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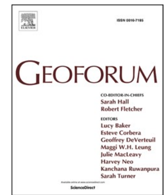

Two houses, one family, and the battlefield of home: A housing story of home unmaking in rural Punjab

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the lived experience of a family house as a battlefield between contrasting views, emotions, cultures and practices of home. It aims to make sense of the underlying tensions as a matter of home *unmaking* – a process of disruption of the normative, relational or physical bases of home – within the housing pathway of an extended family in semi-rural Punjab, India. Building on in-depth interviews with family members and on participant observation of their dwellings, we explore the causes and consequences of home unmaking from without (due to environmental factors) and from within (after deep-rooted intergenerational tensions). By looking at people's ongoing relations with particular domestic spaces and objects within a traditional house (hold), we highlight the negotiation of gender and generational roles and the attendant family transformations. Home unmaking, as a process with multiple sources, temporalities, and entanglements, provokes a range of reactions and counter-reactions in such settings. We capture them, and propose a framework for their comparative analysis and understanding, by embedding people's narratives in their family and housing circumstances. This is necessary to advance further, and beyond the scope of Western countries, research into the unmaking of home, both in and out of one's dwelling.

1. Introduction

Home, as a special form of attachment and appropriation of space, is generally supposed to start from the place in which one is born (Chawla, 1992). It may then overlap – or at least be expected to – with the houses and households in which one lives, or has been living. In a variety of non-Western "traditional" social contexts, including India's semi-rural Punjab which is the focus of this article, the overlapping between house, household and home is often taken for granted. So is the traditional and normatively cogent social order underpinning it, with the attendant power asymmetries and inequalities along gender and generational lines.

However, normative models of the house or of the household do not necessarily match with its lived experience (Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zuniga, 1999). Not all the members of a household, or dwellers of a house, experience it as home in a normative sense, as a place where they enjoy security, familiarity, and some control on their personal space (Boccagni, 2017). Less obvious, though, is to explore the gap between normative models and actual domestic experience as an ongoing, relationally and materially based matter of home making and *un*making (Baxter & Brickell, 2014). How does a dwelling operate as home in a "thick" sense, rather than only as a shelter? What happens in the latter case, given the relations between family members and the influence of domestic infrastructures, affordances and objects?

As we illustrate through our case study, the qualities that turn a house into a home can be negatively affected by external factors (e.g. a hostile environment) as much as internal ones (e.g. household-based conflict). Home can be unmade in infrastructural, relational, even emotional regards. We understand home unmaking as a cumulative series of critical events, rather than as a synonym with the detachment from the domestic space which is inherent in all housing transitions, only to be followed by re-attachments to different dwellings over time. We do so by delving into the housing history (Lawrence, 1985) of a family in semi-rural Punjab, seen from the viewpoint of one figure in it – a woman we call Sundeep – and through her mixed relations with the house(hold) of origin and the current one.

Through a theoretically informed discussion of this "family tale" of home unmaking, we cast light on the lived domestic experience of a house(hold) as a semi-invisible battlefield. Different actors enact contrasting forms of home (un)making in it, underpinned by equally

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different views of gender and generational roles and obligations. With a view to capturing the multiple facets of home unmaking, we first approach the literature on family life and domestic cultures along the house/home interface, and describe our research setting. We then analyze the lived experience of two houses in the life course of the same family, by combining participant observation with biographic narratives from Sundeep and her interlocutors. This reveals the emergence of significant forms of home unmaking, which articulate the negotiation of kinship values and responsibilities, but also the influence of extant domestic infrastructures, as affordances for dwellers to feel at home or not. We eventually revisit the sparse literature on home unmaking through the findings of our case study, thereby outlining a heuristic framework to inform further research on home unmaking within house stories and family lives.

2. Home unmaking and the tension between normative expectations and relations in the household

Investigating how home unmaking plays out in family life demands some reflection on how a house is constructed as home in the first place. This has to do with meaningful emotions, but also with in-depth routines and mutual expectations embedded in it (Saunders & Williams, 1988; Somerville, 1997; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Boccagni, 2017). Different dwellers experience a particular domestic space as more or less homelike at different points in time, depending on the combined influence of external (i.e. political and environmental) factors and of internal (household and life course related) ones. Whatever its degree of "homeliness", a house operates as a central stage on which family histories unfold, while also shaping them in subtle and meaningful ways. It can be approached as a research site in itself, for its societal meanings and functions, but also as a privileged access point to the (re)production of family life (Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995); put differently, it is equally relevant to ethnography and biography (Carsten, 2018). In both respects, the house as a lived space can be illuminated anew, behind the veil of its being private and apparently natural (Miller, 2001), as a site of home (un)making.

At a theoretical level, our case study draws on recent elaborations of the house/home interplay such as the one of Handel (2019), who argues for three levels of investigation. The first, *housing regimes,* addresses the home/house as part of power dispositives and as a feature in planning systems, state policies, market and political economies. The material and spatial characteristics of homes/houses and neighborhoods reflect formal rules about what is (un)allowed, (in)efficient, (un)desirable. The second level, *critical phenomenology,* explores the distance "between the ideal type of home/house in a given society and its concrete embodiments" (Handel, 2019: 1046; cf. Rapoport, 1969). This means that the infrastructures and affordances in a home/house should be considered in their materiality, functionality and relationality with the dwellers. Last, *active dwelling* is an invitation to see homes/houses as ongoing processes. The empirical question is whether people's situated agency can turn an imperfect home into a home-like place, and to the (dis) advantage of whom. In this optic, dwelling practices are inherently political, as acts of place-making and resistance within unequal power relations. A critical and interdisciplinary theory of housing/dwelling should combine these levels to understand *why* people build houses and dwell there, *how* they do so, and *what it means* for people "to build a house and to make a home" (Handel, 2019: 1050).

Likewise, Brickell's (2012) critical overview of home studies emphasizes the material, imaginative and emotional aspects of home as a question of home*making:* a process that is temporally patterned, operates on multiple scales and is interdependent with power and identity relations, hence has an inherent political dimension. Whether in the private domain or in public space, people live their homes differently and have unequal possibilities to act or resist changes in them, depending on factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and class, as well as their position within a household. However, the material, relational and emotional bases of home are permeable to several forms of erosion or loss – put differently, of home *un*making (Baxter & Brickell, 2014). Home may be unmade in space, through literal destruction or dislocation, and in time, whenever an emplaced sense of home is connected with the past, but no more with the present experience of dwelling.

