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## Research Article

# Homeless migrants' commoning practices. "Our House" solidarity project in Athens' Omonoia square

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**Abstract:** In recent years, Athens has been at the center of the so-called "migration crisis", as thousands of newcomers have found temporary or permanent refuge in the city. However, because the state's housing policies have reduced the available positions of those who have the right to settle in state accommodation structures, an ever-increasing number of newcomers facing homelessness and live in city's streets, parks and squares. In this context, a solidarity collective kitchen named "Our House" was self-organized by a group of newcomers on the city's central square, Omonoia Square, where it remained for two years. Our House project activities, based on mutual help and commoning practices, claimed the homeless migrants' right to the center of the city. However, in 2019 the square was turned into a construction site and Our House activities were prohibited. This paper is based on ethnographic urban research and discusses the solidarity practices of homeless migrants through the theoretical approaches of the right to the city, as well as critical approaches to homelessness and urban commons. The main findings of the paper focus on highlighting the homeless migrants' commoning practices, and the paper's contribution lies in the enrichment of theoretical discussions on the right to the city and urban commoning practices through the case homeless migrants's self-organization.

**Keywords:** migrants; commoning; homeless; Omonoia Square; Athens

### Highlights:

- The question of the homeless migrants' right to the center of the city
- There is a lack of addressing the solidarity commoning practices among homeless migrants
- Urban regeneration plans vs. homeless people

## 1. Introduction

'I am very happy that Omonoia square is on the final stretch and will open to the residents of Athens soon. Let's fall in love with it again' (Bakoyannis, 2020). These were the words of the mayor of Athens in February 2020, a few days before the renovated Omonoia square was opened. However, the crucial questions are: To whom is the Mayor speaking? Who are considered to be the acceptable residents of Athens, who have the right to "fall in love" with Omonoia Square again? What will happen to those who have been using it for years: homeless people, migrants, peddlers, sex workers, protesters, the people who have found refuge in this central square of the city? The answer may not be given directly by the mayor's announcement, but numerous magazines, mainstream media and articles throughout the last few years have emphasized that the square has become degraded and should be renovated and cleaned up, that is, by removing the above-mentioned groups, which the authorities and media consider undesirable (Athens Insider, 2021; E-kathimerini, 2022; Gill, 2011)

Omonoia Square is one of the most emblematic squares of Athens. From its initially design in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the square has been redesigned many times; the most recent renewal plan was in 2019-2020. The opening of the new Omonoia Square in March 2020 was celebrated by the government, the municipality, the Trade Association of Athens and the mainstream media for the new iconic and colorful fountain which one of the Europe's largest by volume of water, with a diameter of 30 meters and capable of shooting water to a height of 20 meters (Claus, 2021; Trade Association of Athens, 2019).

However, the new design of the square is different from the previous one, which provided a multitude of places for people to stop and gather. In contrast, the new design is completely devoid of urban furniture and seating, and there is no provision for greenery, planting, or trees. Thus, the square has been made an inhospitable place to those who would like to use it as a meeting place; as a result, it has become a mere transit point or a backdrop for tourists' selfies from the windows and rooftop gardens of neighboring hotels. In fact, the renovation project was sponsored by donations from the nearby hotels. Moreover, the redesign project did not follow public participation processes, and several civil society organizations criticized the project for lacking transparency and enforcing gentrification in the wider area. In their objections to the municipal authority architects, urban planners and the Association of Architects argued that the renewal plan is arbitrary, as no architectural competition has been carried out and it has not received the necessary permits and opinions from the Council of Architecture, the Council for Town Planning Issues and Challenges, the Ministry of Environment and Energy, and the Ministry of Culture (Association of Graduate School Architects - Panhellenic Union of Architects, 2020; Association of Graduate School Architects - Panhellenic Union of Architects, 2019; Papagikas, 2020; Petridis, 2020).

One of the less discussed issues is that the renovation project effectively prevents the gathering of homeless people in the square and, at the same time, the activities of the homeless migrants' "Our House" project, which provided daily meals to homeless people in the square, are prohibited. Thus, this paper investigates the activities that occurred among the homeless users of the square before its reconstruction. The Our House team was created in the summer of 2018, consisting mainly of Iranian and Afghan newcomers. At that time, in the center of Athens and specifically in areas around Omonoia Square, such as Exarcheia, Acharnon Street and Victoria Square, there were several self-organized solidarity projects for newcomers, such as migrant' housing squats and community centers. With the logistical and financial support of the housing squats, as well as the donations and support of volunteers from European countries, for two years the Our House team maintained a self-organized structure providing food, clothing, blankets, and sleeping bags to homeless people every afternoon in the center of Omonoia Square. The project can be considered quite successful in that not only did a large number of homeless newcomers receive food, but at the same time a place of meeting, socialization, and solidarity was created. It is also worth noting that the distribution of food in the square was not considered a criminal activity by the authorities, at the time, a left-wing government, and, according to the research participants, police authorities were quite tolerant until the square was turned into a construction site and the Our House collective was expelled from the area. In fact, the tolerance of the left-wing government (2015-2019) of migrants' presence in the center of Athens was repeatedly made explicit, such as in the words of the Deputy Minister of Migration: 'migrants sunbathe in Omonoia', meaning, as she explained, that like all residents of the city, migrants also 'have a right to public space and the sun' (Christodouloupoulou, 2023). However, the right-wing government elected in 2019, together with the mayor of Athens, a member of the same right-wing party, established ridding Athens' center of migrants as one of their main priorities. This goal was consolidated with the eviction of many migrants' housing squats (Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022) but also with the renovation project of Omonoia Square.



