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On the theoretical potential of ‘remittance houses’: toward a research agenda across emigration contexts

Paolo Boccagni^a and Marta Bivand Erdal^b

^aDepartment of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, ERC HOMInG, Trento, Italy; ^bPRIO, Norway

ABSTRACT

Migrant houses in countries of origin, referred to as ‘remittance houses’, are a visible marker of emigration. Case studies from diverse geographic contexts have explored their functions. Unlike the surrounding built environment, these houses span the local and transnational realities of migrant lives, while being grounded in specific places. We argue, first, for the need to move beyond locally-oriented reifying descriptions of what is a global phenomenon; second, for the need to analyse migrant remittance houses as part of a broader agenda for unravelling the practical and emotional significance of ‘home’ in migration studies. The paper unveils the constitutive dimensions of migrant houses: their roles as symbols of migration; their significance as economic investments; their presence as physical structures necessitating follow-up locally; their function as second homes for holidays and reminders of (elusive) return migration. Researching remittance houses is a source of insights on questions of broader theoretical relevance, like the temporality of migration, the reach and sustainability of migrant transnationalism and the forms of cultural diffusion associated with it. This calls for a distinctive methodological agenda to advance research, based on a typology of transnational housing investments, which differentiates the locations, functions and rationales of migrant houses.

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1. Introduction

Migrants’ housing investments in countries of origin are a visible and increasingly discussed research subject (Dalakoglou 2010; Freeman 2013; Mata-Codesal 2014; López 2015). Yet, as we argue in this article, these houses offer far more than a background to the life experiences of migrants and relatives connected within transnational social fields (Levitt and Schiller 2004; Lubkeman 2005; Vertovec 2004). Rather, the imaginary and material connections between migration and housing projects ‘back home’ make for an emerging research field across national and disciplinary boundaries. As one enters it, major research questions in migration studies and beyond can be addressed anew. With this objective in mind, this article advances a comparative conceptualisation of migrant houses in countries of origin, both as places worthy of study in themselves and as sites to heuristically investigate questions of broader theoretical relevance.

CONTACT Paolo Boccagni  paolo.boccagni@unitn.it

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On the one hand, we outline a heuristic typology of migration-driven housing infrastructures, in light of their expected and actual uses and functions. This is no easy task, as the houses migrants build, purchase or renovate have been studied from the vantage points of different disciplines, countries of emigration and historical periods, resulting in a fragmented body of literature. On the other hand, we advance a comparative research agenda on migrant housing initiatives as objects with analytical promise to investigate questions of temporality, mobility and cultural circulation. The methodological bases and implications of this research effort, in turn, call for a more specific discussion.

What do we refer to by ‘migrants houses in countries of origin’, remittance houses, or ‘transnational housing investments’? As we turn to existing literature and develop our typology of transnational housing investments, we encounter a variety of locations (e.g. the place of origin), functions (e.g. a place to live during holidays), and rationales (e.g. symbolic investment in the maintenance of belonging). However, there is a basic, shared feature: we scrutinise migrant houses as physical structures that are part and parcel to existing housing systems and arrangements in their areas of location. How these are labelled is a critical concern, which we return to in connection with our proposed typology, where we argue that remittance houses – understood as emigrants’ transnational housing investments in countries of origin – might serve well as an umbrella term for the phenomenon under scrutiny here.

In the subsequent sections, we move to the *why* of this research agenda, beyond a simply descriptive purview: studying the lived experience set within these structures, and the processes that account for their development and diffusion, illuminates questions of broader interest. In order to do so, a more theoretically robust and comparative research agenda on *how* to do fieldwork in this respect is in order. We conclude by highlighting the need, first, to understand migrant houses in a relational framework, as they are interdependent with the local built environment and are exemplary of a globally-reaching phenomenon; second, to approach them as part of a broader agenda for unravelling the practical and emotional significance of ‘home’ in migration studies.

This article is based, first, on our reconceptualization of a large and fragmented assemblage of studies. This starts from a systematic literature review of contributions in the period 1990–2020, although the practice of constructing houses in places of origin is known from historical cases of migration too (e.g. Byrne 2016; Kourelis 2020). Second, the paper draws on our own original fieldwork, past and present (Boccagni [2014, 2020] in Ecuador, Erdal [2012, 2014; Erdal et al. 2020] in Pakistan). Third, it builds on our continued reflections on the theoretical and analytical purchase of migrant houses – combining empirical insights and reflection on existing conceptual contributions in the literature, as a lens to address central questions in migration studies.

2. Why study migrant houses in countries of origin?

In migration research, the theme of migrant houses in contexts of origin, as physical structures and as an integral dimension to perpetuating the myth of return, is a long-standing feature (e.g. Anwar 1979; Fletcher 1999; Miller 2008; Taylor 2015). We refer to them as *remittance houses* (López 2010), in this paper, while being aware that this category is not unproblematic. It suggests structures that are essentially different from the surrounding housing landscape (which is not always the case) and appears to capture only a

possible endpoint (the brand-new house) of transnational housing investments. Simultaneously, this particular label is a reminder of the money migrants send as the pre-requisite for these houses to be invested in. Indeed, remittances are both mobilised and enabling for these houses to exist, whether these are new structures or repairs, whether in the place of origin or in a neighbouring city, whether for parents or for holiday purposes, whether as a token of belonging or as an investment for future financial profit (Lubkeman 2005; Smith and Mazzucato 2009). Hence, we propose remittance houses as an analytically appropriate umbrella term and shared ground for deeper scrutiny of what is captured within.

