

HOMInG interview

with Iris Levin (Swinburne University)

Conducted by Paolo Boccagni in Frankfurt, 15 December 2018



Iris Levin is Research Fellow at the Centre for Urban Transitions, Swinburne University, Melbourne. She works on housing, social planning, migration and social diversity. Her research focuses on issues around housing, the built environment, migration, disadvantaged communities and social mix in the city. She often uses qualitative and visual methodologies and analyses and has experience in longitudinal research. Iris has been involved in research focusing on migrants and their sense of belonging in their homes, social inclusion in public open urban spaces. Her publications include [Migration, settlement, and the concepts of house and home](#) (Routledge, 2016).

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What does home mean to you, in light of your professional and research background?

Home to me is a feeling, more than a specific place. It is a sense of belonging. It can be at different scales: in the world, in a country or nation, in a neighbourhood or city, and of course in a house or dwelling. Most people make themselves feel at home in the dwelling, as a common need of ours, as the dwelling is where we have most control upon. However, from the dwelling we then project something out and explore the world, out of that. That's why home can be at different scales, and feeling at home in the dwelling is not enough. People want to feel at home where they live, in the street, where they go out, when they communicate with other people – it is not only about the dwelling.

At a more personal level, I've noticed that some people really feel at home everywhere, and others less so... I'm one of the "less so"! I'd like to feel at home in different places in the world. For me it is ultimately a matter of belonging to place and community, to other groups of people.

How is that the study of migrant homemaking is distinctively approached, and conducted, from the position of an architect?

I'm an architect, but also a social planner, interested in people. That's why I wanted to move beyond architecture, because I felt that people were not there! The urban environment is also of interest to me, I'm also a human geographer. But what my architect gaze brings to the study of homemaking is the importance and understanding of space in people's lives: how space is constructed, how it affects people lives, how people change it and operate in it; the understanding of the material from which space is constructed and its importance in people's life. These aspects tend sometimes to be ignored, but they are important: the physicality of space.

What is, in essence, a "migrant house"? What distinguishes and characterizes it as such?

I'm struggling with this question! Is there a *migrant house* at all? Can we identify it? I'm not completely sure. You need to approach it also from different perspectives, for instance a class analysis, but there is something about the migrant house that is perhaps unique, related to the migrant background, length of stay, who lives there, tenure status, how much they changed it, and so forth. Beyond that, there is something that is hard to identify completely. Migrants do try to feel at home like everybody else, but also to have some connection with their past. Not all of them, of course, and this is also related to their structural position and opportunity - whether they can make a home at all. There is no straight answer to this question. I feel there is something there, but perhaps it is an illusion...

Could you expand on the use of participatory methods in your fieldwork on migrant houses? How did your (migrant) guests react to them, particularly with respect to pictures?

It is really important to have participatory methods and give some agency to migrants as a way of subjectifying research or, ideally, as a matter of action-research. The latter was not my case though. I asked my participants to draw their past homes, whatever they had in mind, the most significant they felt they had lived in; and then also the current home. I would have liked to ask something related less to the dwelling and more to the concept of home itself. In practice, many participants got trapped in the details: "What do you want me exactly to draw?" It was really hard to get their most conceptual understanding of home. And some, of course, just did not want to draw. Still others started to measure the house around them, and give me a very specific drawing! That was not really useful... If I did again I'd probably ask them to be less connected to the actual place, and more to the feeling, but I cannot be sure that would work either. Nonetheless, I wanted to get their own views. Indeed, some people have some complex issues with holding a pen, maybe after they have long been told they just can't draw! I wanted them to be active in the research, but since they had not designed it in the first place, they were not really part of it. They also took me on tours in their houses, to show me what they wanted to show me. I simply asked them to take me around, tell and show me whatever they liked – all that was important to them. They did exactly so - they shared what was important to them. Yet, many times they just said "Oh look, it is just that, just that..." – in fact they went with me through a process of discovering what they had, and why. Some did really take advantage of that digging into how and why and where they had the things they had. Some did not. I asked for anything they wanted to show me, not necessarily private places only. Some did show me their bedrooms too, particularly women. I mostly interviewed women, who are the ones who are very often in charge of the homemaking... they were often but not always more comfortable to show me around. They always said they had nothing to hide, which was interesting! Why did they emphasize that? You may not want to let someone in, even if you have nothing to hide... that made me feel like an intruder. But generally people enjoyed going around with me and tell what they liked or not, why they had certain objects. Ultimately, as Cooper Marcus (1995) put it, the house is a mirror of the self. This is not always the case, but many times people do feel emotionally attached to their homes, especially if they have lived there for many years, which was the case for many of my participants.

