

# Chapter 13

## Whose Homes? Approaching the Lived Experience of “Remittance Houses” from Within



Paolo Boccagni and Gabriel Echeverria

### 13.1 Introduction

What does it mean, and what implications has, visiting the houses of people who usually live far away and had them built from a distance, as a way to offset their physical absence with the material presence of a building? This chapter explores migrants’ engagement in transnational housing from the inner side of its domestic reproduction, based on ethnographic fieldwork in so-called remittance houses (Lopez, 2015; Lozanovska, 2019; Boccagni & Bivand-Erdal, 2021). Drawing on our visits and stays in migrant houses in Ecuador over the last fifteen years, we discuss what “entering home(s)” means, and what it enables a researcher-as-guest to understand, when a house embodies migrants’ efforts to improve their life conditions and make this visible in their local communities of origin.

The chapter unfolds in a dual register – conceptual and methodological – nourished by our fieldwork and textwork on a variety of housing and domestic settings shaped by migration in different ways. This follows our protracted rapport with their owners, who may be physically absent (that is, migrants) or present (as returnees). By situating our case studies into the overarching theoretical picture of this book, we show how an ethnographic approach to remittance houses illuminates broader debates, primarily in three respects: first, *hospitality*, as a moral regime of mutual expectations under which the ethnographic encounter takes meaning and shape; second, the *ways of (in)visibilization of the absent ones*, or how migrants’ emplaced memories are reproduced or contested through domestic routines and material cultures, in a place that testifies to their influence by its very existence;

---

P. Boccagni (✉)  
Università di Trento, Trento, Italy  
e-mail: [paolo.boccagni@unitn.it](mailto:paolo.boccagni@unitn.it)

G. Echeverria  
Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, Madrid, Spain

third, *kin work and house work across distance*, as everyday ways to manage the domestic space are negotiated between co-dwellers and across distant relations, with little space for mutual control and, perhaps, understanding. Questions and dilemmas about care, “autonomy”, “fixity” and “normality” creep across our home visits, as we eventually discuss. This leads us to yet another, more fundamental and ambiguous question – whose homes these actually are, and what difference this makes in practice. Prior to our fieldwork analysis, some theoretical and methodological notes are in order.

## 13.2 A Theoretical and Methodological Background

There is no paucity of literature, by now, on migrant transnational housing investments and on their impact back on the built environment, and beyond. So-called remittance houses sit on a unique point of intersection and friction between local and transnational, domestic and public, individual and collective, as well as past and future. Relative to the housing arrangements already analyzed in this book, migrant houses in the countries of origin stand out in several respects (cf. Bertolani, Chap. 12). On one hand, they articulate various degrees of distinction from vernacular housing standards in terms of architectural style, size, construction materials and aesthetics. On the other hand, they may not be domestic space in an ordinary sense, unless for some family members of migrants, or for the latter as returnees. Put differently, these buildings articulate the tension between two opposite pressures: migrants’ physical distance from their previous everyday life contexts, and their attempts to overcome it in space (through ongoing investments and attachments) and in time (by paving the way for a future return option, whether this comes true or not).

Against this background, what is the need, and the promise, of a specific ethnographic investment into these housing settings? How to research them, and what difference does it make, to whom? For one thing, a domestic way of ethnography affords us to address the gap between the external appearance of these houses, which is what drives much public interest in them, and their insider experience. Furthermore, doing ethnography in these housing arrangements is part and parcel of research on transnational family life (e.g. Fog-Olwig, 2007; Oso & Ribas-Mateos, 2013; Baldassar & Merla, 2014). Interestingly, though, this literature seldom takes the domestic space as a research object in itself (with major exceptions such as Lopez, 2015; Sandoval-Cervantes, 2017; Lozanovska, 2019). Such a domestic space may assume profound and paradoxical meanings. It may be telling of people and life circumstances located elsewhere (i.e. in immigration countries), as well as of local ones. Overall, a remittance house is at the very least a privileged setting for in-depth interviews and richer data collection (Boccagni, 2023). More ambitiously, it can become a research subject in itself, to explore broader societal and migration-related questions (Boccagni & Bivand-Erdal, 2021; Klaufus, 2023).

In a fundamental sense, these houses are domestic settings like any other. At the same time, they are unique as long as they formally belong to someone who often is *not* there and might never become an ordinary and permanent dweller. Under these conditions, one’s research engagement is contingent on previous relationships with the migrant owners, and then with those who happen to dwell there – family members, caretakers, or migrants themselves as returnees. Once a researcher is invited in, he or she is essentially a guest. It was with such a status that we negotiated our access into several migrant houses in Ecuador, including those discussed below. Both our fieldwork and the subsequent analysis are informed by distinct backgrounds and positionalities: Boccagni, as an Italian ethnographer with a long-term engagement with Ecuadorian migrants and their domestic spaces; Echeverría, as a dual citizen (Ecuadorian and Italian) who approached his informants with closer commonalities language, and possibly culture wise, although typically not in social class or education. In either case, this is no fieldwork from scratch. It started from our pre-existent expertise in Ecuadorian migration and our familiarity with all the selected dwellers, who made for a highly diverse set of participants in terms of gender, education, social class, territorial and ethnic background. This eventually resulted in parallel ethnographic trajectories that unfolded between 2019 and 2021. Out of the five tales from the field that follow, four are referred to Southern coastal Ecuador, an area which Boccagni visited several times, and where Echeverría did a more recent follow up. The last case is referred, instead, to Otavalo, an Andean indigenous community that is unique for the reach of its migration and for its visibility in the literature. Here again, we build on a repertoire of previous acquaintances and visits. Our ethnographic fieldwork has followed the ethical protocols of the HOMInG project. All our conversations and interviews have been held in Spanish. The identities of our participants have been fully anonymized.