2.1. Avenues for comparative research emerging from the literature

Defining the contours of the literature on migrant houses in countries of origin is an interdisciplinary riddle, due to the wealth of angles from disciplines such as architecture and art history, design and planning, history and economics, as well as the more obvious social sciences of anthropology, geography and sociology. The implication so far has been limited consolidation of existing knowledge on this topic. For, while the existence of remittance houses is often acknowledged, both in qualitative studies of migrant transnationalism and in quantitative work on remittances, it is usually not the main analytical focus. Rather, it is mentioned *en passant*, as a (necessary) background for analysis on other substantive aspects of the use and impact of remittances (e.g. Maimbo and Ratha 2005; Page and Plaza 2006; De Haas 2009; Adams 1991). In our systematic search for literature we identified 83 publications which deal actively with ‘remittance houses’ (see Appendix 1 for all search terms employed and the full bibliography). This is a relatively modest number, given the volume of scholarly work on migrant transnationalism and remittances more generally.¹

Emigrants’ houses and transnational housing investments have been explored, mostly with ethnographic techniques, in more than twenty different contexts of origin, all over the five continents. Indeed, a common narrative on migrant houses cuts across articles from local contexts in Asia, South and Central America, Africa, the Middle East and Europe. These are often large houses, which constitute a visible and ostentatious mark of migration. Frequently they are built aiming to improve family circumstances – materially as well as in relation to local social hierarchies. Sometimes, these houses – especially in urban areas – are seen as investment projects *per se* (Bose 2014), as well as examples of ongoing processes of housing financialization (Guyer 2015; Zapata 2018).

Across contexts, the literature points to both unfinished housing projects and to empty or un(der)-utilised houses, upon completion (e.g. Lubkeman 2005). While symbolic and changing values of migrant houses in countries of origin are often acknowledged, there is some inclination to assess the use of these investments as a matter of ‘consumptive’ vs ‘productive’. This is an over-simplification which has been widely criticised in the literature on migration and development (e.g. De Haas 2009; Zapata 2018). In fact, as we argue below, very often this is simply not the most relevant or analytically interesting question to ask.

Relatively little systematic effort is meanwhile put into reflecting on the salience of the contrasting, potentially conflicting perspectives of different actors: migrants, migrants’ relatives, and local communities (Mata-Codesal 2014; Taylor 2015). The existing literature considers questions about why migrants build houses in countries of origin, yet this is

largely done in single-case study manner only, with little attention to similarities and differences across cases. As a matter of fact, comparative investigations across different countries are remarkably rare (but see Klaufus 2010).

Part of this literature investigates the conditions under which these houses turn into homes, that is, inhabited domestic spaces (Boccagni 2020). Interestingly, the migration studies literature on 'home' as a dynamic and processual research object (Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Blunt and Dowling 2006; Ralph and Staeheli 2011) is far richer than existing analytical efforts to understand migrant houses in countries of origin. With a view to enhance the latter perspective, in what follows we develop a specific typology about the locations, functions and rationales of remittance houses.

Prior to that, it is important to highlight that the social study of remittance houses is connected with several promising areas for comparative research. First, researching into remittance houses means also to analyse the *ongoing family economy* of those who built, purchased and use them: understanding the constellation of positions, meanings and functions of housing investments and of houses themselves. Second, there is a key connection with *emigrant transnational housing investment*, which leads to comparatively mapping and evaluating migrants' options and choices for repairing houses, constructing new houses, investing in real estate and the geographic locations of housing investments. Third, the *reactions from local societies and institutions* in emigration countries can be comparatively analysed, with particular attention, on the one hand, to local populations reactions, and on the other hand to the interaction between transnational housing investments and local and national policies (e.g. migration and diaspora policies, housing policies and real estate management). Fourth, there is a major promise in a comparative analysis of the role of remittance houses in changing local landscapes and of the impact of transnational housing on local development, including the contribution of non-migrants in managing or using these houses, and the prevalent discursive representations associated with them.

2.2. Towards a typology of transnational housing investments

Transnational housing investments can be seen to include repairs of existing homes, extensions on standing structures, re-building older homes, or constructing new homes. These housing investments happen on land which is either newly purchased for this purpose, inherited or otherwise transferred within the family, or has been owned for a longer time. The ownership dimension is important, and relates not only to inheritance, but also to debt associated with investment in migration, and negotiation of familial affairs, including questions of marriages as part of the broader picture of intra-familial obligations in extended families. These are precisely the kinds of themes which are often the main analytical focus in research where migrant houses also are mentioned in passing, in conjunction with different remittance scripts (Carling 2014).

