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## Treball Fi de Màster

*Spaces of cultural Exchange: integration of migrant communities  
in urban life through commoning practices in Athens*

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MASTER THESIS

# SPACES OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE: Integration of migrant communities in urban life through commoning practices in Athens

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## **Abstract**

Greece is a country with a large number of immigrant populations having various integration needs. To a large extent, these needs are covered by facilities open to migrant communities that help them remake their lives according to their own aspirations. The purpose of this research is to answer the question 'what are the characteristics of facilities open to migrant communities that enable their participation in urban commons and how their goals, activities, physical characteristics, cooperation with other projects or individuals, as well as their relationship with the neighbourhood affect the process of integration'. In order to answer the research question, this research will analyse integration and urban commons literature. The theoretical findings are confirmed through field research in Victoria Square, a multicultural area in Athens that has hosted migrants for at least three decades and where many facilities of this type are found. From the research, it can be concluded that facilities open to migrant communities that enable participation in urban commons, can foster integration. The results indicate that participation in urban commons enable migrant populations to obtain local knowledge and a diverse network of social connections that help them become more self-reliant. Furthermore, it occurs that participation in urban commons presents an opportunity for intercultural exchange, something that on one hand allows migrant populations to practice their culture and on the other hand helps them to understand and adapt to the local context.

## **1. Introduction**

Close to 857.000 displaced people crossed Greek borders in 2015 and over 173.000 in 2016 (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations 2018) on the way to their dream destination: Europe. After the closing of borders with the Republic of Macedonia, the EU-Turkey deal<sup>1</sup> and because of the slow examination of asylum applications and resettlement processes, many of the refugees remained 'trapped' in Greece. In May 2018, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that approximately 60.000 refugees were living in Greece (UNHCR 2019) and 13.000 of them in Athens, its capital city (UIA 2019). These migratory flows and their urgent needs challenged the Greek State that since 2010 has experienced an economic crisis. This problem has been identified by many NGOs and other community initiatives that try to fill these gaps, acting as bridges among different cultural and social groups. Thus, many facilities have been created across Athens that are open to

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<sup>1</sup>The EU's refugee agreement with Turkey came into effect on March 20, 2016 and was meant to stem the tide of migrants coming into Greece. Migrants arriving after the 20th of March on Greek islands from Turkey would be sent back to Turkey, which is considered to be a safe country. In exchange Turkey would send a refugee for resettlement in Europe (Council of the EU 2016).

migrant communities, helping them to develop a social network and providing them with space for cultural expression. They are multicultural hubs, and by offering informal modes of learning about the city, they can have a significant impact on newcomers' integration. Most importantly, the facilities link many different groups with one another, as well as with the local society. Thus, they offer the opportunity for a more plural and inclusive society to be created. The examined facilities have a physical representation and include among others, community centres like Victoria Square Project and Communitism, housing projects like City Plaza, educational centres like the Orange House, and women's initiatives like Melissa Network.

### *Research purpose and objectives*

The purpose of this research is to answer the questions 'what are the characteristics of facilities open to migrant communities that enable participation in urban commons, and how their goals, activities, physical characteristics, cooperation with other projects or individuals, as well as their relationship with neighbours and their integration strategies, affect the process of integration'. Specifically, this research has the objectives to assess how these facilities foster autonomy, enable migrants to practice their culture, help them adapt to the local cultural context, to create a diverse social network, and finally how they contribute to the local community becoming more adaptive. Such research is very important, as Greece still receives a lot of migrants because of its geographical position. Due to the regional socio-political situation it is expected that more people will come and many of them will stay. Thus, it is of utmost importance to identify what helps people make a new and foreign environment their home and how to create more inclusive societies.

In order to address this question, this research will analyse integration and urban commons literature in order to prove that facilities open to migrant communities that enable participation in urban commons, can foster integration. These findings are confirmed through field research in Victoria Square, a multicultural area in Athens that has been hosting migrants for at least three decades and where many of these kinds of facilities can be found. From the field research, it occurs that these facilities act as cultural bridges among different cultural and social groups and support the creation of a more plural society. This research is limited by the time allotted to complete it, as well as some unclear data associated with the large number of undocumented migrants, the reluctance of some facilities to make time available for academic research, and finally by the language barriers that can render direct communication very difficult.

The research is structured in the following parts: Firstly, integration and urban commons literature is analysed in an attempt to find links between these two areas. From the reviewed literature it becomes evident that participating in urban commons helps migrants to become more self-reliant, to develop a social network, to connect with the local context while having space to practice their own culture, and to remake the city and their lives according to their own aspirations. Moreover, these spaces are open to everyone, regardless of their legal status, and they contribute to the openness of the local community, which becomes more adaptive to the newcomers. For all these reasons one can argue that participating in urban commons has a positive impact on newcomers' integration. In the following part, these theories will be tested in a case study of the Victoria Square neighbourhood in Athens. The literature review findings are supplemented by empirical data collection in a facility open to migrant communities: the Victoria Square Project (VSP). The data collection will include observations, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews with project participants. The findings of field research will be thematically analysed and explained in the next chapter, followed by a discussion chapter. Finally the concluding chapter will answer the research question and provide some recommendations for facilities open to migrant communities.

## **2. Conceptualizing integration and the urban commons**

### **2.1. Integration concepts and problems**

The integration of newcomers into urban environments has been an overused term and often used with different connotations. This part features the collection of different definitions and considerations around integration, in an attempt to create a theoretical basis to build upon it the ideas of this contribution.

According to UNHCR (2011, p.34) '[l]ocal integration is a legal, economic and socio-cultural process aiming at providing the refugee with the permanent right to stay in the country of asylum, including, in some situations, as a naturalized citizen. Local integration follows the formal granting of refugee status, whether on an individual or prima facie basis, and assistance to settle in order for the refugee to live independently within the community'. The evident problem of this definition is that entails the legal status of those to be integrated, excluding in this way the vast numbers of unauthorized migrants that they might remain in limbo for years. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines integration 'as the process of mutual adaptation between the host society and the migrants themselves, both as individuals and as groups'. From these definitions it becomes evident that integration as a process includes different

stages, from being completely alien to becoming part of a society. It takes into consideration cultural aspects, apart from economic and legal ones, and involves both newcomers and established citizens.

Regarding this, Berry (2011) argues that in order to attain integration there is a need for the mutual accommodation of all groups of a given society; dominant or non-dominant in size, and an acceptance of the right of everyone to live as culturally different. Mutual adaptation is also supported by Vrasti and Danyal (2016), in that they criticize its absence and indicate that integration has been used as a way to absorb and manage differences, resulting in the disrespect of the cultures of minorities that they have to be assimilated with the host community. Although the importance of mutuality of adaptation from both newcomers and established residents has been extensively discussed in literature, in reality integration burdens mainly the newcomers. This burden operates through the exclusive and culturally bounded perceptions of the nation-state regarding who is worthy of integration (D'Auria, Daher, & Rohde, 2018; Favell, 2013; Squire, 2011). For this reason, Vrasti and Danyal (2016) propose a new way of building communities 'not formed around a firm centre, but where the excluded are important makers of them' bridging integration discussions with 'the right to the city'. According to Harvey (2012, p. 25) the right to the city is 'to reinvent the city more after their hearts' desire'. This is far beyond the right to stay and implies participation in urban life.

