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Selling a house, staging a dream

Real estate agencies and transnational housing between Spain and Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

Migrants' transnational housing investments are a relatively overlooked field to explore the workings of so-called migration industries, as we do, in this paper, through a case study of Ecuadorian migration. Based on fieldwork with two real estate agencies in Madrid and visits to their housing projects in Quito, we show how these companies support Ecuadorians' collective socio-cultural practices in Madrid, in order to capitalise on their potential to invest in the homeland. As the agencies claim, migrants who buy properties in Ecuador do not just pursue their own interest. They also display their unremitting attachment to the country, besides paving the way for a 'successful' return. As our analysis reveals, housing investments can indeed facilitate migrant's physical, emotional, and existential mobility. However, the repertoire of 'Ecuadorianness' these agencies deploy in Spain has little to do with the symbols and imaginaries of modernity and success on which their real estate developments in Ecuador rely. This reveals the inherent tensions in status and life projects between immigration and emigration contexts, and the role of transnational housing investments in mediating them.

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1. Introduction

'Investing in Ecuador is your future!', 'Start up a new life!', or 'We make a house, you'll make it home!' may all read like formulaic expressions for advertisement. If they enter the life worlds of first-generation migrants like Ecuadorians in Madrid, with the support of a variety of symbols, imaginaries and practices that connect them with the (past) homeland, similar expressions may however take a life of their own. In doing so, they talk to a longing for new or better housing properties back 'home', which is not uncommon in the narratives of international migrants – and to some extent, in their actual practices. Several cases studies have explored migrants' motivations for housing investment in their countries of origin (e.g., Abainza & Calfat, 2018; Boccagni & Pérez Murcia, 2020; Erdal, 2012; Kusakabe et al., 2019; Sandoval-Cervantes, 2017). However, how the nostalgia underpinning it is capitalised for business purposes, and what this reveals on migrants' transnational engagement, is a less explored question. To address it, this article investigates the role of real estate agencies, as an instance of 'migration industry' (Hernandez-Leon, 2013), in facilitating migrants' transnational housing investments, while also

benefiting from them. More specifically, we aim to understand how real estate agencies facilitate the reproduction of migrant's social and cultural practices from the country of origin, as a deliberate strategy to awake their homeland nostalgia and orient their transnational housing investments.

This draws on a case study of two agencies in Madrid, which emphasise Ecuadorian migrants' nostalgic ties to the homeland and somewhat support them, in order to sell real estate properties in Ecuador. As they contribute to migrant grassroots social events like music festivals or beauty contests, these agencies reproduce an assumption that is central to the public debate on migration and development: by buying a house in their countries of origin, migrants are doing more than a self-interested economic transition. They are also bringing financial support to the homeland economy and giving proof of their national attachment. Housing investments are a symbol of migrants' national pride (Conway et al., 2012) and prestige (Smith & Mazzucato, 2009). They may also embody their power (Gardner, 1995) and reveal power asymmetries and exclusion (Page & Sunjo, 2018), as much as their 'success' and prospects for return (López, 2015).

Whether migrants do buy a house in Ecuador at last, and whether they do so through formal estate agencies, is however not the most important thing, for this article. What happens along the process, as we show through our case study, has a stronger analytical relevance to understand the transnational reach and impact of a migration industry. The ways in which these agencies present themselves and approach the market of co-ethnic sociability (Orozco & Yansura, 2019) are highly telling of the scope to capitalise on widespread emotions, such as nostalgia and national belonging, for instrumental purposes. As important, the activities of these agencies illuminate migrants' imaginaries on what a 'good home' should be like, once it is materialised in a new house in Ecuador. It is no coincidence that these housing investments can assume contrasting meanings from the opposite sides of the same migration system.

The study of the role of migration industries in migrants' transnational housing practices has significant implications for the debate on migration and development in Ecuador and elsewhere. Transnational housing investments are not only influencing the land and real estate markets in many countries of the global south, as the cases of Ecuador and Mexico reveal (Abainza & Calfat, 2018; Sloane & Silbersack et al., 2020) They also exert a significant impact on local housing design and physical landscapes in many countries of the world (Klaufus, 2012; López, 2015; Lozanovska, 2009; Page & Sunjo, 2018).

Prior to illustrating this, we provide a conceptual overview on migration industries, in light of the emotional repertoire of first-generation migrants and of the conflation between house, home and belonging which shapes migrants' transnational housing practices. We then describe our research context and methods, to pave the way for empirical analysis and discussion of the main findings. There is a tension, we eventually show, between the immigrant-addressed master narrative of housing investments as a demonstration of 'Ecuadorianness', i.e. life choices driven also by nostalgic and identity factors, and their predominant frame on the Ecuadorian side as a matter of success, modernity and distinction. The implications of this tension for migrants' sense of home and belonging (or lack thereof) towards both their 'home-land' and 'host-land' are discussed at last.

2. On migrant ‘transnational housing industry’ and nostalgia as a capital

A significant number of case studies have explored the multiple meanings and effects of migrant transnational housing investments. Kusakabe et al. (2019), for example, reveal how Cambodian women are often reluctant to invest in improving their housing conditions in Thailand, despite living in the country for many years, with the rationale of sending remittances back ‘home’ to improve their housing conditions for a future return. A recent study by Page and Sunjo (2018) in Cameroon has revealed that the houses built with remittances play an important role in meeting the local housing demand, but at the same time enhances social exclusion and raise new tensions amongst local residents. Abainza and Calfat (2018) analysis of return migration in Ecuador illustrate the significance of home ownership in local perceptions of well-being and thus the remarkable allocation of migrant remittances into house investments. However, with notable exceptions, such as Sloane and Silbersack et al.’s (2020) comparative study in Cuenca (Ecuador) and San Miguel de Allende (Mexico), the role of real estate agencies in transnational housing investments has been largely overlooked. This article aims to explore it further, by revealing how such agencies capitalize on migrants’ nostalgia for their homeland to capture part of their rents and remittances to be invested in transnational housing.