Based on these premises, our proposed typology focuses on three dimensions: (1) The *location* of the housing investment; (2) The *function* which the house performs; (3) The *rationale* for the housing investments (see Table 1).

This typology foregrounds the *locations* of houses (in a relational as well as geographic sense), but also their *functions* (as the way in which they are actually being used) and

Table 1. A typology of transnational housing investments.

Location(s)	Function(s)	Rationale(s)
Ancestral village	• Family home	• Better quality housing
Nearby town	• Extended family home	• Social status
Large city in the region	• Place to (possibly) return to	• Symbolic attachment
Other locations	• Place to stay for relatives	• Presence in absence
	• Holiday home	• Cultural transfer to children
	• Rented out	• Financial investment

rationales (as the logic by which they came about, the reasons why they exist, even if not aligning with use). Two important points should be made here.

First, locations, functions and rationales are three distinct aspects that reveal much about the house itself and its role in the landscape and community it is placed within, but also about the relationships, opportunities and hopes which are closely connected with the house's existence. This also means that while the locations are mutually exclusive for a single housing investment, the rationale and functions need not be – and which functions and rationales might be relevant for houses cuts across the types of locations. There are, however, some likely patterns, whereby the rationale of financial investment is typically associated with an urban setting with growing property value, whereas the rationale of symbolic attachment might be differently felt, depending on type of location.

Second, the trajectories of functions and rationales for transnational housing investments are likely to change over time. Furthermore, for different actors who might be within the same family network there might be different perspectives on their functions and rationale. Therefore, this typology is conceived of as a dynamic analytical tool, which can help capture and unpack the multifaceted ways in which remittance houses gain meaning. Such meaning is negotiated over time and across space.

To illustrate the empirical relevance and analytical purchase of the typology we propose, we will share some examples drawn from the Pakistani context, drawing on interviews and observation (Erdal 2012, 2014; Erdal et al. 2016, 2020). In the Pakistani case, as in much of Asia and Africa, urbanisation is a key trait of societal change. Amir's² case serves as a good illustration. He had lived in the village (in Punjab) most of his life and had worked in the Gulf States for a couple of periods. One son had married and moved to the US, another was working in a Gulf State, and a daughter had married and moved to join her husband in the UK. His wife passed away early on, but he never remarried. Amir lived in a house in the village which he had invested in with the money earned as a labour migrant. Later on, his sons contributed to an extension, to repairs, to improving the quality of the housing. However, due to the electricity shortages – leading to continuous and unpredictable 'loud shedding' where electricity was cut off for hours on end – Amir eventually relocated to a nearby town, where electricity provision was less erratic, and where managing a generator was less costly, in order to have constant electricity. Amir's daughter also lived in the same town with her husband's family and their two children, where both she and her husband were working. The house in which Amir was living had been bought as a joint effort, as a family investment in property – and a place for him to live – in the nearby town. Amir's story – and that of his family – highlights relational dynamics over time and demonstrates how transnational investments are also financially enmeshed in domestic relationships and transactions, whether involving inheritance or debt, or obligations in other forms.

Moving to a third location – larger cities – further expands the repertoire of functions and adds to the complexity of rationales employed in relation to remittance houses. Transnational housing investments in large cities in Pakistan are an important dimension of the real estate boom, especially in cities like Lahore and Karachi. What constitutes or does not constitute the ‘transnational’ in transnational housing investments in large cities is not always straightforward to isolate. There are houses in which families leading transnational lives, or those returning for longer periods, actually live over time, year after year (Erdal et al. 2016). Then there are the properties which are bought with transnational support, but which are lived in by relatives of migrants – be they household members or extended families. The latter can be illustrated by examples from Bahria Town, Lahore, ‘the overseas Pakistanis’ enclave which by its name points to a transnational dimension. Supported by the Pakistani Governments efforts to liaise with diasporas and facilitate investment in Pakistan in general (more than return migration as such), areas such as this one offer particular investment opportunities.

First, Pakistani migrants can buy property in areas such as Bahria Town in order to subsequently re-sell to others who want to buy into these specific areas. These investments may also be held onto as financial investments, with the expectations of profit over time if the market value increases (which is presently the case, due to the boom in the real estate market). Second, investments in these housing estates, similarly to in villages of origin, offer opportunities to provide housing for relatives, all the time, or when needed for specific periods, perhaps offering opportunities of accessing employment whilst having secure housing, and thus providing important contributions to livelihoods. Finally, transnational housing investments in areas such as Bahria Town can also be interpreted as holiday homes, often in parallel with other functions, and perhaps varying rationales for such investments.

Here, we want to return to [Table 1](#), and propose that to make sense of transnational housing investments, the overall literature on second homes, as investment objects for a variety of reasons, can offer complementary insights (Wagner 2014). Over time, if not at the outset, emigrant transnational housing investments appear to converge with second home ownership, more generally when it comes to both justifying the location, the actual functions the house performs, and the rationale employed. This is why we suggest ‘Other location’ as a fourth location, since the investments which families leading transnational lives make in second homes in e.g. Turkey, Spain or in cities like New York or Geneva, should perhaps be analysed within similar frameworks, rather than distinct ones, from the ways in which we approach emigrant transnational housing investments. While acknowledging this convergence, however, we also make a case for remittance houses in migrants’ countries of origin as a research topic itself – one generative of major conceptual insights for migration studies, and beyond, as we develop below.