In an attempt to better understand what constitutes successful integration Ager and Strang (2008) develop a conceptual framework, which identifies ten key domains that contribute to integration. These include employment, education and housing, citizenship and rights, as well as social connections with similar ethnic groups, host societies and the host state. Although this attempt approaches integration in a more spherical way, D'Auria, Daher and Rohde (2018) suggest that these kinds of approaches are 'from a privileged stand-point that reduces and simplifies the complexities of displacement, and accepts the nation-state's framework of categorizing people, as worthy of integration by being with status or without'. In order to define cultural interactions between newcomers and established residents, Berry (2011) suggested a typology that includes the different strategies of acculturation examined from the point of view of both groups. He suggests that integration happens when newcomers keep practicing their own culture, while at the same they are interacting with other cultures and adapting to them. For the same strategy seen from the point of view of the residents, i.e., keeping one's culture while being open to newcomers' culture, he uses the term multiculturalism.

Another important aspect that can be seen as a precursor of integration is according to UNHCR (2011, p.29), self-reliance. This is the ability to meet one's essential needs 'in a sustainable manner and with dignity'. They also argue that a policy, which provides asylum-seekers with 'as much autonomy as possible by promoting active participation and social inclusion' would lead to more successful integration (UNHCR, 2018, p.48). Self-reliance and autonomy can be achieved through local expertise. Buhr (2018) argues that 'becoming local' is not exhausted in knowledge about the built environment and its morphologies. It also includes the complex system of skills developed by inhabitants in order to use urban space, e.g. how someone can find their way in the city, knowing where to ask for information and who is an important contact for what. He explains that local expertise directly affects inhabitants' capacities to participate in everyday urban life.

Drawing upon the previous suggestions regarding integration, this research will look at it as a mutual process of accommodation of newcomers and established residents, which entails adapting to a new cultural context while keeping one's culture. In this direction, a socially and culturally diverse network of social connections is conceived as a decisive factor. As a process, integration includes cultural, social, and economic aspects. It assumes the right to live as culturally different and to reinvent the city according to one's aspirations. Self-reliance and autonomous living in a new urban environment are indicators of integration, as well as active participation in urban life.

Although different scholars (Harvey, 2012, p.67; Vrasti & Dayal, 2016) discuss urban life as a commons, the literature linking integration to urban commons remains limited. In the following part I will explain why participating in commoning practices fosters integration.

## 2.2. Urban commons and integration

Kip et al. (2015) suggest that urban commons is about 'collectively appropriating and regulating the shared concerns of the everyday'. Vrasti and Danyal (2016) argue that urban commons can be tangible and intangible, in a similar vein to De Angelis (2017, p. 18), who differentiates common goods from commons as social systems. The latter has been conceptualized by different scholars (De Angelis 2017, p. 18; Kip et al., 2015; Tsavdaroglou, 2018) as entities that include the following elements: (a) a common resource, (b) commoning (the action of doing in common) and (c) commoners (the social subjects, who are involved in the production of commons). Commons can then be conceived through the typology of a common resource, e.g. water, an empty building, cultural heritage, public space or urban life, that has been claimed or

reinvented by the commoners, e.g. make available to everyone water resources, squatting an empty building, claiming public space, or reinventing everyday life to meet one's aspirations, such that this common good will be collectively used by the commoners.

According to Brinkley (2019), the opportunity of urban commons is the potential it has to provide when private or state aid is not available. Thus, she considers commons a path to self-sufficiency and self-reliance. These have historically proven to be important saving mechanisms of cities in crisis periods, when the national state was not able to support them. Thus, access to urban commons can reduce dependency and foster empowerment, promoting in this way urban resilience. Brinkley considers urban commons as a way to access the economic and cultural opportunities that the city has to offer and she sees connections between urban commons and informality, for instance, the squatting of abandoned land. In this case, what is considered to be unused and empty (resource) is claimed (communing practice) by its new users (commoners) and transformed into a common good.

Vrasti and Danyal (2016) consider the power to collectively create and control urban life as urban commons. Harvey (2012, p.4) calls this power 'the freedom to remake the cities and ourselves'. Moreover, he differentiates between public and the commons, as the former becomes commons only if claimed, protected and used by the citizens (Harvey, 2012, p. 67-89). Thus, commons is inherently political and using it renders the users political agents. In a similar way of thinking Vrasti and Danyal (2016) see urbanity as a common good that is collectively produced by the residents of a city through their presence and everyday practices. They argue that access to urban commons is more than access to public spaces and services and also includes participation in the city life and the potential to remake the city according to one's aspirations. Stavrides (2016) draws an analogy between thresholds and spaces of communing, arguing that the latter open the possibility to transcend social enclosures and open towards newcomers in similar ways that thresholds condition entrance and exit, prolong, manipulate and give meaning to an act of passage.

Shifting the attention to migrant communities and their integration and having in mind the 'common resource – communing – commoners' typology described above, facilities open to migrant communities that enable participation in urban life are communing institutions and everyone participating in them is a commoner. These facilities vary from community projects such as a community centre that facilitate intercultural exchanges and the sharing of common values, to what Sparke (2018) defines as 'geographies of welcome', i.e. spaces that offer 'enfranchisement, agency and hope' to

newcomers, including informal everyday solidarity spaces such as kitchens and gardens, as well as humanitarian care sites such as clinics and schooling spaces. The importance of these spaces for the creation of more inclusive cities is emphasized by Price and Chacko, who argue that '[t]he sharing of common values, while respecting cultural diversity and differences, contributes to a shared sense of belonging and thus builds social cohesion' (Price & Chacko, 2012). According to Berry (2011), interaction between immigrants and locals is a fundamental mechanism for integration that is encouraged by 'shared forums, intercultural dialogue, education about immigrants and immigrant cultures, and stimulating living conditions in urban environments'. An important aspect of these movements is that they focus on solidarity and they are mindful of presence and mobility (Squire, 2011), contesting this way the nation-state's framework of categorizing people as legal or illegal and rendering them hence, worthy of integration or not. Thus, the participation of migrant communities in urban life and the use of commoning practices are actions that question what and who is legitimate, and contest against social and spatial hierarchies imposed by the state, which renders them according to Darling (2017), actions of politicization.

Stavrides (2016, p.2) argues that what commoning practices produce mostly is new relationships among people.

'They encourage creative encounters and negotiations through which forms of sharing are organized and common life takes shape. Commoning practices, thus, do not simply produce or distribute goods but essentially create new forms of social life, forms of life-in-common'.