Both approaches invite a joint understanding of home as a symbolic and emotional experience based on certain practices and relationships, and house as a physical infrastructure with its own material cultures. In practice, a home/house can be *un*made both from the outside and from the inside. In the former case, political, economic, military or environmental processes jeopardize or downright destroy the home/house. The second circumstance is the consequence of death, separation or family breakdown, but also of conflictual role expectations in a household. In either scenario, home unmaking subverts the connection between the ideal family model and the ideal characteristics a house should have in several respects: regarding its infrastructures, its temporal and spatial organization as a lived space, the use and meanings of domestic objects, and the values attached to different household configurations (Cieraad, 2018). For sure, the idea of "what constitutes a 'proper' family", and of how "individuals relate to one another in the intimacy of their domestic life", is itself historically shaped and shifting across countries and social groups (Munro and Madigan, 1999: 107). As important, such ideals have their own influence on "the physical design of the housing within which these social relationships are lived" (cit.). In this perspective, the conflicts that stem from the division and allocation of domestic spaces and times are by no means reducible to functional or organizational issues. Rather, they mirror contrasting expectations and family models. Different household members hold unequal power positions in organizing the home/house according to their needs and preferences, by engaging with the domestic affordances available (Allan & Crow, 1989; Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zuniga, 1999; on India, Sen, 1993).

Based on these critical remarks on the lived experience of domesticity and family relations, we now explore how home (un)making unfolds in the housing pathway (Clapham, 2002) of one enlarged middle-class *saini* caste family in semi-rural Punjab. In doing so, we privilege the viewpoint of a young woman, Sundeep Kaur. The structural transformations of the two houses where she has lived are a mirror of disruptions and continuities in her family life, but also a material background that shapes it. Handel's (2019) "housing regime," here, includes both formal planning regulations and locally relevant traditions, values and norms. Our "critical phenomenology" investigates the gap between the expected function of a house according to Sundeep and her family members, and what the house affords them to do and feel like over time. This calls for some exploration of the interplay between human and nonhuman actors (Latour, 1993) in a domestic setting, as they "mutually constitute one another" through its lived experience (Vellinga 2007). More specifically, we examine how the functions and meanings attributed to nonhuman entities – the house and its structural parts, like walls, doors, windows, lobbies and gates – affect the daily life of our interlocutors and their efforts to make themselves at home. Last, we understand "active dwelling" as any form of resistance to home unmaking, including divestment towards a house that no longer lives up to one's needs and family models (Brickell, 2012).

3. Research context and method

The case study on which this paper builds is a local articulation of

HOMInG, a comparative study of migrant views and experiences of home, including their relationships with left-behind family members as ways of home (un)making. Within this broader research design, Bertolani conducted an exploratory study in two municipalities in semi-rural Punjab, India (summer 2019), following her previous contacts and networks, including family-based ones.[1] While her expected research focus was on changing housing landscapes and material cultures in so-called remittance houses (Taylor, 2013), she also had the opportunity to approach domestic arrangements that had been only marginally influenced by migration. Indeed, and unsurprisingly perhaps, the social and economic consequences of migrants' investments were sparse and stratified across the local built environment, rather than being concentrated only in exceptional or distinctive buildings (Boccagni and Bivand-Erdal, 2021). While remittances did make a difference to the livelihood of some, they were a secondary question in the everyday life of many more. The latter include the family of Sundeep, a woman in her early thirties and an in-law of Bertolani herself.[2]

Sundeep's life story unfolds between two houses, the family one in which she was born and grew up, which we call *childhood house,* and the in-laws' *marital house* where she lives as a married woman. By engaging with Sundeep and with the central members of her family network, Bertolani was able to capture the changing meanings, functions and emotional bonds attached to these houses, parallel to the dwellers' life and housing careers. As the material and symbolic changes in the houses revealed, each of them was not only the central stage of family life, but also an agent of home (un)making in itself. As a social researcher, a "far" family member and an occasional guest, Bertolani encountered instances of home (un)making that emerged as a meaningful question itself. We outline a theoretical framework out of them, in this paper, drawing both on biographical interviews and participant observation of the underlying domestic cultures and practices. All interviews were conducted in English. This allowed to explore the distinct meanings attributed to "house" – as a physical building as well as a metaphor – and "home" – in its relational and emotional dimensions (Boccagni, 2017).

Bertolani's positionality as a semi-insider was not without dilemmas. As an external member of Sundeep's family network, she was in a privileged guest position in her marital house, and was already well-informed about their family life. At the same time, although she did engage with all the relevant parties, Bertolani had predominantly access to one version of this tale of home (un)making – Sundeep's. Her male and older counterparts had a contrasting version of the same family and housing transitions, which was not necessarily "false". It was rather the articulation of different household, generational and gender positionings and views of the world, against a twofold communal backdrop: the built environments in which family relations unfold, and a long-term social change in family values (Uberoi, 1993) which migration has accelerated, Sundeep and her new family tend to embrace, and her in-laws tend to repel. Although their everyday lives are not directly affected by migration, Sundeep's and her husband's attitudes and family patterns seem to be shaped by the migration stories of close relatives outside India far more than the rest of their extended family.

As our analysis shows, the family and housing history of Sundeep has nothing remarkable. It looks rather ordinary, which is part of its significance. Theoretically speaking, this story speaks to broader debates on the complex and gendered interplay between family life and experiences of home within a common domestic space (Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zuniga, 1999). It is also illuminating on the place-dependency – the anchoring in very particular domestic environments (such as rooms, windows or corridors [Davidson, 2009]) – of significant emotions about the past; of meaningful and conflict-ridden relationships in the present; of concerns and aspirations for the future. Furthermore, the story of Sundeep and her families gives us an opportunity to expand on home unmaking in family life out of the Western context in which much of this intellectual conversation is constrained.