3. Studying transnational housing and remittance houses to theorise broader social questions

As our typology illustrates, migration-driven housing investment in countries of origin cuts across a number of research and policy fields. However, there is merit in studying remittance houses not merely as instrumental to specific conversations, such as those

on development and the financialization of housing (Saenz 2007; Zapata 2018; Boccagni 2020), return migration (Anghel, Fauser, and Boccagni 2019), or urban and rural change (e.g. Bose 2014; Melly 2010; Klaufus 2010). Even research on houses as material artefacts in their own right, at the intersection of anthropology, archeology and material culture (Gielis 2011; Leinaweaver 2009), cannot tell the whole story about them.

We suggest that the *whys* of transnational housing, shaped by different interests, expectations and aims, are not the only interesting questions to pursue. Instead, there are less obvious and more intriguing questions that involve the interplay between the building process, or the houses as artefacts, and the external social world, including the emotional economies and relational dynamics between different actors in the housing market (Christie, Smith, and Munro 2008). Just like any other house (Bourdieu 1977 (1970); Gauvain and Altman 1982), a ‘remittance house’ is a microcosm that illuminates key societal questions. Three of these are particularly promising for the research agenda in migration studies: temporality, cross-border retention and cultural circulation. For all of these, the study of remittance houses is a source of insights that should not remain untapped.

3.1. Temporality

Transnational housing investments are a privileged venue to research the temporalities of migration (Cwerner 2001; Robertson 2015) through specific places and material arrangements. Remittance houses materialise migrants’ constructions of the future and display, over time, the (dis)alignments between such constructions and the actual developments in their personal and family histories. The same houses, as argued above, can assume different functions and rationales over time, accordingly.

There may be little new in the argument that any house is far more than a container or a stage for the family life of its dwellers (Altman and Werner 1985; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). Rather, a ‘peopled’ house is a material anchor of continuity between their past, present and future life course. It is a repository of family belongings, accumulated experiences and memories, for the past; a place of protection and everyday social reproduction (but also, in this case, of absence and status maintenance) for the present; a leverage for hopes of improvement, and in the case of migrants a prerequisite for return, for the future. Houses can even stand as memorials of their owners or dwellers, once the latter pass away (Lattanzi 2011). It follows that any house as lived space has something to say, and display, of the history of those who have inhabited it over time.

Whenever migration is associated with the building of a new house, this very act is a future-oriented statement. This does not hold only in an instrumental sense, as is typical of an investment aiming to save money, diversify risk, gain profit or transfer wealth across generations (Osili 2004). The point is that while the house may not turn into a migrant’s home in the short term, it is invariably conceived, desired, and tentatively materialised as such (López 2015; Schaab and Wagner 2020). Whatever its actual function (s), it is inherently meaningful as long as it is expected to host its builders and owners in the future (what we might refer to as a deeper rationale). The notion of future, here, should overlap with *return*, even when homecoming is protracted to the age of retirement or does not happen once for all (Anwar 1979).

A remittance house can be appreciated as a subject for life course studies, no less than for architecture, housing, or urban studies. Rather than being simply a fixed artefact, a

house is a process with a life (course) of its own, which ‘tell[s] different stories at different points in time’ (Pauli and Beford, 2018, 50). Its building and dwelling story mirrors, and to some extent shapes, the life trajectories and future orientations of migrants, as they interact with those of their family members. The ways in which a remittance house is dreamt of, prepared, built and (un)inhabited make for a material and social history of the ebbs and flows of migration, and of its far-reaching ramifications (Miller 2008; Lozanovska 2019).

In several instances, these houses do turn into homes, at least to the benefit of migrants’ family members. However, there are two circumstances – in a home studies jargon, two *ways of unhomeliness* – that make them particularly out of place and have attracted wide scholarly attention:

First, most (stereo)typically, the *empty house*: a building that is relatively well-finished, is cared for by someone else upon migrants’ absence and remains as a mute witness of migration. An empty house is expected to be periodically inhabited by its owners, during their holidays, when it ‘awakes from its slumber and springs to life’ (Pauli and Beford, 2018, 48). Yet, even while staying empty it is a tangible marker of the absents’ presence. By its very existence, it is a way for migrants to reassert their membership and be in a legitimate position to leave again.

Second, most visibly, and puzzlingly for the range of emotions, imaginaries and concerns it raises, the *unfinished house*. In fact, what an outsider would just see as an incomplete, decayed or abandoned infrastructure, may tell a different story – or at least, attempt to – to the local community. ‘These are houses to be completed – not half-ruined ones’, PB’s informant Hamlet pointed out, as they were strolling around the new housing landscape of a South Ecuador town, source of a large emigration to Spain and Italy, upon PB’s last revisit to his previous ethnographic field (Cf. Boccagni 2014). Indeed, as a scholar of rural migration from Algeria put it, ‘a few concrete columns, a piece of wall, the outline of a door prove to those who stay behind that there is every intention to come back and allow the leavers honourable respite to return’ (Loeckx 1998, 91). Put differently, a *failed house* can also be framed as a *work in progress*: a still open promise (for achievement, and return), which renovates itself through its systematic postponement. For sure, the longer the incompleteness, and the owners’ absence, the less credible the promise and the attendant claim for membership.