Hence, spaces of commoning foster integration through the inclusion of newcomers in a social network. This network can be seen as an opportunity for what McFarlane (2011) defines as 'urban learning', i.e. the understanding of the socio-political complexities of a given society, the power relationships and the mechanisms and networks that are developed in order to adapt to such a context. In other words, 'urban learning' is learning to be a citizen of a given society. Moreover, local engagement with the city, for instance through engaging with the activities of the commoning spaces, increases the connection that migrants feel with the larger urban community (Price & Chacko, 2012).

Throughout the integration literature, culture has been a matter of the utmost importance. Price and Chacko argue for spaces to facilitate intercultural exchanges to facilitate cultural appreciation. In such space, activities like collective meals or festivals become opportunities for migrant parts of the society to showcase who they are (Price

& Chacko, 2012). The spaces of commoning discussed in this part act as bridges among different cultures, where according to Stavrides (2016, p.5) 'comparisons between emerging identities are made possible as people use those spaces through constant negotiations. Communities, which inhabit them are thus always communities-in-the-making'.

Taking further the culture discussion, Simone (2008) discusses 'popular culture' as a way to negotiate and cross boundaries of exclusion and in this way participating in urban life. He states that nowadays in urban environments everywhere in the world, there are intense conflicts concerning who has the right to use the city and how. In such a context, 'popular culture' is the everyday practices that people employ to contest these boundaries and appropriate urban space. In other words, exercising 'popular culture' is an attempt to make the foreign, familiar. They are actions to appropriate urban space and reinvent it, projecting on it familiar attributes and eventually rendering it as one's own place. Activities like these can be trivial and simple, from hanging around a square to cooking together, but with great significance. They are negotiations of urban space that render their subjects from passive into active citizens. In this way of thinking, the space itself becomes a platform that enables all these processes to take place.

Lingis (1994, p.12) argues that communities form by exposure of 'one-self to the other, to forces and powers outside oneself', which implies that different social groups within the society need to empathize with one another, embrace their vulnerabilities and accept the otherness of the other in order for a community to form. What would be one of the largest contributions of spaces of commoning that are welcoming to migrant communities, is that they encourage this exposure to happen. Price and Chacko (2012) write about Caisa International Cultural Centre in Helsinki, a forum that promotes cultural exchange and positive contacts between the immigrants and the cultural majority that improved the public image of immigrants, and thereby possibly contributed to reducing prejudices and discrimination. Acting as bridges among different cultural groups, these spaces offer opportunities for everyday encountering that enable the development of a common language and understanding. In this way, the foreign becomes familiar and integration starts becoming a mutual process. This helps negative feelings like awkwardness and fear of the unknown to disappear and thus it opens the way for a more inclusive society.

From the reviewed literature, the connection between participating in urban commons and newcomers' integration becomes evident. Hence, being a commoner, i.e. participating in urban commons, helps migrants to be more self-reliant, to develop a

social network, to connect with the local context while having the space to express their own culture, and to remake the city according to their aspirations. Moreover, commoning institutions are more mindful of presence and open to everyone, regardless of their legal status. They contribute to the openness of the local community, which becomes more adaptive to the newcomers.

### **3. Case study: Facilities open to migrant communities in Victoria Square, Athens**

The following analysis will focus on facilities open to migrant communities in Victoria Square, Athens. These facilities are analysed as commoning institutions where urban life (common good) is reinvented. Their impact on the integration of the participants (commoners) will be investigated in order to test the main argument of this research, i.e. that facilities open to migrant communities that enable participation in urban commons, foster integration. The impact on integration will be based on the definition of integration that has been provided in the previous chapter. Hence, it will be examined how these facilities foster autonomy, enable newcomers to practice their culture while helping them to adapt to the local cultural context, and finally how they promote the creation of a more open and inclusive society.



Image 1. Refugees staying in Victoria Square in the summer 2015.  
Source: <https://greece.greekreporter.com>

### *Case Study Background*

Victoria, once being a bourgeois neighbourhood in the centre of Athens, has, since 1980s hosted different generations of migrants that have given it its unique multicultural character. Already before 1990s there has been mobility of its residents towards the suburbs, which resulted in lower rent prices in the area. In the same period (beginning of the 1990s), many immigrants, mainly from former socialist countries, began moving into the area. This resulted in even lower prices and a culturally diverse population. As the time passed, people from different parts of the world arrived in Victoria and the area became one of the most multicultural parts of Athens. In 2015, images from Victoria Square became the symbol of the 'refugee crisis' in Greece, as hundreds of people remained for weeks, with the Greek State unable to help them (Image 1)

Nowadays, the population of the area consists of different ethnic groups, arrived in different periods. This can be confirmed by the multitude of ethnic associations that can be found in the area and include the Ethiopian, Kenyan, Filipinos, Bulgarian, Egyptian, Madagascar, Ukrainian, Sudanese and Rumanian community centres (Map 1). Quite often these ethnic groups live segregated in their ethnic communities and their bonds and connections with other ethnic, cultural, social groups are limited. It is evident these people have integrated into urban life differently and their needs vary. Many of these needs are covered by NGOs and other civil initiatives and projects active in the area (Map 2). Through their activities they build bridges among these different ethnic groups and facilitate a dialogue among them. Especially after 2015, the number of these initiatives has increased significantly in order to provide services to the newcomers and support their integration into Greek society. This research examines their overall impact on the integration of different ethnic groups and what are decisive parameters for their success or failure. For this reason, this research will focus on a specific facility the Victoria Square Project (Image 2), a community centre in the area that is considered a commoning institution, since it is concerned with the reinventing of everyday life in order to meet one's aspirations.

Victoria Square Project is a cultural and social project, a result of the collaboration of artists Rick Lowe and Maria Papadimitriou. The project has been created in the frames of 'documenta 14' art exhibition in Athens. In VSP's webpage, the project is described as a 'social sculpture'<sup>2</sup>, which 'implies caring for society as a collective work of art' (VSP 2019). The artists identified from the beginning, the lack of interaction among

