

HOMInG interview  
with prof. Mirjana Lozanovska  
(Deakin University, Melbourne)  
Conducted by Paolo Boccagni and Bernardo Armanni  
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Associate Professor Mirjana Lozanovska is an architectural educator, academic leader and researcher with international collaborations and professional experience and awards. Mirjana's research is situated at the intersection of architecture and psychoanalytic, gender and postcolonial theories, to explore a core research question – how does architecture mediate human dignity? Her monograph *Migrant Housing: Architecture, Dwelling, Migration* (Routledge 2019) examines the impact of migration on architecture and is critical to understanding new forms of globalisation. Mirjana is currently investigating the space of labour with a focus on the BHP Steelworks in Port Kembla. This research is part of a collaborative project “Architecture and Industry: immigrants' contribution to nation building 1945-1979” supported by the Australia Research Council Discovery Project with CIs in four institutions (University of Melbourne, ANU, University of Tasmania and Deakin). Mirjana has published widely in journals including *Journal of Architecture*, *Co-Design*, *Architecture Theory Review*, *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*. Mirjana is co-editor of the major architectural history journal *Fabrications: JSAHANZ*.

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**What does home mean to you, as an architect, a scholar of migrant housing, and as a person with an immigrant background?**

As an architect, first... this is a little misunderstood. Architects feel like creators! My inspiration is from philosopher Elizabeth Grosz. She wrote a tiny book, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, saying architecture is like art before all other arts, the frame to organize and extract order out of the chaotic and rhythmic dimension of earth, life and movement, harness these energies and frame them.... In a sense architecture makes home of the earth. Without architecture we as human beings are subjected to the elements and to the chaos.

Architecture is the framing, order, the composer of earth into a home. Composition and beauty are no different from notions such as homing and dwelling... the textures and geometries engender a societal civility out of the earth for human beings, and an aesthetic platform for other arts.

As for myself, I grew up in a family who lived in a house with rooms etc., but it was very important for me to separate myself from the familial environment, as I needed a space of solitude. As Bachelard put it, though, the home is also fictional, and has secret spaces – these are the inner spaces of home. I also like homing as a verb... in *Migrant Housing* I have called it *dwelling*, a verb, the activities of dwelling are what makes a home.

What migration brings into all this is a dialectic between the spatial and relational aspects of home. Many people are embedded in ideas of spatial nesting scales, especially in geography and architecture. Migration cuts through that, because of the relational dimension – I could be closer to someone overseas than to my neighbour. Migration has a very vibrant uprooting of the distance between spatial and relational, and provides innovative ways to reconsider the home. Migrants are both desperately seeking a home, and yet that desire is fraught with a sense of loss and perhaps also an obsession to have a home. Migration brings into the idea that one is not always at home.

There is a loss of sense of the passive being at home that migration raises as a very significant question for research. Importantly, migrants don't build home only by their own individual housing – the only way they can always have home is to transform the larger fabric of cities: cafés, gathering in parks, kids playing, promenade on the high street etc. For the South European migrants I studied, home is an interactive set of

activities that are both social and personal or private. Home stretches across those spatial scales because of the relational aspect. In *Migrant Housing* I examine a homeland village, why migrants return and what the village becomes after migration. The village as a construct is more than the little houses emigrants have built. And the mountain – returning emigrants go for walks there... Migrants are drawn back – not due to memory of the old village as it was, but due to the relational/kinship connection to both the place and people. The village as a site of nostalgia is remade into a new home for immigrants. This has caused immense transformations of the so-called traditional villages. No more vernacular architecture, but a completely different environment.

**You wrote in the book, and told us in your HOMInG presentation, about a migrant who tried to cope with a "stubborn" house - he was invariably unable to transform it fully into home over time, in spite of all his efforts. Is this "stubbornness" a form of agency exerted by the house (as an actor, rather than a passive stage for action)? Does it resonate with an old statement by Agnes Heller, i.e. "every house exerts a degree of tyranny on its inhabitants?"**

