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At home in the gurdwara? Religious space and the resonance with domesticity in a London suburb

Barbara Bertolani, Sara Bonfanti and Paolo Boccagni

Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Trento, Italy

ABSTRACT

'Home', as a special place and a set of practices that separate it from the rest, may 'scale up' to the public sphere, particularly among immigrant and religious minorities. Following this insight, we investigate the functional equivalences between domestic space and public, religious one, based on a case study of Sikh gurdwaras in Southall, West London. Besides their everyday function as hubs for spiritual and cultural connections with the Sikh home(land), gurdwaras reveal a parallelism with a private home in two respects: *vertical* domesticity – the forms of spatial and temporal thresholding that turn a house of worship into the home of the *guru* – and *horizontal* domesticity – the home-like routines underpinning community life in gurdwaras. This opens up a novel space to see temples as infrastructures for people's sense of home, and the reproduction of sacredness inside them as a form of homemaking.

KEYWORDS

Gurdwaras; domesticity; homemaking; semi-public; thresholds; London

Introduction

Can a temple be a home, in a metaphorical sense or in a literal one? What difference does that make to the life experience of its attendees, and to our understanding of its ways of operating? And how is such a function played out in different places of worship under the same denomination, within a specific urban environment?

Similar questions are part and parcel of the emerging debate on homemaking in the public across multiethnic urban areas (Blunt and Sheringham 2019; Boccagni and Duyvendak 2020). There is a promise in investigating how certain (semi)public spaces reproduce, or scale up, 'domestic' routines, rationales and symbols; how they create the conditions for attendees to nourish a sense of home, out of their material, ritual and sensorial infrastructures; and how this process interacts with the views, needs and lifestyles of people themselves.

Following these premises, we interrogate the lived experience of Sikh gurdwaras as functional equivalents of home in Southall, West London. In doing so, we examine the ways and conditions under which worship places (re)produce a sense of home in emotional, identitarian and even practical respects. Particularly in a diasporic context, a gurdwara is a socio-cultural hub and an identity marker for a more or less dispersed and diverse community (Singh 2006; Qureshi 2014; Singh 2014). Studying its everyday

rituals and routines reveals the coexistence of several forms of homemaking, both *vertical* (engaging the transcendent) and *horizontal* (engaging fellow attendees). Home, of course, means different things, to different people, in different contexts (Kusenbach and Paulsen 2013; Miranda-Nieto 2020). As a corollary, a potential analogy between a house of worship and a home needs to be explored at different levels, all of them based on, but not reducible to, its being primarily *a house* (Barrie 2017) – albeit a ‘sacred’ one. In this paper we assess the full heuristic potential of such a parallel, moving from visible and tangible aspects to more indirect and yet revealing ones.

It is relatively straightforward to see a gurdwara as a place that facilitates personal concentration and meditation, protected from the frenzy of the outside world – just what home is supposed to feel like, in the predominant imaginaries at least. More substantially, there is a close relation between a gurdwara and home-as-homeland (Blunt 2005). Many of these temples are infrastructures for spiritual, cultural and political connections between local Sikh diasporas and the Punjab, under one broad confessional banner, or through more specific denominations (Singh and Singh Tatla 2006; Dhési 2009). As community centers, they incorporate a function of religious socialization and cultural reproduction across the diaspora, through traditional and ritualized teachings and acts of worship. This nourishes belonging and identification with the ‘collective home’ of believers across generations and, potentially, worldwide.

While these facets of homeliness are all important, they are only a background for the functional equivalence between gurdwara and home on which we elaborate here. As our fieldwork in Southall reveals, two alternative ways of looking at a gurdwara as home are more original and theoretically fruitful: first, the institutional production of internal thresholds of sacredness, to qualify that space as home of the Guru Granth (the Sikhs’ sacred scripture); then, the necessary reproduction of domesticity on an extra-domestic scale, to enable the worshippers’ engagement with it. Therefore, we explore the parallel between gurdwara and domestic space, first, in a vertical sense (Section Entering and maintaining the house of the guru: thresholds of sacredness and ‘homeliness’), concerning the ritual practices of maintenance and of spatial and temporal ‘thresholding’ (Bocagni and Brighenti 2017) of what makes a gurdwara unique: the presence of the Guru Granth as the living embodiment of the guru, at the core of a system of care and host–guest relations that turn the house of worship into (its) home. Moreover, in a horizontal sense (Section Maintaining the gurdwara as a domestic space: practices, moral orders and the interface between private and semi-public) we analyze the homemaking practices that support community life in gurdwaras, and reveal some striking resemblance – but also an elusive interplay – with the management of an ordinary domestic space. We then interrogate this resemblance as a matter of scaling up routines, rules and gender or generational expectations from the domestic to the semi-public, but also, potentially, in the obverse direction. After discussing some ways ahead for research (Section On the back side of the semi-public: from domesticity to domestication, and back to the domestic), we revisit the implications of our study for the debate on homemaking in the public, particularly for immigrant religious minorities in diverse urban environments.

Prior to an in-depth analysis of these vertical and horizontal ways of homemaking in the temple, in the next section we provide an overview of the debate on home in the (semi)public, and of the organizational and methodological aspects of our study.

Home in the semi-public and the case of Southall gurdwaras

Homemaking, domesticity and thresholding in the semi-public

It is almost a cliché by now, in ‘home studies’, to highlight that people’s views, emotions and practices of home are multi-scalar and multi-sited. They do not necessarily rest exclusively, or even primarily, on the domestic space. Quite the opposite: they may involve a variety of built or natural environments, ranging from entire neighborhoods to specific places and institutions inside them – what some literature calls *semi-public* spaces (e.g., Peterson 2017; Boccagni and Brighenti 2017). The ways in which different people feel and make themselves at home across these extra-domestic scales have attracted increasing attention in research on urban diversity (e.g., Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017; Blunt and Sheringham 2019; Kuurne and Gómez 2019).

