

The Struggle for Integration of Refugees and Immigrants: Examples of Integration of Refugees in European Cities and the Case Study of Athens

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the integration of refugees and immigrants into Greek society through the provision of housing. This topic is a hot one due to the fact that many refugees have arrived in Greece during the previous years and there is a need to remain for a long time. Thus, the provision of housing is imperative. However, due to the economic crisis, the creation of such spaces is expensive and unachievable. As a result, alternatives should be examined. For this purpose, different policies of the smooth integration of refugees and immigrants in European countries can provide such solutions. Three case studies were selected across Europe and they have been compared to the Athenian paradigm. Through this research, proposals about their successful integration have been derived. In that way, it will be possible to provide specific plans that reorganize various areas in Athens in order to make this vision a reality.

Keywords: refugees, immigrants, integration, non-used buildings, case studies, Athens.

Introduction

The refugee crisis is located at the foreground of urban history of the Greek cities for a century, considering the continuous flow of population to and from Greece, mainly after the Asia Minor Catastrophe. Indeed, during 1920s, almost 1,400,000 refugees fled to Greek territory (Hirschon, 1989 in Vergeti, 1992). The refugee flow continued during the 1980s and 1990s (Triandafyllidou, 2009; Mogli and Papadopoulou, 2018), culminating in the 2010s, as people from other countries viewed Greece as an entry point to Europe. According to Giannakopoulos and Anagnostopoulos (2016) who quote data of the UN Refugee Agency (2016), roughly 860,000 refugees and migrants have entered Greece during 2015-2016. Following the closure of “Balkan migrate route” in March 2016, dozens of thousands of refugees remained trapped in Greece (European Commission, 2018), despite the fact that the number of newcomers was contained (Figure 1). The initial reaction of the Greek government was the development of temporary housing structures organised in abandoned camps and parks, almost

in the entire Greece. However, as far as the probability of permanent settlement of a large number of people as well as the need for their integration in the Greek society increase, the questions still arise regarding the way in which those people will rehabilitate.



Figure 1. Arrivals per day during 2015-2019 (January). Source: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

Historical approach of the issue notes that during the 1920s the Refugee Restoration Committee (EAP) focused on the refugees' housing rehabilitation mainly in countryside areas but in cities as well, through the establishment of new settlements. Those settlements were developed according to a development plan, as well as granting the exchangeable Muslim property to the refugees (Lianos, 2016). However, there were many other settlements developed without plans. Informal self-housing was the main mechanism used in such cases. In those cases, settlements were located without criteria across Greece (Thessaloniki, Volos, Kavala, Serres, Agrinio, Kesariani, Vironas, Nea Ionia, Kokkinia) (Lianos, 2016). Although such areas were planned as residential areas (Bakogiannis, et.al., 2015), they still preserve their traditional character and mixed-used building forms.

At present, in the context of Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation (ESTIA), housing land is in quest for 20,000 refugees in various areas of the country. In contrast with the housing programs of 1920s that had foreseen the construction of new residences, today's programs focus on the renting of buildings or apartments. Conducting a literature review, it was established that the housing methods provided to the refugees in Greece, nowadays, are the following:

- a) Apartments rented by the state.
- b) Apartments rented by refugees or immigrants. Usually, one group of refugees, relatives or not, reside in one apartment.
- c) Leased hotels by the state.
- d) Refugee hosting centers (hot-spots), which were organized in order to provide temporary residence to refugees. However, in reality, refugees stay in those centers for a long period of time. The centers usually present the below forms: (d1) designed buildings (d2) containers converted in residential spaces, like in the case of Eleona (d3) tent camps, like in the case of Moria in Lesvos.
- e) Refugee hospitality through cohabitation, like the "Home for Hope" project. In the context of this action, the owner of a house accommodates a specific number of people up to two months (up to eight months, in practice) with a small price in return.

- f) Occupation of empty spaces. Typical examples are the ones of City Plaza Hotel and the conquest of the building in 26th Notara Str. in Exacrheia.
- g) Municipal spaces and buildings, mainly in cases of adverse weather conditions.
- h) Public urban spaces, in cases of refugees or immigrants who haven't secured a space or tent to spend the night.

