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# “You’re Always in Transit, but the House Stays”: Remitting, Restoring and Remaking Home in a Migrant Family House in Cuenca, Ecuador

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## ABSTRACT

Unravelling the emotional and relational bases of migrant transnational housing is an emerging challenge for research on home, family and migration. Based on a house biography in Cuenca, Ecuador, this paper reconstructs how a transnational family strived to preserve their past house by renovating it as a bed-and-breakfast. Building on narrative and ethnographic fieldwork, we explore how far a house with a commercial purpose and no permanent dwellers reproduces a sense of “home”, and to the benefit of whom. We thereby connect this house biography to four societal questions: the retention of family memories, the interdependence between distant kin, the temporalities of housing and the commodification of the domestic. This fourfold analysis has fundamental implications for the meaning of home for migrants and for its interplay with housing, fixity and continuity, with an ultimate focus on what the house *does*, rather than on what it *is*.

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## Introduction

You want to return to remember, to stay here again, for it’s like to fill yourself with your past life, to live it so gratefully again. So, you want to return.

(Carla, standing in the B&B patio, 2019)

On a cobbled street at walking distance from the historical centre of Cuenca, Ecuador, lies *La Casa de las Estrellas*, a B&B in a colonial-style building that is hardly distinguishable from the surrounding urbanscape. The owner is Estrella, a resident in Italy for several decades, who decided, with the consent of her eleven brothers and sisters, to buy the old family house from their ageing parents, restore and turn it into a hosting facility. She did so, Estrella recounts, to prevent that the house would go into the real estate market, thereby “abandoning” the family, and to allow her parents a more comfortable relocation. Parallel to that, she realized what seems to be a worldwide migrant dream – to have one’s own dwelling back “home” (Fletcher 1999; Boccagni and Bivand-Erdal 2021). The restored building presents itself as a good option for tourists looking for a typical local built

environment, in a city that conjugates a UNESCO heritage status and a half-a-century history of labour emigration (Miles 2010; Klaufus 2012). By reconstructing its lived experience across two generations, from a family house to a site of “productive” remittance investment, we explore a more general question – if and how a house operates as a “home” that preserves the intimate (and imagined) atmosphere of the old household, once it is inhabited only in a transitory and commercialized way. How does the house/home interplay play out under the pressure of contrasting pulls such as family life course transformations, memory retention, migration driven-distanciation and a market re-orientation, all in the same building?

Drawing on a combination of participant observation and in-depth interviews, we first reconstruct the house and family trajectories embodied in the *Casa de las Estrellas* from the viewpoint of Estrella, the youngest child and now the owner, and of two Cuenca siblings (Carla and Lucho). We then read through their narratives in the light of the emerging debate on home, housing and migration, thereby revisiting four general questions: the retention and visualization of family memories, the day-to-day relational work that underpins transnational housing, the temporalities of migrant housing and homemaking, and the delicate interplay between retention and commodification of the domestic space, whenever the latter becomes a productive asset. What is now a nice hosting facility among many, to the eyes of a stranger-as-tourist, holds deeper existential meanings for its past dwellers – and parallel to that, a remarkable potential as a research site. In this perspective, while acknowledging the significance of what the house *is*, we eventually find it more productive to appreciate what it *does*. Exploring how the house is (re)shaped by its dwellers and what it “does” to them over time reveals the enduring influence of the past built environment and the critical role of its sensorial and mnemonic reproduction. It also illuminates the interdependence between transnational housing investments, emplaced material cultures and ongoing moral economies of family life. An empirical discussion of these multiple intersections requires, first, an overview of the scholarship on transnational migrant housing and of the background of our study.

### **On the (Migrant) Family House as a Critical Research Site**

Our article draws from, and feeds into, the literature on the lived experience and the societal meanings of the house. Any house can be both a unit of analysis in itself and a site to investigate the reproduction of family life and the micro foundations of macro social orders and inequalities (Bourdieu 1977 [1977 [1970]; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). This research perspective reaches back to the anthropology of the house (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga 1999) and, more recently, to relational and affective understandings of place (Cresswell 2014), including home (Massey 1992; Blunt and Dowling 2006; Hurdley 2013). The present and past lived experience of a dwelling infrastructure has much to tell about family life inside. At the same time, studying even one single house can illuminate urban dynamics and tensions, but also societal processes spanning beyond any particular building (Gielis 2011). Once a house is acknowledged as a distinctive research site and as a social actor that “does” as much as it “is done” (Gieryn 2002; Vellinga 2007), there is a promise to reconstruct the intertwining of its material and social life into distinctive house biographies (Blunt 2008; Jarvis 2012). Research along these lines can advance our understanding of

domesticity “behind closed doors” (Miller 2001; Pink, 2006). It also illuminates the interdependence between houses and outer environments, beyond the private/public divide (Blunt and Sheringham 2019).