**Figure 1.** Omonoia Square, almost no people are in the square, and the advertising posters from a commercial center are clearly visible as there is almost no vegetation, July 4, 2023 (source: the author).

Thus, this paper discusses the solidarity and mutual aid practices of homeless migrants in the center of Athens and seeks to shed light on them through the lens of critical approaches to homelessness, the right to the city, and commoning practices. Although there is important literature on urban homelessness (Cloeke et al., 2008; Lacione, 2013; Martini, 2021) and migrant homeless people (Belloni and Massa, 2022; Sanò et al., 2021), there is a relative lack on research on migrants' homeless commoning practices. Thus, the two central notions of this study are as follows: the homeless migrants' commoning practices and the homeless migrants' right to the center of the city. The former concerns how homeless migrants have the ability to exercise sharing and mutual aid practices, whereas the latter concerns how homeless migrants exercise their presence in the center of the city. These conceptual notions are examined in the literature review section and are based on the empirical data of the field research, which will be analyzed further in the results and discussion sections. Subsequently, the main topic of the paper concerns how the activities of Our House have contributed to commoning practices among homeless migrants in the vicinities of Omonoia Square, and what impact this had on their rights to the city. Specifically, the three research questions of the paper are as follows: First, can homeless migrants be conceptualized only as passive and victimized subjects, or could we also distinguish practices of solidarity, agency, and actions for visibility in the public space and for the right to the center of the city? Second, is it possible to enrich the discussion on the practices of urban commoning through the solidarity and mutual help practices of urban homeless migrants? Third, how are urban regeneration projects interlinked with state migration policies, and how does it affect homeless migrants' presence in public spaces? The paper aims to address these research questions in the results – discussion section, revealing the homeless migrants' commoning practices and social relations in Athens' central square. Finally, the conclusion section is based on the findings of the results – discussion section and corresponds to the research questions, emphasizing some arguments for critical inquiry.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Migrants' right to the center of the city and commoning practices of solidarity

According to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR, 2009), the vast majority of displaced populations who seek refuge in other countries are moving to urban environments. However, the state housing policies of many host countries, including Greece, seek to keep

them at a distance from the urban fabric, often in inadequate refugee camps (Martin, at al. 2020; Tsavdaroglou and Lalenis, 2020). Thus, here arises the question of who has the right to the city, and in particular to the center of the city. The discussion about the right to the city cannot but have Henri Lefebvre's legendary work as a point of reference. Lefebvre, in his critical and insightful examination of the sociospatial characteristics of urban space, has explicitly sought to highlight that each city is inhabited by a great variety of social groups, that may compose the "urban society." Admittedly, he is aware that many of these social groups are 'the non-participants, the non-integrated ... who survive among the fragments of a possible society ... excluded from the city' (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 144). Consequently, Lefebvre, theorizing the right to the city, argues that it involves and connects, but also exceeds 'the rights of ages and sexes (the woman, the child and the elderly), the rights of conditions (the proletarian, the peasant), the rights to training and education, to work, to culture, to rest, to health, to housing' (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 157). Continuing this line of thinking, Mitchell (2003) focuses on the encounter with the different, that is, the concept of heterogeneity as an important element of the city, which also manifests itself with the arrival of migrants. As such, Mitchell argues that the core of the discussion on the right to the city is 'the right to inhabit the city—by different people and different groups' (Mitchell, 2003, p. 18) as well as how 'new modes of inhabiting are invented' (Mitchell, 2003, p. 18).

The concept of "centrality" is important for our research on the homeless migrants' right to the center of the city. Lefebvre points out that the right to the city is the right to the 'urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete usage of these moments and places' (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 179). Furthermore, the right to the city includes 'the right to the use of the center, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos (for workers, immigrants, the "marginal")' (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 34). Merrifield (2011) seeks to enrich this argument and claims that the right to the city center should be understood as 'not a simple visiting right ... no tourist trip ... at a gentrified old town ... but a right to participate in life at the core' (Merrifield, 2011, p. 475). More generally, the right to the center of the city is becoming more and more important as businesses, investors, administrators and tourists' interests seek to appropriate it. Unsurprisingly, in the irrefutable and multifaceted conflict for the center of the city, the homeless, and especially homeless migrants, are possibly the most vulnerable population group. Thus, this paper seeks to highlight the homeless migrants' practices in the central square of Athens, for which purpose the discussion about urban commoning practices is useful.