While we deliberately zoom down on particular migrant families, we need also to briefly mention the bigger picture of Ecuadorian labour migration. This has taken a certain relevance, with the US as primary destination, since the sixties of the last century. It has however gone through a drastic acceleration and diversification later on, after the systemic crisis of the country in the late nineties (De La Torre & Strifler, 2009). In just a few year time, this resulted in what scholars called a “migration stampede” (Ramirez & Ramirez, 2005), out of a widespread “panic to leave” (Jokisch & Pribilsky, 2002). More recently, international migration has taken more oscillant and mixed patterns, including significant inflows from neighbouring countries – Colombia, Peru, and eventually Venezuela (Ledesma, 2019).

Across the ebbs and flows of international migration, the built environment has grown and changed in ways that talk to its faceted and complex societal impact. In that regard, our fieldwork accounts resonate with much research on the migration housing landscape in different Ecuadorian locations (Klaufus, 2012; Mata-Codesal, 2014; Boccagni & Pérez-Murcia, 2021) and elsewhere in Latin America (Lopez, 2015; Pauli & Bedorf, 2018). At the same time, they are as specific and distinctive as the underlying relationship with the domestic space – an intimate question that may be appreciated, and made sense of, only by being in a house.

### 13.3 Approaching Migration and Family Life from the Inside-Out: Five Tales of Migrant Houses

Visits to migrant houses and short periods as guests in them have been a central feature of our recent and parallel fieldwork in Ecuador. In what follows we discuss insights out of the lived experience of five houses, as recounted respectively by Boccagni (the first three) and by Echeverria (the last ones). While our case selection is partial and limited, relative to the scope of our research, it illustrates different facets of the same fundamental process: the everyday negotiation between pre-existing housing and household arrangements and migration-driven transformation. While each house has a degree of fixity (albeit it does change over time), such negotiations are irremediably a work in progress, as is typical of transnational family life. In the final section we advance further the conceptual and methodological conversation that informed our comparative research design.

#### 13.3.1 *It Stays Here, and Needs Everyday Care: The Family House of a “Non-Migrant”*

It is important to acknowledge, against the risk to exceptionalize migrants (Dahinden, 2016) even in a housing domain, that family migration affects the underlying domestic spaces in myriad ways. These may regard both domestic interiors and the external layout and infrastructural development of a house. In essence, newly-built and ostentatious remittance houses, whether completed and inhabited or not, are only the tip of the iceberg. That a decade-long migration family history influences the pre-existing domestic and built environment also in subtler ways, which are visible only from the inside-out, is a key lesson I (Boccagni) learnt through my periodical encounters with Jorge, in his hometown in southern Ecuador. Jorge has been a key informant and friend for my fieldwork among Ecuadorian migrants over the last fifteen years. My visits to Ecuador have also been visits to his dwelling place – the old family house where he is the only permanent resident by now, while his kin have long been to Italy and his old mother commutes between the two countries. Taking care of the house is part and parcel of his daily routines. This means also spending money for its security, including a better alarm system and electric barbed wire on the outer wall, against the risk of robberies – something that occasionally happens, and raises especial concerns whenever Jorge’s mother is in. “I could never leave until she’s here”, he repeatedly points out. Contrary to his brothers and sister, Jorge has never shown too much of an interest in moving to Italy – unless for the prospect of making more money, at least for a while. At the same time, dwelling there for him is intimately connected with questions of care, both personal (his older mother) and material (the housing property in which they live) (Schaab & Wagner, 2020).

Unlike many houses around, Jorge’s is one-floor only. It is made of a relatively large space under a basic tin roof, with a back patio and external toilets. Its exuberant inner decoration, furnishing and material culture make it more hospitable than

the infrastructure in itself would possibly allow. There is very little separation between distinct domestic environments, or between the latter and the street outside. As a matter of fact, the internal soundscape is seamless in itself – whenever the TV is on, there is no way to ignore it from any corner of the home. It is also pervasively connected with the outer street, in ways that the new and bigger external gate cannot stem (nor, perhaps, is it meant to).

“We did improve it, little by little”, Jorge recounts to me, whenever I’m back. The floor is tiled by now, many appliances are new, the plaster on the external wall is better quality than “in the past” (that is, the apparently still time before her sister left first, i.e. twenty years earlier). However, adds Jorge with a certain pride, “we didn’t make a *casote*”, the stereotypically big migrant house (Klaufus, 2012; Boccagni & Pérez-Murcia, 2021). There is no grand façade in this house – nothing so remarkable from the outside, as a result of major infrastructural investments. While one of his brothers would like to buy the adjacent terrain and cultivate it, this is apparently more for leisure than for a productive investment.

From the outside, therefore, the house would go rather unnoticed. However, the semi-public interior space, a large sitting room, is far from unremarkable. Besides being accurately clean and well in order, it is dotted with markers of Italy – souvenirs, pictures, towels. As I realize after staying in for some days, there is a corner in the sitting room that is more intimate – in a way, sacred – than the rest (Fig. 13.1). This is a small table with a couple of chairs around. It hosts several pictures of the



Fig. 13.1 A “special corner” in Jorge’s place. (Picture by Boccagni)

family, most of them *prior* to migration. A picture of the seven of them all wearing football clothing, standing in front of the camera to mimic a football team, soon captures my attention. Right beside, another picture (and a dedication card with a prayer in Italian) is for Jimena, Jorge's sister-in-law, who passed away in Italy some years ago.