Religious buildings are cases in point of a semi-public space, although their influence on people’s ways of feeling and making home has been little studied so far. And yet, there is a promise in investigating how similar infrastructures are domesticated, i.e., made similar to a domestic place, or anyway to a setting in which people can feel at home. This seems particularly intriguing for research on immigrant and religious minorities who may attach different meanings to the concept of home, across a plurality of places and scales (Tweed 2006). The question is how different dimensions and meanings of home and domesticity interweave with each other in a non-domestic context, and how the mindsets and habits of domestic life are scaled up to the semi-public (and vice-versa); put otherwise, how the boundaries between the semi-public and the private are selectively negotiated and reconfigured, to the (dis)advantage of whom.

Following these insights, we contribute to the debate on homemaking out of the home through a case study on Sikh gurdwaras in Southall, West London. In milieus of religious pluralism, a gurdwara, like other minority houses of worship (Modood 2017), is ‘semi-public’ for it operates as a specific community hub, and yet is potentially open to an undifferentiated public as an infrastructure for its ideological ecumenism (Singh 2005). In a material culture and material religion perspective (Miller 2005; Woodward 2007; Morgan 2010), a gurdwara is a sacred architecture which is constructed by Sikh devotees but also construes that group’s ethno-religious identity and reaffirms it in the everyday. Establishing a gurdwara in the diaspora means marking the land with a socio-spatial (re)appropriation, given the local structure of legal and political opportunities (Nasser 2004). As Dwyer (2016) suggests, the material act of building a non-indigenous house of worship takes along a subset of ‘alien’ cultural practices in search of some domestication (Hage 1997). In this paper, however, we aim to understand such domestication *from the inside out*. While gurdwaras can also be approached through other categories, for instance as places of education or royal palaces and courts (Myrvold 2007; Jacobsen 2012), here we investigate how a Sikh temple itself is made into a home-like space, and how this interplays with the domestic cultures and routines of those who attend it.

Approaching a gurdwara as a ‘public home’, in a diasporic context, is first of all a way to capture its emotional ambience. While our Southall informants did not necessarily associate the word home with the temple in which they were staying, they typically attached to that place ‘positive’ emotions like familiarity, intimacy, or comfort, which cover what much literature defines *feeling at home* (Kusenbach and Paulsen 2013; Boccagni 2017). Moreover, a gurdwara works out as a proxy of home away from home – the

latter being both the homeland and the dwelling abroad – as it embeds and circulates a specific historical and cultural legacy. Leaning on De Certeau's (1984) distinction between space and place, we look at the nine gurdwaras in Southall as 'practiced places' that share some institutional and infrastructural commonality, and yet differ significantly in their diasporic histories, memories and practices, and in the attendant material cultures (Bertolani 2020b). In doing so, we rely also on the conceptualization of those scholars who moved forth the 'spatial turn' occurred in religious studies since the Nineties (Kong 2001), arguing for a two-fold approach to sacred spaces: phenomenological and socio-constructivist (Knott 2010). The former deals with the *poetics* of religious places (in terms of aesthetics and sensuous experience), the latter with their *politics* (in terms of practical and discursive struggles for identity and recognition). The specificity of British Sikhism as a religious diaspora and an ethnic minority offered us a chance to engage with both approaches, thus observing Southall gurdwaras as places of cult and of identity reaffirmation. The tension between the two perspectives is evident in our separate analysis of how 'vertical' and 'horizontal' domesticity are reproduced within the gurdwaras we visited. Yet, it is from the juxtaposition of both that we can gain a better understanding of Sikh homemaking in west London.

Before setting forth our analysis, we briefly present our case study and the underlying research design.

Case study and methodology

This article has its roots in HOMInG, a large-scale study of the experience of home among international migrants in Europe, and of its circulation towards their countries of origin (Boccagni 2017). As a part of this project, we conducted an ethnography in West London's Southall, focused on migrants with an Indian background. The selected location offered itself to scrutiny for its significant presence of multiple generations of Indian Sikhs.¹ This enabled us to combine demographic, ethnic and religious diversity within one and the same district, itself a highly diverse one (Nasser 2004).

Methodologically speaking, this paper is based on collaborative and cumulative fieldwork: two years of research conducted in the district by Bonfanti, between September 2017 and November 2019; individual and joint field visits of all the authors between June 2018 and November 2019; previous background and field contacts of Bertolani, based on her past work on gurdwaras in Italy (Bertolani 2020a). Besides visiting repeatedly Southall gurdwaras in different periods of the year and times of the day,² we interviewed fifteen key respondents, i.e., spiritual and secular staff inside them. We also had myriad informal conversations with attendees, including believers and visitors, men and women, diverse in age and ethnic background. Furthermore, we collected additional views on gurdwaras through in-depth interviews with a dozen non-Sikh local informants such as public officers, priests and clergy of other faiths. On each visit we used the same frame of observation in order to retain consistency and comparability. The focus was on

¹Sikhs are the largest religious group in Southall, accounting for 35% of the local population (about 70,000 overall) (source: <http://www.ukcensusdata.com/ealing-e09000009> - last consulted: 7 April 2020).

²For a typology of gurdwaras in Southall, see Bertolani (2020b). Although this article draws on fieldwork in each of them, it approaches them less as units of analysis than as privileged venues for research on homemaking in semi-public spaces.

‘home-like’ infrastructures, material cultures and embedded routines, in their interplay with the personal narratives of our interlocutors.

For sure, our research strategy was not without limitations. While we systematically tried to reach out to people in all gurdwaras, some – typically the larger and more crowded ‘mainstream’ ones (Bertolani 2020b) – were more visible and accessible than others. Their spokespersons were easier to reach as interviewees and ‘social brokers’, but also more skilled at grabbing our attention with their own stances and interests. Moreover, our status as white but non-British outsiders generated mixed reactions among our counterparts, who often seemed to feel obliged to act as lay instructors of Sikhism. While this did not prevent us from collecting their personal histories and viewpoints, it did require extended digressions into the official Sikh narratives. As or more frequently, the most meaningful self-disclosures – what people felt a temple to be like, how it resonated in their life experience – emerged almost by happenstance, through informal conversation, after hour-long stays between prayer (*darbar*) and dining (*langar*) halls.