Yes! When Southern European migrants came to Melbourne, mostly in Post-WW period, they could only afford dilapidated and substandard housing in the inner city – workers cottages stuck to each other, very dark inside. The immigrant arrived with certain types of dwelling habits, and the task was to make these little houses liveable: pragmatically, as shelters and with running water etc.; socio-spatially, to accommodate a different way of life; and aesthetically. The immigrant does not like the appearance and changes the façade. In contrast to considering this as ‘superficial’ it is a significant decision, as the immigrant instrumentalizes and exerts agency to alter the façade that is visible to the public. The politics of this decision is revealed by the local perception that it ‘does not fit’ – new colours that are not meant to go together. Same holds for the materials he uses – metal, mixture of elements, turquoise and brown... He completely alters the façade of the house. Yet he is still not happy. It still doesn’t look pleasing to him. There is the question of the work of the migrant as a never ending labour. The work of trying to make the house fit the migrants’ ways of dwelling and aesthetic preferences, as an ongoing practice. There are deeper reasons for that, anyway the house brings the person into action. The idea of tyranny is interesting. But it could also be that any object brings us, as humans, into action. We are not actively human, except when we... such as when we bring up a pen, to the action of writing.

As Žižek put it, the object objects! It is stubborn. You cannot make it do everything you want... but it also animates humans into activity, including the activity of dwelling. Remaking the house of Atanas was an activity likened to the verb dwelling or homing. Through all these incremental alterations he is dwelling, but that does not mean that it is not conflicted, not a battle, or that it is finished. Immigrant houses are also perceived as a kind of protest and objection in the local housing-scape. They not only animate the migrant, but also the community, not only the local community, but the national imagery of home. House-objects do not only animate the migrant, but the entire immigrant city. In this case, raising hostility toward the migrant.

**Migrant housing, in your argument, is a distinctive architectural type. Is it also a distinctive social and cultural type? Is it as "distinctive" in Australia as in other immigration societies, or is there anything unique to the Australian case?**

One reason for framing migrant housing in Melbourne as a distinct architectural construct is that it is missing from Australian housing history. Following surveys and fieldwork it emerges that its distinctiveness concerns recrafting and redesigning through a series of ‘architectural elements’ including the terrace, formal entrance, dignified monumental façade. My thesis is that these ‘architectural elements’ are better understood as interwoven with dwelling and socio-spatial practices, rather than as stylistic categories. The first post-war phase of the migrant house evolves from a cultural confrontation between existing house models and the dwelling practices and social activities of migrants. When this existing model and migrant dwelling habits collide, a sequel of alterations to the house evolves, and these are more clearly visible in the houses where migrants adapted the existing older houses. First-generation migrants with very different ways of living altered houses in a certain way. A very similar process related to southern European immigrants has occurred in Canada, almost exactly the same, and in many parts of the US, in Astoria in NYC; and I think, although there has been very little research, in order to build a detached house, migrants settled in the peripheral

suburbs of places like Sweden and Germany. Images from western Europe indicate similar house constructs. I think it is a global phenomenon related to the post-war migration of southern European migrants. It is not a social or architectural construct that is consistent over time, it is rather the outcome of historical determinants. The houses go through change, but so do the dwelling practices. Second or third generations do not have the same dwelling practices.

However, there is something unique about the Australian case, especially Melbourne and Sydney – one of the most ethnically diverse societies, but still proposing the superiority of British culture. Before the end of WWII, Australia was culturally homogeneous, 99% Anglo-Celtic. What is important about Australia for all migration discourse is that the cultural transformation was dramatic. While various racial and ethnic communities were existent during the gold rush in the nineteenth century, the effect of the so-called ‘White Australia’ policy since federation in 1901 produced a more systemic and internalised racism and discrimination. In the immediate post-war period the large majority of southern European migrants were at the bottom of the hierarchy, though necessary labour immigrants for Australia’s nation-building economy. The shift towards a mass migration policy resulted in a substantially multicultural society and dramatic transformation of the urban and built environment. This context has made the post-war migrant housing phase important.