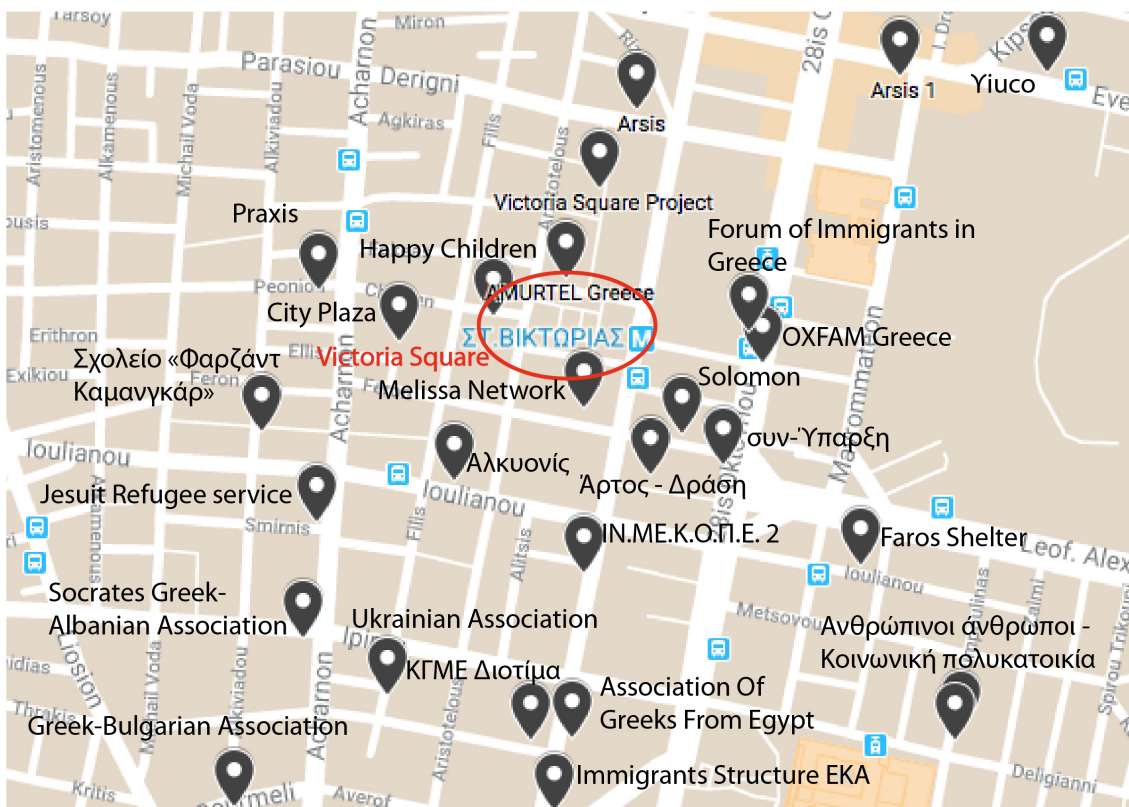
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<sup>2</sup>The term social sculpture has been initiated by Joseph Beuys' and suggests that society can be shaped through different spaces and actions in a similar way that an artist shapes a sculpture.

different groups inhabiting the area. George, director of the project, states that *'different ethnic groups here [in Victoria Square] do not interact one another. There's neither community nor neighbourhood feeling; that of a multicultural neighbourhood with a sense of belonging. What happens in fact is that Africans interact with other Africans, Georgians with other Georgians, Greeks with Greeks etc. So, although there's a condition of neighbourhood, that is the area is not a non-space, there isn't real communication among the different groups'*. Thus, the artists created VSP with the *'goal to create a bridge among all these different cultural, ethnic, and social groups in order to give back a neighbourhood feeling in the area'*.



Map 1. Ethnic Associations around Victoria Square  
Source: Author



Map 2. NGOs and Associations around Victoria Square  
Source: Author



Image 2. Façade of Victoria Square Project and commoners using the public space  
Source: Author

The result is a community centre, where children go to play or draw, people work with laptops, and others hang around to use Internet or meet friends. There are various activities taking place in there, such as skills and language learning, festivals and celebrations, or just hanging around. Through the multicultural background of the commoners, the sharing of time and common activities happens simultaneously with respect to cultural differences, promoting in this way a shared sense of belonging. Thus, urban life is reinvented there and is based on the respect and the right of everyone to live as culturally different. Moreover, migrants have a space to showcase their cultural aspects, while exchanging ideas and values with people from different parts of the world. Thus, the otherness that everyone carries with them becomes familiar and an opportunity of new learning.

Through analysing the aforementioned facility in terms of its goals, activities, physical characteristics, cooperation with other projects or individuals, as well as their relationship with the neighbours and their integration strategies, this research investigates its impact on the integration of the involved commoners. The analysis of VSP suggests that participating in urban commons helps migrants to be more self-reliant, to develop a social network, to connect with the local context while having the space to express their own culture, and to remake their city and lives according to their aspirations. Moreover, facilities like VSP are open to everyone regardless their legal status and contribute to the openness of the local community, which becomes more adaptive to the newcomers. In other words, the analysis of VSP proves that participating in urban commons fosters the integration of migrant communities.

#### **4. Methodology**

For the present study, data-collection was conducted through observations, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol comprising questions around the project and integration and informal conversations with commoners and neighbours. Field research was conducted in April 2019. During this month, VSP was visited daily by the author, which allowed for participation in its activities, as well as learning and interacting with other users and neighbours. Through this fieldwork, the opinions of at least 15 people were collected that resulted in a large amount of observations and more empirical conclusions, which introduced the voices of the commoners into this research. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most suitable data collection strategy in qualitative research for the scope and the nature of the present research. Interviews were conducted with 3 commoners: George and Dorothea, directors of VSP, and Klik, who is co-founder of Melissa Network, a women's organization in Athens and an instructor at VSP since the beginning of the project. The conversations were

recorded and transcribed. Interviews were less than an hour and conducted at the project location. This allowed for better observations of each activity and the neighbourhood, in general. The interviewees were invited to answer questions concerning: how they came up with the idea of the specific project, what have been important catalysts that enabled it to happen, how did they choose the specific location and how the location affects them as a project, what are their goals, what are the connections that they have with the neighbourhood, if they cooperate with other projects, how do they choose their activities, who is involved in the project and in what activities, how have the numbers of participants changed since the initiation of the project, challenges and opportunities that they see in the current situation, what is their understanding of integration and how they try to enhance it, the prioritization of their actions, as well as their future plans. The collected information was thematically analysed and explained in order to develop a better understanding of how goals, activities, physical characteristics, cooperation with other projects or individuals, as well as their relationship with the neighbourhood of the examined structure, affect integration. This allowed for some conclusions about what can make commoning facilities more integrative and some relevant recommendations.

## **5. Results**

The collected data were thematically analysed in the following categories: physical characteristics, goals, activities, cooperation with other projects, groups as well as individuals, relationship with neighbours, integration strategies, and participation of migrants.

### **5.1. Physical characteristics**

From the spatial analysis of VSP, it occurs that the physical aspects of the building where it is located are helpful to its success. The project is located on the ground floor of a corner building on a pedestrian street that ends at Victoria Square (Map 3). Thus, it is very close to the square and the pedestrian street is used as their exterior space of the project (Image 3).