Aside from the exceptional circumstances of family visits from Italy, once per year at most, the house and its interiors seem to be ever the same, one day after another. To that extent, they comply with the basic task of self-reproduction that lies at the ontological core of the home, as a functional environment (Douglas, 1991). Everyday life goes on, for most people like Jorge, regardless of migration – or of “those who live abroad”, as people usually say. However, not every space in the interior is equal to the rest, or holds the same value or flavour for the dwellers. For Jorge's mother there is a special place in the house, as she tells me at some point. Contrary to my gendered expectations, this is not the kitchen, nor her bedroom. It is, instead, the small back garden. This includes a few trees with a flowerbed around them, surrounded by a concrete floor and, more recently, a new porch that Jorge got built (once again, he insists, out of his own money; it seems to be more and more infrequent, as time goes by, that his migrant siblings send him money, unless in extraordinary cases). There is a bit of the fragrance and freedom of the natural environment in that corner, to the eyes of Jorge's mother. Yet, it still falls within the safe boundaries – the tangible bricks and mortar – of her own dwelling space. As for Jorge, the house itself is a special place, relative to the outside world. Once in, he can be more of himself – relax, rest and enjoy the cool, separate from the outside frenzy, as he puts it. At the same time, what makes him feel at home is simply the possibility to lay down wherever, with the mobile in his hands, and carry on an online life that seems to be hardly less rich and busy than the offline one.

### ***13.3.2 In Transition: Dwelling in the House of a Potential Returnee***

Diego, an Ecuadorian in his early fifties who has been to Italy for seventeen years, has kindly offered to host me (Boccagni) for a few days upon my last visit to El Oro, coastal Ecuador (2019). I can be a guest in what he actually presents as “Antonia's house”. It was fundamentally his wife who got it built out of her savings as a live-in care worker in Italy. I remember about Diego and his wife, and so do they, since the times of my PhD fieldwork on Ecuadorian immigrant associations in Italy. I have not met him since, nor have I seen before the new, three storey building their family now owns downtown – one of the many new, large, somehow out-of-scale houses that dot the urban scape. Coming from Jorge's house, I have immediately a sense of closer middle-class comfort – whether for the marbles at the entrance, the tinted windows, the privacy enabled by the single room available for me, or the striking view of downtown from the roof floor (Fig. 13.2).



**Fig. 13.2** The upper floor in the house of Diego. (Picture by Boccagni)

There is something unexpected and intriguing in the internal layout of this house – well beyond the visual references to immigrant family members, Italian symbols or lifestyles (e.g. paintings), or the use of “Italian” affordances and appliances in the kitchen. As I realize after some informal home tours with Diego, his daughter and grandson, there is another interesting fact here. The spatial organization of the interior is not the same as in most houses I have visited so far. The collective and semi-public space of the sitting room is far more narrow and less “peopled” than the spacious private rooms, each of them with its own bathroom. “This is the American style, you know?”, he will tell me at some point. While Diego and his family members and friends do gather up for some chats and drinks every now and then, particularly at night, they tend to do so by taking some chairs out of the door, under the external porch, rather than inside the house. “It’s cooler outside”, says Diego. Indeed, turning the public space out of the doorstep in a temporary sitting room is a very ordinary and spontaneous practice among my acquaintances in town – at least those living in the safer and better lit central areas. However, it is also a way to foreground the divide between public life – where sociability and leisure with friends takes place – and the intimate, less accessible realm of private life.

These days, Diego is immersed in frenetic negotiation with some potential commercial partners to start up an import-export business in Ecuador. The ground floor of the building includes a space that has been precisely left empty for a new retail of international clothing. In fact, things are not going so smoothly as he had initially

planned, when in Italy. Several thousand dollars already lost along the way, apparently unreliable partners, all sorts of bureaucratic traps and complications. It seems like their second family attempt toward homecoming has no more chances of success than the first one, when, the previous year, Diego's wife had returned – in her intentions, for good. Enough with care work in Italy, she thought. In fact, a few months after the savings were over and she was back to look for a care job in Italy. At the end of my stay, Diego seems very likely to do the same – get back in a couple of months, when spring arrives in Italy, and resume his bricklayer job. And yet, in the meantime, their property – so much better, larger and more comfortable than their rented apartment in Italy – is there. Almost finished, and possibly about to get empty again, if only Diego's daughter can make her way back to Italy, as she hopes. "It's a beautiful house - isn't it?"

### ***13.3.3 Left Behind? One Empty Remittance House, from Within***

The Ecuadorian house of Jacqueline is a four-storey building in a peripheral urban district. It was built on the terrain of a pre-existing, smaller one-floor family unit. It is *of* Jacqueline, as she is the legal owner – she got it built in just a few years through her savings as a care worker and cleaner, while her mother was still living there. However, Jacqueline has never lived in the house, unless on holiday. She is by now rather sceptical on the possibility that she ever will, after spending two decades in Italy, getting dual citizenship and remaking her own family, after the reunification of her old mother. Her house is probably the one I am most familiar with. I was invited there already on my first visit to Ecuador, and was hosted there before Jacqueline was ever physically back. I have systematically returned since. This put me in a fortunate position of witness and beneficiary of the main fruits of her endeavours to “move forward” (*salir adelante*) abroad (Boccagni, 2014).

Upon my visits, over time, I have associated a distinctive emotional experience with that built environment, which was expected to make tangible, and instrumentally effective, the social presence of someone who was physically absent. It was a place in which I could relax and have a safe conversation with Jacqueline's mother, sipping together a cup of coffee, while bearing gifts and small parcels from, and to, Italy (cf. Mata-Codesal & Abranches, 2017). More subtly, it was certainly a home-like place, as long as it enabled us to reconstruct the story of Jacqueline's past life, and make sense of her migrant struggle far away from home. Furthermore, being there felt like being in a special and separate place – so more quiet, clean and cosy than the outer, unsafe neighbourhood, as Jacqueline and her mother constantly warned me. As I realized over time, this sense of inclusive domesticity had little to do with the building as such. Whenever I looked at it from the outside, let alone in the pictures, it was just one half-finished remittance house like thousands more around. It was the presence of Jacqueline's mother, hence the emplacement of an



intimate tie with Jacqueline, what made that house a proxy of home – in an ephemeral and short-lived way, for me; in a deeper and existential sense, and yet one hard to turn into everyday dwelling, for Jacqueline as a distant owner.