4. Two houses, one family, and the (un)making of home over time

4.1. Sundeep's housing pathway and home (un)making

Sundeep Kaur was born in a small town in semi-rural Punjab. She has always lived in her grandfather's house until her marriage, together with two sisters, a brother, parents and grandparents. After getting married to Joginder Singh, she moves to a small town to live with her husband, his parents and his brother. Sundeep and Joginder are given a room and a wardrobe in the "new" part of the house, which has been enlarged over time, while an old part of the house remains unused. As a joint family, they share bathroom and kitchen with their elderly kin and partake in daily household activities.

At first, Sundeep finds this arrangement comfortable and convenient. Just some months later, however, she returns to live with her family of origin in order to attend a specialization course as a teacher. Her husband remains in the marital home, which is close to his workplace. Sundeep's training lasts two years, during which she and her husband have a female baby. After that, she returns two more years to the house of the in-laws with her daughter and starts working as a primary teacher in a private school. Then, in agreement with her husband, she finds a better job elsewhere, close to her parents' home, to improve her career chances. Once again, and for about five years, she is back to her childhood house along with her daughter. At last, Sundeep gets a good teacher employment in the small town of her in-laws and reunites with her husband, back to their house.

As time goes by, her relation with the in-laws becomes increasingly tense. No significant bond has ever been created with them, due also to Sundeep's absence from the marital house. Moreover, the economic needs of Sundeep and Joginder collide with the expectations of their older counterparts. This leads to an initial division within the household. The domestic arrangement that used to be comfortable is no more sustainable, based as it is on sharing chores and expenses, and on constant proximity and mutual control. The split-up of the kitchen – no more a communal "hearth" (Vellinga, 2007) – visibly materializes the economic and relational separation of the household (Hershman, 1981). As Mazumdar and Mazumdar point out (albeit referring to the Hindu home), the kitchen and courtyard are "significant spaces" (1999: 167) in which women share daily activities confirming moralities and values about home maintenance. Sundeep, her husband and daughter move from the rooms closest to those of the in-laws to the older part of the house. The two families start leading separate lives. Now they have separate electricity meters and bills. Each family eats and does shopping and laundry on their own. However, they still share several common spaces: the courtyard, the main entrance and the lobby. At this stage, Joginder recalls, the physical division of the building seems undesirable, if not impossible.

In the meantime, Joginder's brother has got married and moved with his wife into the rooms where Sundeep and her family were living before. This makes living under the same roof still more complex. The

[1] Bertolani is an in-law of the family of Joginder, Sundeep's husband. This study builds also on her previous familiarity with the key figures we present below. Bertolani had already been invited to visit what we call "childhood house" several years before her 2019 visit to Punjab, when she was hosted in Sundeep's "marital house". Since then, the empirical material available has been complemented with an ongoing circulation of skype interviews, chats, and visual materials (i.e. pictures, drawings and maps).

[2] This does not mean, however, that there was no exchange of resources between Sundeep and her relatives abroad. The house of Sundeep's in-laws was renovated and enlarged about 30 years ago thanks to remittances from her mother-in-law's family in the United States. Moreover, Sundeep's new housing project is being supported by her husband's uncles and cousin (from Italy and Switzerland, respectively) through financial advice, small economic contributions and a continuous exchange of ideas about the house/home and the relationships between its inhabitants.

new couple complains of lack of space, especially after the birth of a male child. Joginder and his brother eventually buy a plot of land together in the same village, to be used as a parking lot. At a certain moment, however, family cohabitation becomes unsustainable and a conflict finally erupts. Following that, Sundeep tells,

> We need a separate house… we are working so we [*should*] prepare and make our own small house, where we can live happily, where we can [*do what*] we want… I am thinking about another settlement, but [*my husband*] is not ready for a [*separate*] house yet. He says he doesn't want to make huddles in the smooth life of [*our daughter*]. He says we need money for [*her*] study. If we put our money in the house, then [*she*] will be in trouble. So, now the decision is pending. He calls his father: "Give some space to us, we can build a house", so I think they [*are*] thinking of this, his father and [*brother*]…

As it happens, Joginder takes over the ownership of the new land from his brother. He gets a mortgage and starts a new building there. Parallel to that, he signs a private agreement with his parents – within two years, he will vacate the portion of the house he still occupies with his family. The same document provides that ownership of that ancestral property will entirely pass to his brother. After the new agreement, Joginder's parents and brother decide to build a barrier to materially divide the building. What initially seemed unfeasible is now immediately possible: a wooden wall is erected in the lobby, with a plastic curtain to seal up to the ceiling. The main entrance to the house is closed from the outside. To get in and out of their "part", Sundeep and her family need to go through the back door in their bedroom. The gate and courtyard, instead, are under the control of Sundeep's in-laws.

Fig. 1 describes the new domestic organization. Sundeep, Joginder and their daughter live in the old section (light blue in the map), while her in-laws live in the new part (yellow) as a joint family, sharing bathroom and kitchen, as well as household chores.

Parallel to these events, Sundeep's childhood house has also undergone transformations. This is a rectangular building overlooking two country roads, surrounded by a fence wall with two gates. Much of its surface consists of a courtyard dominated by a veranda, where Sundeep and her siblings used to spend time in their childhood, while sleeping and studying in a common bedroom. It was a "modern" house for that time, Sundeep says – once located in the middle of the fields, but not far away from a small town. Its conception met the needs of a typical wealthy household in a rural setting, with several family members living together as a single economic unit (Hershman, 1981). Agricultural work, communal life outdoors and the breeding of some buffaloes accounted for the vast courtyard area.

Over time, only Sundeep's family has kept cohabiting with the grandparents. The internal structure of the building has changed likewise (Fig. 2). Her father has never worked as a farmer and there are no more animals in the yard. After the wedding of his elder daughter, he decided to build more rooms in the internal courtyard space. This is "the new house", Sundeep says, consisting of a "big room", a new *bethak* (the traditional living room to welcome guests) and a new bedroom. The new rooms have a concrete roof, while the old ones have wooden beams and bricks, with the water seeping in during the rainy season. The older part of the building consists of three rooms arranged in a row and facing the veranda: an old *bethak*, a "middle room" (which is the birthplace of Sundeep) and a "big" windowless room (the "privacy room"). As it seems, the old portion of the house was no longer suitable to protect its inhabitants, and the modern part has been built precisely to respond to the changing family needs. Whenever she goes back to her parents' house after marriage, Sundeep is entitled to occupy a single room with her child.

