

# Introduction

## Houses Transformed – Transforming Houses

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Anthropologists have documented the transformation of houses around the globe. However, these transformations have not yet given rise to a debate on the house that focuses on these changes. This is what this volume aims to achieve: to re-engage with houses, mainly from an ethnographic viewpoint, through considering not only their becoming or being but rather their transformation. These changes may occur modestly and step-by-step or massively and quickly, yet they are part of an overall tendency of built landscapes to change on a global scale; even in the ostensibly remotest regions of the world, new construction materials have held sway, and modern, often cement, houses are constructed, or at least aspired to. Seen from a global scale, houses designed by architects are the exception; houses are not commonly built under the aegis of construction firms, architects or urban planners but by the owners themselves and on their initiative (Vellinga et al. 2007: xiii). The change in materiality of houses (for instance, from bamboo or adobe to cement) is tied to far-reaching reconfigurations of the house and the wider sociality in which the houses are situated. The changes in housing worldwide, especially the massive spread of concrete in dwellings in even the remotest spots, bears the potential of conveying meanings of the house, of dwelling and building that may otherwise escape one's view, and they certainly bear testimony to the changeability and innovativeness of houses that under the label of vernacular architecture were regarded as traditional and unchanging.

Houses and their far-reaching transformations have hitherto not been the topic of a systematic and comparative debate in anthropology but

have been addressed within the confines of specialised debates, such as those on vernacular architecture (see, e.g., Asquith and Vellinga 2006; Oliver 2003), urban anthropology (Harms 2012), anthropology of architecture (Buchli 2013) or kinship studies (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Sparkes and Howell 2003). As the house has been variously shown to be a multifaceted entity, the anthropological study of the house and its transformation awaits an equally holistic engagement that engages with its multiple dimensions from a comparative point of view. Especially so-called vernacular architecture, or other versions thereof such as indigenous or traditional architecture, is still often associated with the idea of unchanging, traditional ways of building (Vellinga 2004). This volume questions persistent ideas about the house and develops new conceptual starting points for anthropological engagements with contemporary transformations of houses and dwelling.

From the earliest days of anthropology, the interrelationship of humans and their habitation has attracted the ethnographer's attention (see, for instance, Morgan 1965 [1881]). It was Claude Lévi-Strauss' (1983, 1987) conceptualisation of house societies (*sociétés à maison*) – according to which a house could be considered a moral person, a corporate and property-owning entity marked by continuity, which is expressed in kinship idiom and transcends opposing structural principles – that triggered a re-blossoming of the study of the house in its manifold social and cosmological dimensions. Going beyond the idea of house societies in the strict sense of the term, the house in Southeast Asia, for instance, has been shown to be a vital entity, a 'living house' (Waterson 2009 [1990]) that is enmeshed with the social processes that constitute the institution and physical entity of the house (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Howell 2003; Macdonald 1987; Rössler 1998; Sparkes and Howell 2003). Anthropological studies of the house have described houses as 'biographical objects' that intertwine the biography of the house with its residents (Carsten 2018), as mirrors of socio-cosmic orders (Cunningham 1964), as embracing processes of relatedness (Carsten 1997; Janowski 1995), as an experienced space for which liveliness and permeability of sounds and smells is crucial (Allerton 2013), and as an object of political projects of development and sanitation but also heritagisation (Allerton 2003; Berliner 2012).

Turning to the transformations of houses is a particularly suitable entry point for understanding the entanglements of houses, their materials and wider societal changes. Drawing on the diverse set of chapters, which all address house transformations, albeit with different foci and against different ethnographic backgrounds, we aim to outline in this introduction some fields of enquiry that have emerged in the recent work on houses

and their transformations from ethnographic perspective. Here, we wish also to point out new potential avenues of thought and enquiry. The house and its transformations, also due to their highly visual character, provide multiple entry points for discussion across (intra-)disciplinary boundaries. Indeed, several contributors to this volume have interdisciplinary backgrounds; three authors have been trained as architects as well as anthropologists and work at the intersection of both disciplines.