Interestingly, on my most recent visit the house does resemble, for the first time, the trope of a virtually empty migrant house (Pauli & Bedorf, 2018). Jacqueline’s mother has joined her in Italy at last. A brother of hers is renting their older one-floor apartment – at a ridiculous price, Jacqueline says – while taking care of the house that has grown over it. It is not totally clear what “care” should mean in practice (Schaab & Wagner, 2020), but it has probably to do with keeping the apartments clean, wiping dust, watering the gorgeous plants on the roof floor, and making sure that the property is not at risk of looting. Under the new circumstances, my request to Jacqueline to visit the house again has little to do with the previous regime of transnational hospitality. It still makes perfect sense to her, as she is familiar with, and still curious about, my research work. However, it is also a novel engagement in a play role, with myself acting as Jacqueline’s emissary and her uncle-in-residence to play a dual role – good host to me and, indirectly, good and reliable house-keeper to the eyes of Jacqueline and her mother. This makes for a surreal interaction, in fact just an example of the subtleties and ambiguities that shape the lived experience of transnational housing (Boccagni & Pérez-Murcia, 2021). Most remarkably, I realize once I’m back in, house interiors that have been uninhabited for years keep speaking about Jacqueline and her mother, at least for someone who knows them well. This has all to do with material culture (Davidson, 2009), but not with blatant or ostentatious markers – say, pictures of Italy, national flags, or the like. There is a subtlety to the local reproduction of transnational ties and memories that one can capture only from the inside out, in a moral economy of cumulative relations with the absent ones – Jacqueline and her mother (cf. Pistrick & Bachmeier, 2016; Pérez-Murcia, Chap. 11). On one hand, the interiors being in a perfect order, with transparent plastic sheets to cover the armchairs and one bible left open on the table, give me the sense of a still, immobile, almost “musealized” present – one, however, that is always open to the possibility that a dweller be back and easily resume her routines. On the other hand, my question “How can I tell that this is Jacqueline’s place - and not of anybody else?” finds an answer only *ex post*, back to Italy. This is when the two of us watch the videos I have taken upon Jacqueline’s request. The answer has to do with her own choices in furnishing the interiors – how she channeled her remittances to buy and set up beds, wardrobes, tables and chairs with certain characteristics. “They must be simple, functional and cheap”, Jacqueline invariably stresses. No space for displaying the stereotypical emigrant wealth or ostentatious consumption. As it happens, “the poorer people are, the bigger the house they want to make”, adds Jacqueline ironically, only to make clear that she does not go with the mainstream, even while considering her family a “poor” one. As we are watching once again a video taken in “her” room, Jacqueline suddenly stops and points to the skirting – a detail I would have never noticed alone (Fig. 13.3).

Can you see it? It’s decorated with black and white waves. I bought it because it was cheaper than the other ones with gold and stuff, but also because it reminded me of [...]. She’s an Arab woman, you know? We’ve helped her a lot, with our association.



**Fig. 13.3** Jacqueline's bedroom in her house in Ecuador. (Picture by Boccagni)

This is a small charity for food collection that Jacqueline has set up in Italy over time. Here emerges a circularity between aesthetics, selected memories and moral commitments, as embedded in Jacqueline's room, which can be appreciated even from the most mundane details – as long as one is in and has the trustworthy access of a friend who is being hosted, while being also, incidentally, an ethnographer.

### ***13.3.4 Back Home for Good: From the Dream House to Living-Together-Apart***

Yet another home visit in the coastal province of El Oro, Southern Ecuador. I (Echeverria) have an appointment with Don Antonio in the city centre. He gets there with his massive, brand-new pick-up. It takes a while for him to recognize me. He does, though, once I share a couple of anecdotes about the past. I had interviewed him in Amsterdam several years ago (cf. Echeverría, 2020), a few days before he would leave the Netherlands for good through an IOM voluntary return scheme. Antonio must be in his mid-sixties by now. He first drives me around town. He wants to show me how fast things have changed – so many new buildings, including

in the portal district with its promenade. Generally speaking, returning was ok for him – “the correct decision”. Now he can stay close to his daughters and granddaughters. “The best thing was to invest in their education”. One daughter graduated and is working by now. The other is about to end university. As for him, he has dedicated himself to home repairing, a bit of a carpenter or of a plumber. The good thing is that he carried along his machinery and tools from the Netherlands. Moreover, he works as a chauffeur. He bought the pick-up which he is driving right now and transports people and parcels around the country. “It’s a good job”, says Antonio. Sometimes he gets tired, but “you take your own rhythm”. Enough to live safely. This is also true, interestingly, for the house he built while living in the Netherlands.

The family is what matters the most, repeats Antonio. He had a good time in the Netherlands, but he was always clear on one fact – he would return, and he eventually did. Return “is not so easy as one would think”, but he did find a way to get back to his routines. He has rejoined his small club. He can go there to play cards, have beers and dedicate to *ecuavóley*, his real passion. Catching up with friends again, having good food, staying close to his daughters, keeping busy and seeing his granddaughters – this way he got back to a “normal” life. “Nowadays”, he concludes, “I feel home again. I’m so grateful to the Netherlands, but I’m happy I made it back”. When I first interviewed him, still in Europe, I had the sense of a serious, methodic and pragmatic guy – one with his feet on the ground. He had long been undocumented, living in a room on rental from an Antillean-Dutch lady. He had never got into trouble, everybody seemed to get along well with him. Maybe that has to do with age too. He was almost forty when he left Ecuador – not that young, for a migrant standard. Now, I’m curious to see his house in town. I still remember his room in Amsterdam. It looked like the typical accommodation of those who live with the luggage done, ready to return “soon”. No decoration, only the strictly necessary things around, everything well in order. The place of someone who intimately knows, or maybe hopes, that this is not home for him. It’s rather a place in transition, for a temporary stay, even while the years are passing by (cf. Miranda-Nieto, Chap. 5).