**As a researcher of migrant housing, what can you understand of migrants' family and social conditions, and of their migration histories, from the outside of a house, and what from the inside? How can you combine research on exteriors and interiors, methodologically speaking?**

Research tends to divide interiors (home) from the exterior (house). Yet, interior and exterior worlds are important to discuss separately, but also together. Houses mediate interior from exterior, as envelopes that enable dwelling inside. But the exterior has to navigate many other forces that are sometimes left out of research on the home if it focuses on interiors only: finances, laws, regulations, and various authorities. This is partly why I have called the house an existential infrastructure. If the focus is only on statistics and economics you leave out the deeper aspects of homing and dwelling. Concepts such as Bourdieu’s habitus or the house as ‘opus operatum’ caution against a binary between interior and exterior. The house is not only an image, statistics, or economic aspiration, but is operative, operational related to entry, exit, where you sit, gather, cook, contemplate... the house as such is an operative construct. It is a verb, not an abstract object: interactive with the habitus of people. One of these interactions is that people go in and out.

Another way to approach this can be to focus on the liminal spaces that are neither inside nor outside, neither public or private, terraces, stairs ... to document those spaces and what goes on in them! For example in the detached houses of the Australian suburbs, as elsewhere, the garden and the setting of the front entry are very important, perhaps there is a little Buddha, or an altar with offerings... and you immediately know that the house is aligned with that cultural practice in a way that is visible from the public. So, what is visible from the public that is actually related to the home? That would be another method to hone into the interface between exterior and interior.

Moreover, there are relational and transcultural aspects of interior and exterior. Many elderly migrants may be on Skype or watching TV programmes from their countries, the other side of the world in the middle of their living room! Thus the relational aspect of home crosses geographic and spatial distance via internet technologies. Various virtual and representational interiors are *inside* the home of the migrant.

**I was fascinated by your anecdote on an Italian entrepreneur who sold immigrants "typical" furniture, although none of them ever had similar furniture in Italy. Daniel Miller said basically the same about West Indians in London. These claimed they had decorated their house interiors in a Trinidad fashion. However, as Miller visited them, he noticed this was by no means the case - it was much more of a hybrid! Do you think we could find similar examples in different migration contexts as well? What's your understanding of this hybridization?**

Franco Cozzo is ‘the charismatic furniture merchant and Melbourne icon’ In the 1960s, his customers were Italian, Greek migrants. Later with Turkish and Lebanese immigrants, and in recent years his furniture is popular amongst newer immigrant groups, Indians, Africans. His furniture which is supposedly ‘Italian’ is now desired by very different ethnic communities. This raises the question of ‘ethnicising’ this furniture, as

though the furniture has an authentic ethnic origin. The furniture is made in Italy, transported to Australia and is now the desire of completely non-Italian immigrant communities!

The phenomenon of a diasporic aesthetic may assist in the analysis. When it was desired by Southern European communities there was a very strong sense of luxury about it. I would not analyse the aesthetic of luxury from a point of authenticity, but rather from a different aspect of the migrant subject. The idea that a migrant subject is not only defined by necessity. No human subject is only pragmatic, everyone has dreams and fantasies, and the home is about fantasies and dreams just as it is about shelter and protection. Objects have significance. This furniture was an opportunity to create a setting beyond pragmatism, beyond what is necessary. I have been interviewed for a documentary, *Palazzo Di Cozzo*, created by Madeleine Martiniello. She has visually captured exquisite living room settings comprising this aesthetics of luxury, intricacy and opulence. It is a staged, theatrical environment, performative *in itself*: performing the idea that migrants are not only subject to incredibly hard labour. The official narrative of the Australian post-war mass migration campaign was migrants would fulfil the arduous, dangerous, dirty work. But the house and this furniture was beyond that paradigm and scope. This was outside what migrants were meant to do and how migrants had to serve. It demonstrates a capacity to be a human subject that is not determined by economic factors. There was a lot of creativity, whether we like the look of this furniture or not. Everyone reacts negatively to the aesthetics of this furniture, in the same way as they react negatively to the aesthetics of the migrant house. A more robust and critical view of taste may reveal there is no absolute good taste for instance in Victorian row houses valued by heritage.