Importantly, our selective focus on gurdwaras is not meant to rule out the significance of other semi-public spaces in Southall as a potential source of homely feelings to the local population. Public libraries, association premises, shopping, sport or leisure centers, not to mention other religion facilities, may well perform a similar function. However, we found gurdwaras to be unique in enabling the interaction between two ways of homemaking: institutionalized, vertical domesticity, i.e., attending to the needs of the living *guru* as mission of the place of worship, and grassroots, pragmatic and horizontal domesticity, concerning the forms of conviviality enacted by the devotees. While the latter way of homemaking is not fully distinguishable from the former, researching into their mutual interplay can refine our broader understanding of homemaking in the public.

Entering and maintaining the house of the guru: thresholds of sacredness and ‘homeliness’

Whether in India or in the diaspora, a gurdwara is the Sikh place of worship where religious services take place and the assembly of the devotees (*sangat*) gathers together. Congregational worship lies at the heart of Sikh devotion (Jacobsen 2012). It is defined as such by the presence of the sacred text, the Guru Granth Sahib (henceforth: GGS) (McLeod 1997; Singh 2014). Literally, ‘gurdwara’ means the ‘door’, ‘threshold’, ‘abode’, or ‘seat’ (*dwara*) of the *guru*. A synonym is precisely *Guru Ghar*, ‘the house of the *guru*’. It is the presence and the ritual handling of the *guru* that transforms, qualifies and makes it unique as a space (Myrvold 2007; Canning 2017). The codified ‘needs’ of the GGS, and the emplaced social relationships between the devotees and their *guru*, account for the ritual differentiation of space and time inside gurdwaras. It is no exaggeration, then, to claim that a gurdwara is a home – at least for the GGS, as the host in it – and that its day-to-day activities, which have also to do with cultural reproduction, advocacy and welfare (Bertolani 2020b), are forms of homemaking.

Why a gurdwara can be (like a) home

Southall gurdwaras all lie in a relatively small area, some of them even in adjacent blocks. In principle, and in the words of our informants, every gurdwara is equivalent to any

other. Yet, the choice to attend one or another is generally not random. For some of the people, we talked to this is simply a matter of convenience, depending on distance from home, parking facilities, or proximity to the workplace. Others prefer a particular gurdwara as they find it more conducive to ‘gather for spiritual connection’, or because it is linked to a *sant* or a caste. Sometimes, the choice is driven by the ways of arranging the dining hall (*langar*): whether it includes tables and chairs or just mats on the floor, where people sit, waiting to be served by *sevadars* (any devout Sikh woman or men, of any age, doing *seva*, i.e., the voluntary service). The choice may also come out of familiarity with place – people have attended the same gurdwara since their childhood and keep gathering there, periodically, with other families (Bertolani 2020b).

There are different conditions, then, under which gurdwaras are perceived as more or less home-like infrastructures, which nourish a sense of familiarity, security, and possibly control over space (Boccagni 2017). This has to do with their religious function, as much as the social and cultural ones. People may feel at home in a gurdwara based on ‘the way you treat the others – if you treat people like brothers, that’s what [turns] a house [into] a home’, a young devotee said at Nanaksar Gurdwara. Others relate a sense of being-home to the organization of the spaces and of the religious functions, which facilitates concentration and spiritual research. ‘You go there’, a woman said pointing to a bare room next to the prayer hall, where the *Akhand Path* (continuous reading of the GGS) was taking place, ‘and you find silence and peace’. Indeed, there are functions and activities that are common to most Sikh religious sites, concerning spiritual, educational, socio-cultural and political activities. Nonetheless, such activities are performed in different ways across Southall gurdwaras, mirroring a significant differentiation within the local community (Bertolani 2020b). In the Shri Guru Ravidass Temple, for instance, a particular caste identity is emphasized as an object of pride, advocacy, social agency and claim for recognition. At Ramgarhia Sabha Southall, instead, the caste origin overlaps with specific migratory histories, as its attendants mostly belong to the ramgarhia caste and may be ‘twice migrants’ (Bhachu 1985) from the English colonies in East Africa. A specific migratory history also distinguishes many of the devotees at Guru Nanak Darbar, which is the point of reference for Afghan Sikhs in London. As such, it shows an enduring political commitment and transnational engagement to defend the rights of a particular (and endangered) minority.

This internal differentiation among gurdwaras and within gurdwaras themselves, regarding attendants’ age and gender, exerts an ambivalent effect. It turns gurdwaras into homely and comfortable spaces for some, but not for all. Caste and migration background may influence transnational and imaginary practices related to the diasporic homeland (Thandi 2006; 2014). As one of our informants said, answering the question of where his ‘home’ was, ‘my origin is Afghanistan, my roots are Punjabi, I am proud to be a British Sikh.’

At the same time, many domestic routines are also enacted in gurdwaras. Besides doing worship, attendees eat, talk and spend time together, reproducing something of what they would do in their own dining and sitting rooms. However, there is more to the homeliness of a gurdwara than its ambience, or its function of domesticity by proxy. More fundamentally, this is an infrastructure that enables immigrant reconnection with their ancestral roots. One may feel at home in it, a male informant at Guru Nanak Darbar told us, ‘because you are meeting your own people, land, music ...

speak your own language ... it's like you're embracing your mother'. Gurdwaras reestablish an environment where everyone speaks Punjabi, dresses and eats according to specific Punjabi-styles. This likely produces a sense of being at home for first-generation and new migrants, but not necessarily for new generations who might wish to de-culturate Sikhism (Jacobsen 2012). In a parallel fashion, albeit with a different gender sub-text, one young female informant in Havelock Rd. gurdwara explained that Sikh temples are less houses than 'spiritual homes – if you come here, it's like coming back to your father's house, which for Punjabi [*males*] is their 'home', as they live at their father's place'. Indeed, gurdwaras are experienced as home-like spaces primarily by virtue of their institutional mandate, as the house, and home, of the GGS.