Several case studies of the interplay between structural layouts and subjective forms of dwelling can be found in the built environment literature, across geographical, cultural and disciplinary divides (Gauvain and Altman 1982; Blunt and Dowling 2006). Such an interplay is equally critical to the study of so-called migrant housing, as a research field that attempts to trace the distinctive influence of migration in architecture, in everyday ways of dwelling (Levin 2016; Lozanovska 2019), and possibly in the underlying material cultures (Levin 2018). Such a field also includes the social and material life of migrant past dwellings in the countries of origin, and their transnational renovation (Bocchagni and Bivand-Erdal 2021). Ethnographic research has been done worldwide on migrants building new or “better” houses back home, with a range of (un)intended functions and meanings. Ecuador, and particularly Cuenca, is no exception (Klaufus 2012; Rivera-Munoz and De Meulder 2018; Bocchagni and Pérez-Murcia 2021). While much of this literature shows some pessimism on the sustainability and long-term impact of migrant housing investments, our case study provides a less discomfoting message; or at least, it invites us to capture the entanglements between the social and material life of a house, the underlying family history and the local structure of opportunities.

Migrants’ transnational housing investments and trajectories have significant intersections with the negotiation of their family ties and obligations over a distance. These involve, for instance, the division of roles and responsibilities between genders and generations, or the reproduction of shared memories and worldviews (Fog-Olwig 2007; Pauli and Bedorf 2018). Yet, such intersections are relatively unexplored. This is not surprising if we consider the attendant research costs and methodological challenges. However, embedding research on migrant housing in transnational family life is critical to illustrate the interactions between house and home along the course of migration. We do so, in this paper, by reconstructing the ways in which house-building and restoring fits into one family story and mediates the different needs, interests and desires of its members. The story is about the house of a middle-class Ecuadorian family with a *serrano* and *mestizo* background.<sup>1</sup> Some of its members have lived abroad for decades by now. The investment from one of them is precisely what allowed the older house to take a “new life”. Even so, international migration is only a radical variant of the residential mobilities that are part and parcel of family life over time. These result in contrasting ways to remember, perceive and reshape the same original domestic space. The latter, as a house, has irremediably fixed (if changing) infrastructures. Yet, it is resignified in ways that articulate family and societal change, and deserve in-depth analysis.

## **One House in the Story of a Transnational Family**

This paper draws on a case study in the Andean city of Cuenca in the broader framework of HOMInG, a comparative study of migrants’ experience of home across countries. Bocchagni, who had long been familiar with Estrella as a research informant, was hosted in the B&B during his field visits in Ecuador in 2015 and 2019. Being there meant transitioning from

a guest status to one of witness of a remarkable social process – how a commercial place affords the retention of family memories across distance in time (from one generation to the next) and space (from Estrella’s well-settled family life in Italy, back to her place of origin). Along the process, he had repeated in-depth interviews with three siblings across two countries: Estrella in Italy and, by way of transnational snowballing, Lucho and Carla in Cuenca.<sup>2</sup> Estrella’s siblings joined Boccagni in the house on several occasions and took him around the interiors, in a spontaneous home tour (Ratnam and Drozdowski 2020).<sup>3</sup> This focused on a range of decorations, pictures and objects that invited his interlocutors to tell about their childhood, and then about the reconfigurations of the household and of the domestic interiors over time. Both the interviews and more informal conversations were conducted in Spanish, with some revealing switches to Italian in the self-narrative of Estrella whenever she talked about her family house in Ecuador in the light of her housing and family conditions in Italy. All the quotes and dialogues in the paper come from our own translation, in which we have tried to retain the original nuances and jargons of our participants.

Our fieldwork was informed by an archaeological approach to the lived experience of place (Kourelis 2020). This aims to uncover the stratified layers of a family history in relation to the underlying domestic spaces and objects. It is like peeling off the layers of memories as they emerge from people’s interaction with the house interiors, furniture, and artefacts on display (Davidson 2009). The different viewpoints of each family member are then combined into a broader story in accordance with their family and housing trajectories. A focus on the house as a place in itself, and as a part of transnational social fields in which family members negotiate different roles and expectations, is then the starting point to reconnect our case study to broader societal questions.

While our fieldwork analysis zooms down into the *Casa* interiors, the everyday experience of this house – in fact, of any house – is more like a pendulum. It is made of continuous interactions with the surrounding urban environment through the routines of getting in and out of the house. The neighbourhood itself, with the memories attached to it, is a co-protagonist of Estrella’s family story. While acknowledging this, we mainly focus on the (dis)continuities between the past family life and the lived experience of the house nowadays. This includes Estrella as a “distant owner” who periodically, usually once a year, comes to stay, thereby renewing her special place attachment.

In the following section we approach the house stepwise in time and space, moving from “then to now” and from “the outside in”. We then connect the emerging findings with the literature on the relational and material bases of migrants’ transnational housing and family life.

## **Entering the Family House in Time and Space**

There is a promise to approach the lived experience of *Casa de las Estrellas* both in time, thereby reconstructing relevant family relations and intimate memories, and in space, by observing the social and material infrastructure that hosted and still elicits them. The two perspectives merge into a house biography (sect. 3) that reaches to the here-and-now and speaks to far broader societal questions (sect. 4).

