of each other. Comparison thus becomes a crucial characteristic of heterotopic conditions. Heterotopias are sites of comparison: adjacent spaces are being compared while being separated and connected at the same time. Identities become comparable by being present in a place that gives them ground to share, a place that is not identified by or with any of them.

We need, of course, to distinguish heterotopic performances of otherness that put emphasis on relationality and comparison from fashion-like performances of otherness. What characterizes the spectacular proliferation of lifestyles and consumerist aestheticism is the emphasis on individualist values and the promotion of performances of illusionary uniqueness. Most publicity images try to convince 'you' that 'this product' was specifically 'made for you': wearing it, drinking it, watching it, and so on makes 'you' unique, 'yourself'. Staged heterotopias of fashion and lifestyle showcases attempt to capture the power heterotopic moments have to gesture towards deviation and liberating novelty by converting it to a tamed exhibition of personal taste and to

individual fantasies of distinction. Stereotypical otherness is not relational otherness but otherness captured in the taxonomies of dominant roles. The fact that in the so-called postmodern period such taxonomies appear more diverse or less apparent does not change their normalizing role. A proliferating discourse on diversity and heterogeneity misses (or intentionally hides) the dominant practices of normalization. Normalization is not simply homogenization but, as we have seen in Chapter 1, a process of subjecting the potentialities of otherness to models that shape behaviour according to prevailing power relations.

A social centre, a self-managed factory or an occupied public space may become the locus of a radiating heterotopia. But they may equally be trapped into the model of an autonomous enclave of otherness, as we will see in Chapter 9. A social housing area, a public park or an outdoor festival may possibly become punctuated by heterotopic moments. It all depends on performances of otherness that create or use threshold spaces as instances of encounter and as a means to establish comparisons through mutual involvement. A department store, a amusement park or a gentrified neighbourhood promoting 'alternative' lifestyle products and services are not heterotopias but mere showcases of merchandized, 'tamed' and carefully staged otherness.

If the expanding inclusiveness of a community is activated through comparisons which open the circle of commoning to new potential participants, then heterotopic qualities may become important catalysts in such a process. Heterotopic spaces and times open the boundaries of communities without reducing encounters to a homogenizing procedure. Heterotopias do not circumscribe otherness but actually make otherness visible, actively comparable and thus potentially translatable. The moment

heterotopias become the places of a new 'ordering' process (Hetherington 1997) and their power to generate comparison and thus create common ground without reducing different identities to this common ground, they become annexed to new imposed taxonomies of social practices and roles. It is heterotopias, considered as always-open urban and social pores, which keep the process of expanding commoning always going. Exactly because the prospect of expanding commoning retains its power as equalitarian sharing by opening a community of commoners to newcomers, it needs to activate forms of approaching those 'outside' the already-established circle of sharing. Commoning, if it is to avoid being trapped in new forms of enclosure, needs to open itself to otherness. Expanding commoning gains its power from this always-risky, often unpredictable, sometimes dangerous but always-intense encounter with an 'outside' that may threaten but also enrich an 'inside'. Expanding commoning is the risk that commoners have to take if they don't want to become themselves agents or victims of enclosure.

What follows is a history of urban porosity that has marked the housing complex in Athens already mentioned. Through instances of urban porosity, I will trace not only chronicles of past acts, but also possibilities for future ones. And in the exceptional periods when porosity seems to impose itself as a counter-paradigm, perhaps it will be possible to discern, in this fragmented history of specific urban experiences, heterotopic moments. It is during these periods that the so-called Prosfygika area of Alexandras Avenue temporarily became the locus of a potentially 'other' public culture oriented towards the creation of common space.