In recent decades, the discussion about urban commoning practices has become particularly popular in critical urban studies and urban social movements. The conceptual idea of urban commoning practices concerns self-organized and solidarity relationships among people who self-manage, share and care for open access urban spaces. These practices go 'beyond state/public provision and market - based competition' (Volont & Smets, 2022, p. 85) and thus often come up against urban enclosures like privatization, gentrification, and the intensifying commodification of urban spaces (Harvey, 2012; Özkan and Baykal Büyüksaraç, 2020; Sevilla-Buitrago, 2022). Consequently, as formulated by Stavrides (2023a, p. 154), 'reclaiming the right to the city means reclaiming the city as commons'.

Within the galaxy of movements for the right to the city and urban common spaces, a special case constitutes the urban commoning practices among non-privileged mobile populations, i.e. the migrants' commoning practices, which several scholars have termed the "mobile commons" (Moll, 2023; Trimikliniotis, et al., 2022; Sheller, 2022). At the core of these practices is the crossing of multiple physical and social enclosures and borders, as well as the invention of relationships of mutual aid and solidarity among newcomers. As Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) have argued, mobile commons concern 'the shared knowledge, affective cooperation, mutual support and care between migrants when they are on the road or when they arrive somewhere' (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013 p. 179).

However, although there is extensive literature especially on housing studies concerning the urban commoning practices in migrants' self-organized squats, collective spaces and social centers (Fisher and Jorgensen, 2021; Hilbrandt et al., 2023; Tsavdaroglou and Lalenis, 2023), there is a relative scarcity of research on urban commoning practices among homeless migrants. This paper seeks to address this gap in literature by first elucidating the relevant discussion on migrant homelessness.

## 2.2. Homeless migrants in the homeless city

Here it is important to note that the last decade has seen an important shift in the study of homelessness and urban homeless people. Until recently, scholars (Amster, 2003; Davis, 1992; Mitchell, 1997; Smith, 1996) have examined and criticized urban restrictive strategies and spatial injustice policies such as gentrification, urban renewal projects and, in general, 'revitalisation of "urban living" in downtown areas that involved attempts to clear the central city of homeless people, panhandlers, and beggars' (Cloke et al., 2008, p. 243). Undoubtedly, the purpose of these policies is to transform the city center into an attractive location for investors, tourists and high-income consumers and residents. In particular, the aforementioned studies draw attention to, and highlight the prohibition measures against homeless peoples' right to the city, and especially to the city center, and bring to the fore the concept of 'homelessness in the "carceral", "revanchist" and "post-justice" city' (DeVerteuil, et al., 2009, p. 647). However, such studies have been characterized as "punitive approaches" (DeVerteuil et al., 2009; Lacione, 2013; May and Cloke, 2014) because they tend to examine and emphasize the anti-homeless laws, the spatial exclusion policies, the anti-homeless architecture, and the policies of stigmatization and criminalization, thereby they categorizing homeless people as a victimized, helpless, and weak social group.

Newer studies have emerged in recent years to complement, critique, and further develop older approaches, by seeking to explore and emphasize the affects, performativities, and daily practices of homeless people. The newer critical urban homeless literature aims to devictimize homeless people and emphasize their survival tactics and their agency (Daya and Wilkins, 2012; DeVerteuil, et al., 2009; Lacione, 2013; Martini, 2021; Hodgetts and Stolte, 2016). For instance, Cloke et al. (2008, p. 241) highlight 'the strategies by which spaces of homelessness are disciplined and contained, and the tactics deployed by homeless people to negotiate this containment' as well as the possibilities that homeless people have 'to exercise autonomy within the wider constraints of social and cultural regulation' (Cloke et al. 2008, p. 244). In such a context emerges the so-called "homeless city", where homeless people are often 'undercutting the symbolism and orderliness associated with spaces like squares, parks, shop doorways, railway stations, etc. and thus threatening the "proper" meaning of these' places (Cloke et al., 2008, p. 243). Consequently, the city and the homeless are interconnected and, as Lacione (2013) proposes, beyond the duality of 'homeless people and the city as two discrete, dichotomised, categories' (Lacione, 2013, p. 359), there are 'relational entanglements' (Lacione, 2013, p. 358).

However, at this point it should be acknowledged that homeless people are not a homogenous group, for there are crucial differentiations across, *inter alia*, gender, ethnicity, age, citizenship, and language. This study focuses its interest on homeless migrants, the majority of whom do not have legal documents, or whose asylum request is pending. The relevant literature regarding homeless migrants has highlighted several critical issues, such as the role of social services and humanitarian organizations (Juul, 2022), the 'housing strategies of migrants who are outside the institutional reception system' (Sanò et al., 2021, p. 977), the threats of deportation (Morgan, 2022) and gender power relations (Hordyk et al.,

2014). However, the abovementioned literature suffers from a shortage of research on the commoning practices among homeless migrants. Thus, this paper aims to shed light on this and to contribute to covering the research need for deeper understanding and examination of the possibilities created by homeless migrants to develop relationships of commoning and to exercise self-organized and solidarity practices in the center of the city.