Research wise, revisiting and ideally being hosted in the same migrant dwelling over time is tantamount to collecting a parallel, unwritten but meaningful story of migration and of its social consequences. While no object speaks for itself, there is much to be gained – and of course, to be combined with different sources – from participant observation of the ways in which the socio-material environment has changed after the absence of its owners: possibly improving, gaining new appliances and facilities, growing literally up (in the case of multistorey buildings); other times, instead, going towards a substantive decline, or never amounting to more than an assemblage of bare walls and sparse concrete pillars; or different again, going through cyclical phases of improvement and worsening, which still reflect migrants’ variable concern with communities of origin and their availability and capability to invest accordingly.

Whatever the circumstances, these houses are powerful material metaphors of the (in)completeness of migration projects: the crucial interplay between desires and achievements, in the light of the shifting locations of migrants’ desires and of their variable abilities and opportunities to achieve them. These can be appreciated only in a temporal

perspective. As long as people belong ‘there’ (put differently: as long as they call it ‘home’), the migrant house holds a value that is hardly affected by any possible downside. There is something remarkably universal, here, in an African saying quoted by Van der Geest (1998) from his fieldwork in rural Ghana: ‘the house symbolizes and expresses belonging, so it should be in the place where one belongs’. However, the actual emplacement of belonging, and the broader life circumstances of migrants and left behind relatives, are open-ended and fluid processes. Their boundaries and reach are typically shaped by (mobile) family affective and moral obligations, in the first place. The (fixed) house displays their evolution, but does not determine it in any way (Boccagni and Pérez Murcia 2020).

All this being said, there is also a present side to these houses, out of their day-to-day use, maintenance and care, or lack thereof. This leads to the following point of theoretical interest: the delicate but fundamental interplay between migrant translocal engagements and local, physically based forms of mediation and support. Transnational housing investment and maintenance, as we show, is a critical field to appreciate the impact and resilience of transnational ties at large.

3.2. Cross-border connections

Migrants’ housing investments, as illustrated above, have a transnational rationale and reach of their own. Building houses ‘back home’ through remittances is an obvious case of a transnational practice amenable to be measured and compared across countries and groups (Carling and Pettersen 2014; Kuire et al. 2016a). However, these houses are also a core research concern in more substantive respects too.

First, they are one of the main backgrounds against which migrants’ cross-border connections play out, with their highs and lows. Studying the development and lived experience of remittance houses illuminates migrant’s variable ability and interest to affect their communities of origin and then transfer, reproduce and possibly enjoy the benefits stemming from migration. These houses embody much of what migrants can actually retain there – material infrastructures and resources, but also prestige, recognition, and the ability to affect day-to-day life *in absentia* – and then reappropriate, if and when they return. One could hardly think of a better site to assess the claim for fungibility between physical absence and social presence that lies at the core of the transnational perspective (Carling 2008; Boccagni 2012); put differently, the reach, persistence and impact of migrants’ social actions from a distance.

‘The house’, in Fletcher’s poignant formulation, ‘is the site where presence and absence, *aquí* and *allà* [“here” and “there”], join’ (1999, 141). However, how far this joining process goes, and to the (dis)advantage of whom, is a question that deserves more elaboration. What kind of ‘proxy presence’ (Dalakoglou 2010) do these buildings materialise and enable? This is a necessarily ambiguous process. As is typical of cross-border transactions, it mediates the tension between opposite pressures and stances – presence vs absence but also commonality vs distinction, or departure vs return (Freeman 2013). For such a mediation to work out, migrants’ absent presence may be enough at a symbolic level, but it is not self-sufficient for all instrumental purposes. Rather, it relies on the physical presence of other people, staying there, with whom they are socially connected.

Furthermore, remittance houses should be appreciated as *agents* of transnational connectedness in their own right (Dalakoglou 2010; Schaab and Wagner 2020). They significantly affect the mobile interactions between migrants and their stayer counterparts. In the material, affective and moral economies of migrants' everyday lives, building, having and maintaining a house 'there' may be either a burden or a blessing – most commonly both, in different respects. To make only the most common example, all expenses for housing 'there' are potentially in trade-off with the expenses for migrants' own housing needs and desires in the countries of settlement (Kuuire et al. 2016a). A number of 'failed' (or: 'in-progress') remittance houses are precisely the mirror of precarious trajectories of social and economic integration in the countries of destination (cf. Kuuire et al. 2016b). However, they may also be the fruit of migrants' increasing investment into their own integration abroad, as the time distancing from 'home' de facto makes a permanent return less an option than a myth.