A collective experience of urban porosity

The year 1922 marks a crucial turning point in modern Greek history. An increasingly dominant nationalist ideology, focused on 'liberating' Greek people then living in Turkey, culminated in the disastrous expedition of the Greek Army into Asia Minor. The *Entente* Coalition (Russia, England and France) seems to have encouraged such an expedition after the Sèvres Treaty (1920), or at least did nothing to prevent it. The Turkish Army, part of the National Revolution headed by M. Kemal Atatürk against the Ottoman state, won this war, an outcome marked in Greek history as the 'Asia Minor disaster'. After the war, a treaty was signed specifying a large-scale population exchange to be supervised by the League of Nations (Svoronos 1972).

Some 1,200,000 Greeks, mostly from cities on Turkey's Aegean coast, had to leave their homes and be transported to Greece, deprived of all their possessions. Turks from the Greek mainland, mainly peasants, had to follow the opposite route (Vlachos et al. 1978).

The state's policy was to keep almost half of the refugee population around major cities, so as to control them and to 'integrate' them into the local economy. Those who were allowed to stay in Athens had to build their houses on empty public land, mainly outside the city, using whatever building materials they could find and with almost no money. Shanty towns with no roads or public facilities emerged around Athens and Piraeus. Uprooted people tried to live in a country that appeared more hostile to them than they had ever expected.

Of course, these settlements provided Greek industries and handicraft workshops with low-wage labour. This is why many people considered the refugees a threat to their jobs, and to their

well-being. Refugees were demonized as invaders who would destroy the city's public life. Forced to cross a threshold in a period when it separated rather than connected two neighbouring countries, they were allowed neither to return nor to feel at home in their new destination. These people were actually not allowed to belong anywhere. Moreover, the Greek government aimed to ensure that poverty and discontent would not cross the borders of the shanty town: refugee settlements were spatially and socially formed as ghettos.

People coming into Athens from Asia Minor were mostly city people. They had a highly complex urban culture, so their life, even though almost completely destroyed, followed forms of sociality that were sometimes far richer than those of surrounding neighbourhoods. Refugees slowly re-established a public life based on community rhythms, making their small shops or houses into meeting places to accommodate a rich tradition of collective festivities, music and oriental cuisine. Their way of life invited other city people to share new experiences of urban companionship. Slowly the refugees converted the sanitary zone that was erected around them, those literal or symbolic walls of prejudice and status (Marcuse 1995: 249), into a porous membrane that allowed their culture to diffuse into the city. Instead of representing an unwillingly invading other that stood on the threshold separating two opposing neighbouring countries (Turkey and Greece), the refugees thus came slowly to be recognized as people who dwell on a threshold that connects two cultures sharing many common values and habits. In spite of opposing nationalisms, cultural porosity was to emerge once again, rooted in a history of cultural exchanges amongst different peoples in the Balkans and Asia Minor. After all, this region

was and is still a threshold connecting as well as separating 'East' from 'West'.

After a long period of emergency, during which most of the funds of the Greek Refugee Rehabilitation Committee were used in rural rehabilitation, the responsibility for social housing development was shifted to the Technical Department of the Ministry of Welfare. Almost ten years after the Asia Minor exodus, a slum clearance project produced a series of model settlements (Vasileiou 1944: 80–90, Vlachos et al. 1978: 118, Morgenthau 1930).

The Alexandras building complex, built during the years 1934–5, was among them. The thirties represent a crossroads in the urban history of Athens. In 1929, a new law which established floor ownership in apartment buildings opened the road to rapid commercialization of residential development. In the same period, however, some of the best examples of social housing were constructed in Athens, designed by Greek architects working with the Technical Department. Those buildings constituted an alternative model of housing, contrasting with the packed multistorey buildings of private housing that were soon to engulf all Athenian neighbourhoods.