Taking all the above into consideration it is ascertained that there is no organized plan of housing for a large number of refugees and immigrants. As a result, it is not only a political, social and economic problem but also an urban planning one, since the impacts caused from a rough housing attempt of large groups of population affect the way cities function both in the short term as well as in the long term period. In the context of this research paper, good practices of refugees' housing through the re-use of existing/un-used buildings are examined (Section 2). For that purpose, the possibility of use of empty buildings in Athens is being investigated (Section 4), following an analysis of the current situation regarding the existing buildings of a specific area in the center of Athens (Section 3). Thus, useful conclusions result, which can contribute to the alleviation of the refugee phenomenon through smooth integration of refugees.

Case studies research

In the context of researching for good practices, two refugee establishment cases were examined in Italy and Germany. The choice of countries is related to the increased number of applications for granting asylum from the part of the refugees.

The first case concerns the Sicilian village of Sutera, whose population recorded a continuous drop between 1970 and 2010, a fact that is connected with the high percentages of unemployment in the area (Urbano, 2016; Tondo, 2018) as well as the isolation related to the absence of satisfactory road infrastructure and bad public transportation system (Zancan, 2016). The decision of local authorities (2014) (Urbano, 2016), to provide abandoned homes to 50 asylum seekers contributed to the increase of population of the village (Tondo, 2016), in 2016. The integration of residents was done in the frame of a European resettlement program which funds cities in order to host a certain number of refugees (Tondon, 2018). The financing touches 263,000 euro per year with a positive impact to the restoration and rent of these empty houses as well as the creation of new jobs (Zancan, 2016). The 1,000 m² school of the village continued to operate in spite of the fact that the plan before the establishment of refugees foresaw its closure (Cipriano, 2018; Tondon, 2018). In that way, the purpose of integration of refugees into the village's social fabric was easily achieved and the residents' objections were soon detained (Urbano, 2016). Today, Suttera is identified as one of the best examples of refugees' integration (Open Migration, 2018) which emits multiculturalism and achieves to approach again the interest of its own refugees (Italians that now live and work abroad or in other cities across Italy) visiting the village in purpose of tourism (Urbano, 2016). By highlighting the village as a good practice in combination with the highlighting of monuments of cultural inheritance is considered parameters that might favor the tourism in the close future (Zancan, 2016).

Relevant were the motives of integrating refugees in Golzow village, a rural and structurally disadvantaged region of Brandnurg, Germany (Schiffauer, 2019). The population of the village showed significant drop from the 1990s resulting, in the middle 2010s, in the consideration of closing the local school, since the necessary number of students were not available so that to operate, even one class. Thus, despite the initial anti-refugee climate that was developed (Bell, 2017; Schiffauer, 2019), local authorities proceeded to the establishments of Syrian families. Abandoned houses were available for housing refugees (Bell, 2017; Le Blond and Welters, 2017). In 2015, Syrian refugee children saved the school and new life breathed into this shrinking community (Le Blond and Welters, 2017). Up till 2016, 3 Syrian refugee families were permanently established at the village (Yowell, 2017) and have already joined the local society expressing their desire to become permanent residents of the village (Associated Press, 2016).

The above practices highlight the possibility of utilizing abandoned buildings in order to integrate refugees. Given the proportions, the adaptation of this specific practice by Greece could also have positive effects in the revitalization of areas as well as the parallel relief of a number of people that need a roof over their heads. Such a possibility is examined in the context of this paper. A central part of Athens is used as a case study.

Methodology

As a case study area, the 6th Municipal municipal district of Athens was selected. It includes the following neighborhoods: Ano Kypseli, Kypseli, Nea Kypseli, Amerikis Square and Attiki Square (Figure 2). The reasons why this specific area was selected are the following:

- It is located in the innermost part of Athens. However, it is not consist of a financial district but an area where various neighborhoods are located in.
- It is an area that has been home for a large number of refugees and immigrants. Thus, a proportion of residents feel unsafe and threatened by foreigners (xenophobia) (Bartatilas, 2015).
- Diversity is observed. Not only in people but also in buildings as a result of the alteration of their previous identity. Thus, they consist of transformed neighborhoods (Bakogiannis, et.al., 2015).

The question raised is: in which way a central area like this one, the character of which has been transformed over the years, can be an ideal place for permanent residence of refugees by reusing the existing building potential. The aim of this paper is to identify non-used buildings that, after a refurbishment, can be used as residences. In that way refugees can be smoothly integrated in the Athenian society. At the same time, those neighborhoods can be regenerated, as it was highlighted through the case studies research.

