

Letter from Athens

Looking out across the Greek capital from the top of Strefi Hill, you would not think that anything is wrong in the city.

Although we love to look at cities from a height, there's not much to learn about a conurbation from above, other than perhaps a vague sense of layout and scale. From here, I might as easily be in Tel Aviv as in Athens. Everything is white, baked bright by the unrelenting sun, although there are no skyscrapers and the mountains that surround the Greek capital cradle the city like a picture frame. Apart from two teenage boys playing on their phones, I have the hilltop to myself. In front is the Parthenon, sitting on the Acropolis like a pearl in its shell. To the left is the taller and more tourist-friendly Lykavittos Hill. Strefi Hill isn't in the guidebooks, which is almost certainly why there aren't any tourists here.

Greece has been front-page news for weeks as its politicians have attempted to negotiate the details of a third bailout in a politically and economically charged Eurozone. While the papers have played up finance ministers' meetings descending into acrimonious name-calling, and internal division within Greece's ruling Syriza party that threatens to undermine existing and future agreements, less media attention has been paid to the everyday reality faced by those actually living with the effects of the crisis in Greece.

It was only in April last year that then-deputy prime minister Evangelos Venizelos said, "Greece is leaving the bailout and the crisis behind." Today, however, evidence of austerity policies are visible everywhere. They don't seem to signify that the crisis has been left behind. In a country of just over 11 million people, some 1.3 million were unemployed as of January this year, most without benefits. Wages were down around 38 per cent from 2009 and pensions by 45 per cent. Praksis NGO's day centre in Athens, established to aid refugees, reports that between 40 and 50 per cent of people now seeking help are locals.

While direct links between government and provisions for civic society have been weakened almost to the point of breaking, since 2008 a network of solidarity initiatives has emerged across the country as Greeks try to support each other. These social solidarity movements - many of which are decentralised and non-hierarchical - attempt to fill the gaps as best they can. Greeks see need everywhere around them and many have initiated projects to address the particular concerns of their communities.

Sesoula is a small community-run co-op grocery store in Exarchia, a famously

anarchistic neighbourhood in downtown Athens and home to Strefi Hill. The co-op was established in the last couple of years by a group of local residents as a way to provide nutritious food at low prices to the community, to support small producers and farmers, and to offer an alternative to supermarkets. The small corner shop premises was donated by its owner to the co-op in exchange for renovation and repair work. Founder members volunteered until the shop became profitable, at which point they converted the excess into hourly wages.

A friendly, middle-aged co-op member called Sotiris mans the shop. It's clean and bright and inviting, with various products lining wooden shelves. Sotiris worries that I'm walking around Exarchia by myself (tourist forums are full of would-be visitors wondering whether the area is safe) and when I brush him off he asks whether Europeans really think all Greeks are lazy and selfish. It depends on which European you ask, I tell him. He's frustrated by the thought that the rest of Europe sees Greeks as somehow personally responsible for the current situation. He has family in New York, he says, and they want him to come and live there, but he also has a family here and it's hard to leave.

"But you like it here?" I ask, "Would you really want to leave?" "I like Spain," he says with some finality.

It's a refrain I hear multiple times. Greeks don't want to leave Athens and many use the various initiatives as ways to make life more bearable, stable and sustainable. One gets the sense that numerous projects are last-ditch attempts to make a living in a country where it is

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increasingly difficult to get by. Many feel that, although they do not want to, they will eventually be forced to move elsewhere to survive - whether back to rural villages in Greece where they have family or to other European cities.

Battling perceptions of Greeks as lazy, corrupt victims of a crisis of their own making is another recurrent theme. Mehran Khalili, a British-Iranian political communications consultant, is full of love for his adopted country. Khalili is one of the founding members of Omikron Project, a grassroots PR campaign that was initiated in Athens in 2012 to address Greece's image problem

in the foreign media. "Many of us [who started the Omikron Project] are involved in activism," he says. "And through activism we saw that there's an incredible amount of activity taking place across the country, which greatly contrasted with the awful headlines in foreign papers which were being attributed to Greece."