The Alexandras complex is distinctive in its abundance of open space between the buildings. Although apartments were relatively small (most of them with two rooms, a kitchen and a small bathroom), all of them had ample sunshine and ventilation. These buildings were among the first to concretize the new spirit of Modern architecture in its programmatic manifestos and works on social housing. In 1933, the International Conference on Modern Architecture (CIAM) culminated in the Charter of Athens, epitomizing the objectives of the Modern Movement

(Mumford 2000: 91–103 and Conrads 1971: 137–46). Quality mass housing was one of the major goals. It is not by chance, then, that when Greek architects were encouraged to participate in the design of refugee housing complexes, they employed concepts and models from the Bauhaus School to produce houses appropriate for the new standards of living. Not being the direct result of market laws which had completely reduced housing to a commodity, these buildings could have set an example to follow in the rapid urbanization of the post-Second World War years.

The Alexandras building complex was characterized by a rational layout. It consists of eight blocks totalling 228 apartments of two types. Uniformity is absolutely characteristic. An effort to provide the essential household facilities in a minimum space makes the plans of these buildings representative of the Modern Movement's obsession with efficient minimum spatial standards. Socially, however, those buildings were once again a place where the refugees were to be secluded. No care was taken about the remaining open space, no initiatives were given for the complexes to be incorporated into the city. These complexes were both physically and symbolically set apart from the city, surrounded as they were with amorphous public space easily read as a separating zone.

A kind of deviation from 'normal' urban life must have been attributed to such residential areas that appeared morphologically and functionally different from every other residential neighbourhood in Athens. Although symbolically quite effective, separation was not based on a layout that tried to impose physical segregation. Formless outdoor space was left to surround and contain the blocks. A loose space, with no defined uses, sometimes even without trees, characterized the Alexandras

complex as well as most of the other refugee building complexes. Residents, who had to confront a hostile and unfriendly environment, nonetheless appropriated loose space through private and common activities that could not be contained in the buildings. A rich and evolving common life burst out of the buildings, transforming outdoor space into an ambiguous network of small courtyards, pavements, tree-shaded areas, improvised playgrounds and meeting places (Stavrídes 2002b:142–3).

In direct contrast to the rational and function-oriented design of the buildings, outdoor space was not marked by absolute boundaries. Most of the basement apartments were extended in small private courtyards, which were either circumscribed by low walls and fences or integrated into a recognizably communal outdoor space. In this latter case, private and public uses were not clearly demarcated. Visiting, small feasts and everyday encounters between neighbours wove the fabric of a diverse and porous urban environment. Terraces, where common laundry facilities were situated, became minuscule stages of an everyday theatricality where mostly women met. During the winter, staircases were transformed into noisy play areas absolutely integrated into the life of the buildings. The ‘passion of improvisation’ which Benjamin found in pre-war Naples came to characterize the activities of residents, who became highly inventive in inhabiting their standardized and minimum sized houses. Improvisation appeared to mark their ability to collectively appropriate threshold spaces, converting them into lived spaces. The staircase was not simply used to cross an in-between area. Rather, much of everyday life came to take place in the stairways, as well as in front of doorways, in the pavement areas and in the empty space between the kitchens of facing blocks, which was constantly being crossed.

Activating in-between areas as crucial public spaces means creating urban sites with no clear boundaries. A permeable membrane, a porous membrane, was thus crafted through everyday use. Analogous practices developed in most of the refugee housing settlements throughout Athens and Piraeus (the nearby port city). As Hirschon observes in her anthropological study of such a refugee neighbourhood, 'the pavement became a quasi-private area; it became an extension of the home in full, public view: the community and family commingled ... The notion of public and private space in this locality clearly overrode simple physical, spatial boundaries' (Hirschon 1998: 190). Balancing between the sometimes conflicting forms of sociality connected to family and neighbourhood respectively, life unfolded by converting spaces, which, like the pavement, acquired a threshold character, to common spaces. Not simply annexed to a family's private milieu but also not simply remaining as public city spaces, those urban areas became spatial artifices of an expanding communal life.