**As a researcher of migrant housing, what can you capture of their countries of origin, out of the houses migrants build in Australia? And, vice versa: what would you capture about their country of settlement, out of their house patterns and domestic cultures in the countries of origin?**

In regards to the first question: I did a broad survey of migrant houses that were built in the period 1950s to 1970s. I developed a matrix of visual cues by which to identify the houses that were either built new or adapted; and collated the types and also the extent of these houses focussing on the northern suburbs of Melbourne where many southern European migrants settled. It was visually very clear which were the houses of southern European migrants. For example, if you see plumbing pipe frame pergolas used for grapevines, you know it is southern European. Or a big steel window on an old little workers cottage: it is Southern European! Or if the picket fence is replaced by perforated metal fence; or the terraces on newly built houses. However, my students have looked into different ethnic communities too. Even those who try to look exactly like the mainstream houses will likely have some distinct 'tell tale sign', like shoes left at the entrance door, or the types of plants in the garden, ornamentations on the screen doors with different types of metal work.

Back in the homeland sites, there is a global language of the house whether in Ecuador or Mexico ... not necessarily the exact elements of the houses, but the language of the architectural elements is not from the immigrant cities. These 'remittance houses' reveal a global palette of housing architecture. Sometimes migrants want to build likeness to an image on their travels or in a magazine, but its implementation depends on the materials available, or materials the migrants import, and this manifests the particular appearance of the houses.

In the village Zavoy in the Republic of Macedonia, they have fancy ideas for those houses. They belong to the migrants who go back and forth, sometimes the houses are never completed, and there is such a mixture... it is a collection of images from interests, travels, what they have seen on tv – a diverse collection of things and tastes. I would not be confident, to say from the look of the houses, for example in Ecuador, which immigrant cities those migrants have returned from. It would be from what I know now of the history of migration, not from the look of the house.

**There is an extended interdisciplinary literature on how a house, over time, operates like a depository of the memories, tastes and lifestyles of its dwellers. Is there anything particular in a migrant house, in this respect?**

The cyclic landscape of the migrant is the particularity here. Migrants have a very intensive relationship to housing. Post-war migrants are at times merged with the house. You can also see that in their efforts to make the house a proper, legitimate construct, especially in an immigrant city that has been historically hostile to them, the house is where they invest their capacity and energy, to develop a legitimate existence in that city. For the southern Europeans post-WW2 migrants, a relationship between the migrant body and the house evolves. Over time the house is preserved, manicured, maintained, adjusted, ordered, clean; labour goes into ensuring its proper presentation. The migrant body, working usually in physically demanding jobs, becomes imprinted by fatigue, illness; the body is not looked after in the same way as the house. This intensive relationship alters the place of the house in the migrant psychic landscape.

**Likewise, some research has shown how public/private boundaries are reproduced in house interiors through the division between semi-public and private areas, "sacred" and "profane" spaces, gendered ones, etc. How can you approach and negotiate these thresholds as a researcher? Do they work differently in migrant houses relative to mainstream ones?**

The migrant house as an envelope gave its interior certain liberties for what might be considered as profane in public: e.g. mixing English and Italian into one language to be spoken inside the house, mixing language depending on the family member you speak to. The envelope of the house provides this very interesting liberty for new hybrid cultivations, the same of course for cooking, etc.

However, I don't want to give the impression that anyone in the house has the same attitude. Members of migrant families are at odds with one another with conflict between generations, and differences between siblings. A very significant aspect is that of the male migrants' subjectivity as diminished by migration, and this is due to the loss of their patriarchal public role. Adults find themselves depending on children for communication in English. The house embodies the tensions and individual struggles. The sacred and the profane is very much at the forefront of migrant dwelling and migrant home. Within the household, what might be sacred for one generation, the other will rebel against. This is exacerbated here by an additional agenda to maintain and preserve traditions that might be different to mainstream culture. Things like removing your shoes when you enter houses in certain cultural communities, but not in others, or saying hello or not during incidental encounters. Conversely, in some communities people just stay out at the fence, interacting with neighbours. The fence itself works as a threshold for exchange and interaction.