For the purposes of this article, the term *migration industries* denotes the role of non-state actors, mainly but not only profit-seeking enterprises, facilitating or constraining the migration process through the services they provide (Cranston et al., 2018; Garapich, 2008; Hernandez-Leon, 2013). Their influence can be appreciated at all the stages of migration and involves also migrants’ transnational connections and prospects for return. Over the last decades, research has been done on the development, or consolidation, of a variety of non-state actors that either facilitate or constrain migration flows – sometimes operating on both sides, at different stages. On the ‘facilitating’ side, research has been done on their role in migrants’ legal protection (Barbero, 2019), in access to work permits (Anderson, 2019), in transnational housing investments for retirees (Sloane & Silbersack et al., 2020) and in return migration schemes (Cohen, 2020), among other topics. Less frequently, but crucial for the argument of this paper, research along these lines has been done on transnational real estate agencies (Masterson-Algar, 2016).

It is not uncommon, for transnationally oriented migration industries, to draw on migrants’ nostalgia and belonging as assets for their business strategies (Guarnizo, 2003; Orozco et al., 2005). Money transfer agencies, food markets and ‘ethnic’ restaurants often operate along these lines, by marketing products supposed to be suitable for migrants’ needs, tastes, and desires (Orozco & Yansura, 2019). In doing so, they facilitate the reproduction both of their ordinary life styles, and of their transnational connections. Real estate agencies are a case in point of the latter, for all that has to do with migrants’ use of remittances for housing purposes. Yet, the role of these actors in facilitating migrants’ cross-border investments – what we could call the *transnational housing industry* – has been singularly understudied so far.

As we show in this article, however, the transnational initiatives of real estate agencies open up a unique space to capture migrants’ struggle to build a connection between *homeland* (as a macro scale of ascribed and nostalgic attachment), *home* (as a personal achievement to establish protection, security and comfort), and *house* (as a material structure that should enable, and display, migrants’ belonging, success and distinction,

relative to their country of origin). By purchasing a house in the homeland, migrants should be in a better position to make a *home* for themselves – that is, a significant place where individuals develop personal, social, cultural and emotional attachments (Blunt & Varley, 2004; Masterson-Algar, 2016; Ralph, 2009). Home can then be seen as a relational space where migrant's housing trajectories in their countries of origin and of current settlement inform their ideas of identity and belonging.

However, migrant's 'nostalgia' for their place of origin should not be taken for granted, nor assumed as a desire to go back 'there' (Hage, 1997; Obeid, 2013; Pérez Murcia, 2019). Nostalgia may be also related to migrants' need to feel at home in their current locations (Jansen & Löfving, 2011). Even when it does involve the country of origin, nostalgia needs to be actively cultivated, for it to trigger migrant transnational investments. This is precisely what entrepreneurs like real estate agents may try to do, possibly by emphasising certain ideas of the past in order to influence people's identification with certain designs and lifestyles enclaved in the homeland (Farrar, 2011).

Nostalgia is also one of the drivers, although by no means the only one, of migrant transnational housing practices. Much has been written on this regarding, for instance, its impact on the natural and built environment (López, 2015), its contribution to local development (Boccagni, 2020), and its significance for return migration (Anghel, 2019; Kusakabe et al., 2019). All across this literature, however, little or no mention is made to the role of real estate agencies. This also holds for the literature on Ecuadorian migration, with some exceptions (Masterson-Algar, 2016, 2020; Sloane & Silbersack et al., 2020). While return migration to the Andean country has remarkably increased in the last decade (Abainza & Calfat, 2018; Herrera & Martínez, 2015), and so has transnational housing (Boccagni & Pérez Murcia, 2020), our own research with Ecuadorian migrants in Europe suggests a predominant use of informal channels, primarily family members, friends or neighbours, in facilitating new house purchase or building back 'home'.

Nonetheless, informal networks are not always enough (Hernandez-Leon, 2013). Upon fieldwork in Madrid we also encountered some instances of real estate agencies that do facilitate migrants' cross-border housing practices and investments. They cater for a market that may be oscillating, hard to quantify, and yet retains a basic consistency and a potential for further development.¹ Their very activities, including the periodical organization of housing fairs for migrants in the US and Europe, could not be explained otherwise. Such agencies operate on a transnational scale, no less than a 'local' one, by supporting immigrant clients in legal and financial matters, and by enhancing their connections with the evolving real estate market in the country of origin, particularly in urban locations. In doing so, they rely on well-consolidated connections between sales representatives in the country of immigration and satellite offices in the homeland, based also on their links with the local design, real estate and financial markets.

In short, a transnational housing industry requires institutionalised cooperation within a dense network of diverse corporate and non-corporate actors. Governments and financial institutions can play their part in attracting foreign capital – including remittances from their nationals; and non-corporate actors, e.g., former investors, can either encourage or discourage future investments. However, it also requires fine-tuning with migrants' own life projects, expectations and alignments, as we illustrate in this paper.

3. Research context and methods

Madrid, the city where the bulk of our fieldwork took place, has been a focal point for Ecuadorian migration since the late nineties. From 1998 onwards, the major economic and institutional crisis in the Andean country resulted in unprecedented outflows (Herrera & Torres, 2005) and in an accelerated settlement of Ecuadorian individuals, and then households, in Madrid and elsewhere in Spain (Córdoba, 2015). Over the span of two decades, Ecuadorians have been heavily and disproportionately affected by the housing crisis in 2008–2009 and by the severe economic downturn that followed (Gonick, 2020; Suarez, 2014, 2020). However, they have also benefited from fast rates of acquisition of dual citizenship, making for a remarkable potential – at least in theory – for circular mobility between Ecuador and Spain (Iglesias et al., 2015). As of now, there are about 90,000 Ecuador-born residents in Madrid (*Padrón Municipal*, Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2020). This has created an ideal terrain for a ‘ethnic’ enterprises and migration industries related to legal and social advice, money transfer, food and cultural consumption, but also – unsurprisingly – to housing. The latter field has been at the centre of the *burbuja inmobiliaria* crisis and of the subsequent evictions and ‘insurgent practices’ to block them (García-Lamarca, 2017; Gonick, 2020). However, the local real estate market has been systematically paralleled by a transnational one. The agencies discussed in this paper are a visible and durable example of it.