George says that especially in the summer they literally live outside:

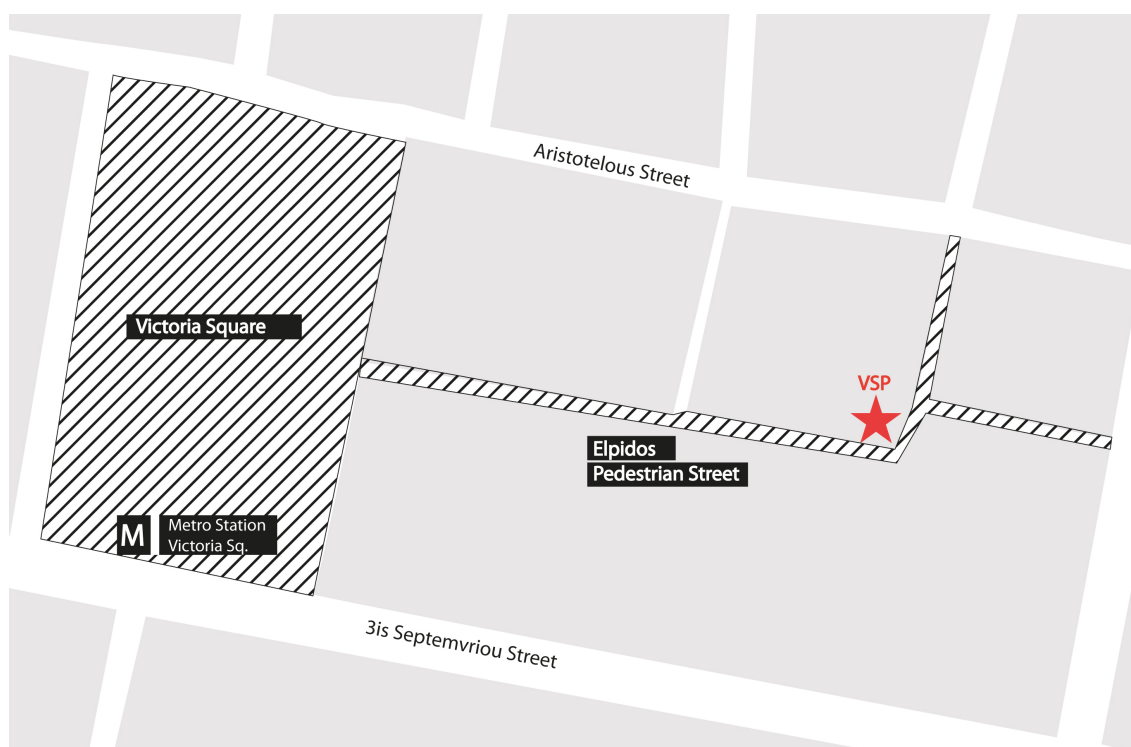
*'We take out our chairs, tables, laptops, and music and we stay outside. Appropriating public space is not only something nice, but also something very Greek'.*

This is confirmed by the author as well, as during the fieldwork with many sunny days, most activities occurred outside, always joined by neighbours, for small talk, or just to hang around. According to Dorothea, this is also a way to trigger interest to the people that pass by:

*‘They get surprised; they stop, ask and might even stay’.*

Related to this, Katerina, a neighbour that passed by to get information regarding Greek courses for a friend of hers, said:

*‘I have been looking at this street and the project since months. The street is always occupied by people and I was wondering what are you doing here and decided to come and ask’.*



Map 3. VSP is located on the ground floor of a corner building on a pedestrian street that ends at Victoria Square. Source: Author

Moreover, there is a more private space on the basement that it is used either for exhibitions, dance classes, rehearsals of different teams or even for more closed events with high privacy demands. For instance:

*“Last year this space was used by an LGBTQ+ team of refugees with obvious needs of discretion for their meetings. So, these events were happening in the basement and they were closed. We were communicating them only through emails with relevant teams that they might have interest to participate’ (George).*



Image 3. The pedestrian street is often used as exterior space of VSP. Source: VSP Archive

The findings highlight the importance of space and physical characteristics of the commoning facilities for their impact on integration. Different space qualities can enable different activities, which in turn can trigger integration differently (Diagram 1). Thus, a more transparent space with a publicly used exterior that can act as a threshold between the facility and the neighbourhood can be more welcoming (Image 4). It enables people to practise their 'popular culture' (Simone 2008). More closed or reserved segments of the society become more curious and open through looking at it. This unravelling of the mystery of the unknown can be an excellent trigger for the process of integration. On the other hand, the existence of more private spaces is necessary for the creation of safe spaces.



Image 4. A more transparent space with a publicly used exterior that can act as a threshold between the facility and the neighbourhood can be more welcoming. Source: VSP Archive

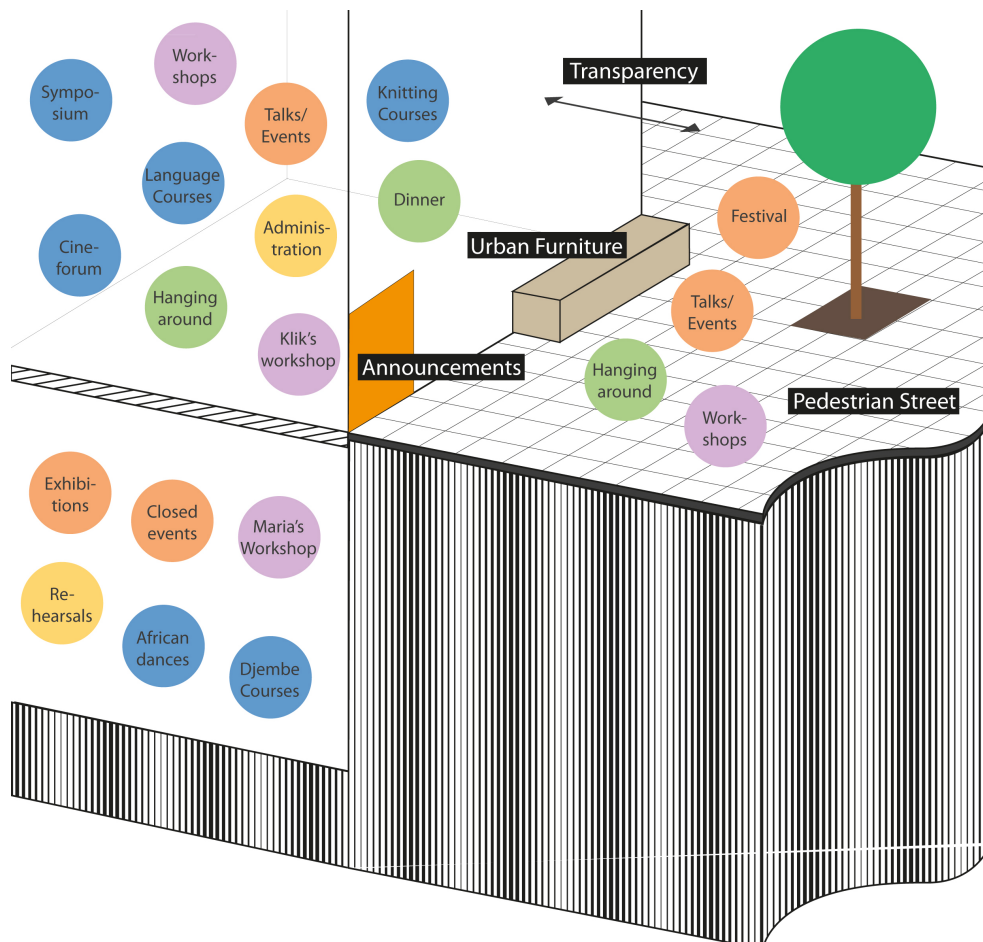


Diagram 1. Physical characteristics of commoning facilities have an impact on integration since they allow for different kinds of activities. Source: Author