The agency of a 'remittance house' is closely associated with that of people who take care of it *in situ*. Any house requires homemaking in a very literal sense – a practical, everyday and typically gendered one (Pink 2004). A house may well be an object of investment, but it still needs to be also an object of social reproduction and, in some sense, of *care*. There is an interesting parallel, here, between migrant caring for left-behind people and for left-behind houses, in terms of practices, emotional investments and dilemmas. In essence, both forms of care 'invoke the active *presence* of a caregiver' (Schaab and Wagner 2020, 3; cf. Dalakoglou 2010; Sandoval-Cervantes 2017). Caring for these houses, on all scales from periodical infrastructural maintenance, to daily chores such as watering plants, calls for the presence of someone there. The attendant division of labour turns out to be more complex, sensitive and emotionally charged, the stronger the kinship or affective tie between a migrant and a caretaker. At some point one may even wonder, in practical and even in legal terms, *whose house* a remittance house actually is. Whether it belongs to the absent ones who built it, financed it (and are supposed to still be 'in charge'), or to those who may inhabit it physically, or even to those who periodically take care for it, is an issue that calls for practical negotiation. All of these parties may have both some interest and emotional pressure to call this place home for themselves.

As the above illustrates, migrants' cross-border connections do not always result in forms of ready-for-use presence. Doing a click on a pc or a mobile phone, whether to send money or a text message, may not be enough to make a difference 'there'. The interpersonal mediation of other locally-based people, with all the relational work this calls for, keeps being essential to the enactment of transnational relationships, at least in this respect. No point in celebrating migrants' virtual connectedness with 'home', unless the 'dirty work' of *re-grounding there* (Ahmed et al. 2003) is taken into account.

Of course, a 'remittance house' is irremediably grounded in a particular context, on the continuum of locations described in Table 1, for its very *raison d'être*. It was built or renewed there as an asset for migrants' present and future lives, and as tangible proof of their ongoing 'social existence'. Yet, the house also tells (or is made to tell) a number of stories (or at least rumours) to different audiences, on the emigration and the immigration side, on which migrants are not necessarily in control. The same goes for its ongoing maintenance. In both respects, how different social actors can appropriate and domesticate again these dwelling spaces is a matter for empirical investigation, with little potential for generalisation.

3.3. Cultural circulation

Another, more exploratory outlet for theoretical elaboration of remittance houses has to do with cultural circulation. In principle, one could expect remittance houses to be a privileged venue to appreciate migration-related forms of cultural diffusion, in terms of material culture and everyday domestic routines. Are these houses really distinctive from the surrounding ones, in other respects than their often 'original' façades, or the likelihood that they be empty or incomplete? Should they be appreciated as *social* remittance houses, inasmuch as they convey cultural influences from other countries – more specifically: from different housing and domesticity regimes – through migrant transnational housing investments?

Migrants' attachment to and investment in particular dwelling places and contexts of origin show that local embeddedness, and the grounded materiality of specific places, still matter. Migrant transnational homemaking is instrumental to achieve forms of local homemaking, rather than being an end in itself (Fletcher 1999; Boccagni 2014). That said, transnational housing investments do contribute to processes of cultural circulation, embodied and displayed in remittance houses, which is an area in need of further empirical appreciation.

The literature abounds with vignettes of migrants sending 'home' pictures or plans for buildings inspired by the built environments they encountered abroad (e.g. on Ecuador, Pribilsky 2007; Mata-Codesal 2014). However, what a supposedly 'Western building' looks like, how it is constructed in sketches by the migrant and then re-interpreted by local architects, and further by those who physically build the house, points to a chain of context-dependent mediations, more than to a process of straightforward circulation.

Likewise, there is no paucity of mentions, e.g. in research on Mexican migration, to *Estilo del Norteño* or 'Northern' building styles (López 2015; Pauli and Beford 2018). Wherever located, remittance houses are a powerful reminder of the existence of a supposedly better elsewhere – the country of immigration, that is, 'those buildings and places' where 'migrants thought of them, dreamt of them and laboured to earn money to construct them' (Byrne 2016, 2361). In this sense, remittance houses are not just 'public statements' of the purported success stories of their owners (Page and Sunjo 2017). They reveal also a grassroots interdependence with far-away life conditions and projects, an ongoing aspiration to reproduce them, and a clear pretention to 'break with the past in terms of design, materials, and function' (Fletcher 1999, 63) of the housing and domestic space. Having said this, how far do they channel different or original cultural patterns? How much do these houses absorb, crystallize and display 'other' building techniques, infrastructural arrangements, architectural styles and domestic cultures as a result of migration, compared to the influence of different, more pervasive sources of cultural diffusion?

Empirically speaking, it would be naive to read these houses as copies or translocations of artefacts encountered, or even only dreamt of, elsewhere; as naive, in fact, as approaching immigrants' dwellings and interiors abroad as a mere transposition of their domestic cultures (Miller 2008). The research available points less to a grand 'translocalization' than to a selective and piecemeal reproduction of specific material and cultural patterns across spatially remote locations (Lozanovska 2019). No consistent set of architectural styles, building patterns or domestic cultures really travels in parallel with transnational housing. What the literature suggests is rather the development of a highly variable

mix, whether in architecture styles or in domestic cultures and practices, where the ‘native’ elements tend to prevail anyway. This bottom-up hybridisation (Klaufus 2010) bears some intriguing resemblance with migration-driven diffusion in other respects (e.g. music, food, clothings, etc.), where the combination of different traits can either be appreciated as a novel cultural formation or discarded as a ‘belonging nowhere’ entity (Papastergiadis 2000; Pieterse 2019). The latter is typically the case when emphasis is placed on migrant lack of full identification, belonging and recognition either in the country of destination or in the sending one.