Our study was part of a broader ethnographic engagement with Ecuadorian migrants within ERC HOMInG, University of Trento, a large-scale study of migrant homemaking across countries. We collected 60 in-depth interviews with Ecuadorians in Europe (in Italy, Spain and UK) and 25 with their family members in Ecuador, between 2017 and 2019. Research participants were selected based on length of residence, family condition, and housing trajectory. Rather than a statistically representative sample, the selection of participants aimed to maximize diversity along these lines. Their transnational housing trajectories were central to these interviews, typically revealing that formal agencies had little or no role in the process. Hearing migrant’s voices in relation to their motivations to engage in housing investment in their countries of origin was central to understanding their transnational housing dynamics. However, in this article we focus on the role of real estate agencies in mediating and facilitating their physical, emotional, and existential mobility. This analytical perspective brings together migrants’ nostalgia for their homeland with the social, cultural, and financial implications of housing investment and the migrants’ search for home.

Given the focus of the paper, the fieldwork on which we draw here took place in Madrid (August–December 2018) and Quito (January–February 2019). In a first stage we undertook ‘walking’ and ‘virtual’ tours in the Spanish capital, searching for dedicated real estate agencies in low and middle-income neighbourhoods such as Villaverde, Villa de Vallecas, Ciudad Lineal and Puente de Vallecas. This confirmed the concentration of a whole range of migration industries, especially money transfer agencies and restaurants, some of the latter advertising housing projects in Ecuador. Yet, we were able to identify only two real estate agencies with this particular target of clients. LEPM started some participant observation close to their offices, only to find out that such a strategy was unproductive. In one case, which we call Real estate agency 1 (REA1), the office opened in

irregular hours, whenever potential customers showed up. In the other (REA2), the office was located in a building accessible only upon appointment.

At the subsequent stage, with a view to better understand how these companies operated, we decided to book appointments, presenting ourselves as clients. The decision followed an in-depth discussion with our colleagues and the Ethics Advisor at the ERC HOMInG project. It resulted in a *partially* covert ethnography (Calvey, 2008; Homan & Bulmer, 1980) or, more properly, a *temporarily-covert* one, because after getting the appointment, we informed the agents that we were members of a research team interested in migrants' experience of home and in their housing trajectories.² REA1's manager accepted a formal interview and invited LEPM to the company's social activities, such as concerts and beauty contests in Ecuadorian restaurants, which were functional to advertising his real estate trade. Moreover, LEPM interviewed the Ecuadorian 'queen' in Madrid, i.e. the winner of the beauty contest, and had informal conversations with a number of restaurant owners, their employees and customers. All these participants were informed about the research aims and gave their informed consent for formal interviews. REA2 rejected a formal interview request but accepted to share information about the housing projects, under the assumption that they were attending the queries of a potential customer. It was crystal-clear that this was the necessary condition under which they would dedicate LEPM some time.

The conversations that followed were of great value for our research purposes. Both the contact persons of REA1 and REA2 were Ecuadorian migrants, keen to share their own dreams of buying a house and the challenges they had faced in doing so. However, and unsurprisingly, getting in touch with the company's clients for in-depth interviews turned out to be impossible. What we did manage to have, thanks to the availability of REA2, was access to a number of real estate projects in Quito. Together with REA2's local agents, we visited eight real estate developments in low, middle and high-income areas of Quito.³ Just as we had done in Madrid, we approached these companies in Ecuador both as researchers and potential customers. Our conversations with estate agents covered the qualities and price of the projects, but also their business with 'people abroad' (an expression much more in use, in Ecuador, than 'migrants').⁴ Unsurprisingly, it was no easy task to find a good balance between their interest in selling properties and our interest in understanding how the company engages with migrants. Several of these estate agents, though, had a migratory background themselves. This made them particularly open to share their commercial experiences with Ecuadorian families and investors, wherever located.

In practice, our joint visits to these real estate developments were like one-shot go-alongs (Kusenbach, 2003), covering both the internal communal spaces and a number of *apartamentos modelo* – empty domestic spaces with sample furniture. Such visits were obviously less intrusive than entering an actually inhabited space (Miller, 2001). Nonetheless, they were still conditional on the temporary negotiation of clear-cut thresholds of privateness, if not privacy. We were entitled to be there only in our capacity as potential customers, together with the agent, passing through the ordinary material and symbolic thresholds that protect domesticity (doors being unlocked, our spontaneous knocking on the door, asking 'May I?', and the like). There was something weird, and over time repetitive, in entering empty and yet-to-be-inhabited dwellings (Paulsen, 2013). Yet, this was far from useless, both as a way to understand what a 'model apartment' looked

like, and as way of staying, for a while, in somewhat intimate spaces in which the agents' own narratives gained in depth and reflexivity.

After that, three main strategies were implemented to analyse migrant housing trajectories and the influence of real estate agencies: reading and codifying fieldwork notes; content analysis; and joint post-ethnographic sessions. These in-depth discussions, soon after each visit to housing projects, were especially relevant to share views about the empirical material collected and to revisit our own assumptions about the role of real estate agencies in migrant's transnational housing practices.

Whether in Madrid or in Quito, our ethnographic engagement was not without challenges and limitations. The main challenge lay in negotiating the boundary between our roles as potential customers and researchers. As Calvey (2008, p. 909) stresses, 'in certain research contexts it is difficult to maintain a strict either/or division between overt and covert, hence the messy reality is more akin to a continuum'. While presenting ourselves as potential customers, we were clear with our interlocutors about our research interests and received their consent accordingly. That said, access to the field would have simply been impossible without a rather dubious, but credible expedient like the client self-presentation. Moreover, we were unable to trace a detailed history of the real estate agencies we studied in Madrid, although the literature available suggests that these businesses started up just after the early 2000 settlement of Ecuadorians in the city (Gonick, 2020; Masterson-Algar, 2016). Most notably, REA1 was one of the first agencies dedicated to the Spain – Ecuador corridor and, by all means, the most durable.