Thus, this volume has three further aims: firstly, we wish to assemble works with a background in different intradisciplinary strands in anthropology, including authors with a background in historical anthropology, political anthropology and kinship anthropology, among others, in order to point out and relate different vantage points on houses in anthropology; secondly, we wish to set aside the almost taken for granted divide between works on house changes in urban and rural contexts; thirdly, and finally, we aim to bring into dialogue scholars from related disciplines and especially those who are trained as architects and ethnographers or social scientists.

Now let us move to some cross-cutting themes in the recent anthropological engagement with houses and their transformations, the first of which is the connection between houses and politics.

## **Houses and Politics: Planning Houses and Rearranging Dwelling**

Houses appear to lend themselves to state intervention: houses encapsulate various meanings and values and have the power to shape processes of dwelling, sociality and even subjectivity. It is no wonder then that house transformations are often aimed at by states through, for instance, housing programmes and urban planning. When discussing the house, investigating the state may be relevant, for the house is, in various regards, implicated in state regulations, policies and projects. State housing programmes and urban development projects and planning schemes are, thus, a common theme in many of the contributions to this volume.

Eli Elinoff (this volume) argues for what could be called a political anthropology of houses that considers the political dimensions entailed in choosing or limiting house designs. He discusses the dwellers' political projects and subjectivity and the political ideas inscribed in state housing programmes in Thailand. In the frame of one housing programme that Elinoff presents, the architects and city planners aim to articulate ideas of 'vernacular' architecture, thereby equating marginalised urban dwellers, who were supposed to benefit from the programme, with rural dwellers

somewhat frozen in time. The vernacular ideal, Elinoff unmasks, is not merely meant to uphold a nostalgic image of appropriate houses but is ultimately about muting the political projects of the residents by producing a sanitised version of the vernacular to which we will come back below. Elsewhere, Gowlland (2020) has also argued that the materiality of dwelling, such as the concrete-encased modern home among the Paiwan of Taiwan, is aimed at cultivating a modern subject who belongs to the state and is subject to Sinicization.

Houses have vital political and historical dimensions. Echoing Janet Carsten's (2018: 103) proposition that houses embody 'the interconnections between individual trajectory, kinship and the state', political projects, state policies and house-building practices are interconnected. In various ways, housing design and vernacular architecture have been among the main areas of policy interventions, with formal housing being increasingly important in urban and suburban areas, where land acquisition is contested or highly precarious. The establishment of permanent houses can be a vital element in the production of a quasi-formal right to own land (Elliott 2021). Drawing on long-term research in the Argentinian highlands, Julieta Barada and Jorge Tomasi show how in the local classifications of domestic architecture a distinctive category of *viviendas* (state-produced houses) emerged. As Eli Elinoff (2016, 2021) shows for the case of informal settlements along a railway in northeastern Thailand, the usage of cement and other elements of neat, modern houses is also what might create and display a belonging to the state. Producing relations to the state is also one of the reasons that Jonathan Alderman (this volume) identifies as to why his Kallawayá interlocutors in Bolivia have entered into a state housing scheme.

The use of vernacular ideals in architecture is also examined by Saffron Woodcraft (this volume) as a sociopolitical imaginary, strategically deployed in contemporary London. Neatness, here, has also played an important role during the urban planning visions behind an Olympic neighbourhood housing project. The governing of façades and front areas is very much detailed in the planning reports, as well as the governing of common areas, which have been designed to produce certain, idealised kinds of social interaction. Here, the planning of infrastructure – most notable, waste disposal infrastructure – played a key role. In fact, housing programmes and urban planning can be discussed as state infrastructure that aims at forming and, what is more, transforming citizens by the set of normative and ontological assumptions built into infrastructural elements. According to Alderman and Goodwin (2022), 'one of the most powerful characteristics of infrastructure is its potential to transform time and space', since infrastructure 'not only has the capacity to bring

life . . . or accelerate death . . . but also the potential to disrupt relations between the “living” and the “dead” and alter the living practices and subjectivities embedded in these relations’. Yet, citizens are not mere users and recipients of state infrastructure but may be actively involved in urban planning. This has been discussed by Eli Elinoff (2021), who draws a rich picture of the different levels on which urban residents of Khon Khaen in northwestern Thailand need to negotiate the planning of the urban neighbourhoods, which they strive to get officially acknowledged and developed according to a diverse set of demands issued by bureaucrats, architects and activists of nongovernmental organisations. Urban planning and infrastructure, it appears, is more about managing disagreements than anything else (Elinoff 2021). Thus, the infrastructure that finally materialises may already differ strongly from what was planned, first of all, and then, again, from how it is used.