### *In Time: Juggling between Then and Now*

The house that is now called *Casa de las Estrellas* was built in the early 1950s on a terrain bought by Estrella's father, a journalist, on the outskirts of Cuenca's historical centre. Most of his twelve children were born there, including Estrella, who was named after her mother. Half a century later, Estrella's decision to dedicate the B&B to both of them articulates a private sense of intergenerational continuity between women and a public statement of belonging to (and ownership of) the house. At the outset, her brother Lucho explains (cf. pic. 1),

There was only the ground floor, as you see in the picture. Some time after coming to live here, they built the first floor too . . . They first came to this room downstairs, so they didn't have to pay rent any longer. They had only two or three children then.



**Picture 1.** The story of the house building, in pictures (*author's picture*)

Since the house was built, one storey after another, structural changes and functional or aesthetic improvements have paralleled the development of the neighbourhood outside, and the changing needs and distribution of the household, inside. When the house was built, adds Lucho, what is now a residential middle-class neighbourhood was virtually non-existent.

They used to call it *huacha*, it's a quechua word, it was the external side [of the city], kind of the bad one ... many people used to come and throw their waste here, because it was right after the end of the market, in the big street ...

As a matter of fact, the surrounding built environment grew in the subsequent decades, just like the house. Private life in the domestic space went hand in hand with the collective life in the neighbourhood. Both hold powerful emotional and sensuous resonances for Estrella and her siblings. Rather than being simply nostalgic for the good old days, their narratives acknowledge the deep entanglements between domestic life and the outer urban space – what has recently been called “urban dwelling” (Blunt and Sheringham 2019).

As one gets out of the house and turns left, a church stands up at the end of the street. “It was beautiful”, recounts Carla,

Because we used to go to mass on Sundays, we wore our best clothes, I remember – we all came down to the street, all keeping our hands – we occupied the full street! Now, if you go up to the second floor you'll see a small window on that side. When the church is lit up at night, it looks like a picture, so gorgeous! This was really a part of our fond memories, the whole neighbourhood was, and our friends here – it was like a part of home.

It is precisely the old-time atmosphere in the neighbourhood, including long-time acquaintances, that makes Estrella feel she's arriving home whenever she's on her way back. “At that time”, she says, “we used to play in the street all day, it was more calm, kind of more healthy ... we knew everybody, house by house ... we were all friends. They're still friends with my brothers there”. Even now, importantly,

I have these memories that are not only in the house, no? I go out of it too – to meet the neighbourhood. Whenever I'm back, it's so lovely to meet those who have stayed there, those who know me ... There's a carpenter opposite my place, he's always been there – he knows more of us than we know of ourselves, because he has seen us growing up all the time, you know? So, it was a pleasure to go out and chat – he's even helped me to fix the furniture. [...] I just like hanging out and chatting around ... that's the nice thing now – not only to meet the family, as they're spread anywhere by now, no?

“Visiting home” (Mason 2004), Estrella tells us from the sitting room of her apartment in Italy, is no simple matter of re-entering a house. It means also reconnecting with people and emotions in the neighbourhood. After all, the familiar things that renew her fond memories there – well-kept buildings in a lively district close to a UNESCO heritage city centre – are also part of the attraction of the new B&B. In fact, urban change is not alien to the neighbourhood, as vividly shown by the new *tramvía* passing by the entrance of the B&B. However, it does not seem to disrupt the “nostalgic city environment” that is part of Cuenca's success story as a tourist destination (Hayes 2020). If anything, it has contributed to the transformation of the house into a productive asset.

The perceived continuity and even stillness in the external built environment does not match with the lived experience of Estrella's family house, and probably of any house, once we study it “from within” over time. As the children grow up and leave the house, an inner pathway of mobility across different rooms parallels the external ones towards different households, locations and even countries. Estrella herself moved to Italy after getting married in the mid-eighties. As a result, the house becomes increasingly empty and demanding, in terms of material and personal care work. “I've slept in all the rooms”, recalls Lucho, and “was the last one to leave”. “Last,” of course, with the exception of his



father and mother, “the first to get in and the last to get out” as permanent dwellers. It was their presence that qualified the building as home [*hogar*]<sup>4</sup>, and possibly as no-more-so-homely once they began to lose their personal autonomy. “This was home”, he adds,

As long as mum stayed here, and it was much more home before, when you got back in the afternoon and could smell the fragrance of coffee . . . I mean, you had another smell, another warmth that was no longer there once mum and dad became old and sick, you know?

By the early 2000s, what used to be a big family house had turned into an empty, rather decaying “nest” in which the ageing parents were bound in a couple of rooms, struggling to manage it alone. In response to this, Estrella’s brothers and sisters had them move closer to another daughter in Cuenca, where they would be “much more protected”. Interestingly, this was no easy transition. The house had been exerting a palpable tyranny over some of its inhabitants (Douglas 1991; Heller 1995). Their father’s reaction, in particular, was telling of the magnetic power of a building in which he had invested so much, only to find it unsuitable to his changing health needs. “Dad”, Lucho narrates,

Had spent all his life in the neighbourhood. Even when he began to struggle to walk alone, even only to buy some bread or newspaper, people would recognize him, everybody would greet him . . . it was a huge cost for him to leave [. . .]. [*Once they moved*] he would always ask us to take him and check where he had left a certain thing, a book, or whatever . . . Although we had done our best to carry his belongings, there was always something left behind . . . it was so difficult for him to leave the house.