Heterotopic moments

On one side of the building complex stood one of the most infamous prisons in Athens. A large multistoreyed building was used to detain common lawbreakers as well as political prisoners until it was demolished in the mid 1960s. People living in the nearby buildings of the Alexandras complex remember how friends and relatives gathered outside the neighbouring wall of the prison, communicating with the prisoners by shouting or receiving notes. People also remember how during the German occupation they used to look from the terrace of their building into the prison courtyard, trying to gather information about the detained

patriots of the resistance. They recite stories of young boys and girls daringly approaching the high walls to collect the messages the patriots used to throw from the windows, usually messages to announce that they were to be executed the next morning. And of course nobody will forget the image of a small black cloth hanging from a cell window to indicate that one of the cell's inhabitants had been executed that day (Papavasileiou 2003).

Through such collective experiences, the Alexandras Prosfygika inhabitants formed a kind of hidden solidarity, participating in their own way in the resistance. An impossible osmosis of the prison space with the outdoor areas of the complex was realized through acts that symbolically perforated the separating wall. A recognizable osmosis between different families in such a period of tacit solidarity and mutual help formed the basis of those qualitatively different social bonds that characterized the community during the years of the German occupation (1941–4). Due to the active involvement of the Alexandras complex residents, those buildings were part of liberated Athens months before the Germans abandoned the city while retreating.

One can imagine this period as punctuated by heterotopic moments. Solidarity seems to have transformed the already-osmotic relations between private and public space into mutually recognized common uses of both private and public spaces, producing, thus, metastatic common spaces. Many residents used to share their poor everyday food supplies, and families used to help each other in taking care of the children or cooking. Out of an extremely precarious situation, and because of the growing appeal of the left resistance movement, a communitarian culture that was distinctively urban manifested itself in the refugee neighbourhood.

In the years that followed, this culture was literally blown to pieces by British canons and aeroplanes as well as by Greek government troops in the incidents of December 1944. During the so-called Battle of Athens, the Greek Popular Liberation Army (ELAS), the major anti-occupation resistance movement, was opposed to British policy in the area, which denied the popular will for post-war democracy and social justice. British politics resulted in a massacre on 3 December 1944, when a huge peaceful demonstration was attacked by royalist troops, sparking a long and devastating civil war (Svoronos 1972). Members of ELAS fought a decisive battle in defence of the Alexandras buildings that were attacked by the above-mentioned forces. Many men decided to side with the fighting guerrillas, while women and children took shelter in a nearby football stadium. As if to dramatically symbolize the osmotic space between the houses, holes were made in the inner walls of adjoining apartments. Those passages enabled the defenders to move from one apartment to another. The Battle of Athens was only a dramatic prelude to the civil war which came after. People living in the buildings in those days of December still remember the romantic young fighters who sought in vain to defend the dream of a just society (Tsougrani 2000).

A 94-year-old inhabitant of Alexandras Prosfygika, who has spent years and years sitting by his window because of a serious disease of his knees, recalls: 'People used to walk differently in those years [during the 1940s and 1950s], they used to look at you differently, they used to say good morning' (Tzanavara 2000). Overlooking one of the streets between the buildings, which used to be a dirt road, this old man was using his window during

the post-war years as a 'box in the theater of the world' (Benjamin 1999: 9).

Urban porosity for this man could not be experienced actively in inhabiting public space. He could, however, appreciate the characteristics of an osmotic public culture, feeling the way his window was integrated into a network of thresholds, as opposed to the screen character of windows in modern big cities.

Since the late sixties, these buildings have from time to time been the focus of successive governments who promised a park in place of a degraded housing area. The pressure produced a precarious situation for the inhabitants, who in most cases were hesitant to spend any more money on house maintenance. Common porous spaces, terraces, staircases and pavements started crumbling. The municipality of Athens did not maintain the vast surrounding open space, which could have been transformed into an urban green area. Instead this area became a large informal car park for people using the nearby hospital or watching a football game in the large football stadium facing the complex. This land is also used every day by those who work in the Supreme Court building (erected on the site of the former prison) and in the Athens police headquarters, located on the next block.