The outcomes, therefore, of state planning may not be as expected. The Kallawayas of the Bolivian Andes that Jonathan Alderman (this volume) has conducted research among have voluntarily opted for the state-donated brick housing, which they have incorporated into their house-centred relationships. Andrea Bravo Díaz (this volume) also points out that a general, and rarely noticed, misunderstanding of the planners of the state housing programme in the Ecuadorian Amazon and Waorani residents is that the latter are poor from the perspective of the state, which regards donating decent concrete houses as an improvement. Bravo Díaz’ Waorani interlocutors, by way of contrast, regard these state houses as small and the hearths as inappropriate for channelling the abundance they assume themselves to be in possession of. Not using donated houses, thus, is not merely a passive mode of resistance but also a result of a different understanding of what a proper house is and what it should enable the dwellers to do.

## Unpacking the Vernacular

The term ‘vernacular’ is simultaneously contested and, though less so, maintained in anthropology (Vellinga 2004, 2011; Waterson 2009 [1990]). Yet what can be legitimately called ‘vernacular’ plays a prominent role outside of scholarly discourses, as Saffron Woodcraft’s contribution on the ‘New London Vernacular’ highlights. The idea of vernacular architecture is, thus, out there, and the differentiation of architecture with a capital ‘A’ and the rest has been and continues to be influential, as Marcel Vellinga (2011, this volume) argues. Highlighting research on ‘vernacular architecture’ and supporting it on institutional levels can give attention to

the value of vernacular modes of building and dwelling across the world and, in institutionalised form, can strengthen the acknowledgement of vernacular architectural forms as heritage. And, perhaps, here we find the strongest argument in favour of using this term: it accords attention to local builders – either lay builders or traditional carpenters – and their skills and crafts. It is in particular for this reason that anthropologists make a pragmatic and heuristic use of the term (Blier 2006; Vellinga forthcoming).

Yet, there are also good reasons for discarding this term. A most obvious point of critique is the observation of the rather unequal domaining: architecture with a capital ‘A’, though capturing only a limited number of sites and buildings, is contrasted with the ‘architecture of the Other’ (Vellinga 2011), lumping together cases from various places. It is the latter ‘that serves to help define and legitimise the exclusive domain of what may be called “high design” or “capital A” architecture’ (Vellinga 2011: 172). While architects are known, builders of vernacular architecture remain unnamed; architecture with a capital ‘A’ connotes innovation and creation, whereas vernacular architecture is associated with tradition and reproduction. The latter was to regard houses as frozen in time and to ignore the constant innovation and change. This has a vital political side: by ‘identifying the vernacular renders makers mute and objects plunder’ (Crimson 2016: 3, quoted in Elinoff, this volume). Eli Elinoff’s inspiring critical ethnographic discussion of the concept unfolds in two ways: he focuses, on the one hand, on houses that cannot be regarded as capital ‘A’ architecture but also, arguably, neither as vernacular. The category of the ‘not-vernacular-enough’ houses is particularly worthwhile to consider, for it reveals the ‘pre-framed moral aesthetic set of judgements’ (Elinoff, this volume) on the grounds of which decisions upon the worth of houses are made – by decision-makers, and, honestly speaking, also by anthropologists, who are inclined towards engaging with more exquisite vernacular houses.

The other, suggestive, move that we wish to highlight here is to analyse ‘vernacularisation’ at work: What happens when a building gets vernacularised? The concept of vernacularisation argued for by Elinoff (this volume) is not identical with common usages of the term that usually refer to processes of localisation; it rather refers to the efforts to isolate, document, decontextualise and explore local built forms that allow someone to transport an object, a design or an idea into a different context. Studying this makes visible how power unfolds in the processes of vernacularisation. For, as mentioned above, not all architectural practices by local residents may be deemed and cherished as vernacular architecture worthy of preservation, as Gizem Kahraman Aksoy (this volume)

vividly demonstrates for the case of the architectural modifications of old Qatari courtyard houses added by their South Asian inhabitants. What is installed, rather, are sanitised versions of the courtyard house. This conceptual lens entices us to investigate the making and unmaking of ‘the vernacular’ through time.