At the core of gurdwara-as-home: the abode and the agency of the Guru Granth Sahib

The Guru Granth Sahib is the Sikh scripture, considered as the living embodiment of the *guru* (Singh 2014; Singh Mann 2017). According to the Sikh tradition, the ten human gurus were blessed and enlightened. The divine message was revealed to them so that they could spread it to humankind through utterances (*gurbani*) that are perpetually manifest in the corpus of the GGS. This is said to encapsulate the teaching and 'spirit' of the ten gurus, as 'at the succession of Guru Granth Sahib the outer appearance of the Guru was merely transformed, whereas the interior 'spirit' remained the same' (Myrvold 2007, 131). Therefore, for many Sikhs the words in the GGS are considered to be the voice of God. They are made accessible in the sacred text and whenever its hymns are activated in acts of devotion. These acts are canonized through traditional rituals, whereby devotees engage in a 'social relationship' with the GGS and establish a connection with the divine. Through a process of anthropomorphism, believers behave as if the scripture had human qualities, needs, and social agency (Myrvold 2007, 2017; Gell 1998).

The exterior form of the book, its *saroop* or 'body' (Kaur Singh 2004; 2008), has to be treated in culturally defined habits ascribed to the domestic life of the human *gurus*. Human *gurus* woke up, got dressed, received their disciples and went to sleep on their own. Now the Sikh followers act out these habits in practice, engaging with the GGS and 'assisting' it. This translates into ceremonies that mark the day of the GGS and of its devotees from a temporal point of view, recreating the routine of a sovereign's court. At the same time, the *guru's* words are made available and activated for the devotees through daily devotional practices, whereby the text and its meaning illuminate the interpreter (Dusenbery 1992; Singh 2014).

In order to explain the agency attributed to the GGS, we can refer to Gell's (1998) action-centered approach, focusing on the social relations in which people and objects interact and hold interchangeable roles. Objects, Gell claims, acquire meaning and agency through social and relational contexts and within systems of actions. Agency is a context-dependent concept, since both objects and persons have interchangeable positions as *agents* (exercising agency) and *patients* (being affected by it). Social agency is relational: while being ascribed to objects, it is also embedded in a network of social relations. People may attribute a soul to objects, rendering them patients in the social exchange of ritual practices. They may dress them with clothes and involve them in

daily routines, arranging and creating proper spaces. At the same time, by attributing power to objects and by relating through specific rituals with them, people become patients in the social relationship.

As research in Sikh studies shows, the GGS can be personified and embedded in a network of social relations by local devotees in different ways (Myrvold 2007). In Southall gurdwaras, in particular, we observed processes of personification of the GGS through appellations that designate respect and through the exchange of gifts and food. Another way to attribute social agency to the guru is through *darshan*, a blessing given by the guru (acting like an agent) to devotees (acting like patients). This is ‘a gift of appearance ... made by the superior to the inferior’ and ‘imagined as a material transfer of some blessing’ (Gell 1998, 116). Entering a gurdwara even only briefly on one’s way to work or home, performing *matha tekna* (the act of kneeling and bowing deeply until the forehead touches the ground), seeing and being seen by the GGS is precisely a form of respect for the *guru* aimed to receive *darshan* for the day.

More fundamentally, in the setting of our research, the social agency of the GGS was enabled by a circumscription of the sacred in space and time, through internal thresholds that demand attention in their own right. Here again, the parallel with domestic routines and cultures is analytically fruitful.

Defining the limits of the sacred through the social division of space

All across Southall gurdwaras, a functional and symbolic differentiation of internal space operates, which results in sacred, pure or more internal areas being visibly separated from mundane and more external ones. There is an intriguing parallel with the rules and thresholds of domestic life in this respect. Just like a guest in someone’s home is expected to enact certain appropriate actions, as (s)he is allowed from the outside into the increasingly intimate space of the interiors, so the devotee entering the *guru*’s house must follow a series of behaviors across internal thresholds.

The spatial organization of Southall gurdwaras can be seen like a system of nested spaces, layers and thresholds, both material and symbolic. At the most external layer, the physical building is surrounded by an enclosed courtyard or by a parking area and is identifiable by the presence of the *nishan sahib*, the Sikh flag. Once in the atrium, the visitor must follow precise rules, which define symbolic thresholds, to be allowed further in.³ Right after the entrance is a hall where some facilities and objects are located: toilets and washbasins, shoe racks and bandana containers. These menial infrastructures are placed side by side with bulletin boards to inform about the liturgical, cultural and educational activities of the gurdwara. Such boards include community service advertisements, ranging from assisted return plans for undocumented migrants to matrimonial announcements, yoga and turban-tying classes.

At some point in this area, a sign on the wall marks another threshold – nobody is allowed to move further in with shoes or with their head uncovered. This delimits a higher level of spatial sacredness in the guise of divine presence. In some gurdwaras,

³Sikh temples are open to every person, regardless of gender, caste, social position and religion. However, it is necessary to take off the shoes and socks, to wash hands and cover the head. Signs at the entrance specify that “any person under the influence or in possession of alcohol or drugs are not allowed to enter”.

interestingly, this threshold is ‘distributed’ at different levels in the interiors. While a notice at the entrance requires all visitors to cover their heads (but not necessarily to be barefoot), an inner and more implicit threshold is marked by devotees themselves, as they leave their shoes at the foot of a staircase or just out of the prayer hall (*darbar*). This comes with a low threshold of access to the *langar*, the community refectory and kitchen, which take on a mixed identity of ‘middle’ or ‘liminal spaces’ (Chidester 2016). They may be completely occupied by tables and chairs, instead of the ordinary mats to sit on the ground, and people are allowed in with their shoes. This may reflect the main characteristics of the local *sangat* (that can be elderly, such as in Ramgarhia Sabha) or the social function of a gurdwara in the local context (e.g., in Shri Guru Ravidass, which welcomes children for a snack on their way back home after school).

On a further level of sacredness and intimacy lies the *darbar* hall, which is by no means visible from the outside. This is where a Sikh congregation meets to pray and engage with the GGS. In all Southall gurdwaras the *darbar* is separated from the rest of the inner space by an entrance with doors. While the *langar* lies always on the ground floor, in multi-storey gurdwaras the *darbar* is usually located at a higher level, precisely for its sacred function – allowing the physical and spiritual encounter between devotees and the *guru*. Inside the *darbar*, a still more internal layer corresponds to the throne, surmounted by a canopy, on which the GGS is placed during the day to allow the religious liturgy, and to the *sach khand*, where the GGS is transferred for the night rest. This semi-invisible place operates as the home of the *guru* in the most literal sense, as a bedroom of its own. In all Southall gurdwaras the throne is richly decorated, especially during religious festivals, and circumscribed by low metal rails. Depending on the structure of the building, the *sach khand* is located on a side of the *darbar* or on a higher floor, to mark its sacredness. Inside the room, just like in the room of the householder or of the most respected guest, there are beds, in some cases king-size and surmounted by canopies, draped with precious fabrics and covered with cushions and decorated linen. The lights are dim and there are no other symbols, paintings or decorations. This is the most private, protected and intimate room of the *guru*’s house. It stays locked after the night ceremony of *sukhasan*. Signs indicating restrictions on access may be placed on its external door. In some gurdwaras, access to this space is reserved for *amritdhari* Sikhs⁴ who may offer guarantees of purity and adequacy.