More recently, Sundeep's childhood house has undergone further radical changes. Once located in the open countryside, it is now engulfed by the growth of the town and its infrastructure. More critically, the state government has decided to build a highway viaduct a few meters away. This is considered a strategic infrastructure by the Indian federal government. It cannot be opposed. Much of her father's land property gets expropriated, and a portion of the house is demolished to leave space for the highway. The remaining portions of the courtyard fall within the buffer zone and cannot be built upon. In short, Sundeep's father is forced to demolish his own house. The demolition of the veranda causes the old rooms in the house to remain uncovered, so even the kitchens, pantry and bathrooms become unusable. In spite of the

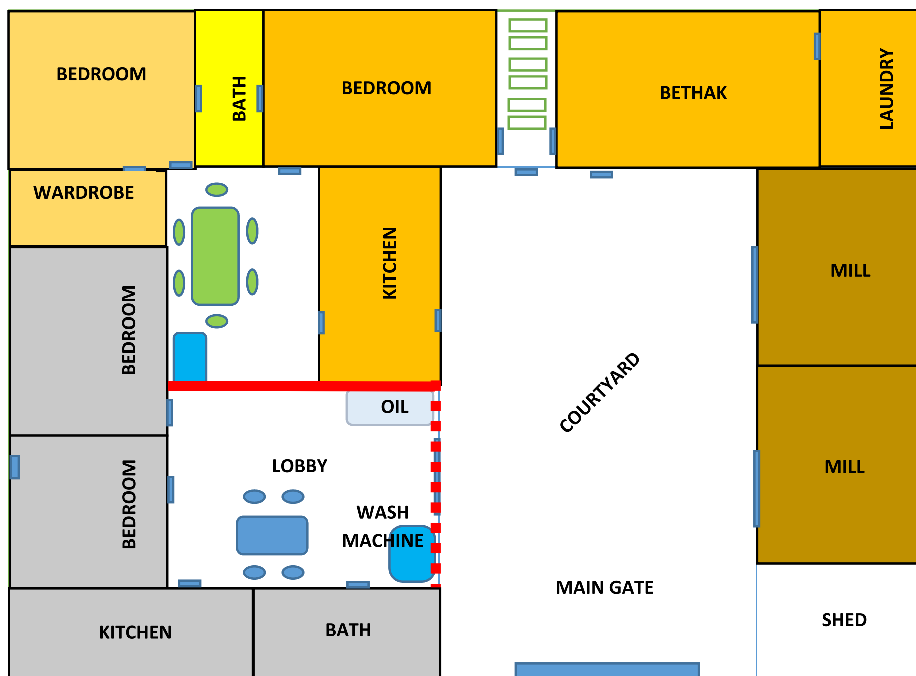

Fig. 1. Sundeep's marital house before and after the final household separation (wooden wall as continuous red line, closing of the main door as dashed red line). (This figure, as well as the subsequent drawing and pictures, comes from authors' fieldwork.) (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

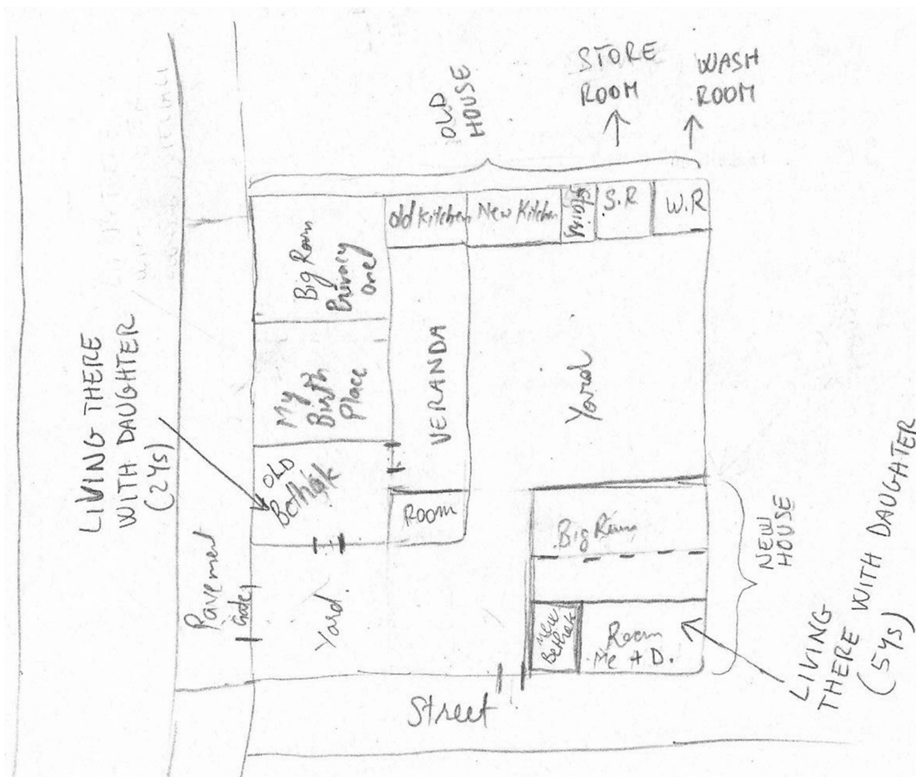

Fig. 2. Sundeep's drawing of her childhood house.

prohibition, Sundeep's father decides to build new bathrooms and a new kitchen in the buffer zone.

The demolition is a traumatic event for Sundeep, her parents and siblings. More than a "domicide" (Porteous & Smith, 2001), it resembles a "self-amputation", for that house is tacitly experienced like a human body (Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995) – indeed, as a part of one's own body (Waterson, 1990; Davidson, 2009). It is Sundeep's father himself who "mutilates" the house in order to avoid paying workers to do that. He then uses the same old bricks to try to heal the wound; that is, erect a new wall.