## Temporality: House Biographies, Kinship and Social Change

‘When is a house?’ is the question that Marie Durand (this volume; see also Gillespie 2007) suggests as an entry point into an investigation of the temporality of houses in the Pacific. Indeed, it has been proposed to study the house from a temporal perspective with a focus on its biography, or as João Biehl and Frederico Neiburg (2021) suggest, of processes of house-ing and de-house-ing (Carsten 2018; Telle 2007). This is in some ethnographic settings particularly suitable where houses are also regarded, whether permanently or situationally, as animated, ‘living’ beings (Blier 1983; Waterson 2009 [1990]). This may remind the reader of the seminal case of the quite transforming houses that Maurice Bloch (1995) described. Houses and marriage, Bloch tells us, are conceived by the Zafimaniry of Madagascar as synonymous, and the setting up of a house upon marriage is only the starting point of a longer development during which the house is supposed to harden like the relationship and the ensuing household should. Through the years of marriage and the birth of children, the house is said to ‘acquire bones’. This is not only metaphorical; in fact, the rather flimsy walls are replaced with timber boards of core wood. Here, quite obviously, the formation and being of a house is very much tied to the passing of time and the biography of its residents. As such, a consideration of its lifetime implies also turning to its ending – its death, in other words (Motta 2021; Stolz).

By following the changing architectural form of the house through time in combination with the social relations and personal biographies in which it is implicated, wider social changes become visible. Simone Abram and Marianne Lien (this volume) use the example of the *hytte*, the Norwegian holiday home, to demonstrate how alterations in architectural form over time mirror and, what is more, shape complex changes in kinship relations. Echoing Lévi-Strauss, they argue that the *hytte* can be understood as a moral person and a member of the family; its character therefore changes over time with the family. Abram and Lien also give attention to material things that the domestic space consists of and that contribute a sense of home, of belonging and of (gendered) identities – a topic central in the work on home and consumption (Miller 2001; Pink 2004).

The changes in houses over longer time spans are also highly suggestive, as Marie Durand's (this volume) historical anthropological approach to Vanuatu houses shows. Durand traces the shift in house-building practices, most notably the incorporation of concrete, in conjunction with the spread of missionisation in the nineteenth century. Durand shows how the new buildings (and also concrete gravestones) were supposed to transform social practices of dwelling to ultimately form new subjects and converts. What is more, the new housing styles were embraced by local builders for the status-enhancement they promised. The shift in building Vanuatu houses, Durand argues, also contributed to a shift in temporal processes by interfering with the local age grade system. Houses and images thereof are good to trigger memories of bygone days – an observation that bears resemblance to Gaston Bachelard's influential elaboration on the imaginative power of the sensual memory of one's childhood home (Bachelard 1964).

## Concrete Materiality and Its Accommodation

The heading of this section includes a pun: it is intended to refer to specific materialities as well as to cement as material. Starting with the first meaning: the nice thing about the house as a subject of anthropological enquiry is that it has a material, literally graspable, form. This also presents us with the challenge of taking the material dimensions as seriously as its symbolic and social dimensions. In recent years, however, the focus on materials and materiality in more abstract terms (the latter being a term that has become subject to some debate, see Ingold 2007) has gained traction. Yet, the effects and engagements with materials still remain undertheorised and often unexplored. House materials are, thereby, a particularly suitable starting point for an investigation of the role of specific materials and their intersection with social processes, aesthetic politics and the sensorial experience of inhabitants through time. For house materials are literally dwelled in and are, as houses are, often entangled with various dimensions of lifeworlds and processes of doing belonging. Thus, all contributions to this volume include a consideration of the material qualities of the buildings.