## 5.2. Goals

VSP has as a main goal, to activate the neighbourhood through the creation of a community feeling and a sense of belonging. As the directors of the project pointed out, they want to create *'a bridge among the different groups that inhabit the area'* (George) and *'a safe space for everyone'* (Dorothea). They do not have a specific target group; they are completely open to anyone, which on one hand makes them a reference in the neighbourhood for all, but on the other hand can be confusing. Regarding this, Dorothea states:

*'There are people that do not find it easy to feel VSP addresses them, because they may consider that spaces like this have basically been created to respond to the needs of different social groups. What we try to achieve is to get rid of these labels and these assumptions, that is we are here for these or them. People get a bit confused because we let everything so open and unlimited and they are not used to it'.*

Regarding being open as a project and not having a specific target group, she adds:

*'We try to provide this feeling of belonging and promote integration, while at the same time looking at newcomers as humans and not as refugees. That is the reason why we try to create activities that do not necessarily focus on a specific target group, but on the common interest in a specific theme. Then, bridges will be built based on this common interest'.*



Image 5. People with different backgrounds meeting on the pedestrian street in between activities of VSP. Source: Author

From the observations and the interviews developed, it can be inferred that the openness of VSP promotes more intercultural exchange, as there are more chances that people from different cultures will meet and spontaneous incidents will occur. For instance, on Wednesdays, language courses finish just before the Symposium talks begin. While the former group are mainly newcomers who want to learn either English or Greek, the latter make up a diverse audience, including neighbours, academics, artists, visitors to Athens and members of political groups. During these two activities, one can see these two different audiences sharing the pedestrian street and casually talking (Image 5).

Going back to the integration definition of this research, which includes practicing one's culture while adapting to the local context and opening of the society in order to be more adaptive, it seems that the more open a facility is, the greater the chances of cultural exchange and, therefore, the more integrative is the facility. On the other hand, having a specific target group makes the facility more approachable for this specific group. This is of great importance if we consider more vulnerable and on occasion more introverted groups, such as refugee women. In such cases, it seems necessary to have a closed and protective structure, where the group feels safe.

### 5.3. Activities

Looking at the weekly program of VSP, there are a variety of activities taking place on a regular basis, as well as pop-up events (Image 6). According to the directors of the project, the latter range from upcycling workshops to art exhibitions and festivals. These are complemented by more spontaneous events, such as a dinner or when people gather to play music together. From the observations, it occurs that each of these activities contribute to integration differently. Activities happening on a regular basis promote team building. Regarding this George says:

*'There are activities that have been happening on a weekly basis since the beginning of the project and in these activities has been developed more the team feeling'.*

Larger events invite more people to get to know VSP and act as an opening to the community that goes beyond the limits of the neighbourhood. From conversations with the participants in two events of this type, it occurred that many people had visited VSP for the first time because of the event, itself. One of these events was the Beaming Project<sup>3</sup> that promoted integration through movement. It began with featured around 50

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<sup>3</sup>The Beaming Project was an event organized in VSP by 50 young people from France, Greece, Malta, and Portugal that interacted through art and sport in order to share incentives and experiences with refugees of the same age. The intention was to build a network of people who have the willingness to develop a space of openness, acceptance, sharing, and inclusion.

people performing in Victoria Square. Their performance attracted more people to the square who joined them, resulting in a small festival. The crowd danced to VSP and the celebration continued, leading curious passers-by to join them (Image 7). The diversity of the crowd matched the diversity of the music. With regard to this, a commoner commented:

*'It is amazing that people from everywhere dance with music from everywhere. This is getting to know each other!'* (Cloé).



Image 7. The Beaming Project – People dancing from Victoria Square to VSP.  
Source: Author

Concerning a larger event that took place in the summer 2018, the African festival, George described:

*'The street was full with the different stands from different countries that they were selling food and other products. There was a lot of people, music and dance everywhere...'*

Spontaneous, pop-up events can be a way to trigger the interest of passers-by but also indicate a place that people feel comfortable to appropriate and express themselves. Relevant to this was a moment when three of the newest neighbours in Victoria Square that use to hang around in VSP started their own tiny concert (Image 8). Although

language was again a barrier to manage a whole conversation, Antuan was telling *'music is my life. I love singing here'*. This directly relates to integration in the way defined in this research, i.e. practicing one's own culture while adapting. These spontaneous activities prove that VSP provides space to its commoners to culturally express themselves and therefore to integrate.

Some activities have a learning character, such as Greek and English courses, knitting courses, African dances and djembe courses, whereas others are based on the exchange of ideas, cultural aspects, and opinions, such as political and sociological talks, communal dinners, and movie-screenings.



Image 8. Spontaneous mini concert at VSP. Source: VSP Archive

Through observing different activities and their audiences, one can see a mixture of new and older inhabitants of the area. Their answers, when asked about their participation on an activity revealed three main reasons: learning, socialising and coincidence. Specifically many answered that they wanted to learn something new, several responded by saying that they wanted to meet people that share a common interest for something and some replied that they had passed by, found it interesting and stayed. These findings were reinforced by the comments of Dorothea and Klik:

*'There are activities where you will come in touch with another culture, such as the African dances, and others where through the participation you will get to know people on a more personal level. In this sense, the activity is the pretext, the way in order to create the team feeling so that the participants feel that they coexist and in this way bridges are built'* (Dorothea).

*'People come to learn knitting, but after classes they stay here and chat. Some of them have become friends through the classes'.* (Klik)

Another aspect of the activities is their nature and what skills they require in order to participate. A commoner in VSP that participated in the Beaming Project pointed out:

*'Activities that do not require advanced language skills such as dance and food are good for cultural exchange. They enable people to showcase their culture and promote integration'.*

Another commoner, who organized the event 'Youth together for refugees', an event about integration of youth refugees, also confirmed this by saying that they wanted to promote integration through activities based on arts as *'arts is a universal language'* (Stella).

From analysing the activities in VSP, it becomes evident that activities that happen regularly promote bonding and social connections. In this way, integration is achieved through the personal connections of people from different backgrounds. Moreover, larger and more open activities such as festivals help the local society itself to become more open. Activities that do not require extensive language skills can be more integrative as anyone can participate. Finally, learning activities, apart from being a social event for many of the participants, promote integration through self-reliance.