Shapeless open spaces such as the one between the Alexandras Prosfygika buildings used to be important informal public spaces in pre-war Athens. Children used them in their games, grown-ups in their walks, younger ones in their exciting journeys into adolescence. Outdoor loose space was, however, demonized by middle-class morality. The word used to name such places was *alana*, and the people who in the middle-class imaginary were only worthy to wander there were called *alania*, a word that

became synonymous with 'vagabond'. The alana was, however, a rich and porous urban space, always in the process of being transformed through use, especially in low-income neighbourhoods.

Alanas were actually spaces of commoning in pre-war Athens. People informally appropriated leftover empty spaces between the buildings and temporarily converted them into ad hoc common spaces. No authority had authorized the informal uses of alanas and that is why those spaces appeared as threatening no-man's-land in the middle-class cognitive maps of the city. The Alexandras refugees had appropriated the alana-like space between the buildings in a more systematic and habitual manner than the occasional wanderers or the playing children. They had integrated this space into a rich network of in-between spaces, a network of common spaces which were shared by the inhabitants' community.

Dispossessed and marginalized people are forced to live in hard conditions in which space is either not enough or inappropriate for a decent everydayness. They often try in informal and inventive ways to compensate for this lack. As Blomley suggests, relevant acts should make us acknowledge the 'possibility of a collective property interest of the poor' (Blomley 2008: 325) recognized as socially just. Even though Alexandras Prosfygika inhabitants didn't actually own this outdoor area (which remained the property of the Municipality of Athens, excluding the streets, which are the property of the Greek state), they should have had the right to claim the area collectively as an integral part of the complex. Instead, the ad hoc use of the area as a car park was the result of an aggressive attitude by people who thought that the area had no owner and that they could use it according to their own interests. This of course became possible

because the municipality never really looked after those spaces. From 2000 to 2010, when the immense pressure on the residents to sell their houses culminated, this deliberate abandoning of public spaces by the authorities which were obliged to look after them was an additional factor which contributed to the buildings' devaluation.

Today's parking area has destroyed the alana character of the complex's open space, transforming it into an inert urban setting. People come and go with only the aim of finding a place to leave their car, sometimes becoming extremely frustrated since this area is now very near the city centre and crowded with multistorey buildings.

The car park users are participating in an individualized appropriation of public space. Their practices of temporary appropriation are simple acts of space grabbing (often recurrent) and actually blocking and degrading the in-between outdoor space's common uses.

We can think of these space-grabbing practices as practices of 'emptying' public space, as practices of blocking the potentialities of alana-like space which would transform it into an urban threshold. Alanas were never empty spaces. They were part of a neighbourhood's diversely used shared space. Alexandra Prosfygika's outdoor area was also not an empty space. Actually, it was emptied as soon as it was filled with parked cars. If 'terrain vague' is more than urban void, then this area was a terrain vague, as 'expectant, imprecise and fluctuating' as Solà-Morales claims such spaces to be (Solà-Morales 1995: 122). But a 'terrain vague' may become the site of commoning not only if it becomes 'filled' with a specific urban use but if it is inhabited and shaped as an urban threshold (Stavrides 2014: 57–8).

During recent years the inhabitants of the buildings were once again demonized as feared others. Otherness was identified this time with stigmatized urban poverty and marginalization, emphatically represented in the image of derelict and deserted buildings. Most of the inhabitants had become owners of their apartments, having paid off state mortgages under very favourable terms. A lot of them, however, in fear of imminent compulsory expropriation, sold their apartments to a public property development company (ΚΕΔ). Others had either abandoned their houses or had rented them to contemporary immigrants and refugees or other low-income people. Some inhabitants, though, remain, descendants of the Asia Minor refugees, claiming their right for a better future in a place where the past was generous, no matter how hard. Today, the area appears to be almost abandoned, symbolically as well as literally 'out of order'. In the heart of Athens, this building complex represents a kind of downgraded housing area that belongs to the past – for many, a collectively repressed past.