In order to gain that goal, land uses have been recorded (ground floor as well as storeys) through a field research. Locally listed buildings have been identified and assessed about their condition (Papadimitriou, 2015). As a result, conclusions have been drawn concerning the existing building potential is suitable to meet the required needs for housing in the central part of Athens.

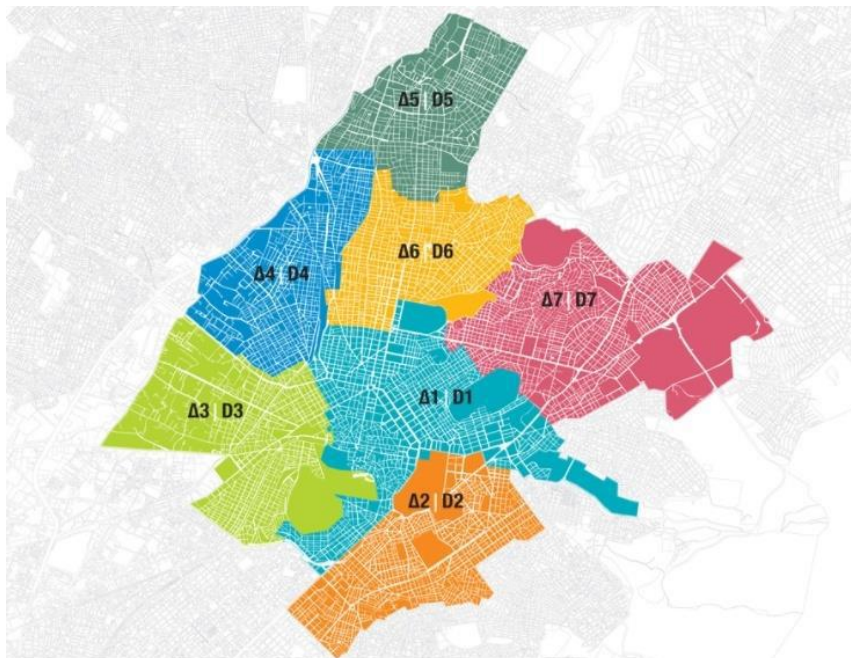


Figure 2. The Municipal Districts (MD) in the Municipality of Athens. MD 6 is the case study area. Source: <http://modmov.ellet.gr/maps/>

What is happening in the central neighborhoods of Athens?

Through the recording of land use in the study area, it was noted that the dominant use was residence. In total 11 different land use categories were registered (Figures 3 and 4). Central functions (commerce and leisure) are located along important roads and pedestrian streets. As a result, informal urban clusters are developed across the city center.

Such areas are Attiki Square and Amerikis Squares, as well as the areas along Patision, Acharnon, Kipseli streets and Fokionos Negri Pedestrian Street. At the above areas, commercial functions and leisure are located mainly at the ground floor of buildings. The biggest part of the area is occupied by residences that are located even on the ground floor of the buildings. It should be mentioned that in the context of this research an assumption was made in order for the recording process to be facilitated: semi-underground apartments were considered as ground floor apartments (Figure 5).

The second most popular land use is that of empty spaces. Such spaces are considered ground floor spaces which, although in the past were used, nowadays are not used, as an aftereffect of the economic crisis (Figure 3).