Unsurprisingly, the whole experience generates a sense of economic loss and emotional powerlessness. Although the amputated house "limbs" were relatively old, they were still in use and embedded significant family memories (Cieraad, 2012). It was in the old *bethak* that Sundeep met her husband for the first time while her parents were arranging her marriage. It was in the "middle room" that she was born, and in the "big room" she prepared herself every day with her sisters. "There are lots of memories" in the old house, Sundeep's brother tells, thinking back to the lush vegetation in the courtyard:

> I spent most of the afternoons on those trees, sitting there and eating berries… this is the best memory I have.

After the amputation, the old house changes in appearance and nature. Like a sick body, it no longer functions well in separating the outside world from the domestic one (Kaika, 2004), nor in providing adequate shelter. For one thing, it lacks rooms. Although all the children are now adults and some live elsewhere, those who remain need their own private space. This is made impossible by the impaired morphology of the building. Moreover, the house fails to stop external noise, air pollution and traffic vibrations, not to mention the risk of major floods. The "outside" now hangs over the house so much that it seems about to enter in a violent and uncontrollable way (Vacher, 2010).

As a result, the "relationship between the house and its inhabitants" (Vellinga, 2007) is disrupted. Healing the house by renovating it again is no longer worth the effort. Sundeep's father and siblings decide to build a new one on a plot of land a few miles away. The ancestral house is then resignified as a "previous home", whose fate remains uncertain. Perhaps it will be stripped of all its furnishings and permanently closed. Perhaps, instead, it will be leased to someone else who has no memories or belongings in there.

4.2. *Values, customary practices and formal rules as a background for home (un)making*

For a correct interpretation, Sundeep's housing pathway should be seen in light of her gender and caste origin, as well as of laws and customs on house ownership, inheritance and expropriation. Sundeep's parents and in-laws have been civil servants or traders for several generations. However, they are part of a caste of small landowners who tend to attribute their family status to land and real estate (Taylor, 2013). This social identity influences their attitude and attachment to houses and their ideas about family structures and relationships. In rural Punjab, home ownership or inheritance has a social, economic and relational dimension. The concept of house as a building is closely linked to that of "joint family" as a family model. *Ghar,* the Punjabi word for "house", means a concrete entity, but also a domestic relational unit (Hershman 1981) and a commensal group (Madan, 1993; Uberoi, 1993). Linguistically, the close link between home and family is revealed by the fact that the masculine word *gharvala* and the feminine *gharvali* mean husband and wife, while the plural *gharvale* points to the more general concept of "domestic family". Sociologically, *ghar* could be translated as household – in this case, a patri-virilocal, corporate and multifunctional group (Ballard, 1982) and a joint property-owning unit, where "the primary property in which members share rights is the house itself" (Hershman, 1981: 57). Several related families cohabit in the ideal-typical household: elderly parents, sons with their families and unmarried daughters, whereas women should move to their in-laws after marriage and become part of their husband's family. Family members are expected to pool their income in a common fund and organize their expenses and daily activities together. This economic organization

corresponds to a patriarchal and collective family model, which structures relationships hierarchically according to gender and seniority. Moral values like respect for the elder's authority, protection of female honor and mutual cooperation are constitutive of this idea of family. In fact, there is often competition in family relations among members of the same gender and within the same generation (Hershman, 1981). The avoidance of shame and the respect for hierarchy and authority are often maintained through moral pressures (Das, 1993) and "emotion work" (Hochschild, 1979), that is, the management of feelings to produce a proper state of mind in other people.

Furthermore, the predominant social expectations about one's childhood house are significantly shaped by gender identity. Boys are socialized to belong to their parents' house and are expected to carry on its lineage (*goth*). Girls, instead, are socialized to belong less to the house they were born in than to the one of their husbands, as they will contribute to their lineages. Women's emotional connections with their childhood house and family members linger over time, especially with their older brothers (Hershman, 1981). However, the idea that after marriage their in-laws' house and husband's family will be theirs too might jeopardize their sense of what a home should be like. Moreover, marriages are normally arranged by parents and elderly family members according to caste endogamy and lineage exogamy (Ballard, 1982). Women have often limited opportunity to get to know thoroughly their husbands, in-laws and future households before marriage, or to build emotional bonds with them. This holds also for Sundeep, who found herself in a house of strangers.

Traditionally, moreover, women do not inherit real estate from their parents, but are entitled to maintenance and to marriage expenses. They build their own economic security through marriage and the properties inherited by their husbands, which will be passed on to their sons. Customs and laws concerning inheritance, therefore, are central to the family structure and organization (Madan, 1993). Under modern Indian law, daughters have the same inheritance rights as sons. Nevertheless, in Punjab the customary law – the code adhered to by the judges during the British Raj – is still widely followed. Upon their father's death, married sisters generally sign away any claim on their brother's inherited estate. Doing otherwise would be considered "unnatural" and would compromise their relationships with male siblings. Moreover, ancestral property – the land – is inherited in a patrilineal way and must be divided equally among all sons, while the properties purchased by the father during his life can be allocated unequally among them. According to traditional rules, therefore, having male heirs is of vital importance. A man without sons "is considered the most pitiable and unfortunate of men" (Hershman, 1981: 76). This is crucial not only for men but also for women, as it consolidates their position and increases their power and authority within the joint household (Das, 1993).

Sundeep and Joginder have decided, all moral pressures notwithstanding, to have no more children after their baby girl. This family choice is very difficult to sustain, especially for Sundeep:

> All [*female relatives and acquaintances*] continuously are making me feeling guilty… Even in my school: [*yesterday the*] cook… said to me "Please madam, do something! You need a [*male*] child!".

Their choice is at odds with tradition, with the customary law on inheritance and with the expectations of Joginder's parents. As contentious is their decision to have two incomes, which results in having economic control of family expenses and in educational and domestic responsibilities falling on both parents. In short, their family project does not match with the traditional household idea, nor with the "ordinary" family hierarchy along gender and generational lines. Although this does not lead to an open conflict, the couple is progressively isolated inside the house, as illustrated above. This is seen as an unavoidable, but anyway negative outcome, because it contradicts traditional morality. As Sundeep recalls:

> When I got married, if [*my mother-in-law*] said to me "do this and that… bring tea, prepare lunch, wash the utensils…" I had to do it at that time, because I never wanted to separate from them…

After that, Sundeep and Joginder's home unmaking emerges as the cumulative result of subtle struggles within the household, materialized through the control of particular domestic places, objects and infrastructures, as we analyze below.