### 3. Research methodology

The paper is based on urban ethnographic material, collected during 2018-2023. Specifically, the research includes desktop research and participant observation. I attended and participated in the activities of the Our House project for almost 10 months and conducted interviews with migrants at different times and over a total period of five years. Thus, the research does not simply cover a moment of the activities of Our House project, but instead follows it from its very beginning to the end of its operation in Omonoia Square, including reflective discussions with its members after the prohibition of its activities and its resumption of operations in a new location. Due to my positionality as a Greek citizen, I chose my involvement in Our House to be as a researcher and not as a volunteer in order to avoid relations of inequality while conducting the project.

In total, 30 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted, as well as several informal conversations with homeless migrants who participated in the Our House project. Most of the research participants and interviewees were organizers and members of the core team of Our House. The interviews took place in the area of Omonoia square before and after the distribution of the food, or in nearby cafes and in the new space – a social center where the Our House project housed its activities after the square was converted into construction site for the renewal project. Migrants themselves chose the interview locations, so that they would feel safe and comfortable expressing their experiences and opinions.

The participants' countries of origin are Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria. The interviews were conducted in English and, in some cases, in Arabic, Farsi, Dari, and Urdu with the help of interpreters. The research participants gave their consent to use parts of the interviews for academic purposes. However, the names appearing in the interviews' quotes are fictitious. The reason for this anonymization measure is that the research participants are vulnerable people; many of them are undocumented without legal papers or with rejected asylum applications. For this reason, their names have been changed to culturally appropriate pseudonyms in order to protect their identity and personal data. Finally, it should be noted that in this paper the word "migrants" is used and not "recognized refugees", "asylum seekers", or "undocumented people", as the activities of Our House project was addressed to all newcomers, going beyond the above-mentioned institutional categorizations.

### 4. Results & Discussion

#### 4.1. Homeless migrants in Omonoia Square

Omonoia Square has always been popular among the poorer economic strata. Specifically, the internal migrants who followed the "Athens Dream" (Andriopoulos, 2015) and arrived in the city from the Greek countryside throughout the 20th century had Omonoia Square as their point of reference, because it is relatively close to the railway stations, the point of arrival for migrants from mainland Greece, and it is also the central station of the metro line, which connects the square and the center of the city with the port of Piraeus: the point of arrival for migrants from the islands of the Aegean Sea (Noussia and Lyons, 2009). Later on, migrants from Balkan countries during the 1990s, migrants from the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa during the last two decades, as well as many homeless people, could be found in around the surrounding area. In particular, the number of homeless migrants around the square has increased significantly in the last decade.

The increase of homeless people in Omonoia Square is linked to the rapid increase of newcomer migrants to Greece in recent years. In the last decade, Greece has become the focus of the so-called "migration crisis" (Lafazani, 2018a). From 2015 to the middle of 2023, more than 1.3 million newcomers from the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa have entered the country in order to apply for asylum or continue on toward countries in Central and Northern Europe (UNHCR, 2023). In particular, Athens, as Greece's capital and largest city, and due to its central geographical position in the country, has become an important crossroads in the movement of newcomers. In the winter of 2015-2016, in order to manage the massive arrival of newcomers, the Greek state proceeded with the construction of accommodation centers – refugee camps, 13 of which were established in abandoned factories or former military camps on the outskirts of Athens (Tsavdaroglou and Lalenis, 2023; Papoutsis, 2021). However, in the ensuing years, many of the state-run camps were closed down. Another key policy was the state housing of vulnerable asylum seekers in rented apartments within the urban fabric under the EU-funded ESTIA program. However, from 2020 onward, this program reduced the number of accommodations available to beneficiaries and was finally terminated in 2022. Finally, many newcomers found refuge in dozens of occupations of abandoned buildings in the center of Athens (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019; Tsavdaroglou, 2018; Lafazani, 2018b). These housing projects experimented with forms of self-organization and solidarity, but since 2019 most of them have been evacuated through violent police operations (Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022). These state policies have not been explained or justified by the official authorities; however, they express the unwillingness of the state authorities to accept the presence of newcomers in the urban fabric. Today, only those seeking asylum have the right to stay in state-run camps; those who have acquired refugee status, as well as those whose asylum applications have been rejected, are excluded from state housing policies. Consequently, in recent years a large number of newcomers have faced homelessness and lacked access to basic benefits such as food, clothes, and cash assistance. The vast majority are living on the streets, in parks, and in abandoned buildings within the city center.

Facing this situation, a group of newcomers, mainly from Iran and Afghanistan, self-organized the infrastructure to distribute food to homeless people every afternoon for almost two years in the center of the city, namely in Omonoia Square.