Likewise, we could not find much data on the impact of the 2008 housing crisis on them. The manager of REA1 suggested that the crisis was a significant challenge for the company, which was only 5 years-old by then, as people were afraid of investing in housing. Given the magnitude of the crisis in Spain, however, there are some indications that some Ecuadorians were able to sell their properties to minimize the financial loss and invested their resources in properties back in Ecuador. Furthermore, and because of data protection laws, we could not get information about the Ecuadorians who had already bought houses, nor interview them, either in Spain or Ecuador.

Drawing from our fieldwork, we now present the workings of the transnational housing industry as a three-act play involving different actors, expectations, interests, and locations. All over the play, the main characters, i.e. REA1 and REA2, capitalise on the home-house conflation – that is, migrants' aspiration to house ownership, and the underlying nostalgic views of 'home'- to facilitate real estate investments in their country of origin.

Prior to that, it is worth repeating that our paper has no ambition to generalisation. Our findings, however, do resonate with an emerging literature on transnational housing and migration industries in migrant's transnational practices (Barbero, 2019; Cohen, 2020; Orozco & Yansura, 2019; Sloane & Silbersack et al., 2020).

4. Performing Ecuadorianness and selling houses: the transnational housing industry as a three-act play

3.1. Act 1: why (not) buy a house via real estate agencies?

It is an ordinary and widespread assumption, in transnational migration studies, that a number of first-generation migrants strive to buy a new and better house in their

countries of origin. A large body of research has explored their motivations in doing so, mostly through qualitative case studies (López, 2015; Pauli & Bedorf, 2018). Interestingly, though, the role of real estate agencies in facilitating the process has received little to no attention (except from Masterson-Algar, 2016; Sloane & Silbersack et al., 2020). Such a gap might simply mirror the limited influence of formal commercial actors in migrants' grass-roots transnational housing initiatives. Yet, it leaves open several doubts and questions, which we address in this paper.

The bulk of our own past research with Ecuadorians in Italy, Spain and the UK (Boccagni, 2004; Boccagni & Pérez Murcia, 2020) suggests that formal agencies have very little influence on migrants' ambitions and decisions in real estate investments. A case in point, among many, comes from the narrative of Paola, who is currently living in Manchester and had bought a house back in Ecuador while running a restaurant in Spain. The idea of going through an intermediary, as she told us, had never crossed her mind. 'My partner and I just wanted to buy a house in Ecuador as a way to invest our savings and then, by chance, the house I used to live in was on sale, and we bought it'. Paola is part of a very dense network of Ecuadorians in Spain. How many of them had also bought a house 'is hard to tell', she added. What is clear is that the role of real estate agencies in the process was utterly marginal:

I cannot remember of people going to real estate agencies or being contacted by them. Those who wanted to buy a house did that by themselves. Many of us [Ecuadorians] do not trust in intermediaries. You know, some of these companies may be not real, perhaps they only want your money and you get nothing in return. Now that you asked me about this, trust is a critical aspect. You don't want somebody just sell you fake promises and then all your effort is a waste.

A lack of trust in formal institutions is recurrent in our interviews. So is migrants' aspiration to home ownership, though. Paola herself mentioned, anecdotally, the case of her partner's aunt, who had bought a house through the intermediation of a real estate agency in Quito. As she entered her new property, she found out that the price she had paid for it was much higher than its real value, and the building materials were very poor quality. 'It was a big disappointment ... and then she just sold the house'. Similar instances tell much of the lack of trust in real estate agencies, but also of migrants' little scope for some control over them – and indeed, for some reality check, out of their own expectations. Both factors likely detract migrants from buying houses through this mechanism.

As interesting, Paola's first encounter with dedicated agencies was in an Ecuadorian restaurant. 'I was there by chance and found leaflets advertising housing projects in Ecuador ... some companies advertised houses in Ecuador in places where the Ecuadorians catch up, I mean, restaurants and bars where people watch the football national team'. Many interviewees confirmed that real estate agencies are part of the material culture of places for co-ethnic sociability, just like remittance agencies, cultural associations or religious initiatives. These are rather unusual social environments for targeting customers – enough so to justify an exploration of the underlying strategies and rationales, through our case study in Madrid.

3.2. Act 2 (scene 1): setting up beauty contests in Spain, selling properties in Ecuador

REA1 has been selling houses to Ecuadorians in Madrid for more than a decade. The company is run by an Ecuadorian migrant who has been living in Spain for over 15 years. It is strategically located in a popular area of Madrid, long inhabited by low-income Spanish families and migrants from different corners of the world. Travel agencies advertising tickets for migrants' countries of origin during religious celebrations or Christmas, money transfer agencies, immigrant restaurants and shops selling 'ethnic' food are all part of the local landscape.

Most of these businesses target native and migrant customers alike. Some, however, especially groceries and restaurants, seem to target mainly migrants. This was clearly the case for Ecuadorian restaurants, which tend to be presented by the owners, and experienced by the clients, as Ecuadorian corners in Madrid. Their 'Ecuadorianness' was enacted through objects representing Ecuador's culture and way of life, but also through an ambience of friendly conviviality. It was not rare for customers to start spontaneous conversations about their daily lives, concerns and politics in Spain, as much as in Ecuador. Several of them seemed to experience those places as their own homes (Miranda-Nieto & Boccagni, 2020). This was the perfect environment for real estate agencies to step in, evoke the clients' homeland, and circulate their own mottos: 'invest in your country and achieve your dream – buy your house in Ecuador'. REA1, in particular, was well aware of the centrality of these places for co-nationals to share information about social activities and opportunities available to them, including real estate investments back 'home'. It was not uncommon to encounter adverts of cultural activities for Ecuadorians such as concerts with Latino artists and beauty contests [Figure 1].