Contrasting views and expectations about marriage and family life are critical to this intra-household conflict. The decision of Joginder's parents to allocate the property of the ancestral house only to the younger son sanctions the breakdown of the family unit. Although legally challengeable, the decision redefines the boundaries of the family and erects an insurmountable internal threshold. Excluding the eldest son from ancestral real estate properties is a public statement of non-membership. This has a powerful symbolic value and a very strong emotional impact for Joginder. It accelerates his own personal home unmaking "from within" and disrupts the emotional bond with his parents. It also helps him to alleviate guilt for not meeting their expectations. Now he feels in a position to invest in new and different homemaking projects elsewhere. Against all odds, he concludes, "now we are building a house for our daughter!"

Overall, home unmaking from within – as in the lived experience of Sundeep's marital house – is an entanglement of relational, emotional, normative and symbolic pressures and constraints. Different family members engage in it, trying to resist or promote change by using the domestic spaces and objects available to them. Home unmaking from the outside is quite a different process (Fernandez-Arrigoitia, 2014). It may be the result of external constraints, such as impersonal laws and bureaucratic procedures that annihilate the domestic space available and undermine the dwellers' room to rebuild it. The shifting boundary between what is external and what is part of the *ghar,* as a home but also as a household, is established from the outside with no room for negotiation. While Sundeep's father does receive compensation, he considers it very modest, as the ancestors' house stands on land still registered as "agricultural". The economic damage is aggravated by the ban on rebuilding the demolished premises. At the end, the only exit strategy is to divest the house and move elsewhere (Brickell, 2012). In this case, home unmaking is no consequence of a progressive family breakdown. If anything, it could be the cause of it.

In both examples, home (un)making occurs through the materiality of the house, which conjugates instrumental functions with the metaphorical meanings attached to it by different dwellers (Handel, 2019). It is important, then, to analyze the role of specific infrastructures and objects in the two houses.

4.3. Home unmaking through objects and infrastructures

As highlighted above, a *ghar* corresponds to a well-established household model based on collective life and joint ownership. It should ensure the safety of its members, for example by providing women with adequate separation from men inside and outside the household. This concept can be traced back to *purdah*, the situational behaviors through which women demonstrate their modesty in the presence of men, for example by covering their heads (Hershman, 1981). Moreover, the ideal house should afford its dwellers to exert control on its spaces and objects, as well as on the rhythms of family life. Against this background, home (un)making can be revisited as a set of practices that support or disrupt domestic security and control. Whether they operate from the outside or the inside, such practices are critically mediated by the use of certain affordances and infrastructures.

In Sundeep's childhood house, home unmaking comes from outside and manifests itself through its partial demolition. In their recollections, Sundeep and her siblings connect the sense of security emanated by that house with the older rooms. A windowless room (the "old big room"), a *bethak* and two internal courtyards operated as thresholds to protect

inner domestic life, divide it from the outside and separate women from men. Together with the "middle room", where Sundeep and her siblings were born, these rooms overlooked a large veranda on the inner yard. The first room was reserved for the women of the house, Sundeep recalls, whereas the *bethak* was like an inner threshold that separated those who were not part of the extended family from the rest of the domestic environment. The two inner courtyards, in turn, allowed for multiple levels of security:

> We [*sisters*] usually changed our clothes in a room where my father and brother never came before knocking… In that room there was no window, there was only a door, so it was safe for us, with privacy. […] I also remember the *bethak*, the guest room… the relatives or the male strangers sat there, because that room had two doors. One [*was*] open in the veranda, like corridor and the other one [*was*] on the outside of the house, in the yard. The strangers [*could*] enter from the main gate and they [could] enter the *bethak*, they [*had*] no need to come in other rooms, they [*didn't*] know about [*the rest of*] the house… We [*felt*] very secure because we [*could*] play in a yard. […] My father… never allowed [*us girls*] to stand on the gate, to see the cars… We had to stay in the inner yard.

In Sundeep's childhood house, safety and privacy were preserved less by the presence of different bedrooms than by the existence of "special" closed rooms and open spaces. In traditional rural Punjabi houses, bedrooms are often shared between several family members and can perform more than one collective function (Loyd, 1984). In our case study, however, it is precisely these thresholding rooms and privacy-maker structures that get demolished. After that, Sundeep's father has a new and higher wall built in their place. It is as if the house needs to be "armed" against the outside world. If previously the thresholds were to prevent people from looking in from the street, now they should rather deter from physical intrusions. The same transformation, with high concrete walls in place of open courtyards, is undergone all over the neighborhood, Sundeep's father says. However, even such a rebuilt and strengthened wall seems unable to meet their expectations. Like a porous threshold (Baxter and Brickell, 2014), the wall lies there to recall the loss of the old part of the house. It embodies its mutilation, by its very presence (Fig. 3).

For sure, a wall is not the only house infrastructure that should divide the external space (perceived as threatening) from the interior (described as vulnerable). Windows, doors and gates are expected to perform a similar function. Windows should allow fresh air and light to enter. Metaphorically, they are openings to the new and the creative (Jacobs & Malpas, 2013; Handel, 2019). However, in Sundeep's childhood house they have turned into breaches through which dust, pollution and noise creep in. Gates and doors, in turn, should afford a selective access to the house, separating inhabitants, guests and other legitimate visitors from anybody else. After demolition, though, they equally fail to accomplish their function. Since the highway was built, Sundeep's parents decided to never leave the house "alone" and empty for fear of intruders. It is no more the house that protects its dwellers, but the other way round – the vulnerable and indefensible house (Hunt, 2009) needs to be continuously manned and safeguarded. Home unmaking, then, occurs as a result of porous and dysfunctional thresholds vis-à-vis the external environment (Burrell, 2014).

In Sundeep's marital house, home unmaking is initially due to the absence of a physical separation between different parts of the household that already struggle to live together. The internal lobby, in particular, comes to be experienced as an uncomfortable, insecure and contested space. Until a certain point, before the physical division of the household, the lobby is a common passage area through the main gate, and therefore perceived as a vulnerable space (Bartram, 2016). Yet, an invisible boundary can be traced, which separates the spaces under the control of each family. This is a mobile, cumulative and situational threshold. It is often erected through the use of objects. On their side, Sundeep and her husband try to enlarge their living space and control a few more square meters in the common area of the lobby. This space, as Sundeep herself admits, is "forcibly captured" by moving objects into the lobby: a chest, some armchairs and a coffee table, washing machine, dog bed and a shoe rack.