#### 4.2. The "Our House" project. Homeless migrants' practices in Omonoia Square

Responding to the needs of homeless people, a collective of migrants called "Our House" self-organized a collective kitchen in Omonoia Square. According to Amir, an Iranian member of the Our House group:

*'We searched several squares to see which is the most suitable for our idea. We decided that Omonoia Square is the best place, because it is next to Exarcheia neighborhood where many migrants' squats are located, near Victoria Square and Monastiraki and generally close to places with homeless people and migrants. We started the project in August 2018.'* (Personal interview, December 16, 2019).



Around the area of Omonoia Square lies the Exarcheia neighborhood, Victoria Square and Acharnon Street, where thousands of newcomers live in rented apartments or in occupied buildings (Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022; Lafazani, 2018b). Also in the wider area are a number of migrant-owned businesses such as restaurants, cafes, barbershops, mini markets, and money changers, turning the area into the main reference point for newcomers in Athens. Therefore, the proximity of Omonoia Square to the aforementioned newcomers' structures and activities was an important factor not only for the Our House project's communication with migrant communities, but also for networking and support of the Our House project by migrants' solidarity structures. The food was provided and prepared by neighboring migrant shelters, migrants' housing squats or nearby migrants' houses and restaurants. Thus, the maintenance and sustainability of Our House as a project, which could be considered as a common, were made possible through supportive relationships. After all, to be viable, any common must network and communicate with supportive projects, otherwise it risks isolation and decline (Stavrides, 2016; Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022).

In Omonoia Square, the Our House group served almost 200 meals per day, provided clothes, blankets and sleeping bags to homeless migrants, organized music concerts, and set up a small street library. These mutual help and solidarity activities can be perceived as commoning practices among migrants that express their claims for visibility and the right to the city center.

In the words of Pezman, an Iranian member of the group:

*'A reference point was set up for both volunteers and activists who want to help the homeless and the homeless themselves in the city center. Most importantly, relationships of mutual help between the homeless began to be created. In other words, Our House became a meeting point, a point of solidarity and mutual aid. The distribution of food was just the occasion for the homeless people to create relations of solidarity.'* (Personal interview, December 2, 2019).

In the above quote it becomes clear that the creation of meeting, communication and solidarity space is just as important distributing food. Therefore, a common is not simply the sharing of material resources; it is also, and indeed primarily, about the creation of new social relations of solidarity and mutual support, which may then have the capacity to invent and activate new practices of sharing and commoning. As Abdul from Afghanistan explains in more detail:

*'Gradually we started to bring clothes, sleeping bags, shoes, etc. Most importantly, homeless migrants themselves started sharing their own things, for example someone maybe has two sleeping bags and bring one to give to someone else who needs it. Also, with the contacts we have in migrants' squats we have found shelter for some migrant families that we met in Omonoia Square. Here I would like to emphasize that most of the homeless people are migrants from the Middle East or Africa, but in Our House, there is no discrimination, everyone is welcome.'* (Personal interview, September 11, 2020).

Consequently, it becomes clear that the idea of the Our House project is to overcome divisions based on nationality and to become a trans-national communication bridge. As such, its operation in Omonoia Square is in direct opposition to the authorities' redevelopment plan, which seeks to make the square attractive only to Greeks or tourists while excluding poor and homeless migrants. Indeed, this feature of the Our House project enriches the discussion on urban commons in that it brings forward the importance of an urban common as a vehicle for the right to the city to include different people (Lefebvre, 1996; Mitchell, 2003) and being open to newcomers without exclusion.

Also, from the moment Our House became a meeting point, various people and activists started helping and bringing clothes and sleeping bags. According to the members of Our House, more than 500 sleeping bags were distributed in Omonoia Square in less than a year. Hakim from Syria says:

*'So now we had food, clothes and sleeping bags. Then, we thought, why not have a barber? The homeless are in great need of barbers. So, we asked homeless migrants if anyone knows how to cut hair, and as a result, a homeless person from Iran would be available to give people haircuts every afternoon for a couple of hours. Then, we thought of having some music. We asked the homeless people again if they knew how to play any musical instruments, and we brought some guitars.'* (Personal interview, February 4, 2019).

In this way, relations of solidarity and commoning shape the welcome framework in which new people can be invited to participate. In other words, as Stavrides (2023b, p. 54) emphasizes, 'commoning practices ... shape both the social relations that support them as well as the actors involved'. This element of solidarity and commoning relations is especially important in the case of homeless migrants. As Salim from Afghanistan has argued:

*'While in Athens there are so many NGOs for migrants that provide food on their sites, until now there was no structure to provide food to the homeless in open spaces. Homeless migrants do not have mobile phones and internet access to look at the map and find the NGOs' buildings. Homeless migrants may know some abandoned buildings and central squares. To be precise, their house is the square. This is how the name "Our House" was born. Omonoia is obviously not a normal house, but at the same time it is the home of so many homeless people.'* (Personal interview, November 21, 2018).