What has received much attention in anthropological studies of houses is the cosmological relevance of certain building materials and the ways in which processing and inhabiting them are enmeshed with ritual practices. For a case in upland Laos, Zuckerman and Enfield (2022) highlight the Kri assumptions that the materials the houses consist of, commonly bamboo, are contaminated upon the death of a resident. Therefore, Kri



bamboo houses are frequently deconstructed and rebuilt on another spot. With timber being a more expansive building material, the use of which is aspired to, this cosmologically founded practice is challenged, for the new timber houses are simply too costly to be left behind. Thus, some Kri have developed a solution: they remove the timber planks temporarily to soak them in the moving water of the river, which washes out the – metaphorical – blood and misfortune tied to serious sickness and brutal or untimely deaths. This points us to questioning what materials and substances are from a local perspective and what they are thought to be able to effect. The experience of materials and their qualia that can be discussed as embedded in a sensory ecology (Bravo Díaz, this volume) thus plays a key role in the choice and use of materials.

One particularly noteworthy material, which is included in the second meaning of the heading, is concrete, the composite material of which is cement, the ‘world’s most used material, after water’ (Archambault 2018). Due to its emission-intensive production, cement ‘has a good claim to being the first Anthropocene element’ (Elinoff 2019). In fact, Marcel Vellinga (this volume) stresses that it is an ‘overheating world’ – in which houses, as architecture in general are located – which should be taken into account in our writings. Climate change, disaster and recurring environmental threats need to be considered increasingly not only by architects in search of sustainable and adaptable architecture but also by the above-mentioned vast majority of self-builders around the world, who may experience the climatic and environmental forces challenging their buildings rather directly (Ley 2021). The production of concrete, it should be mentioned, is also resource-intensive in regard to the use of water, gravel and sand. No wonder, then, the spread of concrete as a building material in various forms, including concrete blocks or reinforced concrete, is rather critically acknowledged by anthropologists – at a time when questions of sustainability are gaining prominence for capital ‘A’ architecture. However, the spread of concrete is an ethnographic fact that we can learn several lessons from: concrete is certainly on the rise on a global scale and spreading even in the allegedly remotest parts of the world where it needs to be accommodated to previously established materials and building and dwelling routines. What exactly happens when concrete is adopted and how such accommodations take place await closer anthropological and comparative examination.

What has been variously shown is that concrete is regarded as epitomising modernity and that ‘cement became the cheap and flexible basis of modernity’s logistics, its aesthetics, and its speed’ (Elinoff 2019; see also Archambault 2018; Forty 2016). From the perspective of residents in areas such as sub-Saharan Africa, which has been called ‘the world’s last

cement frontier' (Archambault 2018), cement and its product concrete are associated with development and modernity. Concrete and its 'conspicuous consumption' (Thomas 1998) may literally materialise the builder's aspirations, ambitions and success. A building boom of concrete houses in sub-Saharan Africa is related to the emergence of the middle class and the practice of 'doing being middle class' (Lentz 2020; see also Gastrow 2020; Mercer 2014; Page and Sunjo 2018; Pauli 2023).

However, concrete may not only be indicative of emerging values and images of modernity but might themselves exert an agency as 'vibrant matter' (Bennett 2010). Julie Archambault (2018) argues that in peri-urban Mozambique, concrete bricks trigger the aspirational imagination of their makers and users – that is, young Mozambiquan men keen on building their own modern house. These aspirations, she notes, are not prefixed, and merely realised, but are also emerging during the engagement of the builders with concrete during which also concrete's materiality exerts certain effects. Seen from this angle, aspirations are also a result of the interaction between builder and concrete.

Another suggestive reason for the success of concrete in areas with different previous building traditions is provided in Marie Durand's account (this volume). The Vanuatu speakers of the islands of the Pacific's Vanuatu archipelago did not regard concrete as an entirely foreign material but as a composite material consisting of external but also deeply local elements: while cement was imported, sand, water and gravel, mixed to produce concrete, were from the islands. This speaks to the alchemic magic of concrete that Taussig alluded to. A mixture of heterogenous elements that during the process changes its form tremendously: the cement powder becomes fluid and after hardening solid. It can be shaped in myriad forms and used for various purposes – which is why concrete and its various derivatives are almost ubiquitous, shaping roads, infrastructure, public spaces, monuments and pieces of art. As concrete has become so important to infrastructure, cement plants, Fivez and Motylinska (2022) argue, have become a meta-infrastructure.