This is not enough, however, for them to take control. As Joginder's relatives run a mill in the courtyard and receive customers every day, it is precisely in the lobby that they place the mustard oil cans they are going to sell. Their customers end up playing a role in the competition for space control, as they are allowed to sit in Sundeep and Joginder's armchairs and use their bathroom, as if the lobby were a waiting room of the mill. "We have no control over this", Joginder complains. He feels both overwhelmed by the presence of strangers and frustrated because his parents do not understand his discomfort. At some point, as an attempt to protect "their" space, he starts locking the bathroom, kitchen and bedroom doors with padlocks whenever he is away from home.

Sundeep and Joginder's dog also becomes a pawn in the conflict. It is not clear, Sundeep says, what the place of their dog should be. Whenever customers enter the house to buy mustard oil, the dog is pushed outside in the courtyard. When customers enter the courtyard to buy the flour from the mill, instead, the dog must stay inside in the lobby (Figs. 4 and 5). As in the example of Sundeep's childhood house, doors are no more sufficient to allow selective access to the domestic space. Dwellers themselves need to protect the house – or at least their turfs inside it.

Even the external gate of the courtyard is unsafe, Sundeep says, after

Fig. 3. The highway looming over the mutilated house and the new wall

Fig. 4. Main entrance, oil bins in the lobby and the use of the pet to exert domestic control.

Fig. 5. Main entrance, oil bins in the lobby and the use of the pet to exert domestic control.

an unpleasant episode – a customer of the mill who, after ringing the bell and having no response, climbed in, took out the flour and left in a hurry. She does not feel at home, by now, because her need for privacy and control is not taken into account by her in-laws. Her sense of home is destroyed from the inside of the *ghar* and through its constitutive relationships. "I don't want to come *[back]* in this house" at the end of the day, she bluntly concludes.

> [*My husband*] comes back at 2:30 or 2:35 pm and I am free on 2o'clock, and within 5 min I am here. So these 20 or 25 minutes are very difficult for me to live here. I can [*stay in this room*], sleep here, watch TV or be busy with my phone, but outside [*this room*] it's very difficult for me to survive…

Things change, however, after her in-laws decide to physically divide the inner domestic space. A makeshift wooden wall, surmounted by plastic curtains, now operates to split the lobby in two parts (Fig. 6). This purposive act of home unmaking ends up being a Janus-faced one. While Sundeep and Joginder lose control over the courtyard and the main entrance, which is closed from the outside, they also gain custody of this part of the house.

Now they can freely move the furniture around and leave the doors of their rooms unlocked. Some objects they had stacked up in the bedrooms, including a big fridge and kitchen utensils, are now in the lobby. Although it is more difficult for them to get fresh air and light, as the windows are locked and darkened, it is precisely the closing of gates, windows and doors that allows them to feel free. "Now we have more privacy", Joginder explains:

> They can't come in the lobby open area, so… that's good. Customers can't come. We have more space now… [*The*] neighbors are helping us, they know our condition… for example, if we have to dry the clothes… we go to the neighbors' house and they have the wires on their roof, so we place them on their house. They are helping us. Everyone is helping us, everyone!

Fig. 6. The wooden wall and the closed main gate transform the lobby into a space of privacy and control.

As home is unmade from the inside, it seems that good relationships – in fact, new sources of homemaking – are found outside the home. Once again, home making and unmaking are deeply and mutually entangled within the same place. Each of them, however, is only a temporary step in an open-ended housing and family pathway.

4.4. Beyond unmaking: exit strategies to regain a home out of a house

All over her family story Sundeep tends to occupy an asymmetrical power position, as she engages with external forms of home unmaking (in her childhood house) or with internal, household-based ones (in the marital house). However, what we may call agency, or "active dwelling" (Handel, 2019), is also part and parcel of her story. This eventually results, in both cases, in opting out of a house that no longer lives up to the dwellers' expectations.

In Sundeep's childhood house, the illegal reconstruction of the bathrooms and the kitchen is a matter of necessity, as much as of resistance to public authorities. However, it is only a temporary solution. As her father's decision to buy another lot for house-building reveals, the old house, now mutilated and offended, no longer meets the safety and control needs of its inhabitants. Interestingly, the new house mirrors a completely different idea of family life, inspired by Western models (Bose, 2014). It is structured on two floors, each of them with two or three bedrooms with private bathrooms and an open kitchen with a neighboring living room. This room performs the function of the *bethak*, but lies inside. The house design is for indoor living, with the garden operating as a collateral and aesthetic space. Collective living is reduced into the living room. Privacy is guaranteed by the fact that all children have their private space and bathrooms, even if some of them will never live permanently there. The new house, therefore, is meant to reflect and reaffirm the ongoing positive relationships between people, even as they no longer live together. Moreover, as Sundeep's father emphasizes, it is much safer than the previous one:

> First of all it's very nice because we raised the house 3 and a half yards from the street, so there is no risk [*of flooding*]… [*then*] there is the municipal sewer, public lighting on the street… and [*the connection to the*] aqueduct [*so we won't have to keep a tank on the roof]*.

In fact, these public infrastructures had already been available in the old house for some years. It is rather the structural layout of the house, decided by Sundeep and her siblings, what makes it more "modern". Perhaps the old house could not have coped with the changing needs of its inhabitants anyway, despite the emotional bond and the memories embodied in it.