Antonio’s house is in a new *barrio*, away from the city centre. It’s a popular one, and it has expanded a lot, he tells me. As a matter of fact, there are many new and big “migrant houses” around, as he adds. His own house, seen from the outside, is rather simple. A one-storey building surrounded by a wall and an internal *patio*. There are some concrete columns with their iron bars popping up in the middle – a not uncommon view in migrant houses (Boccagni & Pérez-Murcia, 2021). These were to be the columns to expand the house, as he was planning to do, when in the Netherlands. However, at some point he gave it up. “So much money... for what? I preferred to send [money] for my daughters’ education”. The house skeleton is still there, like a monument to the dream house (Fletcher, 1999) that could have been, and was not. Antonio invites me to sit with him under a gazebo in the courtyard. “You see – this is where I like staying... just have a beer and see my granddaughters playing around”. In fact, the house is made of three separate units. “In one lives my daughter. I live in another one. My ex-wife is in the last one”. A long and detailed

story about their separation follows suit. It sounds like a sad story – money, lawyers, cheating. At some point, his ex-wife comes out to bring some stuff into the washing machine, on the opposite corner of the patio. “You fucking dwarf”, I hear her muttering. They split up while he was in the Netherlands, recounts Antonio. “Migration puts a couple in trouble. One goes, the other stays, they have a good time, and the family is over. Maybe it’s the price one has to pay”. The daughters were right in the middle of the conjugal conflict. By now, he says, nobody speaks with his ex-wife.

By all likelihood, the ex-wife herself – whom I was unable to reach out – would give a radically different version of the story, and possibly of this house. Whatever the case, the big house is here around the courtyard where we are sitting. It seems to provide enough space for the three of them and for their parallel lives. Thanks to the money gained in the Netherlands, the two daughters had access to an expensive higher education. This has not come without a price, though. Antonio and his wife left for the Netherlands, albeit in different moments, as a couple. They were back as singles, carrying along the fear of missing their daughter’s growing up.

At last, Antonio invites me in. His apartment is relatively small, and yet comfortable and well-organized – the place of a practical guy who lives alone. His room in the Netherlands could have been the room of anybody. A bare and impersonal domestic space, where he perceived himself as only in transit. Here, instead, the place talks about him. There are all sorts of objects that have a value for him in the bookshelf: books, a car wash liquid, an iron, some toys for his granddaughters, plumber tools, a couple of bottles of whisky. There is also, well visible, a set of typically Dutch miniature houses. This was a collection one could get with KLM, as Antonio explains. In fact, they were originally small spirit bottles. This is not his only souvenir from the Netherlands though. There is also, hanging on the wall, an engraving with an Amsterdam canal – a present from his old boss at work – with two hats hanging just below (Fig. 13.4). This is what visually remains of such an important part of his life. It feels somewhat melancholic, at least to me. “Let’s go in the kitchen”, Antonio promptly says. There is chicken with mushrooms in the frying pan. He offers a bit to me. “You see? I learnt this in the Netherlands too. No problem for me to cook now!”

In short, after migration one family house has grown and split into three separate houses. New spaces, roles and family balances have been negotiated inside them. What this house would be like now, if people had not migrated, is a hard and ultimately pointless question. For sure, don Antonio would not be cooking chicken with mushrooms for me. Meanwhile, as I’m looking out of the window, the naked columns are still there – a powerful symbol of the multiple options migration opened up, and of the choices eventually made by its protagonists (Sandoval-Cervantes, 2017). The “success” of his daughters was his major reward, Antonio proudly repeats, “happy” to be back and stay with “his” people. Now, he’s just about to go and play *ecuavoley*. He can give me a lift back to the centre, if I like.

**Fig. 13.4** A wall in Antonio’s sitting room. (Picture by Echeverria)



### ***13.3.5 Leave, Stay or Return: The Safe Haven Is There, and Expands over Time***

Upon my latest visit in Ecuador, I (Echeverria) was hosted in the house of the Sanchez, an indigenous transnational family with a three-decade long history of migration to Europe. I have long been familiar with them. The house and their entire lives prior to migration lie in Peguche, Otavalo – the area of origin of a well-studied migration flow of “transnational peasants” (Kyle, 2003), in fact mainly musicians and handicraft retailers (Ordóñez, 2017; Ordonez & Colmenares, 2019). Pedrito, the father, was among the first to leave Peguche for Europe in the early 1990s. Four of his sons and daughters were to follow his steps in search of better opportunities. Several years later, the family network includes returnees, immigrant permanent stayers (two of them being married to Italian citizens) and circular migrants, the father being one of the latter.

As I approach their family house, walking along the dusty roads of the village, many questions puzzle in my mind. Seen from the outside, this is a relatively old building with a sober façade. It is made out of traditional materials: bricks, tiles,

wood. In that respect, it does not share much with the new (migrant) houses around, which tend to display modern aesthetics, unusual geometrical shapes, large mirrored windows and flashy colors. Yadira, Pedrito's younger daughter, receives me at the front door and takes me into a long corridor toward a large internal patio. Her mother, Jamila, is waiting for us there. Unlike yadira, she wears the traditional Kiwcha-otavalo outfit. After greetings and chatting a bit, Jamila proudly shows the cage with the *cuyes* (guinea pigs), the hens, the dogs and cats. Looking around, I realize that the house is made of different, semi-independent sections in a horseshoe shape around the patio. Each of them is unlike the others, as if they had been built at different times. Yadira confirms my guess: "that part was built by Pablo [*a long-resident in Italy*]; that is Juan's; this was finished last year and Antonio [*a "circular" migrant to Italy*] lives in with his family." In a nutshell, the house as we see it now is the result of a family-driven patchwork, parallel to the course of migration, with each member abroad sending back the resources to build up a new part over the years. Each section of the built environment embodies the life trajectories of the owners, present or absent, with all the attendant memories and emotions. Each part of the house is for a different family member. This gives them a degree of autonomy, even while they stay under the same roof. The patio, like a junction between separate parts, creates a fundamental coherence between them. Its "ruler", the mother, embodies the unity of the house and probably of the home. Interestingly, she is the only one that has never migrated.