Here it becomes apparent that Our House project seeks to bring the condition of homelessness out of obscurity and, by adopting the specific provocative name, seeks to give voice and visibility to the most neglected inhabitants of the city, the homeless, and especially the homeless migrants. However, Our House does not do so following a victimization approach, perhaps with a dose of pride, it proclaims that the square is the real home of the homeless. For instance, the words of Morteza from Iran emphatically demonstrate that the square is the real home of the homeless people:

*'After all, the city itself is the big home for all of us whether we are rich or poor or homeless. Especially if you are homeless, then the city, with its streets and squares, is your real home. The square is the real home for the homeless. The square is just a passage for those who have a home, but for the homeless, it is their real home. Our House wants to demonstrate this, we do not hide ourselves, we go out in the middle of the square and make the homeless people visible. Our House breaks the silence, the sadness and the hunger of homeless people, gives them food, clothes, music, finally gives them a face in the central square of Athens.'* (Personal interview, January 21, 2019).

The idea of visibility and claiming presence, especially in the center of the city, is particularly important. Usually, the literature on homeless people is focused on authorities' restrictive policies of exclusion; however, the Our House case study contributes to the newer stream of agency-oriented approaches that focus on how homeless people 'create spaces for themselves in the city' (Daya and Wilkins, 2012, p. 357). The emphasis on agency is particularly important in the case of the Our House project: On the one hand, it is not based on philanthropic relations and financial support from NGOs, municipal or state organizations; on the other hand, the initial idea and practice was to encourage relationships of care and solidarity between homeless migrants themselves, as well as with related self-organized projects such as the migrant housing squats. For this purpose, the Our House project aims to invert the narrative of the weak homeless subject by highlighting the fact that the homeless are daily users of the city, and especially of the central square, it is they who give it life and break anonymity.

In light of this, perhaps one of the most interesting points in Our House project is the potentialities of transforming the central square of Athens from a space of anonymity to a meeting and welcome space for homeless people. According to Reza from Iran:

*'Omonoia Square is the busiest square in the city. Cars, shops, people pass by and leave, but the homeless stay there. For the homeless people Omonoia square is their home, it is their family. But it is a house without walls, which means that they may be exposed to many dangers, such as police raids; however, it is also an opportunity to create their own community. This is what Our House seeks, for the homeless to come together, to get to know each other, to trust each other and to build their own community. Every day I went to Omonoia Square, many people knew me and greeted me, kissed me, hugged me, called me by my name and I called them by their names. If you stand all day in Omonoia you will not see anyone hugging someone else, people are running by, cars and buses are everywhere. The hug, the smile and the community are missing from Omonoia. Thus, Our House is an effort to transform Omonoia from a point of anonymity, stress, and car emissions into a warm embrace for the homeless. Every day new homeless people appear, they feel safe and a sense of intimacy is created between them. It is still early, it is a small effort, but we have made a start.'* (Personal interview, October 10, 2018).

A very interesting point emerges here. The activities of the Our House project transformed Omonoia Square, from a hub for cars and people who are usually in a hurry, into a meeting place for homeless migrants. The notion of resident or local is probably unknown in the case of Omonoia Square, as everyone is a passer-by, crossing and leaving the square. This fact has a double meaning. Firstly, due to the function of the square as a transit hub, there is no possibility to establish relationships with locals, because, apart from the shops and hotels, the area of Omonoia Square is not a residential neighborhood. Therefore, during the field research and in the conducted interviews it was made clear that the question of whether homeless migrants interacted or created relationships with local people could not be answered, because local residents were absent from the square. Secondly, homeless migrants sought to address the lack of a sense of neighborhood by giving, even ephemerally, features of community and intimacy to the square. What is particularly important is that this was made possible through actions of commoning, which demonstrates that relationships of commoning have the potentiality to flourish even in inhospitable environments like that of Omonoia Square.

However, the municipal plan to redesign the square initially ended the activities of the Our House project by turning the area of the square into a construction site for about a year and a half. The new Omonoia Square, with its new architectural design, does not favor the meeting and gathering of people. The new plan aimed to create a square that would boost tourism in the wider area and discourage people, among them homeless migrants, from gathering in the square. The new square is no longer inviting: it does not welcome passers-by to meet and sit in it, for there is a complete absence of urban seating equipment. In fact, the square turns into a roundabout with a gigantic fountain which acts as a 'decorative decor for the adjacent hotel units' (Papagikas, 2020). In this way, the new design cuts off the organic connection of the square with the life of the city; the square turns into a postcard and 'those who spoil the image' (Papagikas, 2020), homeless people and migrants, no longer have space on the square.

Needless to say, the organizers and members of the Our House project could not challenge the redevelopment project, mainly because of their precarious legal status as homeless migrants, many of whom are without legal papers. However, they did not cease their commoning activities. The lived experience and the commoning relationships that had been built were valuable resources for continuing the Our House project in other places. When the square was transformed into a construction site, the Our House project temporarily moved to Victoria Square, another point of reference for newcomers, where it continued the distribution of food. Later on, the members of Our House rented a space in the area of Kypseli, also a neighborhood with migrants, and created the "Café Patogh" community center. Yet, migrants continued to claim their presence in the streets around the Omonoia Square while police forces implemented a "cleaning-up" agenda.