The purity and sanctity of the room is also guaranteed by immaterial thresholds, such as behaviors that mark it apart from the surrounding space. Upon one of our visits to Havelock Rd. gurdwara we asked a young devotee to see the local *sach khand*. He agreed to lead us for a while, only to suddenly stop a few meters away from the room. It felt like an invisible barrier was lying ahead of us; one, however, that was more or less permeable, depending on the person who would cross it. ‘It’s a form of respect – you have socks, and you haven’t washed yourself’, he explained. ‘For us’, he added, ‘the Guru Granth Sahib is the living guru. During the day, he goes down and stays down [in the *darbar*], in the evening he goes up here to rest.’ While the notion of agency would have probably made little sense to him, he was precisely articulating it through his message.

⁴*Amritdhari* Sikhs have been initiated to the Khalsa sodality and follow a precise code of conduct accordingly.

The thresholds to mark differential access and use of the inner areas are not defined only by the configuration and distribution of space. They also rely on the use of objects. The big screens in the atrium and sometimes in the *darbar* of larger Southall gurdwaras are a case in point. During *kirtan* performances, they provide transliteration and English translations of the hymns in Punjabi. Their presence shows an institutional attention towards both the majority society and the second generations who may not know *gurmukhi*. Likewise, several *darbars* provide seats on the perimeter walls, stools, benches with headphones to amplify the sound for the elderly, and ramps to allow the entry of the disabled. In turn, *langar* halls may provide stools for those who struggle to sit cross-legged on the floor, in addition to tables and chairs. All these affordances are clearly meant to make the common space more inclusive.

In short, the thresholds that divide the gurdwara interiors into different layers of sacredness and intimacy are both material and symbolic. In either case, their cogency – the degree to which they may be crossed – varies across places for different users and purposes, and according to the time in the day, as we illustrate below. What remains the same is the resemblance between this thresholding of internal space, which is instrumental to the agency of the GSS as host or householder, and what would probably occur in the domestic space of the devotees. Any dwelling, as a lived space, includes areas that are more intimate (if not sacred) than others, with their access being marked and differentiated accordingly (Gauvain and Altman 1982; Martsin and Niit 2005). Likewise, any dwelling has facilities and provisions, but also clear rules, to receive and host guests. In this optic, a gurdwara embodies domestic rules and expectations and replicates them on a larger scale, for a larger and potentially more diverse arena of guests.

Marking the sacred through the social division of time

The temporality of activities in Southall gurdwaras is hardly less important than their spatiality in enabling the agency of the GGS. The ritual practices that support it, day after day, follow a well-defined division of time, not unlike domestic or household routines. The opening and closing ceremonies of the GGS in the morning and in the evening mark the two crucial moments of the day within a Sikh temple (Kaur Singh 2008; Myrvold 2007). During the morning *prakash* the GGS is ‘awakened’ and transported on the head by devotees in a ritual procession from the bedroom to the prayer hall. It is then placed on cushions on the throne. Its nightclothes are removed and it is ceremoniously greeted, opened, covered with clothes suitable for the season and eventually consulted through devotional worship, thereby interacting with the devotees. During the evening *sukhasan*, while a series of prayers are recited, the GGS is closed ceremoniously, dressed for the night, carried on the head in procession to its bedroom, placed on the bed, covered and greeted. These sequences ‘activate and passivate the Guru-scripture and create the framework of courtly sessions and congregational worship in the gurdwara’ (Myrvold 2007, 168).

While these ceremonies consist of the same ritual gestures, they are enacted in ways that reflect the specific history and features of each gurdwara. Most notably, we found the *sukhasan* in mainstream gurdwaras to be martial, solemn, sensorially thick – drums, music, songs, loud ovations (*jakara*) – and even ‘emotionally addicting’, in ways that recall Durkheim’s (1995) collective effervescence. The *guru*, as a military

leader, is escorted by *Khalsa* Sikhs armed with long swords across the prayer hall up to its bedroom. Its passage is followed by a procession at the pressing pace of a march. In smaller and sant-led gurdwaras the ceremony is more intimate and accompanied by sweet and repetitive music and chants. The worshippers seem to whisper a lullaby as they get closer to the *guru* and bow respectfully. A voice from the upper floor then announces loudly that the GGS is finally in bed, the assembly replies *Waheguru*, the *granthi* (caretaker) comes out and locks the door. Here comes another temporal threshold. Locking the *sach khand* marks an instantaneous resignification, even re-appropriation of the prayer hall. The same people who were standing silent, thereby showing their respect to the *guru*, now start to joke, chat and move freely around. Throughout the ritual prayer, Bertolani had the feeling of having been allowed in a very intimate ritual – not just a sacred one – as if she entered the home of someone who had made her comfortable as a guest.

What is remarkable, analytically, is that the presence or absence from the room of the GGS – following the home metaphor: the Host or the Owner of the house – changes the ‘quality’ of that lived space. It marks its temporal organization and defines the expected behavior of the worshippers, but also the perceived sacrality of the space, for, whenever the GGS is present, the devotees are engaged in a physical, spiritual and emotional relationship with it. The sacred does not lie in the space as such, but in a social relationship with a special (sanctified) artifact inside it (Gell 1998; Myrvold 2007), or in a way to appropriate that space accordingly – at the most abstract, in a special form of homemaking (Boccagni 2017).

