# Fixed places, shifting distances: remittance houses and migrants' negotiation of home in Ecuador

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## Abstract

Many case studies on the rationale and purpose of transnational housing initiatives and so-called remittance houses have been published over the past two decades. Still missing, though, is a framework to illustrate the conceptual value of researching these buildings and their ways of mediating the relationships between movers and stayers. With a view to this, the article illustrates what remittance houses 'do' to narrow down the gaps that emerge—in space, time, status, and knowledge—between migrants and their communities of origin. As our fieldwork with Ecuadorian migrants in Europe and their left-behind counterparts shows, remittance houses are more than investments, or resources for migrants' emotional attachment and dreams of return. They are also central to the negotiation of class, status and belonging, and to the very interplay between housing and home along the course of migration. As 'agents' in themselves, these houses shape the transnational connections between distant and disparate places, and the circulation of home-related ideas and practices across them. Over time, they embody a variety of meanings and expectations that, unlike the buildings, are far from fixed or immobile.

**Keywords: remittance houses, emigration, home, Ecuador, housing, distance**

## 1. Introduction

New or better houses are a privileged means for migrants to reassert their membership to, and investment in, the local communities of origin. Several case studies have illustrated the rationale and purpose of transnational housing initiatives and so-called remittance houses in a variety of migration systems worldwide (Boccagni 2017, 2020). Yet, there is little of a general framework to illustrate *why* researching these buildings is meaningful, and *what* the buildings actually 'do' against the background of migrants' cross-border relations. These houses are significant as research sites in themselves (Cairns 2003, Gielis 2011), but also as nodes in the networks of interdependence, more or less asymmetric,

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conflict-ridden and open to renegotiations, between people on the move and their 'stayer' counterparts.

Based on this premise, and with reference to emigration from Ecuador, we unveil and classify the functions of remittance houses as an ambiguous embodiment of this interdependence. As we illustrate, the houses built or refurbished thanks to remittances display both the distance between migrants and their main groups of reference, and the ongoing attempts at bridging it. Migrant ways of imagining, building, and using houses 'back home' illuminate the larger social and relational consequences of migration on the local communities of origin. As our fieldwork shows, remittance houses are foundational to the reproduction of four fields of interaction, whereby migrants and their counterparts negotiate mutual interests, commitments, and obligations:

- The *space* interaction between *here* and *there:* the immigration contexts versus the local communities of origin, within transnational fields shaped by migrants' family ties, obligations and aspirations, and by their future-oriented investments back 'home';
- The *time* interaction between *then* and *now*: the initial project to build or refurbish a house through a few years' savings (typically as safe haven for return) versus the following, hard-to-predict developments, whereby these houses may be completed, inhabited, increased in value *or not*—in all of these respects, paralleling the temporalities of migration;
- The *status* and *taste* interaction between *us* and *them:* the different, sometimes opposite views and representations of these houses among different subjects and groups in the local context of emigration. Most notably, the 'normalizing' accounts of migrants and their family members lie in contrast with those of local professionals (e.g. architects and urban planners) regarding the traditional and canonical patterns of the built environment;
- The *knowledge* interaction between *outside and inside:* what one can assume from the outside, considering also the pervasive stereotypes about these buildings, does not match—it may even be opposite to—the 'real experience' of their use. In-depth qualitative research, including our own, is particularly revealing in this sense.

All across the analysis we use expressions like remittance houses (López 2015) or remittance architecture (Klaufus 2011) only for the sake of clarity. In fact, they do not say all of these buildings. As important, they may say little to their owners or dwellers, for whom they are simply houses, hopefully to be turned into homes, as we discuss at the end. Indeed, the extent to which these houses turn into inhabited and resignified domestic places is critical to mediate migration-driven tensions and recover a sense of normality out of them. *Home*, here, is understood as a special kind of relationship between individuals and places (Boccagni 2017), entailing both material and symbolic dimensions (Blunt and Dowling 2006). It has to do with a fundamental human need to emplace 'ontological security' (Dupuis and Thorns 1998), and to connect a sense of stability and openness to the future—whether this is achieved or not—with particular dwellings ( Hage 1997 ). Home is related to the places where people live and to the circumstances, objects, social and cultural practices that make these places home-like (Pérez Murcia 2019b). That the

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house-to-home transition is complex, and time- (no less than place-) dependent, is the point we make at the end of the article, where we also emphasize the significance of remittance houses as *agents*, no less than *stages* for migration-driven social change.

## 2. Migrant houses as fixed bases to negotiate shifting relations

Our research in Ecuador was driven by a broader concern with the interplay between the extended geographical mobility of people and the irremediable fixity of the houses some of them already own, or try to get built while working abroad. We aimed to unravel the complex configuration of meanings and functions that houses embody, as mediators of migration-driven distance and absence (Loeckx 1998, Dalakoglou 2010). As several case studies suggest, a number of tensions unfold over time, parallel to migrants' transnational family life, around the ways and possibilities of building (or improving), then using, representing and making sense of migrants' houses (Leinaweaver 2009, Van der Horst 2010, Pauli and Beford 2018). As long as their owners are away, these houses 'do' something more than containing people (if any). Rather, they are expected to socially compensate migrants' physical absence and to publicly display their commitment to return in the future.