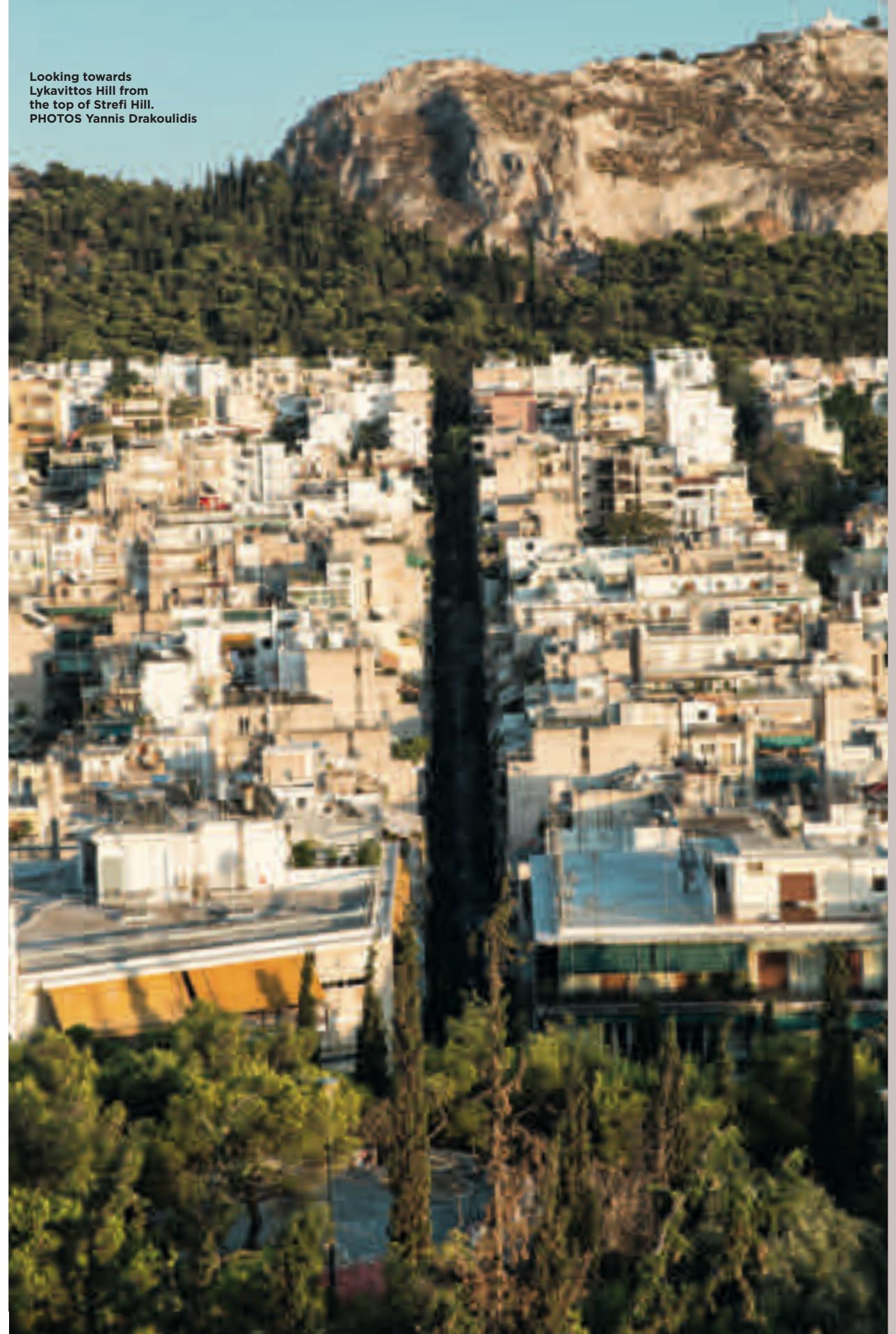
The Omikron Project's most successful campaign to date is a map of hundreds of grassroots groups in Greece, from education movements and alternative micro-economies, to urban improvements and collective kitchens. It's an inspiring snapshot of the steps locals are taking to improve their communities in difficult times. "The barriers for entry [to social initiatives] are so low," says Khalili. "There's no money to help get things started, but there's no risk either."

London has been my home for the past eight years and Khalili is half-British, so we can't help but note the striking dissimilarities between the Greek and British capitals. When British prime minister David Cameron launched his Big Society manifesto in 2010, the programme was widely ridiculed for its ideology of "integrating free markets with a theory of social solidarity" and criticised by the Left for attempting to replace state welfare with people power. Yet seeing how the crisis in Greece has reinvigorated civic society is inspirational and educational. Equally fascinating is Khalili's assessment of grassroots social movements, such as Solidarity, in Greece. "Let's face it," he says, "many of these projects address various gaps left by the state, systematic issues. The need is there. We must fix it. Cynicism,

like you often see in Britain towards these kind of projects, is tedious and unhelpful." At least in this context.

Two of these gaps are addressed by Traces of Commerce, an on-going empty shops project launched by three architects: Harris Biskos, Martha Giannakopoulou and Clelia Thermou. Since the crisis, it has been increasingly difficult for young people to find work. The unemployment rate, at the time of writing, is 25.6 per cent, while youth unemployment is nearer to 60 per cent. Many are leaving Athens to seek work elsewhere. Equally worrying are the huge numbers of empty buildings and storefronts >

Looking towards Lykavittos Hill from the top of Strefi Hill. PHOTOS Yannis Drakoulidis





Above, left to right: Costas Theocharis from Collaboratorium, Hlias Giannopoulos, and a visitor in Fixers, a 3D-printing workshop in the Traces of Commerce arcade, which launched in 2014 to open up the ground floor of an empty building to young artists and designers for temporary residencies. Goods on the shelves of neighbourhood co-op Sesoula in Exarchia. Sotiris and his mother pack up groceries in Sesoula, which supports local producers and offers an alternative to supermarkets.



Empty buildings in Exarchia.