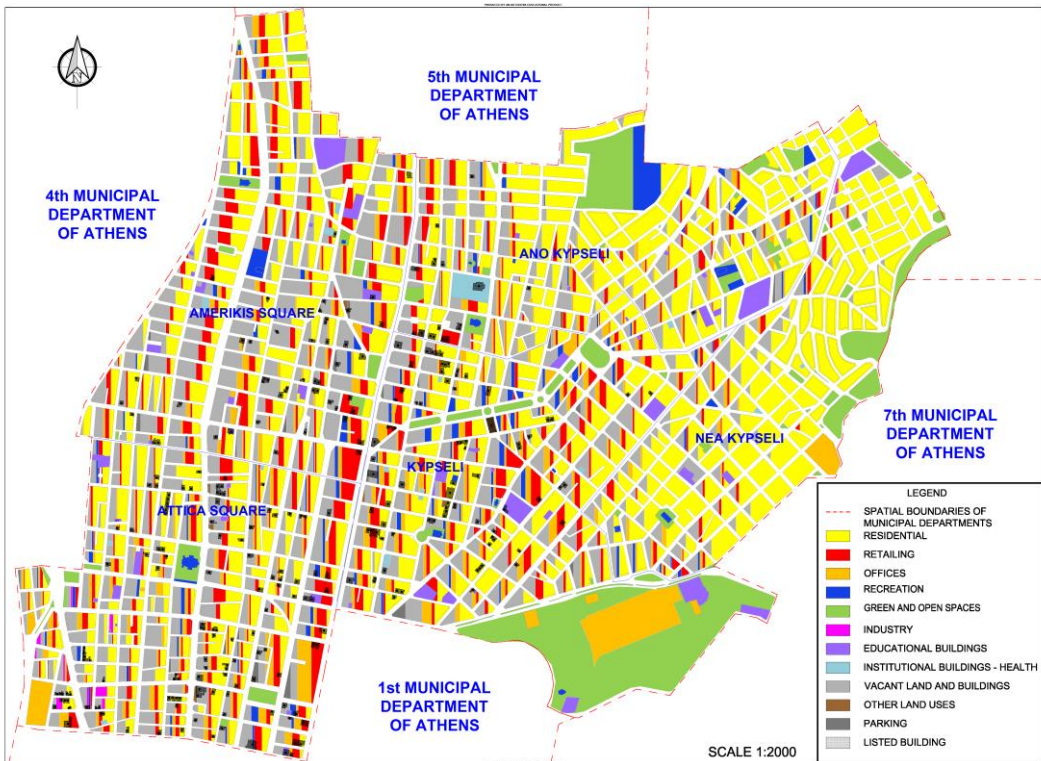


Figure 3. Land use recording (ground floors). Source: Own Elaboration.

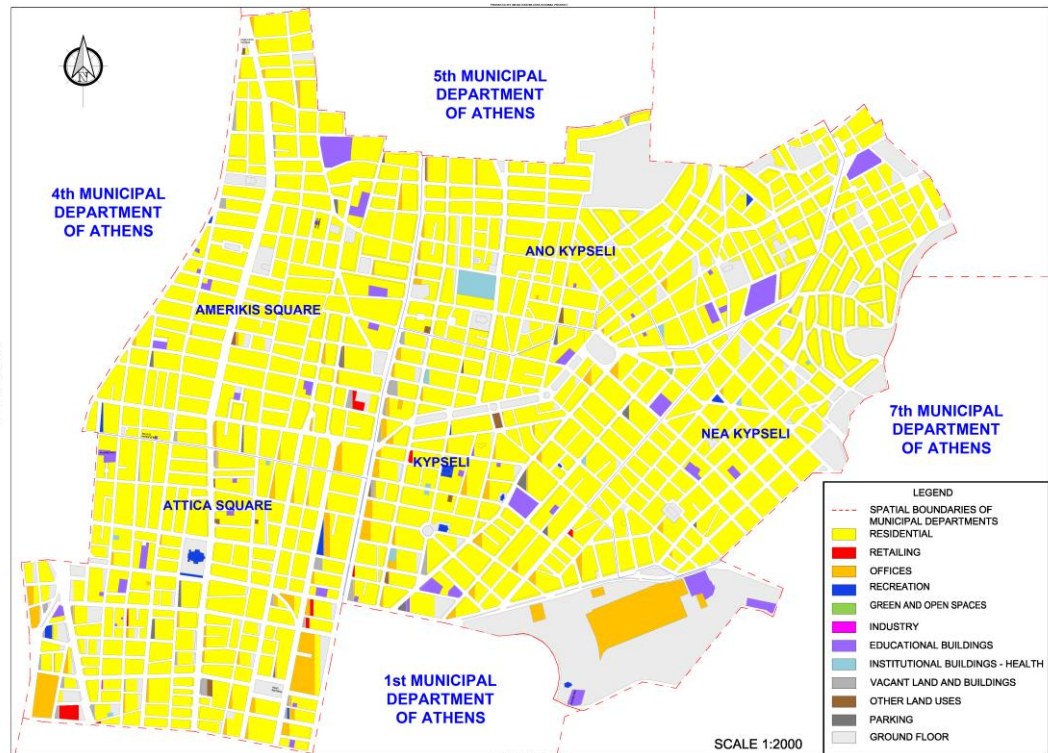


Figure 4. Land use recording (floors). Source: Own Elaboration

Figure 6 presents the listed and non-used buildings in the research area. In total, 288 listed buildings are located in the area, 120 of which are uninhabited. Therefore, 41.6% of buildings are not in use. Obvious is that Attiki Square and Amerikis Square areas are where the largest volume of such buildings is located. Many of them are mentioned as listed for over 30 years but so far no maintenance, restoration or reuse works have been made in order to operate again.