Not by chance, REA1 was often the main organiser of these events. Whether in a concert or in a beauty contest, sociability and business were closely entangled with each other (Portes, 1995). Although such informal settings may seem an unlikely stage to discuss such demanding investments, in fact they do make for an effective strategy – one based on the (re)creation of a more or less essentialised Ecuadorian culture and identity (Pallares, 2005). Beauty contests, as LEPM found out, are a case in point. In every stage of the contest, parents and their families and friends meet and share food in an Ecuadorian restaurant. All the hits of the beauty contests are advertised in popular places of the neighbourhood and enlivened with popular Latino music and artists. Like in TV's beauty competitions, when contestants are not in the stage, advertisement dominates the scene. This is the perfect time to emphasise that migrants' struggles in living abroad will pay off, and that REA1 will help them to achieve their dream 'to buy a house back in Ecuador'. In order to do so, as REA1's manager explains, the company provides financial and legal advice when needed, and helps migrants to find a project that suits their financial possibilities.

Through similar initiatives, REA1 is strategically creating spaces for Ecuadorians to reproduce certain forms of sociability, as well as a platform for advertising and potentially selling housing projects [Figure 2]. By sharing migrants' food and drinks, no less than their collective memories and nostalgia for Ecuador, real estate agents build trust with potential customers and reinforce the idea that they should invest in a house in Ecuador anyway (Gonick, 2020). Those who seem more persuaded to do so are then invited to a private meeting in REA1's office.



Figure 1. 'Miss Quito in Spain'. A beauty contest organised by a real estate agency in Madrid.⁵



Figure 2. Housing projects in Ecuador advertised in an Ecuadorian restaurant in Madrid.



Figure 3. Housing and restaurants tours advertised in Madrid.



Figure 4. Interior decor of one of the housing projects visited in Quito.

In short, by reproducing some mainstream ways of ‘being Ecuadorian’ in Spain, real estate agencies compound migrant sense of belonging and nostalgia, to then capitalise on it. For sure, the emotional power inherent in so-called remittance houses (Sandoval-Cervantes, 2017) facilitates their business. Prior to selling a house, REA1 is ‘selling’ an idea: its business is not just for a building to be purchased, but for a ‘home’ to return to. As LEPM interviewed the manager, he was shown photos with customers receiving the keys of their new brand houses in Ecuador. ‘We care about our customers’, he claimed. ‘You can



Figure 5. Communal areas in one of the housing projects visited in Quito.

see the happiness in their faces when receiving their brand-new house'. Potential customers, in turn, seemed happy to gather together in the events organised by REA1, which also supported fundraising initiatives, at Christmas time, to buy presents for Ecuadorian children from low income families in Spain.

In practice, most migrants are unlikely to buy a house through real estate agencies, for reasons including lack of trust on third parties, the cost of financial intermediaries, and their own interest in designing/building their house by themselves. However, many of our informants have a very positive engagement with REA1 and show gratitude for its manager, who presents himself as 'an Ecuadorian working for his homeland in Spain'. By pursuing their own interests, REA1 and its partners are bringing Ecuador to Madrid.



Figure 6. Interior decor of one of the housing projects visited in Quito.



Figure 7. Communal areas in one of the housing projects visited in Quito.



Figure 8. Communal areas in one of the housing projects visited in Quito.

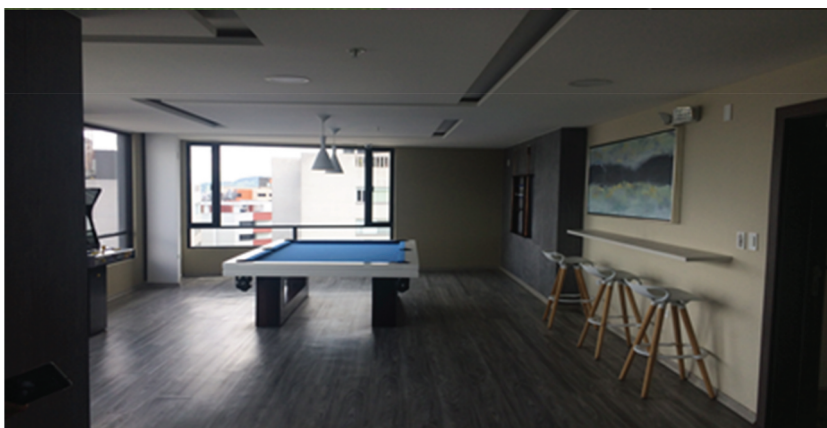


Figure 9. Communal areas in one of the housing projects visited in Quito.

While enjoying and sharing the pride of being Ecuadorian, some of these migrants do embark in the project of buying a property in their country of origin.

3.3. Act 2 (scene 2): 'helping migrants to achieve their dream homes to return to'

REA2 is a multinational company which has been selling housing projects in Latin American countries for several years. The company, which has sale representatives in Europe, America and Oceania, unambiguously targets Latino migrants as its main customers. LEPM approached its offices in Madrid, only to find out that doing fieldwork there was much harder than with REA1. Except for the organised real estate and gastronomic tours, as discussed below, the company had no outreach plans or community engagement strategies – it was 'only' a company. As LEPM asked for a formal appointment, he was asked for his personal details. When he arrived at the meeting, a person matching his nationality was waiting for him with a very well-organised portfolio of housing projects in his country of origin. Her professionalism was impressive, she had leaflets and videos of the housing projects ready to be displayed. When LEPM mentioned that he was not interested in housing projects in his country of origin but, instead, in Ecuador, the agent looked both surprised and disappointed. Why would a migrant be interested in a house, in a country other than his own?