We move into the living room, which has a rather basic outlook, as if it were still to be completed. Relative to the whole house, it is rather small, perhaps 3 x 3 meters. A fireplace lies at one corner, close to a few armchairs and a small table with a television on top. The walls are almost entirely bare, unless for a couple of things hanging up, possibly the only clear markers of a migration background. A small frame includes a fabric with some sentences in Italian: "The rules of the house: who opens, closes; who empties, refills; if something falls, pick it up; if someone rings, answer; if someone is sad, comfort him; who dirties, must clean!". Close to it is a collection of four plates representing the four seasons. Overall, taking care of the house interiors, or articulating a certain aesthetic or self-representation through them, does not seem to be a priority. The house infrastructure as a whole has something inconsistent. There are parts in which the levels of the floors and ceilings do not match. In several areas, including the sitting room, the floor has no tiles – only concrete. However, this has to do less with a lack of resources – many family members have long lived and worked abroad – than with a lack of interest. The house, I realize, is perceived as a location that fulfills key instrumental functions for its dwellers, rather than as an intimate setting for beautification, comfort, and warm domesticity (Municipio del Distrito Metropolitano de Quito & Cordero, 2003; del Pino, 2010).

It is also remarkable to see how people use the different rooms on the ground floor. This house is far more than a dwelling place, for the family to rest and have leisure. It also accomplishes broader and more pragmatic functions. Some spaces are visibly meant to be "productive": in one room there is a loom, in another, overlooking the street, a small shop. On the back side there are some machines to make stamps on t-shirts. The patio itself has little of a domestic garden. It is rather a space

to breed animals, dry textiles, do the washing, and store objects. As is typical of rural and traditional housing, one and the same place combines domestic and productive life – two aspects that in more “modern” dwelling tend to lie on opposite sides of the doorstep, although in far from irreversible ways (as the pandemic has further revealed). This conflation between domestic and productive may be the reason for the lack of decoration in the interior. The spaces dedicated to sleeping, eating and spending time together are very much the same in which people weave, cook, or store things. A straightforward and functional approach to the use of domestic space governs the Sanchez’s house, regardless of migration. This can be perceived even in the kitchen, as I’m standing at its big window that looks on the patio, while having a coffee with Jamila. This is perhaps the most embellished place of the house, and yet it follows the same functional patterns. In one corner, a semi-industrial oven is used to make bread to be sold in the shop. On the opposite corner lies a big refrigerator, on a long wall the kitchen furniture. As I eventually find out, Jamila has recently travelled for the first time to Europe, to join her daughter who was about to give birth. Italy was so nice, she says. Moreover, she was so happy to be at her daughter’s side in such an important moment. However, after a few days she started to miss her house, Peguche, her animals. It was time to come back.

As I am about to leave, I ask Jamila if I can take a picture with her. “Yes, of course”, she says, and soon adds: “do you want to take a picture of the *cuys* (guinea pigs) too?”. After our final hug, the image of the old woman with her traditional dress in the middle of the patio, with the cage of the *cuys* and all the dogs and cats around, remains impressed in my mind. The home has grown around her and the patio, the only two fixed elements in a place and a family that the migratory experience has radically changed. There is a clearly gendered and traditional, ultimately unequal domesticity embedded in this house. It is thanks to it, however, that the house has retained its multifunctional purpose and navigated across the ups and downs of migration, instead of turning into the empty shell of yet another remittance house.

### **13.4 Entering the House, Moving Out, Moving Forward: A Discussion**

The short housing tales presented above are primarily the stories of Jorge, Diego, Jacqueline, Antonio, and the Sanchez family – and of the places they call or would like to call home. However, these stories speak to questions and dilemmas of broader societal and existential resonance, in several respects.

Methodologically speaking, our case studies stress once again the added value of *being in* when it comes to connecting people’s narrated biographies with their everyday practices, the main stage on which they take place, and the material cultures that articulate their ties with people located elsewhere in space and time. All this being said, there is another question that cuts across our fieldwork: the critical

embeddedness of this way of doing research into mutual regimes of hospitality (cf. Bonfanti, Chap. 4; Pechurina, Chap. 6). Whenever we were hosted in the place of some migrant acquaintance or friend, we were there to share some moments of their lives, as their guests. No room for academic detachment, all room for engaging in some form of reciprocity as good guests are expected to do, incidentally co-producing an account that has (also) an academic significance. While being in the house of someone else has all to do with a host-guest relation, any form of proper ethnography hinges on a certain way of hospitality – the researcher being accepted as a guest in the lifeworlds of their interlocutors as hosts – to be viable and meaningful (cf. Harney, Afterword). A guest position is not without limitations and contradictions, as many of the previous chapters have illustrated. Nevertheless, nourishing it in a not merely instrumental, ad-hoc or predatory way is a requisite for good knowledge production, no less than for ethical accountability.

Interestingly, such a guest status reveals a parallel with the position migrants themselves may end up occupying, whenever they are back after many years. This is the condition of those who no longer feel at home, or are entitled to, in their native place. Edith, an Italian-Ecuadorian citizen and a long-term informant of Boccagni, has successfully invested in transnational housing since the outset of her migration career. Twenty years later, her affective, family and professional life is deeply rooted in Italy, whereas Ecuador is essentially a place for vacation. What this feels like in practice is nicely captured by her own words:

If I go back there, all the houses I have are on rental - I can't even return to my- *my* - place, you know? Either I go to my mother's or to my in-laws. But I'm just a guest there, it's not home! If I want to get a glass of water, I need to ask for permission. It's not like at home, where I can do whatever I like. [...] And then, after a while, you're no more used to that... and want to get back here. Here, by now, we are - what's the word? - integrated. It takes time - you need to speak the language well, get used to things, have a job... but home is here by now.