#### 5.4. Cooperation

From the interviews with George and Dorothea, it occurs that VSP is extroverted and cooperates with different groups and individuals, including artists, universities, schools, and other similar projects.

*'On a weekly or daily basis we have cooperation with Khora Free Shop. We cooperate with them for our clothes swab the second Sunday every month. Souzy Tros is another project of Maria Papadimitriou and it is like a sibling project of VSP. Together we organize many events. We also cooperate with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lyceum of Athens that is in Cheyden Street (a street very close to VSP). We do different activities together in general, but this period we mainly help them to publish the school newspaper. There are also the guys that organize the Cineforum every 2<sup>nd</sup> Thursday. These are some*

*Erasmus students of art. In general we have close cooperation with Athens School of Fine Arts and mainly with its Erasmus students. This has probably to do with the fact that most of the activities here are in English. In all we attempt to have different kinds of cooperation...*' (George)

Despite the fact that cooperation with other NGOs of the area would be something desired for VSP, and attempted as well, George and Dorothea mentioned that this is not always easy, as many of them can be introverted and inflexible, in the sense that they focus specifically on their goals and target group and do not necessarily look for cooperation.

*'What in fact happens is that we have more relationships with the people participating in the projects that pass by the neighbourhood and see that something's going on here rather than the NGOs themselves.'* (Dorothea)

The plural cooperation of VSP brings together actors from different backgrounds in a singular space, something that can trigger a dialog among them. As these partnerships usually entail a sort of cultural exchange, it can be argued that they enhance integration as they enable different cultural aspects to be expressed together. In contrast with more introvert projects found in the area VSP fulfils through its different partnerships the needs to meet, share, learn, and express one's self while working together.

#### 5.5. Relationship with the neighbours

The fieldwork in VSP revealed very good relationships with the neighbours and different types of relationships. Many are commoners themselves as they participate in the activities or just hang around, some pass by just to say 'hi', and others have supported the project in the making of its space. George, Dorothea, and Klik mentioned referred to this:

*'Something really nice here is that people from the neighbourhood even if they do not participate in our activities they are happy that we are here. They might pass and say 'hi' or bring us food, tell us their news, chat about something going on in the area,... This is very important to happen, although sometimes it has nothing to do with our activities. It creates this neighbourhood feeling.'* (George)

*'The neighbourhood has accepted us. We attempt to cultivate a constant dialogue with them and see how this social sculpture is being developed. But apart from the relationship with the neighbourhood as a whole there is also the individual level; the relationship with each person separately.'* (Dororthea)

*'When we wanted to have our first meeting here we didn't have any chairs and tables. And we didn't want to buy, because it was temporary. So, we asked the neighbours if they had any old furniture that they didn't need that could give us. So, some responded and we got help from the neighbourhood. If you see the chairs today, they do not match. We collected them from the neighbours'.* (Klik)

What George, Dorothea and Klik said was reinforced through conversations with at least 10 neighbours. Many feel safer with VSP, as whenever they need something someone is there to help them. This is also confirmed by the fact that they allow their children to be alone there. Furthermore, many seem to enjoy the neighbourhood feeling that VSP, as a place that refers to everyone, provides. Relevant to this was a moment that a girl from the neighbourhood asked to celebrate her birthday in VSP. Some neighbours emphasize more about the aesthetics and answered that VSP has made the pedestrian street nicer. Different from these positive reactions were two rather indifferent and distant opinions. These neighbours they did not know much about the project or had an opinion about it. Finally, from the people asked no one expressed a negative opinion about the project.

Good relationships with the neighbours and good communication have a profound importance for the impact of the project on the integration of migrants. Good relationships are necessary for the people visiting the project, becoming curious about their work, and finally starting to participate in any possible way. Thus, communication is the base of any commoning process, as commoning is actually as already seen a new way of building social relationships.

#### 5.6. Integration (no) strategies

VSP sees integration as a mutual process. According to George:

*'Integration should not happen only from the people into the area, but also from the area into the people. For this reason we work with every one here, so that everyone realizes that Greece in general, and specifically this neighbourhood (Victoria Square) have turned from monocultural into multicultural and this is a fact, a real condition. Therefore, we have to learn ways to coexist with the otherness. For this reason we work a lot also with the Greek community'.*

In VSP integration is not a goal but it happens as bridges among the different ethnic groups are created. Thus, it occurs from the observations that integration is not achieved through specific integration strategies, but through an open dialogue among different parts of the community. This happens mainly in the following ways:

- a. People come together and get to know each other through a common interest for a particular subject, i.e. through the activities. Thus, integration happens on a more personal level.
- b. The neighbourhood gets to know new cultures through the events and exhibitions taking place, which result in it becoming more open and adaptive.
- c. Different cultural groups have space to practice their culture
- d. Promotion of self-reliance of newcomers through language courses

#### 5.7. Participation of migrants

Through the time spent in VSP it became evident that the project had a high presence of migrants. It was observed that the year of their arrival in Greece related to how they participated in the project. People who arrived in Greece before 2015, i.e. before the so-called European refugee crisis, participated more in the activities. People who arrived after 2015 were less involved in the activities, apart from the language courses, but they still hang around VSP. According to George, this might have to do with the fact that newcomers are more concerned with other issues and have more urgent needs such as housing, which the project does not address.

‘Usually newcomers come to ask for advice and help with specific issues. Some of them they might stay and hang around as they feel safe and welcomed to stay, but they do not participate that much in the activities, at least not in the degree that we want. It is something that it needs more time’ (George).

According to Dorothea language is also a barrier, as most of the activities happen in English and not all of the newcomers speak English yet.

*‘There are language barriers. We try to solve them with the language courses but it needs more time. For instance last week in Cineforum (movie screening every second Thursday) came some people that they haven’t learn yet neither English nor Greek good enough, so they had difficulties to follow the movie’* (Dorothea).

When it comes to language classes, though, most of the participants are newcomers. Moreover, there are many migrant children in the space or on the pedestrian street. They are literally growing up here and although there is not a specific activity targeting them, they are very present. Furthermore, there are many pop-up events where the participation of migrants is higher, such as mini-festivals, parties, and exhibitions that specifically intend the cultural exchange of new and old-established residents of the area.

The participation of migrants in VSP indicates it is a safe and welcoming place for them. It contributes to the development of a diverse social network, their adaptation to the local culture, and their learning of new skills. Through their presence there, migrants reinvent urban life into one that includes them and their aspirations. Moreover, their presence in VSP is essential for the project to fulfil its goal, i.e. create bridges among different ethnic groups in Victoria Square. Thus, migrants' participation in VSP is an indicator of the successful contribution of the project in the process of integration.

In summary, the physical characteristics of a facility have an impact on the kind of integration process that will be triggered. The same is valid for its goals and the activities that take place there. Moreover, relationships with the neighbourhood and other projects are necessary to stimulate integration, as they are a precondition for different groups to want to get to know each other. Furthermore, it becomes evident from the analysis, that having clear integration strategies is not of major importance as integration can successfully happen as a side effect of commoning institutions.