Most buildings are in bad shape, since damages are located both on their inside and outside, as well as on roofing and electrical equipment. Thus, budget line is in need for their repair in order to become habitable. Their surface is large since most of them were built during Interwar period. In this context, a building could be divided to, at least, two smaller in order to facilitate more families. Taking into account that a single person living by himself should have at a minimum 25 square meters of residential space, it is ascertained that 2,806 people can be housed in residences of a total surface of 70,155 square meters.

Bearing in mind that asylum applications up to 2017 were 58,661 (Newsroom, 2018), it is noted that such an intervention could satisfy about 4.8% of them. An important fact is that most uninhabited listed buildings are relatively close resulting in enabling their communication, the growth of social network with others of the same nationality and their feeling of a familiar environment towards them. However, due to the fact that the buildings are located in a large spatial unity, ghetto phenomena are unlikely to happen. Besides, the number of refugees that could live in this area utilizing the specific method is quite small in relation to the population of the study area.

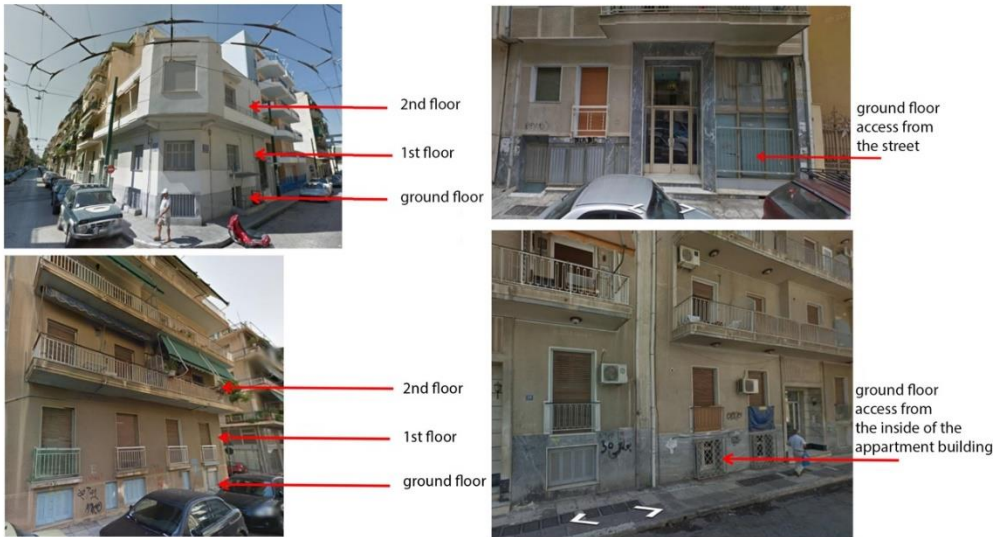


Figure 1. Buildings in the case study area. Source: Google Street Maps.