Parallel to this, the wooden divide in Sundeep's marital home embodies the final act of home unmaking from within. It makes blatant the relational break with her in-laws and the consequent disruption of the household model as a co-resident, commensal, economic and multifunctional group (Ballard, 1982). This is no longer home for Sundeep and Joginder, who start building a new house elsewhere. Again, such a house reflects a distinctive new lifestyle. Everyone has their own bedroom and attached bathroom. The kitchen opens onto a large single room that serves as dining and living room. In order to expand it, Sundeep and Joginder eliminate the pantry and the *pooja* room (a space for prayers and meditation) from the initial project. This collective space is for watching television, listening to music, reading books or playing games. Altogether, the new house reflects a dwelling model that is closer to the Western one, based as it is on the coexistence between opposite pressures (Cieraad, 2018): "doing things together" as part of a culture of consumption and leisure, but also cultivating "the individual self-expression and identity" (Munro & Madigan, 1999: 108). In this house there are no spaces that guarantee the traditional separation between men and women (*purdah*). As important, with its first floor consisting of a separate apartment with an independent entrance, the house Sundeep and Joginder are building is meant to be the future house of their daughter. This contradicts customary inheritance practices. The very act of building, then, is already an act of dwelling (Heidegger, 1971). More recently, forced to smartwork after Covid-19, Joginder and Sundeep visit the construction site every day and stay there as long as possible. They set up a temporary canopy to protect themselves from the heat and carried a sofa from their old lobby. Thanks to their mobile phones and laptops, they created their own office there. In that place they eat, work and rest during the day, despite the presence of the workers and the noise of the construction site. By moving certain objects into the new space, while also discarding others despite (or because of) their symbolic value, they are making themselves at home again.

5. Conclusion

All narratives produced in the here-and-now are open-ended processes, as much as the life and housing trajectories of those who articulate them. Likewise, no form of home (un)making is necessarily the last step in one's dwelling experience. What comes after that, in Sundeep's story, is an attempt at "uprooting and regrounding" home (Ahmed et al., 2003) elsewhere, by building a new property. While the new house displays innovative features, it is meant to afford the same qualities – an effective boundary from public life, a sense of security and intimacy – that the old one no longer afforded. At the same time, our comparison between old and new houses reveals a fundamental tension between two ways to conceive and practice domesticity: on one hand, the traditional view of the domestic as a common space that is shared among family members for purposes of mutual care and social reproduction (cooking, cleaning, etc.), informed by deep-rooted hierarchies between genders and generations; on the other hand, the emerging connection between domesticity and the ownership of an exclusive space, in which different household members are expected to exert a degree of privacy and control.

As these parallel house stories exemplify, home unmaking unfolds as a set of (un)intentional social practices that change extant built environments and domestic cultures, thereby jeopardizing the memories, emotions and aspirations embedded in them. In this sense, home unmaking is qualitatively different from the ordinary loss of these emplaced emotions for a life course effect. It does not depend simply on the fact that people shift their attachments across different dwellings over time. Instead, home unmaking operates as a process in itself (Baxter & Brickell, 2014). However, it can have different sources, forms and consequences, as we sum up in the heuristic framework of Table 1. This starts from an ultimate understanding of home unmaking as any process that entails the loss of a situated sense of home – of all that was or should be in the scope of home, and no longer is.

In terms of *source(s),* home unmaking may stem from broader, extra-domestic political, economic or environmental circumstances. This demands to situate micro household dynamics in a macro scenario. However, home may also be literally or symbolically unmade within specific household configurations and tensions; in our case study, those emerging from the gap between prescribed and experienced household models. In either case, the outcome is a deep sense of emotional, sensuous, even cognitive estrangement (Ahmed, 1999) towards the built environment which used to feel like home. As the story of Sundeep shows, the distinction between home unmaking from outside and inside articulates different views and models of home. In Sundeep's childhood house, home is unmade as a place-specific sense of security, protection and comfort. Emplacing a sense of home there becomes structurally impossible after the destruction of a part of the house. In her marital house, instead, the unmaking of home is related to patriarchal and gendered expectations about the household, which, if met, would have enabled acceptance of the new family as still part of the household. In short, homemaking from within is revealing of the conflict between hard-to-reconcile views of the household, hence, of the home. Homemaking from without, instead, reveals the detrimental influence of external structural factors on which family members have little or no control.

In our particular case study, unmaking from within and without are mutually separated dynamics. However, they may well overlap within the same material infrastructure, and possibly be synchronous with each other. In either scenario, home is unmade at one or multiple *levels* simultaneously – the material one of house infrastructures; the relational one whereby the situated interaction with some people makes unhomely a previously home-like space; the emotional and normative one, resulting in the loss of a sense of home emplaced in particular places and material cultures, whenever their expected meanings and functions get disrupted. As important, people *react* to home unmaking in different ways, including by "opting out", as Sundeep and her husband do. Time wise, home unmaking takes different *rhythms.* It may be more of a cumulative process, such as in our case study, or stem out of specific and traumatic events, such a natural catastrophe or the sudden loss of a close family member. Likewise, home unmaking can be experienced across different *temporalities,* as something that relates to the past (e.g. Sundeep's childhood house that feels unhomely by now), to the present circumstances (e.g. Sundeep's marital house), or even to future ones – whenever people see no meaningful future horizons in the places that used to be home for them, as is often the case with international migrants (Boccagni, 2017).

Most fundamentally, there are instances in which unmaking emerges as a distinctive process, as in the forced demolition of Sundeep's childhood house. More often than not, however, home unmaking is nothing but the other side of the coin – what goes along with homemaking, as experienced from different people, interests, or positionalities. To

Table 1
Situating home unmaking in the house and family life: a heuristic framework.

Source	External to the house(hold) | Internal to the house (hold) | Simultaneously from outside and within
Levels	Material | Relational | Emotional
Reactions	No visible or significant ones | New forms/channels of homemaking | Opting out
Rhythm	Cumulative process | Disruptive event
Temporalities	Past-related | Present-embedded | Future-oriented
Entanglements with homemaking	Absent | Trade-off | Ambivalent

repeat, the story of Sundeep's marital house is also a story of home being eventually made again, from the viewpoint of her in-laws. The practices and devices that *unhome* her and her husband are the same that afford their counterparts to *re-home* there. As still different scenario, however, seems to be not uncommon. The same dwelling arrangement may simultaneously be a source of home making and unmaking, in different respects, for the same individuals. This leads us to the fundamental ambivalence of the emplaced experience of home (Boccagni et al., 2020), which did emerge at several steps in Sundeep's housing story. It also invites further research on the irremediable *entanglements* between homemaking and unmaking, to orient a more theoretically reflexive and less formulaic use of this notion in exploring the "battlefield of home" over time.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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