This reconnects with another tension that creeps across our narratives, regarding the ultimate limits of migrants' transnational connectedness; or, seen from the other end, the relative autonomy of a community of origin *as a community*, "of origin" being one peripheral attribute among others (that is, a reductionist and insufficient category to make sense of it). Of course, migration does affect life back "home" in many critical ways, mainly as a result of remittances. At the same time, as soon as one gets out of a migrant house, they will easily breathe a sense of normality, or business as usual, in all that has to do with everyday life there. On the "sending" side of any migration corridor, life goes on in its own way. This is not necessarily the same as when migrants used to be there, nor the one they dream of while living elsewhere. What for most migrants ends up being only a place for holiday, for non-migrants is simply the ordinary place to inhabit one day after another. Daily routines of time consumption, including work (or perhaps the search for it), shopping, leisure and thus forth, keep on in spite of the absent ones – possibly at rhythms lower than those to which migrants have got accustomed to abroad and, many of them would add, with more of a live-the-day attitude and little ambition to improve further. In this perspective, migrants and their counterparts may well be connected



through the internet and social media, potentially at any point of time and with minor efforts and costs. Nevertheless, their experiential worlds and their temporalities need not be in sync with each other. There is a simultaneity, in this, that is much more layered and contradictory than the image of a linear relation would suggest. In a similar way, migrant houses visualize and coalesce several contrasting temporalities and their evolution over time, as all our case studies show (cf. Boccagni, 2023). In short, a “successful” migrant may have built their houses as planned, and possibly made some profit out of that. However, *their* place – where one associates the intimate feeling and freedom of home, and is acknowledged as in-place (Pérez-Murcia & Boccagni, 2022) – may be no longer there. This, in turns, opens up the debate on return migration, as a major topic for research, policy and biographical purposes (Anghel et al., 2019).

Houses like those described in our fieldwork lie at the core of the prospects and dilemmas of return – indeed, of the sustainability and perceived success of one’s future life after migration. It is a pervasive and reasonable assumption for a migrant to invest in new or anyway better housing, as a precondition to make it safely back. No one among our informants would have probably questioned it, in principle. Nevertheless, the idealized view of a new house as a key target of migration, laden as it is with so many simultaneous expectations (investment, improvement, belonging, prestige, protection, etc.), may obscure more than it reveals for migrants themselves. There is a subtle but fundamental tension between house building or refurbishment as a value in itself, and as a component of a broader strategy of social re-inclusion. Migrants may have a hard time as returnees if they are not in a position to disentangle this tension in due course. “No house will ever feed you”, as one informant of Echeverría poignantly puts it: “if you’ve nothing to live off, the house is of no use – it’s actually a problem”. In a nutshell, unless a migrant (family) is long-sighted and lucky enough to invest remittances in more “productive” ways, the house they (re)built there has little chances to turn into a home, as a permanently lived dwelling place (Lopez, 2015; Boccagni, 2020). It may even occur that the dream of the house “kills the home” (Echeverría, 2021), whenever migrant future projects are not, and possibly cannot be anchored into economically and socially sustainable life prospects.

And yet, the house is there and matters, in a way or another (Boccagni & Yapó, 2022). No way to dismiss this, as long as transnational migration holds sway, either for a migrant or for a scholar in migration.

## 13.5 To Conclude

Overall, our fieldwork reveals meaningful parallels, resemblances and mirrorings between the life course of each house and of its inhabitants. There is more than an abstract and evocative metaphor at stake here (Marcus, 1995). At a very practical level, the ways in which a house is built, refurbished and used, or possibly neglected, are like a palimpsest on which a researcher can reconstruct a whole story of family

migration – depending also, of course, on in-depth relational engagement with the protagonists. Unlike in a palimpsest, however, the biographical layers left by migration into a house do not strictly overlap with each other, so that each new layer would make the previous ones invisible. We can rather observe a cumulation between different layers and traces of migration, just like in the vertical or horizontal expansion of the physical infrastructure of the houses in which we stayed. Old and new elements are deeply entangled with each other, and so are the memories and emotions associated with the household members. Against this backdrop, operating a respectful disentanglement – through domestic material cultures, routines and narratives – affords to enrich our understanding of people’s housing and migration pathways.

Being in a house, including a migrant house, is a condition to epistemologically unpack it from the inside-out, beyond the bricks and mortar. As a bounded region of a larger space, a house cannot stand in isolation from the outer environment. While it does need to interact with it, for its infrastructural survival, it also participates in external social change and makes it visible at a miniature level. The peculiarity, here, is that the relevant external environment is both a local and a transnational one. As a special container of space, moreover, a house is no monolithic entity. Its interior is invariably stratified and marked by different thresholds of comfort, intimacy and personal meaningfulness. This includes more or less tangible boundaries and special places, whether these are practiced (by day-to-day dwellers) or imagined (by those migrants who are owners, but only occasional dwellers). As important, a remittance house, just like any infrastructure, can also be an “actant”. It does things to those involved with it and to the broader community around. This holds true and needs to be acknowledged even when a house “does” nothing else than staying there, sometimes in a dilapidated state, thereby tacitly showing that the earlier dreams or ambitions attached to it were not accomplished.

As long as a house stays there, whether it is inhabited or not, we can still ask something more fundamental – *whose home* ultimately is it? Such a question encounters different and context-specific responses across our fieldwork. All of them show that the question is worthwhile, not so much for a matter of legal ownership, which is relatively uncontentious. The question has all to do, instead, with domestic use, presence, attachment and appropriation – or lack thereof. The point worth investigating is who, and under what conditions, is interested and enabled to attach a positive sense of home to a certain house – that is, to a portion of space that may afford some of the normative attributes that are predominantly attached to home in the literature (i.e. protection, intimacy, security, and thus forth). An entire constellation of actors, including migrants, may be in a position to do so at different moments. However, it is equally plausible that none of them really does – perhaps because migrants (and/or their left-behinds) have no more resources, interests or reason to care for the house; or possibly because their current inhabitants have much the same sense of temporariness and disregard for domesticity that is not uncommon among immigrant newcomers; or, still different, because their inherited cultural background involves little concern with Western-centric idea(l)s of domesticity. All these possible developments, which would demand more connections with

research on home unmaking and displacement, have been exemplified through our fieldwork. How the materiality of home is then emplaced or not across migration, who has a right to do so, and why, are all crucial questions for further comparative research on the lived experience of remittance houses, along the conceptual and methodological lines suggested in this chapter.