In order to appreciate their potential as research sites, however, a dual research transition is in order: from the mainstream social representations attached to these houses, to the ways of (un)inhabiting them; and from a typically idiographic focus on particular buildings, to an acknowledgement of their interdependence with the local (and even the international) housing landscapes, and of their significance as research venues to investigate broader concerns. Following these premises, we investigate what the ways of building and using (or not) these artefacts reveal about the distribution of ideational, decisional, and control resources between migrants and their counterparts; about the gap between the expected (or dreamt) uses and functions of a house, and those it does assume over time; about the tension between the meanings and values attached to the house by the owners, or dwellers, and by the surrounding local community; about the distance between the outside look and the interior lived experience of any remittance house.

None of these questions is totally new to interdisciplinary research on the buildings that derive from migrants' transnational investments. A general distinction can be traced, within this sparse literature, between case studies with a descriptive or context-specific remit, and research with a stronger ambition for original knowledge production. Out of the latter, three arguments have been particularly inspiring for our Ecuadorian case studies: the temporality of these housing projects, the need for a life course optic on them, and their centrality to migrants' constructions of the future (Datta 2008, Sandoval-Cervantes 2017, Pauli and Bedorf 2018); their significance as material statements of migrants' claims for membership and recognition (Smith and Mazzucato 2009, Melly 2010, Page and Sunjo 2018) and of their 'socially desired identity' (Dovey 1985); more recently, the emerging emphasis on the distinctive 'agentic power' of migration-related artefacts, no matter how 'fixed' they obviously are (Schaab and Wagner 2020).

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All of these points can be fully appreciated, and advanced further, through a comparative analysis of the interactions between migrants and their main groups of reference, as long as they rely on different ways of framing and using the same dwelling space. The latter can then be interrogated as a potential compensator of distance-related tensions. How far this compensation works, and to the (dis)advantage of whom, is the last question to be addressed in this article.

## 3. Empirical context and methodology

It would be hard to find out, across today's migration studies, instances of large-scale migration that do not leave visible traces in the built environment and housing-scapes of the communities of origin. For sure, there is no paucity of literature on migration-driven housing investments in Ecuador. Large-scale emigration from this country dates back to the seventies at least, primarily involving the centre-south *Sierra* as an area of departure and the US as a context of (often illegal) settlement (Kyle 2000). Emigration has remarkably accelerated in the early 2000s, involving the country as a whole, after the major 1999 crisis (Herrera and Torres 2005). More recently, migration-related questions gained unprecedented visibility in the early years of *correismo* (2007–2017), moving then to a phase in which *im*migration—related to undocumented migrants and asylum seekers within the country—is constructed as much more politically salient (Herrera et al. 2018). All across these decades, changes in the building landscapes have paralleled the development of emigration. However, it is particularly in the Andean region, and most notably around Cuenca that such changes have been the subject of specific research (Jaramillo 2002, Pribilsky 2007, Klaufus 2012, Mata-Codesal 2014, Rivera-Munoz and De Meulder 2018).

Against this background, our research aimed to advance the conversation on remittance houses in terms of multi-locality (as we selected four different locations across Ecuador), multi-spatiality (with a focus on the interaction between left-behinds and migrants in Europe) and multi-temporality (comparing the current state of remittance houses with their original building projects). This involved participant observation, in-depth interviews and life history collection with a number of migrants in Italy, Spain, and the UK, as well as with their family members in Ecuador. We aimed to explore how migrants' economic and social remittances affect the built environment in the communities of origin, particularly their own houses—with all of aesthetics, material cultures and ideas of home associated with them. In doing so we looked also at the ways of using these houses—rented, hosting family members, or just empty or unfinished—and at local residents' perceptions about them. Some of our interviewees in Ecuador had a migration background themselves. This enabled us to investigate how their own experience had influenced their ideas of home and the aesthetics of their houses.

In practice, we did participant observation and conducted 32 in-depth interviews in semi-peripheral urban areas of Quito and Cuenca and in semi-rural areas of the provinces of Esmeraldas and El Oro (January–March 2019). In the case of El Oro, data collection also included follow-ups with individuals and families interviewed over the previous 15 years by PB, since the beginning of his PhD research project (cf. Boccagni 2014). In most of these locations we had 'tours' with the family members, in and around the houses. Furthermore,

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we engaged with local residents, both specialists (like architects or urban planners) and more 'experiential' informants. Our case selection was in part driven by previous contacts and interviews with Ecuadorian migrants in Spain, Italy, and the UK. Yet, it also reflected the aim to compare the influence of migration on a variety of housing landscapes: *Costa* and *Sierra*, long-term migration and recent flows, semi-urban and semi-rural areas. The option for relatively peripheral areas came once we realized that in large urban areas, and most notably in Quito, one can hardly reconduce the impact of migration to a distinctive style. We then narrowed down our search for remittance houses within very specific neighbourhoods, following also the migration chains we had traced from Europe.[1]

Most of the neighbourhoods where we did fieldwork are inhabited by low-income mixed-raced families. Self-construction tends to dominate the landscape. At least in some cases, the provision of public services such as water and electricity are not guaranteed 24/7. Against this background, Cuenca and its surroundings are a case in itself. Those who migrated from there over the past decades used to live in low-income neighbourhoods. Partly as a result of remittances, the land price in these areas has substantially increased and mansions ranging between US$ 150,000 and 500,000 can be easily identified surrounded by very humble houses. As discussed in the rest of the article, many of these houses visibly contrast with the local architecture and remain unfinished and unoccupied.