Once LEPM gave some basic explanations for his interest in the real estate market in Ecuador, his case was transferred to an Ecuadorian agent, who did not take long to prepare and share a professional portfolio of housing projects in Quito, supported by some dedicate videos. The company 'does its best' to match customers nationality with the migrant's country of origin, the agent stressed, because 'being a migrant helps to understand the needs of migrants'. She enquired about LEPM's links with Ecuador and was happy to accept that he was just looking for a potential financial investment. Even after that, the agent kept emphasizing her positionality: 'As an Ecuadorian', she proudly said, 'I know first-hand how important it is for Ecuadorians to buy a house in our country. Most of us share this dream and I am here to support them to achieve it' (cf. Masterson-Algar, 2016). There was so much more than 'selling a house' in her work, as she put it. However, the emphasis on technical competence and reliability was no less strong than the one on Ecuadorianness:

We take care of every step because buying a house is a big decision. We help our customers to find a project that suits their expectations and financial restrictions and provide them with the specialist legal and financial advice they require before embarking in such a project. Above all, our customers know that we put all the money in a bank that every Ecuadorian knows. It gives them tranquillity because their money is in good hands.

Trust, reputation and control over the use of remittances were emphasized as the main issues that the formal mediation of an agency was expected to sort out. As interesting, the agent elaborated with LEPM on the reasons migrants might find REA2 attractive. Many of her customers came from low-income families but wanted to buy a property in wealthy areas, often perceived as safer, with better housing infrastructures, facilities and green areas located nearby. Going back to the same areas as before was just ‘pointless’, she added. ‘You know, you want to improve your life standard. Otherwise, why leave at all?’.

As these vignettes illustrate, REA2 and REA1 could not be more dissimilar. While in REA1 a single person manages all the business from a rather improvised office, REA2 has a large dedicated staff to manage customers and specialised departments for marketing, finance and legal matters. They both have migrants as the main target, though, and resort accordingly to different social and cultural forms of ‘Ecuadorianness’. REA2, in particular, organises real estate and gastronomic tours, and then advertises its transnational housing projects around the food being served in Ecuadorian restaurants [Figure 3].

So far, from the Madrid side. What about, however, the development of real estate projects from the Ecuadorian side? The transnational reach of REA2’s activities, and our own self-presentation as potential customers, enabled us to collect some relevant insights upon fieldwork in Quito. This made for a new ‘act’ – one as tentative and exploratory, we realised, as the experience of those returnees or circular migrants who purchase a property from afar, and then see it for the first time once back ‘home’.

3.4. Act 3: ‘your roots will always be here’

Once in Ecuador, we had the opportunity to visit eight new real estate developments connected with REA2 in Quito. Most of them were in middle to high-class neighbourhoods. Target customers, the agents said, were ‘people with a good income – including many who live abroad’. As expected, there was a significant diversity in the design, facilities and infrastructural quality of these brand-new housing projects. However, the interiors, at least in the empty dwellings accessible to us, tended to follow contemporary international design, often with open-plan kitchens decorated with Italian marble and American appliances, medium-large size rooms and ample living rooms. Bedrooms included standard decorations such as small pictures on the bedside with quintessentially white heterosexual families, with two children each. Still another aspect was equally at odds with the choreography of real estate marketing and fairs in Spain: the thorough absence from these *apartamentos modelo* of Ecuador-related artefacts or symbols – anything that would ‘emplace’ them in the country where they happened to be and not, potentially, anywhere else [Figure 4, 5, and 6]. Leaving aside these details, as soon as we were *in* our attention was ironically attracted from what lay *out* – the stunning external views of the Andean slopes surrounding the city, including forests, up to the *paramo*.

As interesting, all the buildings we visited had some communal space inside, in a sort of recreation of the external environment from within the private one (Paulsen, 2013). One

of them, in the residential area of el Bosque, was equipped with a gym, sauna, jacuzzi, pool, cinema, games room, picnic area, and a 360-view terrace. This design concept, the local estate agent told us, had been inspired by life in semi-rural areas. 'There', he explained, people tend to embrace nature and the value of time for family togetherness and neighbours, contrary to the frenzy of a city like Quito. When asked why returnees may consider to buy such apartments, he shifted the focus from the client target to the quality of this housing opportunity:

We do not care if the person who buys one of our flats is a migrant or not, but I think some of those who left the country may find a property surrounded by nature attractive. Some may miss this contact with nature. Some may just want to invest in their country or have a good house for retirement.

Indeed, investing in new properties that are left empty is nothing new in-migrant transnational housing (Pauli & Bedorf, 2018; Wagner, 2014). It is actually just a minor instance of a far broader and global development in housing financialization (Guyer, 2015). In any case, no room for nostalgic constructions of Ecuadorianness, in the narratives of our Quito interlocutors. Lots of emphasis, instead, on pristine contact with nature as something that many urbanites (including migrants) miss – and that a well-conceived and exclusive building should give them back, in a remarkably domesticated fashion (Masterson-Algar, 2016) [Figure 7, 8, and 9]. 'We're not selling bricks and mortar here – we're selling a lifestyle', the agent in El Bosque concluded. This was precisely the life style returnees were expected to tend towards, regardless of their actual achievements (cf. Rainer (2019) and Sloane and Silbersack et al. (2020), for a similar argument on retired 'life style' migrants from rich countries to Latin American countries, Ecuador included).

A sense of connectedness with the natural environment is one of the few things in common between the houses and neighbourhoods that migrants left behind, and those advertised by the estate agencies we visited. Most of the Ecuadorian migrants we encountered upon fieldwork, whether in Italy, Spain or the UK, had relatively modest (if any) housing properties, prior to migration.⁶ Most of them were self-designed and self-constructed buildings in low-income neighbourhoods. Things had not changed that much during migrants' absence, as our visits to their former houses in Quito showed (Boccagni & Pérez Murcia, 2020). Santiago, for example, grew up in a popular and semi-rural area of Quito. Since his arrival in Madrid, he has been sharing flats with either family or friends in places he describes as 'modest', and yet located in the city centre. He had left Quito with an intention to save money for buying a house in 'his' own neighbourhood – the place he used to share with his family. After four years spent working in central Madrid, though, Santiago started appreciating the benefits of a neighbourhood with well-developed infrastructures and easy access to schools, health care services, jobs, and parks. As a result, he still wants to buy a house in Quito but now he would rather do so in a 'better area' of the city. By this he means a place that offers better security conditions for his children and partner and access to facilities comparable with those he is enjoying in Madrid. At the time of our last encounter, he is starting to save as much money as possible to afford a property back in Ecuador, while reducing to the minimum his living expenses in Madrid. His narrative illustrates well the ambition to move into a 'better place' and scale the social ladder in the years to come.