Taking care of the guru and of the people: seva and the intersection between vertical and horizontal domesticity

In each gurdwara, the practice of *seva* and especially of *guru seva* (any ritual act of service in proximity to the GGS) can be reframed as a form of care for the built environment, the community and, most important, the corporeality of the GGS (Myrvold 2007; Kaur Singh 2008). On the one hand, the direct involvement of the devotees in everyday chores like cooking, cleaning and tidying recalls the day-to-day activities in domestic routines. On the other hand, performing *guru seva* implies something deeper – a direct contact and relationship with the ‘body’ of the GGS. This recalls the profound respect that a guest owes to the owner of a house, or possibly the attitude a younger person should have for their older parents. In more analytical terms, seeing *seva* as care illuminates the connection between two parallel forms of homemaking in a gurdwara, just like in any domestic space: in the ‘vertical’, care for the GGS – the material, emotional and ritual care for what (or who) is most dear, sacred and protected inside a home, which also relies on the spatial and temporal thresholds discussed above; in the ‘horizontal’, care for the devotees – all those activities that the feminist literature on domesticity calls social reproduction. Both ways of domesticity – in essence: caring about and caring for (Tronto 1989) – are necessary, if not sufficient, to cultivate a sense of home in a domestic space. So they are in a gurdwara, as a far more flexible, but still ultimately exclusivist version of home. It is on the ‘horizontal’ axis of domesticity, however, that the house of worship-home parallel is both more evident and fraught with contradictions, as we illustrate below.

Maintaining the gurdwara as a domestic space: practices, moral orders and the interface between private and semi-public

While *Guru seva* is made of sequenced ritual acts that a designated Sikh attendant (generally a male *amritdhari*) is entrusted to perform, the ordinary activities of *sevadars* are indeed comparable to day-to-day domestic practices of homemaking in a literal sense. However, the commonsense notion of domesticity we use to define them is not unproblematic (Hollows 2012). While resonating with the condition of ‘being at home a lot with one’s family’,⁵ domesticity bears a deeply gendered sub-text. Even the most ordinary of domestic practices is informed by specific social norms and moral orders (with various degrees of power and subjection), as the feminist literature has revealed (Hooks 1992; Young 1997). In particular, what Lynch (2007) defined as the subsets of non-commodifiable care work (i.e., love labor, general care work and solidarity work, which are respectively being offered for one’s primary, secondary and tertiary relations) seem to inform also the composite domestic practices and moral orders that maintain and govern the gurdwara. With this premise, we can pave the way for a critical exploration of the interplay between homemaking in a private Sikh home and in the Sikh assembling space *par excellence*. Are gender and generational relations simply reproduced in gurdwaras as in the domestic sphere, or does the semi-public space modify them?

Exploring domestic practices in gurdwaras

Whether and how a gurdwara operates like a home for the Sikhs in Southall is a question that involves, ‘horizontally’, the most elementary forms of domesticity. Cooking and cleaning are two domestic activities that neither a private nor a semi-public home can dismiss. As old Barooji, a former *granthi*, once said to Bonfanti musing over his life: ‘Guru Granth Sahib breathes, but also people in the gurdwara do. It’s like a [collective] body that needs fresh air, food to digest, and filth to take out’. This comment introduces a vivid analogy between place and body, on one hand instilling the sacred spark of human life in a house of worship, on the other referring to the continuous care work that any gurdwara needs in order to function unremittingly. Similar to other collective milieus, the call to cleanliness is a pointer of social and religious appropriateness, moral purity being an integral part of Sikhism (Nesbitt 2005). To maintain one’s gurdwara unsoiled is an essential task for any committee. Larger gurdwaras, in particular, adopt a policy of non-stop maintenance, and yet with deliberate inconspicuousness. Bertolani and Bonfanti noted oftentimes in different gurdwaras that vacuuming or wiping were performed by young adult males. This suggests a possible change in the division of household chores between young men and women, and allows us to reverse a stereotype based on the fact that older Sikh men would hardly have done the same in their homes.

Cooking and sharing meals are also constitutive features of making home in the gurdwara (Desjardins and Desjardins 2009). The collective preparation and consumption of food in the *langar* represents the communal effort of the Sikh for making devotees feel at home, both sensorially and symbolically. While smaller gurdwaras may not have a kitchen on site, in which case volunteers take turns in preparing food at home and

⁵Cit. in Cambridge Dictionary 2018, consulted on 25 March 2020.

delivering it there, most gurdwaras are provided with stoves, sinks, utensils and cooking appliances for a large number of attendants. The food which they serve for free takes after the traditional rural fare that is still widespread in the Punjab (Khare and Rao 1986). Steamed rice and *chana masala* or lentil soups, *roti* and occasionally fresh fruit or sweetened yogurt are served in steel *thalis*, alongside *chai* and still water. This does not simply guarantee a spiritual connection with the historical gurus' ways of life. It also stimulates a transnational association with a homeland that gets materially reproduced thousands of miles away (Taylor 2013). The *langar* is considered sacred and is partaken in that spirit by Sikhs. It is the act of generosity with no restriction in terms of creed, caste or condition that adds value to the food distributed in a gurdwara. Despite this, Bonfanti recounts that an apprentice *ragi* in his teens at Park Avenue gurdwara, with whom she was queuing for their turn to be served, whispered to her grinning: 'Come home and my mum will prepare samosa and chicken biryani ... real Punjabi food for you!'. Such a joke does not necessarily articulate disdain for the gurdwara food. In fact, comparing the langar to homemade Sikh food possibly means conceding higher palatability to one's mother's cuisine as it is eaten at a family's dining table, while retaining consciousness of the exceptionality of preparing and sharing a meal for free in the gurdwara. Besides, similar remarks are as telling of food authenticity in the composite landscape of diaspora tastes (Mannur 2007) as of gender dynamics being enacted, whether in the gurdwara or at home.