In a nutshell, most empirical studies highlight a significant distance between abstract assumptions of global interconnectedness and migrants’ possibility or interest to reproduce the values, ways of living and tastes they encountered ‘abroad’. Remittance houses are less a fruit of cultural diffusion, than the incremental product of a ‘distributed practice of building’ (Byrne 2016, 2368), out of the interplay between different actors, resources and ways of building, in different countries (Datta 2008). Their functions and rationales vary accordingly, as we highlighted in the previous section. What remittance houses ‘do’ is more diverse and fine-grained than enabling the circulation and emplacement of ‘alien’ architectural and dwelling styles. Rather, these houses visibilize some particular traits: design, layouts, decorations etc. – which their owners perceive to be salient, modern, desirable or in some way ‘better’ in the context of immigration. Of course, this also depends on the skills and resources migrants have to import these cultural and material traits (including building techniques or materials), and on the reactions of their non-migrant counterparts. Nonetheless, while remittance houses clearly have an aspect of emulation and social mimicry, they are perhaps more revealing of migrants’ own selective acculturation into particular aspects of the mainstream architecture abroad – as for the house size, colours, materials being used, flashy details etc. The piecemeal appropriation of specific cultural patterns (once again: *regrounding*), more than their abstract circulation, is what can be inferred from a remittance house, on any scale from the exterior to the minute decorations in the interior.

A vignette from the authors’ fieldwork may illustrate this. Following his last round of research on transnational housing in Ecuador, PB, back in Italy, shared with his friend and informant Miriam the pictures he had taken in her newly built house. As they were scanning the pictures together, with PB asking Miriam if she would see anything special there, it came as a surprise that she emphasised – out of the many small adaptations in the house – the skirting she had just bought for ‘her’ room. This was a rather basic skirting board, painted with tiny black and white waves. Miriam had chosen it, as she explained, because it was much cheaper than the others, but also because it reminded her of an Arab woman she had met and made friends with in Italy (Arab women being a key group of clients for the charity Miriam herself had set up in the country).

As several other examples would equally show, all that evokes the countries of immigration may reflect the owners’ personal tastes, memories or past life events, more than any substantive change in their identities, values or socio-cultural alignments. Particularly in the interiors, a remittance house speaks of individual migrants, or their families, more than of the larger social and cultural backgrounds they engage with. The lesson to be learned for the study of migration-driven circulation is that there is little point in discussing cultural circulation as an abstract process, unless we zoom in on the particular, local and personal forms of mediation on which it relies.

4. Researching remittance houses: toward a research agenda

As the previous sections have shown, there is no dearth of fieldwork on remittance houses by now. However, some specifically methodological elaboration is necessary, here, for different purposes: to tie different research techniques with distinct underlying questions, appreciate the limitations of the prevalent strategies and highlight the promises – as well as the pitfalls – of a comparative and interdisciplinary research agenda. As a result, this section will have a rather ‘programmatory’ tone, although definitely not a prescriptive one.

There is a difference, to begin with, between peripheral mentions of remittance houses, as we can find in a plethora of qualitative studies, and a specific research focus on them. The latter requires a distinctive theoretical and methodological background, whereby the ordinary repertoire of migration studies opens up to the contribution of architecture, housing studies and material culture, among other fields. However, the predominance of very specific case studies in the dedicated literature is not without its problems. This is less for generalisation purposes – some key points do resonate across case studies, as we have shown – than for the resulting fragmentation of knowledge. It may then happen that researchers cultivate the (mis)perception of ‘discovering’ anew a field on which literature has already been produced in virtually any migration system. In fact, the gap between the universal reach of some core aspects of remittance houses and the insularity of research about them is a major constraint to the recognition and growth of this field. It is good to notice, in this optic, that recent research shows a more dialogic and interdisciplinary take than past efforts (see, for instance, Bose 2014; Byrne 2016; Schaab and Wagner 2020).

Furthermore, researching migrants’ transnational housing investments is complex enough to entail a risk of methodological simplification, potentially leading to some cognitive traps. This is no surprise, given their diverse and even contrasting functions and rationales, as highlighted in Table 1. And yet, more explicit discussion is in order for the study of remittance houses to grow in quality no less than in quantity. The most predictable and yet recurrent of these unhelpful ways of seeing remittance houses is *exceptionalism*: the perception that these artefacts are ontologically different from any other house, thereby reproducing a biased cognitive frame that is often applied to ‘migrants’ (Dahinden 2016). As a result, the local social and cultural embeddedness of the house goes unrecognised and the wealth of potential insights from housing, home and urban studies is missed along the way.