#### 4.3. Homeless migrants' agency, commoning and the struggle for right to the center of the city

Until now, the discussion about homeless people in Athens has focused mainly on Greek citizens who lost their properties and jobs due to the previous decade of financial crisis (Arapoglou and Gounis, 2017; Kourachanis, 2017; Sapounakis, 2015; Theodorikakou et al., 2013), whereas research on homeless migrants has been absent. Thus, this case study seeks to highlight a neglected but growing aspect of homelessness, that of homeless migrants, and for the purposes of the paper, the following four arguments are sketched.

First, the displacement and exclusion of homeless migrants is no mere side effect, indeed, it is a goal of the Omonoia Square regeneration plan, which seeks the commercial and touristic revitalization of the wider area. The entities behind this initiative hope to dramatically reduce the likelihood that tourists or affluent shoppers will encounter people who cannot afford to stay in expensive hotels or shop at luxury retailers. The homeless, and especially the migrant homeless, have no place in the new Omonoia Square. This finding confirms the validity of the older theoretical approach on homelessness, namely the so-called "punitive approach" (Lacione, 2013, p. 359) regarding the policies of exclusion of the homeless from city centers. However, Our House's activities, as long as they lasted, also reveal the transformative potentialities of homeless migrants' practices.

The second argument, therefore, is that the discussion about homeless migrants should be enriched by the agency shift of homeless literature, which 'unsettle[s] the dominant representations of the homeless city as a landscape of despair' (Martini, 2021, p. 57). Although there is a significant output of scientific research on homeless migrants, this paper aims to underscore that migrants are also 'active urban agents and (infrastructural) change-makers' (Beeckmans, et al. 2022, p. 16). As Mohammed, a member of the Our House group, argues:

*'Society often looks at and considers homeless as people who have no power, who are not strong, who are weak and sick. But the homeless are very smart people. They might find themselves without hope. But the most important thing is that homeless people help each other. The main difficulty homeless people have is to create friendships and to not be treated as weak. The second important issue is to feel creative, this is what we are trying to do in the Our House project: to create a meeting space where homeless migrants can express their creativity. Some may know how to play music, others how to cook, others how to cut hair, all of us know how to do something or can learn something. That's why at Our House we seek to create something that feels like our home.'* (Personal interview, May 26, 2023).

Therefore, it is important that the condition of homelessness, and especially the homelessness of migrants, be disentangled from the rhetoric of victimhood and powerlessness, and instead be focused on the commoning agency, which includes the daily active practices and the possibilities of homeless people to invent forms of mutual care, empowerment and creativity, and which can also acquire a spatial character in the perspective of the Lefebvrian "urban society" (Lefebvre, 1996). According to Blomley (2008, p. 320), 'the commons, ..., is not so much found as produced, ... the commons is a form of place-making.' In the case of the Our House project, it is precisely this productive place-making possibility that emerges. The research on the Our House project demonstrates that homeless migrants' agency has the following three features: Firstly, it has the capacity to materially support newly arrived people who are facing homelessness; secondly, it seeks to bring out the unique and different



**Figure 2.** Graffiti on a small pillar in the square that is written the slogan: “MIGRANTS WELCOME, UNITED WE STAND” July 4, 2023 (source: the author).

abilities of each homeless migrant by encouraging them to practice and exercise their talents e.g. through activities like music and cooking; and thirdly, it is a place-making process of giving life and usability to a location, Omonoia Square, which would otherwise be nothing more than a place of anonymity, of hastily passing by and daily stress.

Third, the Lefebvrian concept of the right to the city can be enriched by the practices of homeless migrants. Hassan, from Iran, reflecting on the activities of the Our House group, emphasizes that:

*‘For most of the people, the street or the square is a place that they just pass, from their house to their job, to a restaurant or to a bar. They just cross the square. They don’t stay there; they don’t use the space. Our idea was very provocative. The homeless people that are living in the street, they are the real users. So how can we conceptualize the appropriation of the square, from an empty space to a real human space and how can the homeless, who are the real users of the square, to eat, sleep and create friendships in the square. This was the main question and stake of the Our House project.’* (September 10, 2023).