It is worth highlighting, however, that our case studies were not selected for their conspicuousness. Rather, they followed the development of our previous fieldwork with Ecuadorian migrants in Europe. While interviewing their significant others in the local contexts of origin, we also searched for remittance houses in other areas influenced by migration. While in places such as Cuenca migrant houses tended to be very distinctive, in Quito the difference could hardly be perceived from outside. We needed to look at the inside to gain a better understanding of how migrants circulate ideas of housing and home.

Indeed, upon fieldwork we became fully aware of the potential bias inherent in selecting houses based on their appearance. Why focus only on buildings that look quirky to one's eyes, and not on more conventional ones? Whenever scholars select houses considering only their 'quirkiness', they simply miss what conventional houses owned or built by migrants and their families can also tell us, especially from the inside. Perhaps more critical, they risk portraying migrants and their houses as 'conspicuous', even 'exceptional' subjects and objects.

As our article was the fruit of four parallel and cumulative qualitative studies, it has no ambition to generalisation. The empirical findings, however, resonate with a widespread literature on the housing aftermaths of large-scale migration. More important, they make space for further theory-building on the mediation function of these houses and their own 'agency', but also on the cross-border circulation of ideas and aesthetics about home, and on the critical interface between the house and the home dimension of the built environment.

## 4. The house as embodiment of the distance created through migration, and of the attempts to bridge it

Building on our fieldwork, we can analyse the functions of remittance houses in coping with the forms of distanciation—i.e. separation between migrants and their points of

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reference—that migration entails. Such processes are an inherent source of tensions, conflicts, and dilemmas. As we pointed out in the introduction, remittance houses articulate them, and are expected to mediate their downsides, at four levels: in space, time, status, and knowledge. Ethnographic and biographical instances from our fieldwork will illustrate the significance of these tensions and the possibilities of working them out, depending also on the ways of inhabiting migrants' housing spaces.

All of this argument holds as long as migrants perceive or construct these forms of distanciation as excessive and undesirable; put differently, as long as they retain a significant transnational engagement, with an ultimate aspiration to homecoming. Whenever, over time, immigrants see no more the distance from home communities as an issue, they may have little point in investing and cultivating their status there. Empty 'monster houses', in Ecuador or anywhere else (e.g. Aguilar 2009, López 2015), are a powerful reminder of this possible development.

### 4.1 In space: Translocal connections, cultural circulation, and in-place mediation

Remittance houses are often portrayed as embodiments of migrants' achievements, of their expectations (or possibly dreams) of return, of their stubborn claims for membership (Melly 2010, Freeman 2013, Mata-Codesal 2014). In all of these respects, a house should display the social presence of someone that is physically absent. However, the view of these buildings as a tangible manifestation of migrant 'absent presence' needs further deconstruction. While a house may tell much of those who bought it or had it built, it can hardly be a functional equivalent of their presence. Rather, the ways of conceiving, building, and using these artefacts are significantly affected by the spatial distance between migrants and their counterparts.

For sure, migrants' housing (indeed, *homing*) desires (Brah 2005, Boccagni 2017), and the remittances they invest accordingly, are what makes these buildings possible in the first place. Nonetheless, there is little obvious or pre-determinable from abroad in how the buildings are built, what they look like, what purposes they eventually serve. The socio-material processes whereby the houses are built and inhabited are simply not under their full control. Instead, the personal mediation of some 'left-behind' is hardly less important and critical than the money investment from abroad. This is true not only for house-building—whether involving architects, builders, bricklayers, or just family members or acquaintances. As important is the interpersonal mediation of someone to look after the house over time (Pauli and Bedorf 2018). While the house itself works out like a personal and family memorial (or even monument), it still relies on negotiations that make transnational fields more complex and intriguing than a simple matter of 'living dual lives' or 'being here and there' (Sandoval-Cervantes 2017).

When PB returned after 10 years to the El Oro house of his friend Miriam, an Ecuadorian woman in her early forties—now an Italian citizen—who had never lived there unless for holiday, he found several improvements in that concrete three-storey building, just next to her older sheer-metal roofed home. However, all Miriam's close family members had left. Two elderly uncles were now supposed to take care of the house—cleaning it, watering the plants, checking up the security system. Nonetheless,

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there was little obvious in what they had the 'right' to ask Miriam in return—whether money, the possibility to live there, or the immaterial currency of gratitude. Mutual distance, and possibly the elderly's poor confidence with information and communication technologies, did not make things any easier. The warm hospitality they displayed to PB upon his visit hardly affected Miriam's mixed emotional attitudes towards them, as he eventually realized.