The widespread use of concrete is remarked upon by anthropological observers rather critically. Especially in areas where concrete has been increasingly replacing local or other replenishable materials, the move to concrete is assumed to be an inaeesthetic side effect of 'modernisation' and 'development'. Moreover, anthropologists frequently mention the downsides of concrete – notably, the poor ventilation of concrete houses, its less-than-optimal adaption to tropical climates and the lack of flexibility, re-use and decomposition of concrete house elements. However, concrete may be, in fact, cherished by the ethnographer's interlocutors for various reasons. In addition, it may turn out that new building materials

such as concrete do not, in the long run, have the anticipated disruptive effects with regard to social processes, kinship and belonging: Marcel Vellinga (this volume, 2004) discusses the changes in Minangkabau houses through the last decades, highlighting how the incorporation of new materials and designs, especially the prominence of ‘small houses’ for nuclear families, have not eroded the belonging within matrilineal descent groups, for these family houses continue to be built in close proximity to each other on the land owned by the matrilineal kin group. Something similar has been argued by Martin Rössler (2009), who stated that the obvious changes in house materiality among Makassar of South Sulawesi do not occur side by side with stark social changes – quite the contrary. Several chapters of this volume point out that house transformations, even the outwardly tremendous ones, may not imply drastic social changes. What is thus focused on in various contributions is how new materials are being accommodated and harnessed for their alleged potentials while drawbacks, some not anticipated, may require attention (see also Stolz, this volume). These dynamics are promising entry points for anthropologists and could be met with excitement, as Marcel Vellinga (this volume) emphasises.

One established approach that caters to this observation focuses on house transformations as consumption, especially in the frame of the migration-house nexus. The consumption of new house designs and imported materials and technologies is aimed at displaying socio-economic success and enhancing status. The ‘conspicuous construction’ (Thomas 1998) of such houses in the context of migration is based on remittances. Lavishly constructed but perhaps never dwelled-in, remittance houses fulfil the double function of signalling presence while the owners are absent and indicating their care for their kin at home while not attending to them on a daily basis. Houses in the highland Guatemalan village of Todos Santos, Andrea Freddi (this volume) shows, legitimate their owners’ absence from the village by demonstrating their commitment to their community; at the same time, they demonstrate the individual trajectories of the migrants and a ‘communal desire for modernity’. Here, concrete is accommodated to highlight the house owner’s aspirations, to showcase their success and root them in a place that they wish to have at least the option to return to.

However, local recipients may identify, from their perspective, equally disadvantageous drawbacks of concrete that need to be catered to by builders and inhabitants. Drawing on ethnographic contexts in which concrete is a new building material that differs strongly from previously used ones, several authors highlight the importance of giving attention to the social, ontological and sensorial qualities associated with

different building materials. Discussing the case of Waorani speakers in Ecuadorian Amazonia, Andrea Bravo Díaz (this volume) speaks of the locally perceived need to ‘domesticate’ concrete. Concrete comes at some advantage, for it allows withdrawing temporarily from certain social demands and limiting exchange and circulation of humans, things and spirits, but it also has disadvantages to be dealt with. These are especially connected to what Bravo Díaz calls a sensorial ecology. Concrete does not so much cater to the local emphasis given to freshness and coolness, both being assumed to be fundamentals of good health and wellbeing. Concrete interiors feel stuff, get too warm and emanate bad smells according to her Waorani interlocutors. Bravo Díaz shows what is locally done to evade some of these disadvantages while harnessing the potentials of concrete-encased dwellings. In a similar vein, Rosalie Stolz (this volume) shows how concrete is cherished for its limited permeability in comparison with relatively permeable bamboo and wooden houses; however, it is exactly this social and sensorial feeling of encasement that sits uneasily with locally common forms and experiences of social interaction that has led to an unexpected upsurge of outdoor sociality.