However, a new set of experiences of urban porosity has recently emerged, scattered among the devastated everyday life of the buildings, resulting from initiatives taken by those who resist the demolition of the complex. A residents' coalition, with a few determined and active members, has managed to combine its forces with architects and teachers from the School of Architecture at the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA). Volunteer and ecological organizations have contributed to this struggle that started in 2000. Through public appeals, demonstrations, exhibitions, happenings and discussions taking place in and around the buildings, these residents and activists from the left and anti-authoritarian movement have shown that this

housing area represents an anti-paradigm to Athens's housing history (Vrychea 2003).

Participating in a course focusing on social housing, students of NTUA School of Architecture have shown through differing proposals that a revival of the area can be achieved through regeneration plans that respect the history of the buildings and learn from the informal uses of their inhabitants. In those student projects, the rich variety of extensions offers an architectural vocabulary that gives form to additional spaces for small apartments, encouraging at the same time osmosis between collective and private uses.

Celebrating the prospect of reviving a rich space-commoning culture, a two-day festival was organized in 2003. This same year, because of the 2004 Olympic Games programmed to take place in Athens, the government placed extreme pressure on the inhabitants. The Council for Modern Monuments made a controversial decision to support the government's main target. This decision proposed the preservation of only two out of eight buildings in the complex, considering them worth preserving as an example of a modern housing project. Sampling of course has nothing to do with the essentially paradigmatic nature of this building complex. Such a decision can neither preserve the porous condition of its urban space nor its potentially heterotopic character.

The two-day festival aimed to show through exemplary acts of re-inhabiting a different concept of social housing that was and can be concretized in the Alexandras Prosfygika. Different groups of young activists and students of architecture organized temporary squatting in empty apartments now belonging to the government-run KED. Exhibitions presenting the housing

problems of Athens and a history of the refugee settlements and struggles were organized. Prototypical children's areas and environmental awareness exhibits were housed in appropriated empty apartments. The prospect of an osmotic relationship between public and private uses was also explored by improvised constructions in outdoor space, obstructing parking uses and encouraging various acts of collective appropriation and companionship. A small deserted coffee kiosk that used to be a neighbourhood's meeting point was reconstructed and reused ad hoc. An improvised stage was constructed in one of the open spaces. Musicians as well as performers had the opportunity to communicate with the residents and all those who used the area daily and were unaware of its potentialities as a public urban space. Many people, including numerous remaining inhabitants, had the opportunity to experience an essentially heterotopic organization of space.

All these festive and paradigmatic acts attempted to regenerate a porous common space. They tried to show that the history of those buildings has transformed them to potential sites of an osmotic common life. Staircases were to become again spaces of life and everyday improvised encounters. Windows were transformed into doors, establishing a direct communication between basement apartments and the outdoor spaces. Balconies were used as temporary boxes overlooking theatrical sketches in the public space: balconies which at the same time are miniature stages of individuality that differentiate the uniform appearance of the façades.

The festival culminated in a large feast, which was enjoyed even by the patients of the neighbouring hospital. An active group of doctors supported the idea of converting some of the empty

apartments into a free guesthouse for the patients' relatives, who come from all over Greece to this public anti-cancer centre.

This festival demonstrated that the preservation of this building complex cannot and must not take the form of a museum-like renovation of the buildings. What is worth preserving is not the memories attached to the buildings, but the passages that can connect these memories with the present.

Memories of porosity

We can perhaps understand the history of these buildings as being perforated by moments of heterotopic potentiality. Rather than a continuous chain of events culminating in the present, this history is more like a discontinuous and shifting flow influenced by critical turning points. We can understand those turning points as temporal thresholds, periods that seem to disconnect past and future only to establish new, unpredicted links.

A housing complex absorbs history through its porous walls. Memories seek out traces; mostly, however, memories interpret and reinterpret traces. What the festival sought to establish is exactly this memory of turning points, this memory of fertile discontinuities in history. Refugees in the Alexandras complex, people-on-the-threshold, have witnessed a history of threshold moments, both in the micro-history of their places as well as in the macro-history in which their homes were directly involved. Monuments, on the contrary, represent marks in a national narrative obsessed with continuity, marking the road from 'glorious ancestors' to the present (Boyer 1994: 343).