## **6. Discussion and recommendations**

The analysis revealed the following themes:

- a. The physical characteristics of facilities open to migrant communities are important to the kind of integration process that they stimulate and the people that they invite. The findings revealed that a variety in space qualities allow for different kinds of activities and space appropriation, which result in different ways to achieve integration. Thus, it is recommended that the facilities have adequate spaces that can accommodate different kinds of activities with different needs of privacy that would vary from very open to very private. The former can be translated into a call to the neighbourhood to look at the project and its activities, as well as into an invitation to participate in their commoning practices, whereas the latter will create more safe and peaceful spaces that would enable more introverted and shy groups to participate in the project.
- b. The goals of a facility and whether it has a specific target group or not affects the way people interact with it. Hence, there is a fine balance between being open as a project in terms of to whom it is referred and having specific target groups. An undefined target group facilitates more intercultural exchange, as people from different backgrounds can pass by and casually interact with one another. On the other hand, this can be also a drawback, as some people might not feel concerned by the project and hence might not participate. This is very

important if more introverted groups are considered. Therefore, when it comes to facilities open to migrant communities it would make sense to have a combination of openness and target group definition. For instance, a project can be completely open to all as VSP, but it could include some activities with a specific target group. In this way, these groups that otherwise might not feel taken into consideration by the project, are specifically invited and therefore there are more chances that culturally different audiences will meet at the same space. As it has been argued throughout this research, such cultural exchange will enhance integration.

- c. Regarding the activities that take place in the project, the analysis revealed that their frequency affects integration differently. Activities that happen on a more regular basis connect people through common interest in a specific topic and help in the creation of teams. Thus, integration is achieved in this way through the development of a diverse social network. Furthermore, activities that do not require advanced language skills allow for the participation of more people, including those that have not mastered the English and Greek languages, which is exactly the very group with the largest need to integrate. Activities that introduce a new culture such as festivals, promote integration through enabling migrants to expose their culture and their background and make the neighbourhood more adaptive. For these reasons, it is recommended for facilities that intend to facilitate integration to have a variety of activities and event that would address larger audiences with diverse needs. In the same way described regarding target groups, this will allow for a bigger impact on integration.
- a. A good relationship with the neighbours is of utmost importance, as it will invite them to visit the facility and see positively the project and its commoners. Hence, good relationships with the community promote integration through making it more open and adaptive. If a good relationship with the neighbours creates bridges among the different ethnic groups in an area, cooperation with other projects can create bridges with the city and, thus, expand integration in another level. These partnerships enable different cultural aspects to be expressed and dialogues among different groups to start. All these could occur at the city, regional, national, or even international level. Thus, openness and extroversion are recommended at different levels, as a way to make a call in the society to be more adaptive and look at cultural diversity, not as something

threatening, but as a positive condition that could contribute to a more plural society.

- b. In order to achieve integration, it is not necessary to target integration. Integration is a positive way to participate in urban life, with one's recognized rights to live as culturally different, and reinvent the city according to one's aspirations. It can be achieved as an outcome when more open, cooperative, and inclusive societies, with connections among their different cultural groups are facilitated. The presence of different ethnic groups in a place starts a dialogue among them and gives them the opportunity to expand their social connections and mutually adapt to each other. Hence, one can argue that promoting commoning institutions that build more inclusive societies and consider collective well-being, can be more effective for integration than just looking at integration strategies.

## **7. Conclusions**

This research aimed to identify how participation in urban commons can directly relate to the process of integration of migrant communities. Based on review of urban commons and integration literature, as well as qualitative analysis of the findings of field research on a community centre in Victoria Square in Athens, Greece, it can be concluded that facilities open to migrant communities that enable participation in urban commons foster integration. The results indicate that participation in urban commons enable migrant populations to obtain local knowledge and a diverse network of social connections that help them being more self-reliant. Furthermore, the research demonstrates that participation in urban commons is an opportunity for intercultural exchange, something that on the one hand allows migrant populations to practice their culture and on the other hand it helps them to understand and adapt to the local context. Hence, according to the definition of integration provided by this thesis, participation in urban commons relates to the creation of more integrative societies.

The contribution of this thesis is of great importance for a country like Greece with constant arrivals of immigrants and a weak state that often fails to provide them with adequate support. What this research suggests -a linkage of integration with urban commons- has already been identified and realised by the multitude of facilities that work with migrant population in everyday life. What this thesis does is in fact a more academic and systematic looking at the practices of these facilities.

Start of this thesis were the facilities open to migrant communities that have been created since 2015 in Athens and help them to reinvent their lives according to their

aspirations. This research focused on urban commons literature, based on the idea that these facilities contribute in the production of urban life that is considered urban commons. Looking at this literature, it becomes evident that many scholars consider urban commons as a new way to create more inclusive societies. Then, the attention was shifted to integration literature in order to create a framework to analyse if and how these facilities contribute to integration. The theoretical findings of this thesis were tested in the case study, the VSP. Through analysing its goals, activities, physical characteristics, cooperation with other projects or individuals, as well as their relationship with the neighbourhood, this thesis has drawn some conclusions regarding what make this kind of facilities more integrative. Their physical space has a strong connection to integration and it is suggested a combination of open and private spaces, which can respectively give a feeling of welcome and safety. Moreover, facilities that do not have a specific target group address to everyone and in this way they promote intercultural exchange and are more integrative.

Going back to the literature review and the obstacles that may occur through a rigid definition of who is eligible for integration, the contribution of commoning facilities that do not define their target group to integration is very important. By not having a specific target group these facilities promote integration for everyone, even for people that would not be eligible by strict target group definitions. Apart from this, a combination of learning activities that promote self-reliance and activities that everyone can participate regardless their language knowledge can be very integrative and promote bonding among the participants. This combined with an extrovert attitude of the project can make the local society more open. Moreover, this thesis has proven that integration policies are not necessarily important to integration, as integration can happen as a side effect when an open and inclusive society is created. In this way of thinking what is needed is a society that embraces otherness and difference sees their potentials for development as well as a more plural and reach urban experience.

To better understand the implications of these results, future studies could address the creation of more inclusive societies through the promotion of commoning institutions. As seen in literature review commoning institutions is often a novel way to conceptualize urban life aiming at more collective ways of living. Maybe then the discussion on integration should be shifted from targeting people and make them adjust in the society to facilitate the creation of more commoning institutions that in a natural an organic way help people adjust to societies and societies to people, promoting in this way more inclusive societies. According to these ideas, practitioners should consider the optimal organizational structures of such institutions, whether or

not there should be any kind of hierarchy, especially when it comes to decision-making, and ways to incorporate them within the existed social, political and economic system. Moreover, it is suggested further research to identify potential conflicts between commoning institutions and the capitalist organization of life and the cities, as well as innovative and creative ways to overcome them.

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