Another line of enquiry is the particular enmeshing of concrete with political projects. As mentioned above, concrete’s shapability and comparatively easy processing has certainly contributed to its far-reaching use in the context of infrastructures, among which are military infrastructures or hydropower dams, but also in the framework of public housing, and urban planning. Concrete is thereby having certain power-related effects: as Penelope Harvey (2010) has argued, concrete is quite literally ‘cementing relations’, with which she refers in particular to relations of power in state contexts. While the state and politics are discussed separately below, here we wish to point to the connection that some scholars see between concrete as material and politics: according to Elinoff, there is a close relationship between concrete and corruption with regard to Thailand. Concrete, moreover, holds a firm place in (late and post-) socialist architectures. Thus, in various regards, we should be wary of the political projects that concrete is part of as well as of the political-economic aspects entailed in the chains of production and distribution of concrete. Both narratives of development, which have a vital political side, and narratives of the success of concrete share their teleological nature: while development has mainly one direction, the endpoint of which is striven to, concrete is also regarded as the endpoint of a teleological move towards concrete houses.

However, the move to concrete may not necessarily be as straightforward and irreversible as critics as well as proponents of concrete or other

modern houses may think. Geoffrey Gowlland (2020) has shown for his Taiwanese case that slate has been replaced by concrete on a larger scale. However, after the material damage following one of the earthquakes typical of the region was visible to the residents, many decided to move again to using slate. Concrete dwellings may also not be used by locals as they were intended by state planners or development agencies. Concrete houses provided as compensation after relocation or in the framework of development projects may be used as an official but not a de facto residence or as a storage room. The creative adaptations and adjustments of concrete to specific and localised dwelling requirements and routines speaks to the active roles that residents and builders play in constantly transforming their built environment.

## **Transforming Houses, Literally**

Investigating house transformation implies giving attention to those who actively contribute to their transformations. For houses do not miraculously transform themselves: especially where ‘autoconstruction’ (Holston 1991) reigns and the work of design, planning and building are not separated, it is lay builders who engage with design and materials in creative and innovative ways (Marchand 2009). Building itself is not merely manual execution, however, but entails ‘the creativity of the “messy practices”’ as Tim Ingold (2013: 59) has shown. Being responsible for design as well as construction – something that is commonly kept apart in capital ‘A’ architecture – leads to a different attentiveness of the builder, whose work entails a higher degree of improvisation and responsiveness to various factors that they need to take care of. In general, this line of inquiry echoes the call within anthropology for focusing not only on the finished product of the house as a static entity but on the practices of making and transforming buildings. In fact, there is a growing body of literature that investigates the processes of building and working in the context of construction companies (Pink, Tutt and Dainty 2013), of architects (Yaneva 2007; Yarrow 2019) and in the context of urban planning (Elinoff 2021). The production of what is commonly called traditional or vernacular architecture, the latter being a term that we complicate below, is also well documented with a special focus on artisanry, as well as on engrained social and cosmological concepts and values (Blier 1987; Marchand 2009; Vellinga 2004). We argue that the ‘situational improvisation and experimentation’ (Marchand 2009: 81) of local artisans and builders comes especially to the fore when the latter experiment with new materials and designs.

Thus, it is builders who are changing houses and perhaps even whole built landscapes by appropriating novel building practices, experimenting with previously unused materials and by developing new house designs (Archambault 2018; Gowlland 2020; Nielsen 2011; Stolz 2019, 2021). What is shown throughout the chapters is that in such circumstances houses become hybrid products that do not owe their creation to one set of minds and hands or another and are neither necessarily vernacular nor modern but mix aspects of old and new techniques, and techniques from one place and another. This is because they are the site of the various relationships that go into their construction, and so reflect these relationships. Focusing on highly mobile craftsman and construction workers in India, Elisa Bertuzzo (this volume) shows how the carpenters creatively combine and accommodate different materials and styles. Migration brings together builders with varieties of vernacular building traditions; constructions practices are taken out of their usual location (de-territorialised) and inserted with possible modifications elsewhere (re-territorialised), thus building practices in one part of India become formed, diluted and transformed through migration. Migrants and mobilities play important roles in several contributions to this volume, which echoes a wider trend in the literature on migration and home-making in anthropology and beyond: Andrea Freddi vividly highlights the striving of Guatemalans abroad to manifest their presence-while-absent in Guatemala by commissioning villas with lavish façades. Houses built through remittances also become ‘an objectification of upward social mobility and a memorial to overseas work’ (Aguilar 2009: 106), though empty remittance houses can also become a testament to a place’s gradual abandonment (Pauli and Bedorf 2018: 58).