I also took my own pictures. Again, participants just said they had nothing to hide, some were really happy for me to do so. Another option would have been to give them the cameras, like Ayona Datta (2008) did. I didn't do that. As for the request to take pictures to the homes, from the outside or

the inside, people may react in different ways, but most of those I met did not have any problem. The camera is a really good tool to think later on what is there, in a house, and what is not.

Based on your experience, can you expand on the promises and pitfalls of doing comparative research - across countries, across groups etc. - on migrants' sense of home, homemaking practices, and housing?

Comparative research is a really good opportunity to understand how things work in different places and societies, although in a way it makes things more complicated! In my PhD research I had six countries and different societies involved, even more languages, and three different religions; quite a lot of factors that can make it complex. At the same time, I had the opportunity that I knew well two societies in the first place, and could draw some interesting parallels between them. Therefore I thought I had to use this! A comparative study is important not only for policy purposes, but also to find out that we are really quite the same, regardless of different habits and languages. We all feel we need to belong and do relatively similar things to achieve it.

As I found out, regardless of where immigrants came from, and of the major differences in the underlying societal structures, their actions and ways of constructing their homes were quite similar. There are many different meanings and motivations in this process, of course, but the basic thing is that we all want to belong and feel at home. In this sense there is a similarity in the ways people construct home, even from different cultures, countries and cities, and even with very different built environments and different opportunities to do what they want. Even people who had lived in the former URSS and did not own their home, they said they had felt at home in their past dwellings because they were secure there. The feeling of home and the desire to feel at home is universal, I think. We all share it.

Some research on migrants' home experience has recently taken the shape of "home tours". What would you say about this research option?

I simply asked participants to take me to a tour in their homes and show me around. I had never encountered before people who would call it this way, but it was very empowering to enable people to tell and show what they liked or not. I enjoyed that and I think they did too! I felt grateful and very humble that they let me in. People always felt a kind of a need to apologize: "This is not that nice!" I tried to assure them. I didn't want them to feel judged in any way. Some were actually very proud of their homes. A woman, for instance, emphasized that the home was according to her own taste. She wanted me to take as many photos as I could. Yet, I always felt it was not completely clear or obvious that they would let me in.

Much research on lived domesticity has shown how domestic spaces hold a variety of internal thresholds, as for what spaces are accessible to whom, how, under what circumstances. How did you find these thresholds of domesticity to work out in your fieldwork? Did they meet your own expectations?

I used to tell people that they didn't need to show me their private spaces, but some did it nonetheless. It was mostly women. Maybe it was also for their pride, if they felt that their spaces

were presentable, clean and well-organized... which they usually were. Some, instead, did not take me to their private spaces, which was also OK for me.

During your fieldwork, what did entering people's dwellings feel like? Again, anything specific in entering a "migrant house"? And any particular ethical dilemma, in doing research of / out of / in migrant houses?

I had got their formal consent, and most liked me to do that, but I'm not sure I was completely confident with entering people's homes. Now I do much research on social housing, and in this case there may also be concerns for my own safety – you never know what may happen inside the home of someone else. During my PhD fieldwork I never felt unsafe, but now with interviewing people in social housing, you really never know what you can find. There was also the ethical dilemma of going to people's places and looking around for anything, which can be a bit uncomfortable, although most people made me feel very comfortable. It was anyway a process that takes time: you need to gain the trust of people to be able to go around in their homes. This can also be beneficial for participants, and in any way it is not going to damage them.

What next, for your own research agenda on migration and home?

Now I am more interested in exploring the feelings of home at different scales, in particular in public urban spaces: how people try to create "circles of belonging" round themselves; how and where they belong, if at all. This is also important for people that "look different", that are somehow "others". But I have an ethical dilemma there. Maybe I should first look at how people like myself look at them. Unfortunately, there is not much support from the government, in Australia and maybe elsewhere too, to research these groups in the public space. But that makes it all the more important!

Thanks very much for sharing all of this with us!

References

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