Overall, real estate agencies like REA2 have a clear understanding of the ambitions of migrants like Santiago. As agents in both cities used to repeat, migrants work so

hard to make a living abroad that they *deserve* a 'better' house. 'Why do you want to leave your country and your family to have a difficult time abroad', an agent wondered, 'if not for getting a better quality of life when coming back?'. The narrative of sacrifice, dignity and remuneration was part and parcel of their marketing discourse, no less than the assumption of return as the 'natural' ending point of migration. This seemed to echo with migrants' own expectations, including those of the agents with an immigrant background. As an officer of REA2 told us in Quito:

I worked 24/7 in New York as a cleaning lady for many years with very little time for family and friends. Everything was about work. I did not want to come back to Ecuador and just live as I used to before leaving for the US. I wanted to buy a house in a good area of Quito. As I say, *la cabra tira al monte*.⁷ Otherwise, there are no reasons to leave our family and friends, our food, and all the beautiful things of Ecuador behind.

As in this example, estate agents and house-hunters find a common ground in their experiences of migration and their ambitions towards buying a house. This is supposed to make more credible the claim that 'we do not only sell houses but the possibility to make the migrants' dream of a home in Ecuador true'. Sharing the same moral economy about the dream house (Suarez, 2014) was no less important than a common national background, as in the narrative of yet another agent:

I met an Ecuadorian woman in the US about 2006 who wanted to buy a house for herself and her mother in Quito. I met her again by chance in 2019 and she mentioned that she still wanted to buy a house. By then, I was no longer working in the cleaning sector but as the sales representative of an international real estate agency selling houses in Ecuador. I just started to search for the right property for her and we found it. When she got the keys, she said 'thanks to you I have achieved my dream house; now I have my place in Ecuador'. That is so beautiful and rewarding.

5. Discussion: 'bringing Ecuador to Spain'⁸ – and back what?

Most Ecuadorian low-skilled migrants arrived to Spain after a major financial crisis in their country, only to find themselves again in the middle of an unprecedented crisis, from 2008, with the surge in foreclosures and evictions that followed (Garcia-Lamarca, 2017). While real estate agencies in Madrid have been instrumental – if not complicit – to the widespread impact of 'speculative practices of global real estate and financial markets' (Garcia-Lamarca & Kaika, 2016, p. 313), some of them have also been sensitive to another development: migrants' interest in investing in the real estate market back in Ecuador. In order to target this segment of the market and 'capture' their rents, these agencies systematically emphasise migrant belonging to their countries of origin. By appealing to emotional slogans like 'your house, your home' and 'invest in your homeland', and by supporting the reproduction of 'Ecuadorian' social and cultural practices in Madrid, these companies are doing more than '*bringing Ecuador to Spain*'. They are also reinforcing migrants' nostalgia for their homeland and potentially influencing their return ambitions.

However, neither the landscapes where the housing projects are built back in Ecuador nor their interior design match with the stereotypical version of an Ecuadorian house, as advanced by the same agencies in Madrid. Migrants as clients were largely recruited in places where some cultural representation of Ecuador stands out, as articulated, for

instance, by pictures of indigenous communities in traditional clothing, houses surrounded by animals and natural landscapes, or tapestries with traditional musical instruments and food. In fact, this iconography partially depicts the houses and often semi-rural landscapes in which migrants used to live before. It says, however, very little of the new housing developments with which the agencies connect migrants as prospective clients. Most of them have been built following modern construction techniques and either American or European housing design and deco. In no housing project we visited in Quito were we able to find a single item evoking 'Ecuadorian' traditions and ways of life. Much of the infrastructure and design of those flats could have been found in any modern metropolis elsewhere. If the agency played its commercial strategy by 'bringing Ecuador to Spain' to recruit its clients, the typical house articulated rather a way of 'bringing a standardized Western imaginary to Ecuador'. Put differently, on the immigrant side REA2 played the cards of symbolic ethnicity and Ecuadorianness, whereas back to the context of origin it rather used a register of upwards social mobility and prestige.

While such a strategy has eminently commercial purposes, it does tell us something about migrants' multiple belongings, but also about their struggle for belonging and recognition in the homeland and abroad. As our previous fieldwork suggests, many returnees have a sense of going back to a completely new place and space. They may encounter houses that are better designed and constructed, in environments perceived to be safer, and yet they do not necessarily feel at home there, nor in the broader public space (Boccagni & Pérez Murcia, 2020). In turn, real estate agencies like those we studied are well prepared to persuade customers that their efforts abroad did pay off. Their message is clear: returnees deserve a place with better housing infrastructures and facilities. Some of these housing projects have even been conceived as private social clubs. Real estate agents advertise them as an opportunity (for migrants) to scale the social ladder. The lure of popular Ecuadorian culture that brought some of them 'home' has either to be recreated in the domestic space from scratch, or to be found elsewhere. It is the language of mobility and prestige, not the one of ethnicity or culture, that migrants will be expected to speak if they go back there – as long as they can afford it.

6. Conclusion

The so-called remittance house, i.e. the final outcome that these agencies mediate and that a number of migrants aspire to, is actually a matter of transnational *housing*. This is often an extended process, which combines, on the migrant side, different sets of expectations and desires: physical (i.e. return), social, symbolic and even existential mobility (Hage, 2005), but also renewed belonging, and hopefully membership, in the national 'home' they came from (Boccagni & Pérez Murcia, 2020). As this aspiration for membership and mobility is played out in a transnational field, real estate agencies may step in and capitalise on the promise for both, as our case study has shown.