Remittance houses can also be investigated as means of bridging another spatial distance: the one in housing standards, and possibly in architectural and decoration styles, between 'good houses' in the immigration context and the average standard of a house in Ecuador. As our fieldwork suggests, the construction of a migrant house as 'good enough' depends on a number of functional and aesthetic features, with a more or less stereotypical Western building as benchmark. Aspects such as dark or mirror glasses, aluminium finishes, disproportionate columns at the entrance and a tympanum over it, or the very magnitude of a building are all ways of displaying success by evoking 'other' cultural contexts. At a very broad level, these infrastructural patterns and material cultures point to a desired resemblance with the perceived standard in the context of immigration. In this optic, transnational housing is also a channel of cultural diffusion from below, as it displays the *local* influence of *alien* models—those migrants were fascinated with, and attempt to reproduce. However, across our research sites we were hardly able to find instances of a simple reproduction of the 'typical' house interiors from another country. In fact, remittance houses convey all forms of hybridisation, based on the owners' individual tastes and on the resources available, rather than any consistent pattern from abroad (Pellow 2003, Klaufus 2011). As important, they do so under distinctive interpersonal mediations.

What is tentatively reproduced, as the façades and the interiors of the houses we visited illustrate, are very specific and evocative domestic objects or patterns of decoration. They primarily speak of migrants' own tastes and lived experiences. They make for an assemblage that may conjure different places, housing styles, and life experiences, but only through the active mediation of migrants and left-behinds, in light of their tastes, mutual interests, and of course, of the resources available. When PB, back to Italy from Ecuador, shared with his informant Jacqueline the videos he had taken in her new house in El Oro—by her own request—he was faced with an unexpected development: only very minor details in the interiors were really related to Italy, in Jacqueline's memory and understanding. One of them was the skirting she had set up in 'her' room. Nothing conspicuous there—it was actually the cheapest available when she bought it. The black-and-white arabesque on it could hardly be taken as a marker of Italy in any way. Yet, Jacqueline had chosen that skirting as it was reminiscent of an immigrant Arab woman she had met and helped in the past, as a part of the activities of the Italian charity in which she volunteered. What had recently changed Jacqueline's attitude towards the house was less its resemblance to any 'Italian' standard than a more fundamental and personal thing—her mother had eventually left it, after family reunification with her in Italy. Following this, there was little point for Jacqueline to call that place home again and invest further in it. While her spatial distance from the house remained the same, temporality—her family life course—was at the roots of her changing attitude. What a house 'does' in

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mediating migrants' transnational relationships, therefore, is not given once for all. There is an oscillating time distanciation at play, which is just as significant as the spatial one.

## 4.2 In time: The house as a claim for continuity between past, present, and future

A time-sensitive approach to remittance architecture is necessary, first of all, to unpack the rationale of its development: why some migrants choose to invest in a house for an uncertain future in their places of origin, rather than improving their housing conditions where they live at present. In essence, a house in Ecuador is expected to be a source of existential continuity between past, present, and future, against the disruption of migration (cf. Datta 2008). It should enable a migrant to reconnect mnemonically and sensorially with *then* (the time and places left behind in the past), from *now* (the transnational space between emigration and immigration context), towards another *then* (a desidered or imagined life destination in the future). By virtue of its 'rootedness' in a place that is still called home, a house can work out as an anchorage into past memories and identifications; a device to retain a meaningful location in the present; a springboard to keep alive the ambition of return and possibly achieve it in the future (cf. Pauli and Bedorf 2018). Yet, the gaps between the different meanings and functions associated with remittance houses over time remain, and deserve more analysis.

A house to be built from scratch or at least improved, and then possibly shared with the closest kin, figured high in the early imaginaries of the Ecuadorian migrants we met and collected memories with, one or two decades after they had left the country. Most of them framed their housing investments precisely as a way to strengthen the links with it. Likewise, their significant others in Ecuador tended to share this view of the house as a sanctuary for return. Santiago, an Ecuadorian migrant LEPM interviewed in Madrid, told him of his ambitions to build a house for his wife and daughter in Uyumbicho, a rural district of Quito. Building a house, he said, would ensure a better future for his family and himself upon return. Compared with the indigenous community he belonged to, Spain was basically a transient space in his life course. When in Uyumbicho, LEPM interviewed Leonardo and Juan Carlos, his father and older brother, respectively, who stressed the importance of owning a house in one's place of origin as a symbol of return. The father was indeed encouraging Santiago to build a house in the same plot of land which he had inherited from his parents, and where he had spent his entire life. His older son Juan Carlos, who had also been to Spain, had already built a flat in the second floor of that house. *Owning* a house, Juan Carlos said, was a central and family-shared motivation for going abroad. 'My mother has been living for years in Spain but she is building her house here, in this neighbourhood . . .. She has even sent special tiles for the kitchen and floor . . . to me that house is like a palace. It's not finished yet but it is one of the biggest and more beautiful of the area.' It is actually uncertain when Juan Carlos' mother will be back to Quito. Yet, as he repeats, she has a place to come back.

Indeed, the emotional and symbolic value of the remittance house as a potentially ever-available safe haven should not go unnoticed. That said, migrants' actual housing trajectories do not necessarily match initial expectations. Some of their housing projects may be never completed, just while migrants themselves indefinitely postpone their return. Even

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when they do return, they may fall short of resources to complete their 'dream houses', whenever their initial projects to start up new stores or businesses turn out to be unviable (Herrera & Martínez 2015). Over time, then, the same house embodies and visibilises the distance between earlier intentions and later developments, parallel to the life and migration course of the owners and of their significant others. Such a gap is particularly striking whenever a house is empty, abandoned, or incomplete. Even in the stories of 'successful' migrants, however, we encountered a gap between the initial attribution of strong emotional and affective meaning to the house, as long as return was a credible prospect, and the later acknowledgement that it had been a somewhat misplaced investment. While the building may remain the same, the expectations it is invested with do change over time.