> in the city; 1,500 and 2,000 respectively, according to Biskos. "The contemporary Greek city is based on ground-floor networks," he says. "People live the city through the ground floor, and between 2008 and 2012 there was a noticeable boom in shops closing down and buildings emptying out. It completely changes the way people use the city, as well as one's day-to-day perception of it." In 2014, Biskos and his collaborators received permission from a social-security fund that owned an empty office building not far from Syntagma Square to host an exhibition in its ground-floor arcade. They issued an open call for young practitioners to occupy the shop spaces and participate in workshops about commercial activities disappearing from the city centre. The month-long series of workshops culminated in the refurbishment of the shop spaces and an installation of hanging neon signs in the arcade. This served to return light and public notice to the abandoned building. "Everyone came to take an Instagram," says Biskos. "It's Instagram urbanism, sure, but people nevertheless

take notice of something they previously did not." The project ran for a second time this year, with residents - young designers, artists, architects, publishers, collectives - occupying the shop spaces for three- to six-month residencies, leasing them for free on the condition that they provided two collaborative workshops per month and did not sell any goods or services. The residencies recently finished and most people have yet to empty their shops. A couple of the spaces are still occupied by people working - Pavlina Alexia Verouki making hand-engraved gold jewellery; Konstantinia Vafeiadou crafting straw hats using traditional millinery techniques; and Fixers, a 3D-printing studio that has managed to launch a successful online business. Other shop spaces were occupied by The Athens Zine Biblioteque, a library of more than 300 zines; a studio for sign-making and printing; and Debop, an alternative city guide and blog about Athens. Biskos and his colleagues hope to run the project for a third time and have been searching for a way to let residents turn a profit. "It's difficult," he says, "because

everything becomes much more complicated when you try to make it commercial. The way we have been working, the residents occupy the shops and that's it. But as soon as we bring payment for goods or services in, they have to register as businesses, pay taxes, pay rent and utilities. In Greece, those processes are slow and difficult." Unlike in London or New York, there's no sense that these kinds of projects are the handmaiden of gentrification. For one thing, the context of Athens is dissimilar to many other cities - the number of empty buildings is vast, there's little foreign investment in property pushing up prices, and most premises are privately owned rather than land banked by developers. "Athens is a human-scale city," says Biskos, "and things happen slowly; change happens slowly. But we're not trying to design the city; we're trying to design the conditions for changes to happen." Other grassroots initiatives address further essential problems, from volunteer-run health clinics to the creation of more green spaces in response to Athens's lack of parks and gardens. In Kypseli, an ethnically mixed, high-density neighbourhood in the north >

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Lights in the Traces of Commerce arcade.



> of the city, physicist Costas Zampelis has initiated a project called Fotini Kypseli that aims to bring better lighting to the area's shops and residential buildings. In times of need, non-essentials – such as lighting in entrance areas of residential buildings – are often neglected. By using low-cost, energy-efficient LED lights, Fotini Kypseli hopes to relight the streets and homes of Kypseli, making the area feel safer and more attractive. It's a simple, focused idea, but one with significant potential impact.

Other activists have formed Save Greek Water, a campaign to prevent the two state-owned water utilities – EYDAP in Athens and EYATH in Greece's second city Thessaloniki – from being privatised. Dimitris Nikolaou, a long-time corporate lawyer and communications-team member for Save Greek Water has helped lead the campaign to educate the Greek public about the dangers of privatising profitable state-owned utilities. "We're not so much an activist group," he says, "but rather a unit of researchers striving to make the knowledge we gathered during these last three years common to the public."

Formed during the first bailout accord, the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (HRADF) was responsible for selling off state-owned assets. Sixty-one per cent of EYDAP was transferred to HRADF in two instalments in 2011 and 2012, while 74 per cent of EYATH was transferred, again in two instalments in 2011 and 2012. The information campaign by Save Greek Water eventually

culminated in a judgement last year from one of Greece's highest courts, the Council of State, which declared that the state must own 50 + 1 per cent of water utilities. While many considered the Council's decision a success for the campaign, only 34 per cent of shares have been returned to the Greek state. Save Greek Water has continued to press the Syriza MPs for action, but so far with little effect. "Unfortunately, I think the situation in Greece will get worse before it gets better," Nikolaou says. "But I do believe that if the people wanted to behave

navigate, how noisy, hectic and chaotic it was, and how, according to a recent Eurobarometer survey, Athenians are the least satisfied people in Europe with their quality of life. It continued by enumerating the wonders of an Athens that existed more than 2,000 years ago.

To follow this example, it's easy to see Athens as a tale of two halves: the glorious ruins of the ancient city and the sad wreck of today's state capital. But this attitude sells short not only modern Athens, but modern Athenians as well. From architects trying

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as citizens, the politicians wouldn't be able to stop them. Extreme situations force people to decide what's really important."

Leaving Greece, I bought a copy of the International Herald Tribune to read on the flight home. It came with a copy of a tourist magazine about Greece, a special issue dedicated to the city of Athens. The editor's letter opened with a paragraph about how unlovable the city was, how difficult to

to revive downtrodden city centres, to activists helping to draw attention to the consequences of selling off state-owned assets, the breadth of social and urban initiatives and commitment to improving lives in contemporary Athens by its inhabitants is far more worthy of attention than these sad binary oppositions. ●

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