At that point, the old building had no more inhabitants. “As you know”, says Estrella, “an empty house is going to deteriorate itself and then . . . what on earth could we do?”. The answer came from Estrella herself. It was facilitated, economically speaking, by her immigrant background – a rather successful one, by the ordinary standard of her co-nationals abroad. After extended discussion with her family in Ecuador, as well as with her partner in Italy, she purchased the house from her parents. Thanks to this investment, which aggregate statistics would classify somewhere between “family” and “entrepreneurial” remittances, Estrella’s parents and siblings were able to purchase two more apartments in outer Cuenca. This allowed her parents to inhabit one and live off the revenue of the second apartment, given out for rent. Parallel to that, Estrella had the house substantially renovated from a distance, although with periodic visits to Ecuador. The *Casa* reopened as a B&B in 2012. As of now, it is run by a young local woman with training in management, together with a couple of staff. While Estrella is always in touch with her via whatsapp, Carla and Lucho visit the building “every now and then” to supervise, respectively, the ordinary expense management and all infrastructural issues.

Overall, it is relatively straightforward to see this family housing shift as an instance of transnational care circulation (Baldassar and Merla 2014): a migrant daughter made a difference to the life conditions of her older parents back “home,” as a part of their mutual affective and moral engagement (Brandhorst et al., 2020). In fact, this was less an individual initiative than a combined effort of the whole family, with different people providing different forms of care (Schaab and Wagner 2020) – just like Estrella’s siblings do nowadays, in contributing to the house management. That said, there is more to this episode than an exercise of distant care, as we show in the rest of the paper.



### ***In Space: From the outside In***

A few years after the opening of the B&B I (Boccagni) entered it for the first time, after Estrella's invitation. I am a rather unremarkable tourist whenever I stroll in the streets around, and an equally ordinary guest, once I'm in. Even so, I cultivate some ambition to match what I've heard about this place – and what I've read about migrant housing – with the materiality of a distinctive built environment. This ends up in a tricky exercise, with some temptation of "orientalism" always looming. Much of the interior consists of guestrooms by now, although some of the erstwhile common space, including a reading room with books in several languages, retains the same function. Room interiors hold a generically pleasant atmosphere for the guests, while possibly conveying deeper meanings to the past dwellers. A range of decorative objects scattered throughout – paintings, vintage tools, rugs, memorabilia – are meant as aesthetic devices for an outsider, and as mnemonic devices for those who used to be insiders; put differently, they operate as "affordances" (Clapham 2011) for their memory-making. The same infrastructures embody variable "thresholds of domesticity" (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017) depending on who is interacting with them – a customer, a family member, or Estrella herself.

My wanderings inside, as a guest fascinated with the house aesthetics but relatively unfamiliar with the underlying personal stories, inevitably end up in the inner patio (pic. 2). What is now a luminous sitting room for guests used to be the core of day-to-day family life and social reproduction. It is not by chance that my conversations with Carla and Lucho start here and then move from one floor to the next, through the vacant rooms, up to the attic. This used to be a depot of old or unused stuff – a peripheral space that children had turned into an adventurous corner to play hide-and-seek, or possibly peep on the neighbours. It is now a cosy apartment with Estrella's personal belongings and memories, including her pictures on the walls. While this might evoke an "empty migrant room" (Pistrick and Bachmeier 2016), this space has actually a very active use, as the guest suite. It is precisely here, though, that Estrella comes to stay, thereby interrupting its commercial function and re-privatizing it for a while, upon her home visits.



**Picture 2.** Once the core of the home, now a B&B sitting room: the inner patio (*author's picture*)

"I've lived my entire life here until I got married. There are so many memories, you know?", Carla proudly tells me as soon as we start chatting.

Whenever I'm here I keep feeling, seeing and remembering what used to be here ... it really was, and it still is in some way, you know? You feel that you're staying exactly where you've lived so long. It still feels the same, that's why this place holds the spirit of home.

While Carla visibly displays the positive emotions attached to her childhood house, Lucho has an interestingly mixed gaze, as he takes me around. His professional expertise in the construction industry pushes him to linger on technicalities such as the texture of the bricks or the roof sealing improvements. Even that, however, comes with memories and anecdotes popping up in every corner. There may be little of interest, for a guest, in looking at what is now the laundry room. It does mean something, though, as soon as Lucho tells that it used to be their father's studio – his "sacred" space, as a journalist, and possibly the only one where children's access was strictly limited.