'If only I had known!', exclaimed Patricia, a long-term informant of PB in Italy, as he brought her some presents from her mother who kept living in El Oro. 'It's always like this with the migrants, you know? You start and think you'll stay three or four years, make money, save it, make your *casita* and get back . . . nothing of that! That's our mistake', Patricia added: 'spend all for our house, and then it stays there - I should have saved more money here instead of sending it there all the time. At the end of the day you stay here, don't you? Whatever the problems you have, home is here for us by now. We're - what's the word? Ah, we're integrated'. This was a very plausible statement for a person, now Italian citizen, who had long reunited her family and had spent almost half of her life in Italy. It also mirrored some bitter irony, though, in acknowledging that Patricia's life course had taken exactly the opposite direction to the one long envisioned by her dreams, and her remittances. In a strictly economic sense, her house 'stuck in Ecuador' was no liability. Patricia was gaining some money out of renting it. However, it raised powerful and contradictory emotions at the core of her revisit of the past, and of what might have gone otherwise.

In any case, building a 'sanctuary for return' is not an ambition for everybody. We also found counter-narratives in the ways a piece of remittance architecture is perceived within the same family. Paola and Douglas, an Ecuadorian couple LEPM met in Manchester, built a remittance house with the financial resources they earned in Spain. The façade, they said, is inspired by the houses they inhabited and saw while living there for over a decade. To Paola, the house is largely a financial investment. She does not want to return because her children, who were born in Spain, did not engage with the Ecuadorian way of life. After 18 years spent abroad, Paola herself has detached from what she calls Ecuadorian culture. Douglas, by contrast, sees the remittance house mainly as an emotional investment—a place he aspires to go back to live after retirement. When in Esmeraldas, LEPM had the opportunity to visit the house he had previously seen in photos and videos. That house, their relatives said, was a financial investment but above all a home for the transnational family when they would decide to return. It still unquestionably belonged to Douglas, Paola and their descendants, described as Spanish citizens but 'Ecuadorians by heart': 'They know they will always have a home here. Nobody can expel them from their home in this country'. The present emptiness of the house made it no less meaningful to our left-behind interviewees. Looking after it and visiting it, for Paola and Douglas' family, was a way to feel that 'part of them' was still in the house.

Overall, even a well-finished remittance house is something of an unaccomplished project, as long as it stays empty. However, its partiality can be subject to opposite readings—

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a less-than fruitful investment, or even a burden, as much as a *second* home that will always be potentially available, no matter what. Members of the same household, and even individual migrants, may oscillate between these contrasting views over time. Even when a remittance house is structurally complete, then, it is bound to be a privileged research site on migration-related ambivalence (Freeman 2013).

### 4.3 In status and taste: Embodying the distinction between 'us' and 'them'

The distances created by migration, and the significance of remittance houses in embodying them, are relational no less than spatial and temporal in kind. They can be appreciated through the status distinctions, and the different ways of judging what is appropriate, 'belonging' or 'in place', which set migrants and their families apart from their stayer counterparts. In this respect, the migrant architecture embodies the tension between what is deemed pure and hybrid (Klaufus 2011, López 2015) through a dual contraposition: in inter-group relations, migrants (as the stereotypically newly rich) versus non-migrants (with particular regard to the pre-existing establishment); at a societal level, traditional styles, tastes and rules in architecture and urban planning versus all that is alien or non-belonging in the ways of building, in the materials being used, or in architectural styles (Mata-Codesal 2014).

That a house is a symbol of migrants' search for status, no less than belonging, was clear across the narratives of our research participants in Ecuador. 'Those who live away' build 'giant houses' in their places of origin—as Juan, the grandfather of our Madrid informant Valeria, told us in Quito—because they want to show everybody that their migratory journeys paid off. 'You know, vanity is inherent to humanity'. He added: 'you can see some houses here, but if you really want to see *migrants' houses* you must visit Cuenca. There, you can see mansions and villas and find that most of them are empty'.

Unsurprisingly, our non-migrant interviewees in Cuenca articulated similar views. Bolivar and Maggy, the parents of a PhD student LEPM interviewed in Manchester, emphasized that remittance houses are primarily a symbol of economic power. Migrants, they said, have been historically perceived as an underclass (cf. Klaufus 2012). This may be part of the reason why they feel the need to build houses that only few people could afford, even within the local elites. When asked about the possibility that their son would build a house once back to Cuenca, they had a slightly stark reaction: their son was an international student—not a migrant. There is a difference, they explained, between those who move to improve their academic skills or explore the world and those who migrate for economic betterment. The former two groups are not in need to demonstrate economic power. Migrants do, in spite of their higher income.