In institutionalized Sikh spaces, Bains (2020) maintains, women are generally 'relegated to female tasks of food preparation and general cleaning'. This argument was overall validated by our own fieldwork in Southall. In no gurdwara have we met female *granthis*. According to our interlocutors, this role would expose women to jeopardize their reputation; it would not be possible to guarantee them privacy, since a *granthi* is required to sleep in the temple. As it also happens for the Sikh diaspora in other countries (Bertolani 2020a), the role of women who engage in *guru seva* is more confined in space and time. For example, the ladies' *kirtan* sessions we attended had an almost exclusively female audience, as they were organized during working hours and on midweek days. In general, young women performed seva in 'separate' spaces of the gurdwara, for example in the kitchen, and less often in direct contact with other devotees. This subdivision of space based on gender and age, although not rigid, recalls the traditional separation of women from men inside and outside the household. It can be traced back to the customary practice of *purdah* (lit. *veiling*, as a means of protection from lustful eyes), as situational behaviors through which women demonstrate their modesty in the presence of men (Hershman 1981). As Rait (2005) argues with particular reference to Sikh British women, although the custom of *purdah* might have come to Punjab with Islam and the first Gurus refused Sikh women to be veiled (as proof of their equality to men), a general adherence to the discourse on female modesty spread and persists throughout the Punjab and its diasporas (Bonfanti 2020). Yet, as we found out, exceptions may come from smaller and less formal gurdwaras. A case in point is Miri Piri, whose Committee is led by a woman (widow of the former headman), where it is only women who distribute meals in the langar.

Going back to Douglas (1991), who typified home as 'a kind of space' with its own hierarchical self-organization, we may see that the clear-cut gender roles in the daily management of gurdwaras entail both commonalities and differences with private

dwellings. If, however, we were to isolate one feature that pertains to some gurdwaras but not necessarily to Sikh private homes, this is the presence of security staff. Hired personnel, recruited by the gurdwara committee, can be found patrolling the entrance of larger gurdwaras. The figure of the watchman embodies the need for a house of worship to be secured and protected from the outside, but also to be safeguarded from within, in case any attendant breaches explicit rules or implicit norms of conduct. Just like the idea of home is often tied to the need for protection from intrusion or threats, the openness of a gurdwara to the public requires appropriate surveillance, in order to ensure respect for the sacred space and safety for the devotees. The guards are easily recognizable, as they wear yellow and black striped jackets provided by the City council. This detail does not simply satisfy the requisite for semi-public homes like worship houses to care for public order. It also reveals the bond of selective trust that local politics has tied with mainstream gurdwara committees, implicitly endorsing their (often caste and class based) community to publicly claim their right to the city (Gale and Naylor 2002; Nasser 2004).

Altogether, then, a functional analogy exists between Sikh private homes and their houses of worship in several respects. And yet, it would be challenging to enquire whether this scaling up perspective works also in the obverse. Can we think of ‘scaling down’ the way the Sikhs experience their ‘communal’ home as affecting the ways of inhabiting their private home-spaces? What kind of circularity (or short-circuits) do these different scales of home produce in a diaspora context?

Exploring the moral orders underlying gurdwara domesticity

No matter how menial these ‘scaled up’ domestic practices appear, they need to be appreciated in light of the moral, no less than ritual orders informing them. This requires one step back into the ethical foundations of family and social relationships among the Sikhs, including caste and gender issues, in order to see how moral commands emplaced in a gurdwara rebound on mundane homes.

Although the structure of the Punjabi society and its partial reproduction in the diaspora are beyond the scope of this article, the literature makes a key point: a well-defined social, caste and gender hierarchy is still generally persisting, regardless of the promise of gender equality Sikhism pledged since the origin of the Khalsa (Singh 2014). This is apparent in a Sikh home and partially analogous to the distribution of power within a gurdwara: gender and age differences are salient in this regard (Dusenbery 2018; Bains 2020). As our fieldwork in Southall suggests, men, especially the elder ones (at least as long as they are independent), retain the role of householders: they are responsible for the maintenance of the home often both in financial and symbolic terms while being paid great respect and care. Their authority holds in a house of worship no less than in their own domestic space. Bonfanti remembers playing bingo at home with two British Sikh young siblings (born in London from Punjabi parents) and being instructed that ‘the longer and whiter the beard’, the more honorable a Sikh old man should be considered ... if he spoke little English and flawless Punjabi, better still!

The lived space of a gurdwara is also revealing of the persistent influence of home as a place where to revive migrant people’s homeland, from a distance. As our fieldwork

suggests, Sikh people coming from Punjab are often granted privileges or greater social recognition for being presumably heralds of higher religious piety or moral appropriateness (cf., on different South Asian diasporas, Werbner 2002). We encountered several instances of Sikh *granthis* based in India who were invited to oversee collective celebrations in Southall. As our occasional visits to private dwellings show, the same social dynamics seem to run in Sikh diaspora family homes, whenever members of the 'left behind' extended family have a chance to come over and stay for months (generally on a tourist visa) with their expat kin, often long-term or multi-generation residents. Sometimes these transnational movements upset run-of-the-mill British Sikh family life, exposing the frailty of a household model that is hard to reproduce as it shifts from the 'traditional' Punjabi way to a reformulated habit in Britain (Baumann 1995).

On the back side of the semi-public: from domesticity to domestication, and back to the domestic

While our fieldwork has extensively explored the negotiation of domestic symbols, emotions and routines in Southall gurdwaras, and the potential of a parallel between worship and domestic spaces, there are two facets of the debate on public homemaking which did not fall within the scope of our research. We briefly discuss them here, to pave the way for future investigation.

One major question involves the interplay between any domestic space and the surrounding environment: in this case, how the parallel with a home is experienced from the outside, i.e., the non-Sikh local community, and how the very existence of a number of gurdwaras engenders claims for domestication – i.e., visibility, recognition, possibly control – relative to the neighborhood. As our fieldwork shows (Bertolani 2020b), some of Southall gurdwaras are 'distinctive' enough to operate as public statements not just about the presence of Sikh minorities, but also about their visibility and claims for power and prosperity. In particular festivities, Sikh celebrations and processions involve significantly larger sections of the public domain, potentially attracting thousands of pilgrims from other British locations (most recently on the 550th Gurburab in November 2019). Gurdwaras are hubs for relations with the local community in different guises, informed as they are by the tension between their own specialty as sacred spaces, visibly differentiated from the rest, and their ambition to be open and inclusive to the non-Sikh (Singh 2006). Whether this ambivalent projection in the public ends up in 'commonplace diversity' (Wessendorf 2010) with little consequence on ethnic relations, or – instead – in contentious forms of space appropriation, and how this informs inter-religious relations, is a question that calls for more comparative ethnography.