As we hang around, what is a nice and comfortable house interior to my eyes is a receptacle of sensuous and emplaced memories to my counterparts (Hect 2001). While each family member carried away their special belongings over time, a number of communal or personal artefacts are still powerfully there. So, an old and vintage radio frame links back to the radio programme their father used to run. The big table in the breakfast room brings back to the family evening meals. The most powerful memories are attached to one particular room on the inner corner of the first floor. Both Carla and Lucho, on separate occasions, point up to it as soon as our conversation warms up. The room has one window on the balcony and is possibly the point of the house that lies farthest away from the outside. This is where they and Estrella were born. Interestingly, the reminiscence about the room is as vivid as the sense of excitement upon the awaiting for the newborn baby.

[Carla:] The room upstairs, you see, the "yellow" one – it was my parents' bedroom, so I was born there ... there was a door to separate it from the corridor, you know? Well – they locked it, and we were all outside, waiting for the new baby to be born! I do remember when Estrella was born ...

[Lucho:] I remember when Estrella was born. It was in that room up there, they kept us all in another room, "don't move!", the doctor was taking care of it, then the women came down ...

There is nothing special in that place by now, to the eyes of a non-family member. As long as home is the place in which one was born (Mallett 2004), however, it is one of the reasons why this house still somehow feels like home – in a moral sense, it *ought to* feel like home – to Estrella and her siblings.

### **Why the Lived Experience of a House Matters on Extra-domestic Scales**

There is more than the pleasure of collecting a family narrative in its original stage, however, in our engagement with *Casa de las Estrellas*. This is like a kaleidoscope that opens up to several questions of larger significance for research on transnational housing and family life.

### ***Saving Family Memories by Materializing Them in Place***

The first and most tangible question involves the reproduction of family memories over time, lest they be dispersed under the dual strain of intergenerational transition and large-scale migration. A house can be a privileged receptacle of past reminiscences, in this case after a restoration that is meant to display an “authentic” atmosphere to an external audience. While the guests of a B&B are a transitory presence by definition, the infrastructure is not. Nor are, in the intentions of Estrella, the memories embedded in it.

*Casa de las Estrellas* as a tourist facility is fundamentally the same place where the everyday life of a large family was played out, decades before. The retention of its interior infrastructure is enough to reproduce meaningful reminiscences for some family members. These are “no free-floating abstractions”, says Estrella. “It’s images that have to do with a room, the patio, the kitchen” – hence, with sensorially being there. “Whenever I’m here”, adds Carla, “I can’t get into the rooms, of course, but I like to stay a bit on the patio and look around, see the flowers, enjoy the whole thing”. However, these situated recollections do not emerge by chance. The memory-making power of the building is enhanced by Estrella’s active choices in remaking it up. Central to her idea of restoration is the use of local original materials (e.g. tiles and wood infrastructures), as well as older family belongings, to visibly situate it in a certain architectural and family tradition. This is explicitly in opposition to the option to refurbish the interiors by giving them a “modern”, standardized and impersonal outlook.

We started to imagine how we could restore the house without damaging it, but just making it more comfortable, no? I would have liked to keep all that was in ... but the world had changed so much! [...] As soon as I was there, my sister took me shopping around for the interior covering ... she showed me good, modern fashion stuff, but I said “No! This just looks like Italian ceramic”, you know what I mean? No way! I began to work with craftsmen in Cuenca, little by little, with an architect trained in restoration ... what I did was to recreate the house as I had always seen it in my dreams – a beautiful one. That’s exactly what I say whenever I get in now!

For sure, the aesthetic of nowadays’ interior is no straightforward reproduction of the old one. However, it is no transposition of an immigrant aesthetic (Lozanovska et al. 2020) either. It rather articulates Estrella’s idealized memories about the past, as well as her personal tastes at present. The bright colours in the guest rooms, she admits, say more of her own personality than of the older rooms: “Well – I altered the philology of our family tale”. This is also a balancing act between recovering from the past and meeting the expectations of potential customers. In short, “it is as much a house of memories, as an ideal one” – ultimately, the one of Estrella’s ideals (Chapman and Hockey 1999).

However, not all of the past domesticity is visible to an outsider gaze. The stratification of what is (to be made) visible or public is particularly remarkable in the attic (pic. 3), the space that best embodies the multiple connectedness and the structural ambiguity of a migrant house (Boccagni and Pérez-Murcia 2021).



**Picture 3.** Going back in time: the corridor from sitting room to the bedroom in Estrella's apartment (*author's picture*)

As one gets in, an old frame stands on the left wall with a print of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. "Dad used to keep it well in sight", Lucho says, "and to quote it in his radio programmes". As one moves from the sitting to the bedroom, in a micro-travel back in time, more pictures appear hanging on the walls, including one with Estrella's parents and several ones that portray her doing sport activities as a young girl. Less predictable, and more intriguing, is the presence of two locked-up coffers behind the entrance door. One, explains Lucho, is "only for Estrella's things – she holds the key". The other is for "Dad's old books and stuff", that is, belongings that are too personal to be kept outside, and probably just too many to be carried elsewhere. One coffer epitomizes the spatial interdependence with Estrella's everyday life, far away from there; the other encapsulates the temporal interdependence between the present B&B and the past family house. One of the objects in the coffers, Estrella tells us, is a wooden tricycle with an interesting story.