Real estate agencies occupy a unique position in migrants' transnational social fields. As infrastructures for housing investments across borders, they facilitate the connection between the imaginary, emotional and symbolic dimensions of home, and the tangible materiality of the house as a place to return, or at least as a durable asset. In connecting migrants with their cities of origin, agencies mediate the distance between them and a housing (and financial) market with which they have little familiarity, particularly in large

cities. In practice, this mediation is rather selective, as only a minority of migrants engage with these agencies, and possibly fragile – no large-scale data is available, as of now, on its actual reach and impact. Nevertheless, it is worth analysing, as we did in this article, for a number of reasons. Primary among them is that it illuminates the disjuncture between the lived experience and representation of migration at the opposite ends of one and the same corridor, such as the Spain-Ecuador one. This speaks to the migrant ‘status paradox’ (Nieswand, 2013) and to the possibility of solving it through housing investments, as an empirical question. These findings resonate with research suggesting the critical role of housing investments in migrant’s search for status and prestige in their countries of origin (Boccagni & Erdal, 2020; Page & Sunjo, 2018; Smith & Mazzucato, 2009).

As our study revealed, the same real estate agency, and possibly the same agent, circulate significantly different imaginaries and views of migration and of ‘Ecuadorianness’, depending on the side they approach. In Madrid, the message for potential customers is a strongly collective and culturally based one, whatever the form of Ecuadorianness (i.e. food, music, fashion etc.) to underpin it. Among a fragmented and diverse community of co-nationals, who typically rely on weaker social networks and articulate a more uncertain belonging than in Ecuador, the message is firmly reassuring: your ‘being Ecuadorian’ matters and needs to be acknowledged and valued; you belong (also) there where your roots lie, and sooner or later you will be back; buy a house with us, so the syllogism ends, and all of this will become easier. The message is obviously self-interested, and the essentialisation of Ecuador may look naïf or improbable to the most acculturated (or disenchanting) among Ecuadorians in Madrid. Yet, as we found out, the message has its own impact. People do attend the initiatives set up by these agencies, although this does not automatically turn them into clients. In short, the agents’ message in Madrid aims to restore a collective identification out of the necessarily individualised life world of labour migrants.

In Quito, however, the same companies operate with a totally different tone: the new house – as its location, layout, and marketing presentation show – has to be a better one, in a better position, for more successful *individuals*. The collective dimension, among co-nationals in Quito, is already out there – no need to emphasise it further. What is rather necessary, for the housing project – and supposedly, for migration – to succeed, is standing out of the collective. Once emigrants turn into returnees, they are no more part of a diverse and fragmented community, which is supposedly in need to reproduce ‘Ecuadorian’ ways of life and to cultivate nostalgia, lest it loses its own identity. Quite the opposite: migrants as returnees, seen from the Ecuadorian side, matter – read: are suitable clients – if they can show that they made it on their own. They are no more like the others. The house should be there to display this to non-migrant co-nationals.

In essence, housing agencies as part of the transnational migration industry try to capitalise on the socially disruptive effect of migration, by appealing to immigrants’ collective identity and belonging (elsewhere); and to capitalise on the potential for upwards mobility associated with return migration, by luring former migrants to achieve, and show off, a really good house as a proof of their success. How far this strategy works out in practice, and to the (dis)advantage of whom, is a question that deserves more empirical and comparative research, in Ecuador and beyond.

Addressing this question, as our case study shows, has conceptual and practical implications for the debate on transnational housing and development. Conceptually

speaking, it allows us to better understand the role of migration industries in transnational housing practices and unpack the connections between nostalgic views of the homeland and ideas of house and home. In practical terms, by looking at the role of real estate agencies we can better understand the impact of transnational housing on local real estate markets, housing designs, and the transformation of physical landscapes, especially but not exclusively in the global south. Overall, as Boccagni & Erdal (2020) suggest, the study of transnational housing opens up new venues for theorising broader social questions including the financialization of housing and return migration, as well as the emotional economies and relational dynamics between different actors in the real estate market.

Notes

1. As a recent survey on Ecuadorians in Madrid shows (n = 520; average length of stay: 14 yrs.) (ERC HOMInG, 2019), only 5% of interviewees owned a house before migrating to Spain, 22% had built it in the meantime, and 37% were willing to either buy or build one. Interestingly, this data suggests that citizenship and the existence of significant others living in migrants' cities of origin influence the migrant's attitudes towards investing in housing in Ecuador. Ecuadorians with dual citizenship are less likely to invest in real estate back in Ecuador, whereas those whose relatives still live there are more likely to do so. Closely related, the recent account of Abainza and Calfat (2018) suggests that Ecuadorian households with at least one returnee have higher probability of house ownership.
2. A discussion of the often-blurred boundaries between 'overt' and 'covert' research goes beyond the scope of this article. See, however, Homan and Bulmer (1980), Calvey (2008), and Hammersley and Traianou (2012).
3. To be precise, three sites were located in wealthy areas of the city with prices ranging between US\$ 150,000 and 190,000; three in middle-income neighbourhoods, with prices ranging between US\$ 120,000 and 150,000; two in a low-income area with prices below US\$ 50,000.
4. Obtaining exact figures on the percentage of customers with a migratory background was no easy task. Our informal conversations with estate agents suggest that such data, if available at all, are only accessible to those in charge of the legal and financial areas of the company. One of our interlocutors, however, estimated that about 10 out of 150 properties in the project he was selling had been purchased by Ecuadorians abroad.
5. This picture, and all those that follow, are from authors' fieldwork.
6. See footnote 1.
7. This is an idiomatic expression which in this context means something like 'your roots will always remain here'.
8. This title is inspired by Obeid (2013).

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