**What are, in your view, the prospects, limitations and dilemmas for comparative research on migrant housing across countries, and across migration systems?**

Comparative research is very important. It is time for this type of research to be more seriously tackled, but it is also important for history to be included in comparative analysis. You cannot compare the post-WW2 migrant houses I studied with, say, the new contemporary migrant houses of Indian middle class migrants. In order to compare these a researcher needs to look both at immigrant history and to housing history. The houses may look like little Taj Mahals, but they are not necessarily so in practice... given that the current procurement of housing and its global imagery is very different to what it was in the 1960s in Melbourne. In relation to the transformation of homeland sites, it would be very interesting to compare places, for instance the transformations of Turkish villages produced by the new housing of immigrants returning from Germany (cf. Van der Horst), the studies of López in Mexico, and so on. This would be excellent work to do, to develop a framework for looking at transformations of housing and broader built environment and places. There would be very important underlying factors, but not necessarily "similarities": for too long, scholars in this field have operated within particular disciplines. Ways of bringing these scholars and studies together can be productive.

**Could you expand on the distinction between "existential" and "patrimonial" territoriality?**

*Existential territoriality* relates to migrant houses in immigrant cities, a response to the very hostile environments within which immigrants have to carve out a way and a space within which to exist. It involves existential questions. Quite a large part of immigrants in post-WW2 period went back due to the humiliating

treatment they received. Why stay in this environment, if the economies of homeland countries improved? There were also real factors that gave rise to existential questions. Research has shown how some migrants never form relationships or family. There are several reports of mental illness and alcoholism.... very severe histories. Even the most “successful” ones experienced strong discrimination. Scholarship on migrant housing is limited, there is an erasure of the history of housing by migrants. Even the writing of my book was an existential question – migrants were not meant to have their own histories, pasts or traditions. A labour migrant was meant to leave all cultural traditions behind – and was meant to only serve as a mechanism for labour. *Existentiality* refers to human subjectivity rather than biological existence. Describing the house as existential territoriality refers to space as a platform for cultivating hybrid kinds of existence, accommodating non-linearity of pasts and futures.

In contrast, in the villages, left abandoned and neglected, vernacular housing deteriorated. The emigrants that had left the homeland village, eventually inherited the properties when the first generation of non-migrants passed away. These properties underwent a more typical procedure of sub-division: lands were divided. I call it *patrimonial* because there was not a capacity to ‘preserve’ an ancestral home, given that those people did not live there anyway. There was a loss of dwelling in this regard. The ‘twin house’ idea presents this tension between habitus and dwelling practices that get disjointed from the homeland. Habitus and dwelling are decoupled from the house. For the migrants in the city, the house is a way to compensate this loss after migration, but not to replace it. In the village, the house is really about property with fences, boundaries that demarcate, spaces that are privatized.... A property ownership and capital agenda emerges in the architecture of the new migrant houses in homeland villages. Migrants still have some deep wish to be connected to the village through the house, but the house manifests estrangement to the village, not connection to it. This decoupling of the house from everyday sensory qualities of it has been captured in migrants’ chants: “Roses don’t smell like roses here... tomatoes do not taste like tomatoes...” and so on. This is an erosion and disappearance of dwelling and habitus from housing. Then, architecture is diminished generally.

**Migrants, you told us, seem bound not to make themselves fully at home, not even in a new, better house. Is this, phenomenologically speaking, a prerogative of migrants? Or is it ultimately a "destiny" of human beings, who "home in" toward a place to call home, without ever reaching it completely?**

The migrant experience and condition, for unprivileged migration, is like an expulsion from their homeland in tension with a necessity to get out of there in order to live. This sense of being pushed out, of having very little choice is intertwined with stories coming back from migrants, including a certain sense of adventure. A destiny narrative is at work in migration and the migrant condition: being pushed out, discriminated against in the new country, being looked upon negatively, struggling towards belonging. A major obstacle in the 1950s for migrants from southern Europe is language – they did not speak English! This idea of not/belonging is what accentuates the struggle of not/feeling at home. However, this is not the whole truth. Migrants are constructive – post-war migrants altered or built their houses, built networks and communities, transformed their neighbourhoods into forms of belonging. Nonetheless, the affective aspect of homing, of passively being at home is what is always intersected not by the memory of ‘home’ but by separation and a shared loss.

Another dimension is the extent to which migrants stop being migrants and are acknowledged as citizens who have contributed to new contexts. Even while post-war migrants might have a job, a house, still after 70 years of post-war migrants ‘being here’ – building houses, creating neighbourhoods - their houses are not accounted for in housing histories. This form of never being at home is at a level of national narrative. Even subsequent generations may be identified by their ‘migrant’ background questioning their right to the immigrant city.