This intention and desire, but also the practice expressed by the homeless migrants, who are the city’s least privileged inhabitants, confirms the Lefebvrian discussion on the right to the city. However, it could be argued that it reaches beyond this because the homeless migrants, in contrast to other social groups, use the street and the square as their home as well. Although these places may be precarious and vulnerable to multiple risks; it is there that the homeless becomes the actual daily and nightly users and agents of the right to the city, and especially to the city center. At this point, the emphasis on Lefebvre’s right to the center of the city should be added: In opposition to state migration policies that enclose migrants in camps outside of the city (Tsavdaroglou and Lalenis, 2023), the Our House project supported homeless migrants who claim their presence in Athens’ most central square. However, unlike the old government, which acknowledged the square as a space of commonality, its demolition and reconstruction by the new political leadership shows that the homeless migrants have only limited rights to the city, not least of all, they are deprived of the right to protest because they do not have status as citizens. Fourth, the discussion on homelessness, and in particular, homeless migrants’ practices, can be deepened through the approaches of commons; conversely, the discussion about commons can be enriched through the mutual help practices of homeless migrants. This enrichment has a double benefit. Firstly, until now, the practices of homeless migrants have received relatively little recognition as commoning practices. However, in the Our House case study, it became clear that homeless migrants have the ability to transform one of the most central squares of Athens into a potential common space, specifically by creating a welcome, creative, and open infrastructure for homeless people. As Stavrides (2014) argues, ‘emerging subjects of commoning actions transform themselves by always being open to “newcomers” ... by becoming always newcomers themselves’ (Stavrides, 2014, p. 548). This is precisely the aim of Our House: that homeless newcomers in Athens create a place of meeting and mutual support for other homeless newcomers in the central square of the city, thereby bridging the condition of homelessness with that of the newcomer. Secondly, the literature on commons usually examines commoning practices and infrastructures of commons whose members are homogeneous in terms of nationality, religion, ideology, and citizenship. However, the Our House project for homeless migrants demonstrates that it is possible for commoning practices to be developed among people from different countries of origin or different religions and cultural backgrounds. In the words of Azar from Afghanistan:

*‘The goal of Our House is to succeed in breaking down the divisions between locals and migrants. If you are homeless, it doesn’t matter which country you are from. Your home is the street and all homeless people have the same needs, and the most important ones are companionship,*

*mutual help, and friendship. We have seen that this happens at Our House. Homeless people who didn't know each other before have come closer through the activities of Our House, and friendships have been made possible regardless of the ethnicity of homeless people'* (Personal interview, November 10, 2020).

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper, I sought to analyze and reconceptualize the migrant homeless peoples' right to the center of the city through the lenses of urban commoning practices. The paper draws on the Lefebvrian right to the city as well as critical literature on homelessness and migrants' commoning practices. The presentation of the conflict around the Omonoia Square renovation project, and the examination of the activities of the Our House activities for homeless migrants lays the foundation for the following arguments corresponding to the introductory research questions.

First, this paper aims to respond to the call of Cloke et al. (2008, p. 242) to 'breathe new life into understandings of the homeless city', by going beyond the literature that views homeless people only as 'undesirable in prime urban spaces' (Hennigan, 2019, p. 150) and as 'passive victims of new policy regimes' (May and Cloke, 2014, p. 896). Instead, this paper aims to illustrate and underline the possibilities of solidarity, mutual help, and commoning practices among migrant homeless people, as well as their attempts to claim visibility and the right to the center of the city. Although homeless migrants' lives are fraught with precarity, this study adheres to the argument that homeless migrants have the potential to exercise spatial agency (Awan et al. 2011). This is manifested mainly in their daily presence in Athens' central square, where they created the necessary conditions for their visibility and, with their activities, exercise in practice their right to the center of the city.

Also, the Our House project case study enriches the literature on urban commons. Commoning among homeless people, and especially among migrant homeless people, reveals aspects of commoning that are not yet fully examined. I argue not only that commoning practices among homeless migrants in Omonoia Square contest forced victimization, criminalization, and marginalization of state migration policies, but also that they experiment with forms of horizontality, mutual help and solidarity, thereby highlighting a collective agency. The latter was possible because Our House was not the only project of solidarity with migrants; rather it operated in cooperation and mutual support with other migrants' self-organized projects in the wider area of the Athens city center. Furthermore, another important characteristic of Our House commoning practices is that they transcend ethnical divisions and the participants of the project experiment with forms of encounter, togetherness, and interaction among homeless people beyond the borders of citizenship and nationality.

Moreover, the paper contributes to the examination of migration policies that reign within the built environment in urban areas. Usually, the research on migration policies focuses on state policies to prevent the arrival of migrants, the violent push backs (Border Violence Monitoring Network, 2020), the housing policies of confinement in refugee camps outside of the cities (Tsavdaroglou & Lalenis, 2023), the slow and labyrinthine bureaucratic procedures of asylum requests (Tsitselikis, 2019), as well as the daily manifestations of xenophobia and racism (Arvanitides et al., 2021; Lafazani, 2021; Papatzani, 2021). An additional category that this paper highlights encompasses the state policies of urban regeneration, which result in the prohibition of migrants' activities, and especially the displacement of homeless migrants, from prime urban areas.

Finally, the Our House project, for as long as it was allowed to function, aimed to resignify and transform the Omonoia Square from a place of anonymity into a place of care and community that territorialized new transnational common spaces for the most vulnerable people, emphasizing that homeless migrants' lives matter and deserve to be visible in the center of the city.

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