The history of this refugee housing complex is connected with ruptures in the homogenized narrative of Greek official national history which crucially shapes Greek society as a fantasized

common world. The refugees interrupted national history and caused conflicts and collective hostility. Packed in their modern buildings they were both outside the city and outside the prevailing urban ethos. However, they managed to perforate the separating spatial and temporal membranes. The German occupation, the liberation of Athens and the civil war that followed were major ruptures in modern history that were mended by the dominant ideology of post-war discriminatory democracy. In the Alexandras Prosfygika the marks of these ruptures remain, representing thresholds in the past and indicating an alternative future. Life could have evolved in a different direction, if the refugees had been allowed to develop their own distinct sociality in a modernist environment transformed through use. A rich public and private life found ways to produce spatial experiences of differentiation, as well as communality, deflecting the homogenizing modernist vocabulary. Those buildings could have become an experimental prototype for modern urban concepts in the city of Athens. Instead, they were allowed to crumble, waiting to be wiped out by the market version of collective housing, the Athenian private development 'boxes'.

The refugees of Asia Minor were people who had to wait for a long time on the threshold, trapped between the world they were forced to leave and the one that they were seeking. These people, perhaps more than anyone else, were in a position to understand how important it is for the city to include and not separate. Their ambiguous and discontinuous life in the refugee settlements can indeed indicate the possibilities of an osmotic urban experience.

The Alexandras Prosfygika inhabitants could have developed a closed community in search of mutual protection and attempted to preserve a threatened collective identity. Instead of that,

they opened their community and developed forms of urban commoning that welcomed others. Their use of available shapeless public space with inventiveness and persistence created a common space that was not identified with the building residents' community. In their own way they supported practices of expanding commoning which included neighbours, relatives from other refugee complexes and settlements, and friends from all over the city. Their culture was a cosmopolitan one even though frictions and hostilities between ethnic minority groups or different religious communities developed during certain periods in their homeland (Asia Minor) due to dominating national rivalries.

What happened in the Alexandras complex is perhaps indicative of the overall changes in Greek society activated by Asia Minor refugees between the two world wars. Most of those refugees who came from important and flourishing cities were not ready to accept that their form of integration into Greek society would be in village-like enclaves of urban misery clearly separated from the rest of the city.

A shared culture and memories of a common world (even when severely shaken) can play an important role in shaping practices of commoning. The sometimes desperate effort of collective survival does not necessarily lead a community to barricade itself in. What those refugees have taught us is that crucial and urgent needs in conditions of devastating poverty can possibly create opportunities for expanding commoning so long as commoners share values and aspirations that transcend their life conditions in a certain period.

Could the present-day inhabitants of the complex profit from the experiences and acts of the 1922 refugees? Probably yes.

Some of them are immigrants from various parts of the world who found shelter in the complex either by occupying empty apartments (which had been bought by KED and remained unused after the demolition plans were cancelled by the Supreme Court's decision) or by renting those which still belong to private owners. Through the participation of activist squatters, who also use some abandoned apartments, today's immigrant inhabitants have developed forms of sharing and cooperation and even managed to expel from the complex some who were involved in mafia-like practices (including drug dealing). Unfortunately, surrounding hostility as well as a culture of fear spread among most of the so-called 'illegal' immigrants prevents them from attempting to expand the commoning practices they tacitly develop. Maybe a kind of 'separatist' militant orthodoxy among the involved activists has also not helped in opening the circles of commoning, although those activists offered much in establishing inhabitants' assemblies and organizing collective kitchens in the outdoor common space (which is always to be reclaimed from the parked cars). But, after all, expanding commoning is always a possibility to be created jointly through shared needs and shared dreams.