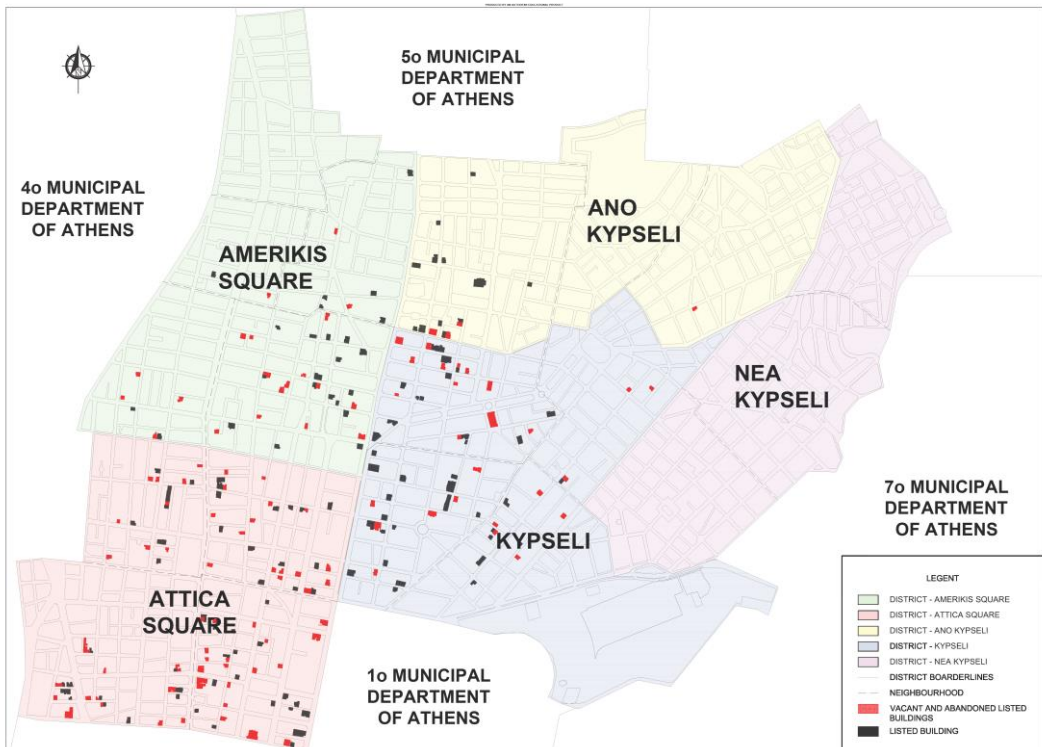


Figure 6. Listed and non-used buildings in the case study area. Source: Own Elaboration.

The possible facilitation of refugees in the study area can also have positive effects on the economic activity of the study area due to the fact that a large number of empty ground floor stores are now available. In time, the new population of the area could work professionally at the same area with positive effects in the economy of neighborhoods. Besides, there are many stores in several areas of the center where the owners are immigrants.

Conclusions

The refugee crisis concerns many people across Europe due to its large scale during the last years. In Greek society the phenomenon is intense and in combination with the economic crisis, it doesn't allow Greece to correspond in the best possible way. The finding of economic solutions is the target for the housing of the large number of people. In these interventions the use of the current buildings is imperative within cities and settlements of the country. The specific practice has been applied to different cases across Europe, like in the case of Suttera and Golsow villages examined above.

The reasons for characterizing this solution as viable are: (a) this specific solution is more economical, in relation to practices concerning the construction of new areas for refugee residences, meaning the extent of cities or creation of new settlements and (b) even though in cases of abandoned or listed buildings, their restoration is a procedure of great cost, however, European Union provides funding tools towards this direction, as shown from the examination of case studies across Europe. In this way, the absorption of capital is not superficial and budget lines function as a temporary liquidity injection in the Greek market but at the same time essential since buildings in the city are restored and their architectural inheritance and historic identity are preserved.

In this context, this specific study focused on the research of the current situation in central neighborhoods of Athens. Studying the land uses and the presence of possible usable buildings of the 6th municipal district of Athens, the following statements are noted:

- There is a large number of uninhabited listed buildings which were not used, for many years, and there is no effort of restoring them. Their possible usage of housing refugees can help up to 2,806 refugees to find a house. Such an action should not be confused with confiscation of the owners' estate but as a short term reciprocal concession of their property due to the benefit related to the free restoration and renovation of each building. The implementation of this specific action is in the political will, after the owners' consent of those buildings.
- The diffusion of an important number of refugees in a wide urban unity rather their concentration in a neighborhood can contribute in their smooth integration to the Greek society. The neighboring of their residences with Greek households and people of the same nationality in neighborhood level contributes to the growth of such social networks. Furthermore, the fact that central functions such as services, recreation and commerce are located, allows the creation of intercultural social networks.
- Beyond the benefits that owners of such houses are expected to have, some benefits for local society arise too: (a) aesthetic due to the improvement of structured environment, (b) reduction of the delinquency and the sense of insecurity, due to the previous ascertainment and (c) socio-economic benefits due to new residences. In this context, the development of motives for the integration of refugees can contribute to the activation of some of these non-used spaces located at the ground floors of the study area and their use for commercial purposes.

The implementation of this specific practice can be a pilot effort across Greece, in order to assess its results in the near future. In case the results are positive it could be assumed that it is possible to apply such interventions across Athens and other Greek cities in order for refugees and immigrants to be smoothly integrated into Greek society. At the same time, the building potential is preserved and cities are transformed into more compact urban cores and, therefore, more sustainable.

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