As similar narratives suggest, houses are pivotal to migrants' search for a 'proper place' in the city. They also imply a claim to stand on the same foot with the local elites—something the latter unsurprisingly oppose. In the words of an architect LEPM interviewed in Cuenca, migrants 'have the money and the migratory experience ... but they are perceived differently as a social group. You may consider how they dress when they return. They are so visible. I believe they do not really want to return and we do not really want them to do so'. Indeed, the same houses embody migrants' resentment against the

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perceived failure to acknowledge their contribution to the country. While remittances are welcome as they feed the local economy, what migrants themselves represent is more contentious, as they are blamed for leaving their children behind and for what many see as the negative impact of migration on family values (Herrera and Torres 2005).

Building a remittance house, then, is a socially contested act. Depending on whether it complies or not with vernacular architecture, that house can be perceived as an ordinary investment or an artefact that affects the local landscape—in the mainstream view, for worse. In fact, whenever migrants' houses stick to the local housing design trends, they are hardly identifiable and are rarely a source of concern for those interested in preserving the local landscape. This is largely the case of a city like Quito. Even in urban areas well-known as emigration districts, our 'walking tours' would have failed in spotting out a distinctive remittance architecture, unless local people had shared their knowledge about it (cf. Lattanzi 2011: 72ff). This stood in contrast with its visibility across the semi-rural areas in which we did fieldwork, whether in the *Sierra* or in the *Costa*.

Regardless of the location, we encountered a remarkable convergence on the perceived characteristics of these houses. The same does not hold for their perceived impact on the local landscape. While architects and housing specialists invariably framed them as detrimental or incongruous at best, local residents had contrasting opinions. Relatively low-income residents, such as a school driver who showed us the empty houses in his Cuenca *barrio* one by one, tended to appreciate their aesthetics. Indeed, that driver aspires to build a similar house himself. On the opposite side, a local architect involved in neighbourhood conservation claimed that the new houses that had replaced the traditional adobe ones did not fit in a city with a UNESCO heritage status. Similar arguments had probably sound bases in a strictly technical domain. Even so, it was hard not to see a status-based and exclusivist subtext in them—one specular to migrants' unwritten claims to be no more the outgroup, or the under-group, by virtue of their new and better houses.

## 4.4 In knowledge: What the outside signals, what the inside reveals

At yet another and more analytical level, remittance houses should be appreciated from *within* as lived spaces, as much as from *without* as displayed artefacts. This would help reduce the distance between stereotypical views and fine-grained understandings of migration itself. Houses that have been 'left', or are inhabited only on an occasional basis, are not necessarily 'abandoned' (Lattanzi 2011). Houses that are perceived as unnecessarily 'fancy' from outside may have a logic, even a rationality of their own, once appreciated from the inside (Grigolini 2005). Even when the external side of a migrant house is (by choice or necessity) a rather anonymous one, the lived experience of the interiors is uniquely revealing of the interactions with people on the opposite side of a migration corridor.

Our informal conversations with residents in areas with a pervasive migrant architecture revealed some common perceptual patterns. When they were asked how they would recognise a migrant house, people tended to give a similar answer across our fieldwork locations: '*It is quite simple - A migrant house is never finished*'. There was more to this statement, we realized, than a joke about other people's perceived failures. It was also a way of pointing out that a house may be never completed, in the eyes of its owner, because

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it should accommodate the extended family in a single building by adding one storey over another—a claim for fixedness, or return to the roots, against the dispersion created by migration (Pauli and Bedorf 2018). This aim of cumulative building up, both in a literal and metaphorical sense, was shared among the bulk of our informants, movers or stayers, particularly from rural backgrounds. Indeed, as long as there are more storeys yet to build up, and more expected dwellers that do not stay in, the house is not really finished. This does not mean that remittance houses are necessarily incomplete. It does point out, though, that whenever they are (perceived to be) incomplete and empty they stand most in contrast with the ordinary representation of the home. We will discuss this aspect below. Here, some more communal patterns are worth highlighting, based on the internal side—our visits and hospitality in a number of these houses—rather than only on the external layout.

Santiago's father, Leonardo, who has never migrated, inherited a house in Uyumbicho. He invited his sons, both in Spain, to build their apartments over his property. This was a way for him to preserve the memory of his family and the ambition to have the family reunited in a single place. His older son, Juan Carlos, accepted the invitation after returning from Spain. LEPM visited the house and the façade of its two levels looked quite similar. The interior layout and deco of the two dwellings, however, told different stories. Leonardo's was an ordinary low-income *sierra* home in bricks and mortar, with little or no paint on the walls and very humble kitchen and toilette. Juan Carlos', instead, stood out in many ways. Thanks to his work experience in the construction sector in Spain, Juan Carlos had become familiar with the building techniques there and with the interior decoration of what he called traditional Spanish houses. 'What I liked the most', he added, 'is the idea of having an open kitchen—integrated to the living room—and a chimney'. These features are far from common in Ecuadorian houses, he stressed, even among wealthy families. The bright colours of the interior walls had also been inspired by what he had seen in Spain. Indeed, Juan Carlos wanted to bring something from there to Uyumbicho. Yet, what he had actually brought back were less material things than ideas of how to make his Ecuadorian dwelling 'beautiful and homely' with a Spanish touch. This also applied to a piece of furniture, in a corner of his living room, which hosted a noticeable concentration of personal belongings, including photos and little souvenirs. Interestingly, we found equally 'special' corners in most of the houses we visited, with the visual reminders of the dear ones abroad being generally more visible than those of the emigration country as such (cf. Pistrick and Bachmeier 2016). More often than not, migrants' pictures were combined with those of their family life in Ecuador, prior to leaving; and sometimes, in a more unsettling but revealing way, with the pictures of other family members that had passed away.