Dad has always given us all he was able to, but no luxury. So when he got his first salary he had enough to buy a tricycle – this was the first toy he was able to buy for my brothers! I got so emotional as I saw it again ... but I keep it locked in, of course, just where it used to be. I didn't place it out because ... you know, certain things are like ...

Questions of privacy and intimacy are part and parcel of memorialization through material culture, as this excerpt shows. Overall, though, the memory-making function of the B&B is neither fully intentional or explicit. It is also the inertial fruit of the same things staying there over time and being occasionally revisited – one might say, re-animated – by the same people. Put differently, the familiar atmosphere inside the B&B does not simply rely on the story of the old dwellers, made public. Although the website does mention the family story, "you won't find it on a board as you enter", Estrella tells us, bursting into laughter. "The bulk of family pictures, with the faces in, they're in my apartment now, because they matter more for me ... that's where I feel most at home now", as a result of the selective "privatisation" of those particular rooms. There are then more subtle, sensorial and not-so-personal ways to reproduce the family story. This is less through

an explicit narrative than by means of elusive hints in the material culture, including the use and disposition of vintage objects, wall decorations and pictures. More fundamentally, the sense of familiarity relies on the very maintenance of the same interior infrastructures after restoration – “the house is still there”.

### ***Negotiating the Relational Bases of Transnational Housing***

Whenever Estrella’s siblings leave the house at the end of our conversations, they cannot but repeat, as Carla does, “Thanks Estrella for maintaining it . . . which was our common aim, wasn’t it?”

Give it to her – she feels it just like we do, and wants to preserve it as it was when she lived here. That’s why they remodelled it and it keeps being the same. If we had sold it out to someone else, maybe they wouldn’t care for what it was like, right? Maybe they would change it their own way and we couldn’t get back in, which would hurt us a lot . . . now, instead, you can get back whenever you like! [. . .] It may be Estrella’s house, but in practice I’m enjoying it more than her . . . sometimes I just have a stroll and have a look in – kind of “living” it, no? Estrella does not.

Who really owns a house, who “enjoys” it and who should care for it are not obvious questions under circumstances of transnational housing (Schaab and Wagner 2020; Boccagni and Pérez-Murcia 2021). In order to make sense of them we need to unpack the family negotiation of the rights and obligations attached to the ownership, access and maintenance of the house. This relational work is made only more complex by the physical distance between owners and dwellers or users.

Technically speaking, *Casa de las Estrellas* is nothing but “Estrella’s house”. The youngest member of the family has become the owner of what used to be the house of all. However, it is plausible that she will never dwell there, unless on holiday. While Estrella is the legal owner – she fully covered the renovation expenses and monthly receives a “modest” revenue out of the B&B – she does not even hold the keys of the house (unless, interestingly, for the coffer in her room). This does not question her status or entitlement. However, it does reveal ambiguities and dilemmas that are typical of the lived experience of remittance houses and require further exploration of the underlying kin- and care-work.

The story of *Casa de las Estrellas* is entangled in questions of care at multiple levels. This is not only because Estrella’s housing investment has indirectly enabled better caring arrangements for her parents. As important, some form of care-in-place is necessary for the house to maintain its ambience as a tourist facility. Much of this care work can be done only in presence, albeit with a certain scope for remote control from Estrella. It is mostly externalized to the paid labour force – a local manager and some staff – but, as our interviewees believe, it should not be reduced to that. It is only people of the family that can dedicate to that house – their house – better attention and care than for an ordinary commercial building.

As the owner, Estrella may well have the last word on all decisions involving her *Casa*. However, she is by no means self-sufficient in running it. Since the very outset, her transnational housing initiative has rested on the collaboration of her siblings in place.

This involves trust as much as emotional attachment. Now, looking after the house “with more affection”, as she puts it, may contribute to the guest perception of the B&B as a special place, entangled as it is with the family history. As Estrella acknowledges,

If I had not their support in Ecuador, which is a matter of total trust, there would be no way to make it, I guess – not even the restoration. The thing is that [*with different people*] there’s not the same . . . it’s something that belongs to us. My sister can get in any moment and say: “Look, you didn’t clean here!”, as if it were hers. If there were only people with no emotional relation with that place, it would be a different story . . . I really couldn’t have done all of that. I mean, it’s easy to imagine it from here, but in practice – it’s a different thing.

This mutual cooperation is made more “natural” by kinship ties and by the common attachment to the house. Yet, it is necessarily enmeshed in a moral economy of mutual expectations and obligations. This cannot be settled by contract or given once for all, as family relations have their own reach and life course. One’s attachment and commitment to the family house may well be mitigated over time as it intersects with alternative needs, interests and priorities. This may end up in a thorough “commodification” of the house management, which is not without consequences.

“I’ve always come here”, is Lucho’s premise,

But I can’t keep doing so every week, every month. I mean, you keep all your memories and attachments, but as time goes by, you come here less and less . . . it may be that at last it [*the B&B*] turns into a real estate asset with good memories and nothing more – it would still have its financial value too, of course.