## References

- Anghel, R., et al. (Eds.). (2019). *Transnational return and social change*. Anthem.
- Baldassar, L., & Merla, L. (Eds.). (2014). *Transnational families, migration and the circulation of care*. Routledge.
- Boccagni, P. (2014). What’s in a migrant house? *Housing, Theory and Society*, 31(3), 277–293.
- Boccagni, P. (2020). So many houses, as many homes? In T. Bastja & R. Skeldon (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of migration and development*. Routledge.
- Boccagni, P. (2023). One essential home (“Ecuador”), another existential home (“with my mother”), many houses in-between. In L. E. Pérez-Murcia & S. Bonfanti (Eds.), *Finding home in Europe*. Berghahn.
- Boccagni, P., & Bivand-Erdal, M. (2021). On the theoretical potential of ‘remittance houses’. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47, 1066–1083.
- Boccagni, P., & Pérez-Murcia, L. E. (2021). Fixed places, shifting distances. *Migration Studies*, 9(1), 47–64.
- Boccagni, P., & Yapó, S. (2022). “You’re always in transit, but the house stays”: Remitting, restoring and remaking home in a migrant family house in Cuenca, Ecuador. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 39(5), 611–629.
- Dahinden, J. (2016). A plea for the ‘demigrantization’ of research on migration and integration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(13), 2207–2225.
- Davidson, T. (2009). The role of domestic architecture in the structuring of memory. *Space and Culture*, 12(3), 332–342.
- De La Torre, C., & Striffler, S. (Eds.). (2009). *The Ecuador reader. History, culture, politics*. Duke UP.
- del Pino, I. (2010). *La casa popular de Quito. «Otra» estética, «otra» vida*. Abya Yala.
- Douglas, M. (1991). The idea of a home: A kind of space. *Social Research*, 58(1), 287–307.
- Echeverría, G. (2020). *Towards a systemic theory of irregular migration: Explaining Ecuadorian irregular migration in Amsterdam and Madrid*. Springer.
- Echeverría, G. (2021). When the house kills the home. *HOMInG blog post*, available online, [homing.soc.unitn.it](http://homing.soc.unitn.it)
- Fletcher, P. (1999). *La casa de mis sueños: Dreams of Home in a Transnational Mexican Community*. Westview Press.
- Fog-Olwig, K. (2007). *Caribbean journeys: An ethnography of migration and home in three family networks*. Duke University Press.
- Jokisch, B., & Pribilsky, J. (2002). The panic to leave: Economic crisis and the ‘New emigration’ from Ecuador. *International Migration*, 40(4), 75–101.
- Klaufus, C. (2012). *Urban residence: Housing and social transformations in globalizing Ecuador*. Berghahn.
- Klaufus, C. (2023). Norms and forms of the remittance landscape in Latin America. In P. Boccagni (Ed.), *Handbook on home and migration*. Edward Elgar.
- Kyle, D. (2003). *Transnational peasants: Migrations, networks and ethnicities in Andean Ecuador*. Johns Hopkins UP.
- Ledesma, N. (2019). Ecuador migration trends. *Inter-American Dialogue*. Available online.

- Lopez, S. L. (2015). *The remittance landscape: Spaces of migration in rural Mexico and urban USA*. UCP.
- Lozanovska, M. (2019). *Migrant housing*. Routledge.
- Marcus, C. (1995). *House as a mirror of self*. Conari Press.
- Mata-Codesal, D. (2014). From 'mud houses' to 'wasted houses': Remittances and housing in rural highland Ecuador. *REMHU*, 22(42), 263–280.
- Mata-Codesal, D., & Abranches, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Food parcels in international migration*. Springer.
- Municipio del Distrito Metropolitano de Quito, & Cordero, J. (2003). *Casa Ecuatoriana*. Ed. Cobol Servicios Gráficos.
- Ordóñez, A. (2017). *La migración transnacional en Peguche, Ecuador; y la fiesta del Pawkar Raymi*. Abya-Yala.
- Ordóñez, J. T., & Colmenares, F. A. (2019). Tres generaciones del transnacionalismo kichwa-otavalo. *Migraciones Internacionales*, 10(6), 1–24.
- Oso, L., & Ribas-Mateos, N. (Eds.). (2013). *The international handbook on gender, migration and transnationalism*. Edward Elgar.
- Pauli, J., & Bedorf, F. (2018). Retiring home? House construction, age inscriptions, and the building of belonging among Mexican migrants and their families in Chicago and Rural Mexico. *Anthropology & Aging*, 39(1), 48–65.
- Pérez-Murcia, L. E., & Boccagni, P. (2022). Of home-comings and home-scales. Reframing return migration through a multiscale understanding of home. *Global Networks* 22(3), 499–513.
- Pistrick, E., & Bachmeier, F. (2016). Empty migrant rooms: An anthropology of absence through the camera lens. *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*, 3(2), 2015–2215.
- Ramirez, F., & Ramirez, J. (2005). *La estampida migratoria ecuatoriana*. Abya Yala.
- Sandoval-Cervantes, I. (2017). Uncertain futures: The unfinished houses of undocumented migrants in Oaxaca, Mexico. *American Anthropologist*, 119(2), 209–222.
- Schaab, T., & Wagner, L. (2020). Expanding transnational care networks: Comparing caring for families with caring for homes. *Global Networks*, 20(1), 190–207.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