In many other cases, the migrant houses we visited had a distinct character from the outside, no less than inside—although, again, the former was not predictive of the latter. LEPM, for instance, gained access to a remittance house in Esmeraldas, thanks to his previous rapport with the owners in Manchester. Besides looking different from the neighbouring houses in size, style, and colour, the interior of that house was marked by a larger kitchen and living room. Again, the walls were painted with vivid colours. Back in Manchester, LEPM asked the owners about that. The colour choice, they said, was instrumental to make the space more inviting and beautiful. Likewise, PB spent some days in a

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four-storey house built in El Oro through the savings of Jimena, who had been in Italy for 17 years as a live-in care worker. Its stereotypically modern façade, with one (still empty) space on the ground floor for a soon-to-be retail trade activity between Ecuador and Italy, would have been fungible with many other remittance houses around. The interiors, however, were more of a personal and distinctive matter. Jimena's husband Pedro, back there for a while to start the business, showed him that each room had been equipped with a separate toilet. Each floor had the space for an autonomous bar on the corridor—'that's what houses in the US are like', Pedro told him. However, his favourite corner of the house was on the top floor, where a number of lushful plants had been growing, 'Jimena's favourite ones'. Pedro used to water them every morning, 'just like Jimena does when she's here', and certainly did not bother as PB took pictures of him doing so. Again, the interior life of the house had much to say of transnational connectedness—with the dear ones and their life styles and tastes, as much as with what was broadly constructed as 'Italian', 'Spanish', or 'American'.

For sure, gaining access to the interior of a migrant house is nothing obvious or unproblematic, just like visiting any domestic place (Miller 2001). It is actually a matter less of visits than of hospitality (Sandoval-Cervantes 2017), which we were able to negotiate in several instances in El Oro, outer Quito, and Esmeraldas, thanks to our personal ties with migrants and/or our past fieldwork there. In the case of Cuenca, instead, we were simply unable to get access to any remittance house. This made still more salient, albeit necessarily incomplete, the accounts we collected from a number of local informants, as mentioned above. A common insight across these conversations was that the interior of and the exteriors of these buildings tend be at odds with each other. Contrary to what their external appearance would suggest, the houses are rather modest from the *inside*, all our interlocutors claimed. The idea that most of them are vacant, occupied by animals or just used as warehouses was not uncommon. Central to these social representations, and probably not far from the reality of things, was once again the idea that many of these houses were *unfinished projects*. They were, a local architect said, 'a non-concluded story', one in which the owners, if they return at all, do not want to show the interior of their houses but only the façade.

Yet, these stories were also *non-told*, as much as non-concluded, in all the respects that exceeded the hyper-visible façades. No wonder that the owners would keep those houses protected from the judgmental view of neighbours, not to mention those specialists who see themselves as the only qualified to decide what is (not) appropriate. Even in this regard, the little visibility or accessibility of the house was an implicit demand for respect and normality. Whoever, after all, would claim the right to judge (let alone visit) the interiors of the house of someone that is not framed as exceptional, 'different' or out of place, like an international migrant?

## 5. From house to home: A way to bridge the distance?

'Seldom', claims an intriguing study of remittance houses in Madagascar, 'does a migrant house become a home' (Freeman 2013: 99–100). Although this may sound too much of a generalisation, there is some fundamental truth to it, we realised at the end of our

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fieldwork. This is related less to the frequency ('seldom' underestimates things whenever some circular migration is possible, such as for Ecuadorian migrants with European citizenship), than to the fundamental transition from house to home—a question at the core of an extended literature in housing and home studies (Blunt and Dowling 2006, Atkinson and Jacobs 2016).

Much of the forms of mutual distanciation between migrants and their counterparts are there to stay—most obviously, and necessarily, those in time. However, what can mitigate the tensions and the conflicts associated with them—what 'bridges the distance' in a selective and time-dependent way—is not just a house as such. The latter is an affordance (Clapham 2011), although one that exerts an agency of its own, if only for the need to be taken care of and for the real consequences of this (Dalakoglou 2010, Schaab and Wagner 2020). What matters the most is instead, and once again, that this built environment turn into a peopled one—that a house be perceived, lived and domesticated as a home. This may involve someone else to live there, but possibly also, at some point, the owners, i.e. (former?) migrants. For the latter, in the abstract, a house built elsewhere can make sense even as a financial investment, regardless of what happens next. However, an investment rationale is hardly enough for that house to be constructed as 'normal', hence to be socially accepted within the local community it lies in, and to which it makes a silent claim for membership.