Another promising way ahead involves, as previously mentioned, the reverse side of homemaking in the semi-public arena. The scaling up of home-related views, emotions and practices in gurdwaras may be paralleled with forms of *scaling down*, i.e., changes in private homemaking and in family relations, following people's involvement in domestic practices in a house of worship. Domestic gurdwaras, that is, room-scale gurdwaras that Sikh people may install in their own houses and reserve for family attendance, are the most obvious instance of 'scaling down' (Hirvi 2016). And yet, a whole range of domestic relations could be revisited by tracing the influence of established routines in gurdwaras –

e.g., the gendered division of cooking and cleaning – from the outside into the domestic space of Sikh households. The same holds for the evolution of generational, class and caste relations. All these facets of multi-scale domesticity call for more research across the public-private divide, into the forms of homemaking that penetrate it in both directions. Methodologically speaking, more systematic shadowing with gurdwaras' attendees, thereby reaching *in* (i.e., the domestic space) and *out* (broader ways of sociability in the neighborhood) with them, would be particularly valuable for a two-fold purpose: avoid exceptionalizing worship places, and gain a better sense of how devotees' ritual practices are embedded in their biographical and housing trajectories.

Conclusion

The parallelism between a semi-public place of worship and a private home, along which we structured our analysis, is not without limitations. It relies on ideal-types, if not idealizations, of both gurdwaras and homes. It is ultimately analytical, more than experiential: while the functional resemblance with home captures several emotional, symbolic and practical registers of everyday life in a gurdwara, 'home' is not the first word people would employ to describe it. 'This is not our home', an old man replied in Ramgarhia langar, 'because we don't sleep here ... and we can stay in only during the opening times' (contrary to what the GGS 'does', we might add). Or possibly, 'this is more than a home' – a guard once told us – because '*everybody* is welcome here, not just your family'. Describing a gurdwara as 'home' might even sound desecrating, diverting a sacred space to profane use, like a *sevadar* affirmed in the Park Avenue darbar once the collective prayer was over: 'this is no house for your comforts, please pay respect and be quiet!'

Even in a simply descriptive sense, then, the metaphor of home inspires different thoughts and feelings to different people. Applied in a more analytical sense, though, it does cast light on the lived experience of the gurdwaras we visited, the evolving intersection between vertical and horizontal domesticity, and the ways in which private and semi-public values, routines and material cultures are imbricated with each other. Most notably, a *vertical* domesticity optic illuminates the role of infrastructures, material cultures and ritualized social relationships in sacralizing a certain place, but also the interdependence between care and respect for that place and for the community of devotees. This connects with our simultaneous emphasis on *horizontal* domesticity – the gendered rituals and sets of practices whereby a gurdwara is made hospitable, and in many ways home-like, for its attendants.

Some might object that the emphasis on vertical domesticity is misleading, for the ways of thresholding space and time inside a gurdwara have to do with the sacred – not with the domestic as such. However, the conceptual links between these two notions should not go unnoticed. In principle, the creation of sacred space and time has precisely to do with setting some sites, people or objects apart, and ultimately interdicted, from the ordinary, un-exceptional human experience (Douglas 1966; Evans 2003). In turn, homemaking operates by separating some parts of space from the rest, due to its being special (hence, by necessity, more exclusive) in some sense. It follows that thresholding the sacred does bear a functional resemblance with homemaking as such (cf. Tweed 2006). The question is rather who is allowed in and who

is left out in the process, under what rules, through which ritualized practices and embedded routines.

Summing up, the notion of home, besides having obvious and significant resonances in the everyday lives of our informants, nourishes analogies, first, with the processes, physical and symbolic, whereby gurdwara interior spaces are differentiated and selectively accessed; second, with the practices of social reproduction enacted within these spaces; third, with the functions of protection, conviviality and familiarity with the place which gurdwaras as semi-public spaces are expected to provide. The modern notion of home itself, as a bourgeois construct, presupposes the exclusivity of certain spaces – those on which residents have rights of property, or anyway of stay – relative to all others (Cieraad 2006). Once this functional equivalence is scaled up from the domestic sphere to the larger audience of a semi-public space, the right of access and stay may be less exclusionary. Yet, it still rests on more or less contentious rules and stratifications regarding the legitimate ways of being, feeling, and doing in that place; and the opportunity – even the right – to reproduce different dimensions, meanings and practices of home, as Sikh devotees do in Southall gurdwaras. For sure, this is homemaking by default – no need for people to be reflexive about it. However, such un-reflexivity, which is typical of the ordinary experience of home, by no means reduces its analytical significance in interconnecting different symbolic and functional spheres of the human experience. There is a promise ahead in investigating the ways in which homemaking operates in the semi-public domains, no less than in the domestic one; in religious institutions, no less than in the secular space, as long as forms of spatial and temporal thresholding, to divide what is special from what is not, are constitutive of their reason of being and of their everyday routines.

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Notes on contributors

Barbara Bertolani is a sociologist specialized in the study of South Asian minorities in Italy. Her research interests include kinship, intermarriages, ethnic and kin networks, transnationalism, gender violence and Sikhs, analyzed through life histories and qualitative methods. Since 2019 she has worked in the comparative ERC-HOMInG project, exploring the home-migration

nexus. Besides her academic commitments, she collaborates with the Anti-violence Centre of Modena, Italy.

Sara Bonfanti is a social anthropologist, specialized in gender studies, with expertise on South Asian diasporas and multi-sited ethnography. Keen on participatory and life history methods, her research interests include kinship, religious pluralism and media cultures. Since 2017 she has collaborated in the ERC-HOMInG project, exploring the home-migration nexus across European cities. Her publication record includes *Ethnographies of Home and Mobility* (Routledge 2020, co-authored). While editing an oral history book project, she is about to release a docu-film on minority houses of worship.

Paolo Boccagni is Professor in Sociology (University of Trento) and Principal investigator of ERC-HOMInG. He has published in the sociology of migration, home, diversity and social welfare. He is currently doing comparative research on the lived experience of home, with a particular focus on asylum seekers in reception facilities. Recent books include *Migration and the Search for Home* (2017) and *Thinking home on the move* (co-authored, 2020).

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