As the excerpt suggests, the relational foundations of a (migrant) house feed into questions of open (or uncertain) temporality, and potentially of downright commodification, which are worth exploring further.

### ***Coping with the Temporality of Housing and Home***

“The house”, says Estrella, “keeps being there”, unlike herself, “and lives its own life”. This inadvertently echoes long-standing and widespread imaginaries of the house as a living entity (Waterson 1990; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Davidson 2009). Analytically speaking, it is an invitation to take in earnest the agency of *Casas de las Estrellas*, which “does” things – it elicits attachments and memories, requires cleaning and care, and of course hosts and protects its dwellers. The house has its own life course, which is interdependent with that of the people engaged with it. At an earlier point, its slow infrastructural deterioration was in striking parallel with the precarious health conditions of Estrella’s parents. While the subsequent renovation gave the house a new life and function, it by no means eliminates its interdependence with the family life story.

As the previous dwellers grow adult and move elsewhere, they may well retain a significant affection for their childhood house. However, as Lucho repeats, memories and affections about the past are not the whole story in people’s lives. There is so much more in them, and as many reasons to expect an increasing detachment over time:

The initial idea was clear – we all love the house, we all can get back any time . . . however, one year after another, we all have our own lives and it gets more complicated, you kind of detach yourself . . . all my brothers and sisters came to see the house at first, they even invited their friends in. However, some of them haven’t been around for years by now.

There is no judgemental stance in these words. It is simply an acknowledgement that, while each family member has the same “right to memory” in the house, they all take their own life paths, which may lead far away from the home in emotion, no less than in space. There is nothing surprising, after all, in gradual detachment from a house with no permanent dwellers. However, this does not sit well with its need for everyday care. If for most siblings the family house is less a place of their own than a beautiful museum of their past, is it still home in a normatively positive sense for Estrella herself?

“Let me think a bit – it’s not an immediate thing!”, she responds smiling (and, interestingly, in Italian).

Home ... Of course, I have my place in mind – the place I go to stay when I get back to Ecuador, you know, the attic apartment – I made it thinking of my return there. So, whenever I return I think “I’m going home”. But the notion of home and family I’m returning to has changed over the years. I mean, home is no more the place where I was born, and stuff. Of course, that’s still like a beautiful picture frame that wraps around you – all my memories, the pictures and colours I had there, as it used to ... but if I think “I’m going back”, now, I’m going back to see my siblings, to chat with my sister all the time, maybe hang out in town. I mean – I could go back and love Ecuador anyway without my apartment, right? This [*the notion of home*] has definitely changed in time, because it’s very much bound up with people.

The very idea of home, for Estrella and for many more migrants, has a life course of its own (Dawson and Rapport 1998; Ahmed et al., 2003; Boccagni and Vargas-Silva 2021). It starts from the childhood house, it follows it to a certain extent, and tends to depart from it over time, shifting to significant relations as the most fundamental concern.

Even so, the house stays stubbornly there and looms in the family imaginaries of the time ahead of them. What about its own future, as a permanently-non-permanent dwelling place? Unsurprisingly, Lucho and Carla hope that Estrella may keep it as long as possible. The owner herself articulates a similar hope, but anchors it to the geographies of her own life course. This may make things still more uncertain.

I hope my daughter will take it over at some point ... but you can’t really know the future. For sure, I’m not going to sell it from one day to the next. That would be too bad after I took care of all the smallest details ... in the end, if my children and grandchildren stay here [*Italy*] in the future, that’s what determines where you’re going to stay, no doubt. No *casa* can ever change that!

This leads us back to the ultimate limitations of a house, including *Casa de las Estrellas*, in contrasting family dispersion over time. In fact, the commercial value of the B&B is not necessarily affected by this. Even so, what is the impact of commodification – turning what was a private, family space into a commercial infrastructure for outsiders-as-guests – on the retention of a home-like space, as long as home is possible at all?

### ***Opening the Domestic to Commodification***

Turning a private domestic space into a commercial one was critical to cover the restoration expenses of the *Casa* and retain the bulk of its architectural style and material cultures. Its self-image as a B&B draws also on a captivating presentation of the underlying family story. Family embeddedness and entrepreneurial orientation, therefore, feed into each other at several levels. However, the reproduction of an intimate, homelike



atmosphere for commercial purposes is fraught with dilemmas (Roelofsen 2018). What is meant to embed and evoke a personal family story may end up being perceived as a pleasant, but ultimately standard, impersonal and memory-less consumption good. Is this, we might ask, an example of undue “colonisation” of the private and domestic space by the commercial one? What does this case study say for the emerging debate on the commodification of housing after large-scale international migration, among other factors?

Migration driven-investments have had their own influence – albeit a minor one, relative to other factors (Aalbers 2017) – on the financialization of local housing markets and the cumulation of empty properties, which hinder their accessibility and affordability as sites of family reproduction and consumption (Zapata 2018; Wagner 2022). What our case study suggests, however, is that the transformation of a house from consumption good into productive asset does not necessarily supersede its family value. It may actually be a way to reaffirm it. If empty or under-utilized properties seem to be frequent aftermaths of migrant transnational housing, setting up the B&B is meant precisely to prevent a similar scenario. This is facilitated, of course, by the favourable location in a city that is a privileged tourist destination.