For sure, whenever return or circular migration occurs, the transition from a house to a home is there—potentially at least. However, there are some critical nuances in how a sense of home is attached or not to these places, from the returnee side, which speak to the debate on the complexity and ambiguity of return (Markowitz and Stefannson 2004, Anghel et al. 2019). As we highlighted above, returnees may end up being unable to complete, let alone maintain, new or better houses there. As interestingly, some of the returnees we met in different Ecuadorian locations had created in-house 'Spanish corners', often in the living rooms, as the places where they felt more at home in their houses, neighbourhoods, and cities. A case in point is Gloria, who, once back to Ecuador after several years spent in Spain, decided to leave untouched the exterior of her house in a low-income area of Quito. Yet, her kitchen and living room, with all of their furniture, photos and handcrafts, gave us a clear sense of her attachment to Spain. Why she did not build a new house and decided to keep 'Spain' only in the interior was not clear, but the way she was perceived by the local community had something to do with that. After her return, Gloria told Luis Eduardo Pérez Murcia, the neighbours started to make fun of her accent, her dress code and her ways of behaving in public. Some nickname her as *la espaola* to imply that she behaves arrogantly after living in Europe. Gloria stressed that she feels at home within her house—where she recreates part of her dwelling trajectories in Spain—but far away from home in her neighbourhood and city. In a similar vein, several returnees or circular migrants (the distinction being highly labile) PB encountered in El Oro, in his follow up visits, seemed to cultivate and display an equally mixed emotion—for themselves and, even more, for their children. The pleasure to stay in their new houses went hand in hand with a lack of comfort towards the surrounding environment and the prospect to stay there for good. Even when the remittance house was a home in many respects, it was still something of a bubble, relative to the rest. While, seen from afar,

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Ecuador and the local community were unquestionably 'home', once back there the sense of home tends to scale down, or back, within the bricks and mortars of a house.

As many of our returnee informants had to realize, home is a multi-scalar experience (Baxter and Brickell 2014). Its meaning, intensity, and locations scale up or down at different steps in the life course, with some scales—in this case, the community or the country of origin—being less home-like than others, i.e. the domestic space as such. In essence, inhabiting the house one invested so much in does turn it into a home. It cannot be a guarantee, though, that a sense of home may extend to the broader community, that the mutual disjunctures enhanced by migration may be 'healed', or that the 'natural state of things'—that pre-existing migration—be ever recovered at all.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the role of remittance houses in shaping the distance and the relationships between people and 'their' places, after transnational migration. We advanced, and substantiated through our fieldwork, a four-fold frame of analysis involving migration-driven distanciation in space, time, status, and knowledge. While our own findings are context-specific, the analytical framework was fruitful enough to be potentially relevant for research elsewhere in areas of international emigration. Looking at these different facets of the gaps between migrants and their counterparts would be particularly important for comparative research, across countries and groups, which is surprisingly rare for such a widespread development as transnational housing.

As we realized, remittance houses mediate in significant ways the relationships between migrants and stayers, besides acting as silent museums of the evolution and directionality of migration itself. Based on four case studies in four different areas of Ecuador, we illustrated that remittance houses enable a number of migrants to cultivate a sense of being present, in spite of their physical absence, in the lives and landscapes of those in their communities of origin. In this sense, the houses are not only physical structures but also agents in themselves. Their 'agentic power' (Schaab and Wagner 2020) is manifest in the practical, relational, and emotional work required by their maintenance—indeed, by their very existence. Furthermore, remittance houses are agents insofar as they embody the connection between very distant landscapes and ideas of housing and home. This contributes to their perception as out-of-place artefacts, exactly like their owners.

As the master narrative we heard in fieldwork says, these houses are somehow outsiders to the places where they were built—they do not belong there—because of their distinctive character. The same holds for their emigrant owners, on grounds of class or status, no less than for their physical absence. In this perspective, research on remittance houses is not only relevant for housing design or for the impact of migration on the built environment and landscape. It also matters as it opens up a window into migrants' shifting and contentious belonging in, and alignment towards, their communities of origin.

Furthermore, remittance houses tell us something important about the concept of home. As our case studies consistently reveal, we cannot just assume that an occupied house qualifies as 'home', while an empty one would not. For sure, at least a part of migrants' transnational housing investments is inscribed in a family project of return.

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That special physical space is then assumed as an aspired home for the future. Most of our interviewees in Europe, whether feeling at home abroad or not, do aspire to transform their houses into homes. However, there are also those who recognise, over time, that this is unlikely to be ever the case. Furthermore, there are returnees who experience their place as home and returnees who do not, possibly as a result of intergenerational differences between the life horizons of parents and their second-generation children. All of these scenarios leave some space to appreciate the value of remittance houses even regardless of return—as long as migrants perceive them as emotional homes to which they are existentially and spiritually connected (Lattanzi 2011, Pérez Murcia 2019a).

Finally, as our study shows, the meanings and expectations attached to a remittance house are far less fixed and immobile than the artefact itself. They change over time, thereby complicating the common sense equation between house and home. The latter notion may have to do with dwelling in a place (rather than leaving it behind for good), but also with something more intimate and harder to codify: how, when, and where we want to claim, feel, and experience a place as specially 'ours'.

## Note

1. In Quito we focused on Biloxi, Ciudadela Pérez Intriago, La Magdalena, Llano Chico, Solanda and Uyumbicho. In Cuenca, data were collected mainly in Pueblo Ochoa de León, Checa, Chiquintad, and Totoracocha. In El Oro, data were collected in peripheral neighbourhoods of Machala and Pasaje. Finally, the selection of Esmeraldas followed Pérez Murcia's contacts with a family who had migrated to the UK after living several years in Spain and after a short return to Ecuador, where they bought and redecorated a house there.

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