Migration can have a significant impact on house-building practices, both in the places that people migrate to and their places of origin. Very often, houses built through remittances echo houses that migrants come to be accustomed to viewing as markers of status in the places from where they send remittances and, one might argue, reflect a desire on the part of the migrant to project an image back home of themselves as having advanced in status as a justification of their migration, and a reward for their years of sacrifice in a foreign land. Gizem Kahraman Aksoy in her chapter shows that houses allow the migrants to project a higher status for themselves on their return to their place of origin, building houses back home in Pakistan and Bangladesh that are inspired not by the old Qatari courtyards that they rent but by the more ‘modern’ villas that their landlords currently live in. What could be seen as irony in this case is the fact that, as Kahraman Aksoy shows, while living in Qatar migrants endow with life the traditional courtyard houses that they reject

back home and which have decreased in popularity among local Qataris. Mobilities can be important also on a smaller scale, as Marie Durand (this volume) highlights: an ideal Ni-Vanuatu skilled personhood implies the acquisition of skills during a temporal and spatial trajectory across the archipelago. The command of building is a key skill that adds to one's reputation, and it is the buildings as physical traces that a man has left in the landscape that are recounted in the funeral oratory upon his death.

## Conclusion

The nice thing about transformations, especially rapid ones, is that they make things visible that might have escaped our view otherwise. This holds true for houses: though visible and even easily tangible, we tend to overlook them, to take them for granted. What is more, we may easily label them as, for instance, 'vernacular dwellings' – using sketches or drawings to highlight the type it represents, thereby assuming that a wall is a wall and a window a window. This seduction can be challenged by looking at how an image of a certain house may be totally changing. Taking a temporal perspective and starting off with the transformations and shifts helps us to see houses in the process of being made and remade – metaphorically, during a process of designing, conceptualising and (urban) planning, or literally by means of the skilful crafting, building and rebuilding of houses.

The contributions to this volume are highly diverse in several regards, and yet have a common aim: they are contributions focusing on a wide set of ethnographic settings on different continents, discussing changes occurring in urban but also rural locales. Some chapters are written by anthropologists or social scientists also trained as architects or working closely with architects; other chapters are written by colleagues with expertise in various fields of anthropology aside from their interest in houses. While this is, arguably, a great strength in itself, what will strike the reader is the joint stress on how transformations are done quite literally. This book's focus is on how houses are transformed by people, residents and institutions, who engage in making, remaking and planning houses. The contributions will emphasise relevant dimensions of the ways in which transformations are aimed at and/or brought about: this may include political aspects, social dimensions, the passing of time and the way in which concrete materiality is thereby accommodated, to name but a few but without the (preponderous) aim to cover the topic of transformations in its entirety. This volume's aim is, rather, to entice readers to find inspiration in it to further the anthropological and

interdisciplinary engagement with houses in the process of being made, undone and remade.

## Epilogue

As I am writing this introduction, only a couple of weeks have passed since a massive earthquake wreaked untold havoc in Turkey and Syria. According to the Turkish government (reported by Reuters, 2 March 2023), 156,000 concrete buildings crumbled into pieces, burying who and what was in them underneath tons of rubble. Hundreds of thousands of people have been left without shelter. A natural disaster? Certainly. And yet, critiques, geologists and structural engineers point out that the safety of the buildings was oftentimes questioned because of low enforcement of building regulations as well as ‘construction amnesties’ granted by parliament for buildings that did not meet safety standards. The political critique in Turkey has thus been fuelled by the reasons why the impact of this natural disaster has been so massive. What has occurred in Turkey and Syria moves our hearts, and it reminds us that houses first and foremost provide us with the shelter that we are in dire need of. It also shows that wider political and economic forces and motives behind building processes as well as environmental dimensions should be within the framework of our research.

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