Commodification, here, is the necessary condition for the infrastructural survival of the previous family house. No need to regret the good old times before the B&B transformation, for the simple reason that those times had long been over anyway. If anything, Estrella’s investment affords to retain something of them in material and visual cultures. This is not to deny that remittances from abroad affect traditional housing patterns, possibly replacing them with apparently more modern, and often less functionally adequate – a *nouveau riche* development that is highly (and patronizingly) described in the public debate, including in Cuenca (Klaufus 2012; Boccagni and Pérez-Murcia 2021). Estrella herself would see “no point”, she says, “to return there and make one of those big new modern buildings – there’s plenty of them already”.

In short, a “conservative” approach that claims continuity with the past informs both the renovation and then the use and self-representation of the new *Casa*. However, its distinctive style and atmosphere are contingent on the passionate commitment of Estrella and her siblings. If this is to cease, the *Casa* might struggle to retain an image of cultural distinctiveness and family continuity, relative to the larger hospitality market in Cuenca.

## Conclusion

An ambivalent sense of disruption and continuity emanates from our biography of *Casa de las Estrellas*, all across the social questions it is connected with. While its restoration was meant to retain pre-existent infrastructures and material cultures, it has not gone without change – quite the opposite. By way of a functional overturn, the erstwhile irrelevant space of the attic has become the most personal space of the entire house – “Estrella’s room in Cuenca”. The patio, which used to be the core of day-to-day family life, is now an impersonal open space for all guests. More fundamentally, what used to be a family house is now a commercial facility. Is this a (less cynical) instance of the principle whereby “everything must change for everything to remain the same”, as in *The Leopard* novel? Put differently, has the house changed only in its most superficial appearance, while retaining a substantive continuity in architectural infrastructure, in aesthetics and in family relations and obligations, from one Estrella to the next?

This is a powerful and captivating self-representation. However, it does not match the reality of this house, and possibly of any house. As our fieldwork shows, the perception of sameness – hence the argument that the house still feels like home, or the “house-home equivalence” does not hold to further scrutiny. This is not for a matter of infrastructural change, or even for the absence of permanent dwellers. It is, instead, for a fundamental question of time. While Carla feels wrapped by “the spirit of home” on her occasional visits, and tourists seem to encounter an equally pleasant (if more shallow) ambience, the house cannot but pay the toll of temporality. No conservative restoration can revert its life course. This is what Estrella captures when finally admitting that going back, by now, is a cherished occasion to catch up with relatives and share good memories, rather than an intimate form of homecoming (Durr Schmidt 2016). Home is now wherever her partner, children and grandchildren are, she tells us at last. Whether for her or other family members, home as the ordinary place of dwelling and intimate relations lies elsewhere. Still, keeping the house in good conditions is a relief. It is the reassurance that the family history is kept alive, cared for, and reproduced in an informal museum of memories, for the time being. Turning the house into a commodity is a reasonable price to be paid to preserve such memories. Commodification is not at odds with its “home spirit”, for that intimate spirit was long gone anyway.

What this essentially means for the social study of home is that the overlap of home with one particular house, be it even the childhood one, is still bound to be ephemeral. As people grow up and move through their life trajectories, their sense of home may shift accordingly into different locations – and possibly be attached to people, more than place – rather than eternally lingering behind. Whether people engage in large-scale migration or not, their experience of home seems to turn into a matter of *homing* anyway (Boccagni 2022). That is not to deny the powerful fascination of all attempts to reconstruct home in the past built environment, just like the *Casa* does. However, this is precisely a matter of *doing*, more than *being*. For research purposes, what the house reconstruction *does* – here: facilitate family cohesion, regenerate a building, attract tourists – is more analytically fruitful than what it *is*, or claims to be. Ultimately, approaching home in terms of functional equivalence, as an emotional, moral and mnemonic underpinning of family life over time, opens a more promising research avenue than eternally seeking where, or what, home should be. While home can hardly stay in the same place forever, the house has “its relative fixity” (Clapham 2011: 364). It is worth exploring further what it does as a consequence, both at familial and societal level, in proximity and over a distance, as we argued in this article.

## Notes

1. *Serrano*, in Ecuador, refers to people coming from the central highlands (*Sierra*). *Mestizo* refers to people of a mixed European and American Indian ancestry. This is an ethnic/racial classification whose first use dates back to the time of the Spanish Empire.
2. We have changed all the names of our participants in order to protect their identity and privacy.
3. While in Cuenca, Boccagni had also informal conversations with the B&B manager and her staff. However, he was unable to engage directly either with Estrella’s parents, due to their health conditions, or with siblings other than Lucho and Carla, most of them living elsewhere.

4. *Hogar* is a Spanish term that could be roughly translated as *home*. It is a common understanding among Spanish-speaking populations that *hogar* is not simply a house (*casa*). Rather, it is the place where people feel most “in place” and nourish their intimate familiar relationships.

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