Another tempting but rather unproductive ways of seeing these houses is one we could call *aestheticism*. This is the inclination to focus on any material culture detail (most visibly, decorations) as meaningful in itself, rather than as part and parcel of the complex material, moral and affective economy that underpins a building (esthetic tastes being only a variable among many, and not an isolated one).

Third, another stance that does not help the development of strong research is what we would simply call *tourism*: a straightforward presumption that having a look at these houses from the outside – only to be confirmed in the perception that they are ‘bizarre’ – would be enough to make some sense out of them. On the contrary, the most powerful studies of remittance houses done so far have clearly illustrated the merit of what Van Maanen (2011, 220) called ‘the unbearable slowness of ethnography’.

Of course, there is no blueprint or one-size-fits-all solution for a suitably thick research strategy. That said, a ‘methodologically good enough’ study of remittance houses should aim to closely link people’s accounts (whether of migrants, dwellers or other local inhabitants) with the everyday social practices that take place in them, or close to them. There is relatively limited attention to the day-to-day homemaking practices in these houses, consistent with the exceptionalism trap discussed above. Likewise, given the significance of temporality, it would be important that researchers be able and motivated to return exactly into the same dwelling places over time (e.g. Pauli and Beford 2018), rather than being content with a snapshot approach.

All in all, an ethnographic account of one or a few remittance houses, and of the transnational investments and family trajectories associated with them, is already complex enough as a stand-alone achievement; all the more so, if researchers successfully negotiate a status of guests, rather than visitors (Sandoval-Cervantes 2017; Erdal et al. 2020). That said, there is still a largely unaccomplished promise in advancing research along comparative lines. To this end, drawing on a mix of ethnographic and quantitative data, especially from household-based surveys which collect data on migration among household members and on use of remittances, is a promising avenue for realising the heuristic potential of remittance houses for theorisation in migration studies.

In surveys in countries of settlement, for instance, questions are sometimes asked about migrant ownership of housing in countries of origin (e.g. Carling and Pettersen 2014; Kuuire et al. 2016b). Yet, our primary attention here is on the potential of household surveys in emigration contexts, where questions about the use of remittances and about home ownership are asked (Erdal 2012). It is evident that much data on migrants’ houses in countries of origin exist in surveys which have been run in migrant-sending areas. However, the data is fragmented, with few questions in a given survey of relevance. If used at all, this is less for analyses of migrant houses than for remittances.

Against this background, a theory-driven research agenda on remittances necessitates a three-pronged comparative approach: between different *locales* in the same migration system (including urban vs. rural locations) and across different migration systems (with a focus on substantive aspects of housing investments, or of everyday life inside them); between different *disciplines* (sociology, anthropology and geography, but also housing studies, architecture, etc.), to draw on different ways of seeing and researching the same substantive topics; and finally, between different steps in the *time line of the housing investment and migration process* (stages, temporalities, evolving construction of the future, return plans, memories and ways of retention of the past, transmission of parents ancestral identity to children).

5. Conclusion

Migrant houses in countries of origin, as we argued in this article, are neither a novel phenomenon, nor an isolated one. Indeed, they are hardly less recurrent across migration systems than other foundational patterns of migration, such as the transnational flows of remittances which enable their existence. Yet, research on migrant houses is unnecessarily fragmented, primarily as a result of deep-rooted national, disciplinary and methodological divides. There is however a major promise, as we have shown, in developing a more systematic research agenda into transnational housing investments

and the new and distinctive housing arrangements that can be found across migrant countries of origin.

Studying remittance houses reveals interconnections with a variety of substantive topics in migration studies – with salient intersections with urban, housing and development studies. It allows to develop original theory-building regarding questions of broader significance. It also invites to consolidate an original methodological repertoire, at the crossroads between different social science domains, and including both qualitative and quantitative methods and data.

In all these respects, the study of remittance houses opens meaningful and original connections between the macro consequences of migration, as exemplified in urban and real estate development, and the micro levels of changing domestic infrastructures and material cultures in the everyday. Likewise, it illuminates the connection between the external, relatively standardised understanding of what a new or better house should look like, and the internal, subjective and emic experience of it as a home – whether for migrants or somebody else; whether at present or in a future that may be hard to predict.

Thus, migrant houses are – and should be recognised as – far more than a backdrop for other research concerns. Yet, they are not an autonomous phenomenon. The study of the lived experience associated with these houses, and with their variable position in space (in the material and social landscape of migration and of its social consequences) and in time (in the life course of individuals, of households, and of migration projects), calls for further analytical effort. As long as there is potential to invest more in comparative migration studies, despite the challenges and pitfalls this raises (Fitzgerald 2012), there is a potential to expand research into remittance houses – as places, as biographical markers and sites to uncover the specific contribution of migration to local and global social change.

Notes

1. We reviewed existing literature which deals with migrant houses built in countries of origin systematically, over the period 1990–2020 (see [Appendix 1](#) for methodology). The choice to focus on the last thirty years mirrors the accelerated development of migration studies literature in recent decades, although the phenomenon at hand is far from new (Blunt and Dowling 2006).
2. All names used are pseudonyms.

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