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Identifying International Migrants' Investments in the Indian Urban Fabric

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Introduction

- 1 The ambiguity of being here while belonging there that lies at the heart of migration (Sayad 2004) translates into a specific spatial form: the 'migrant's house', that retains strong symbolic meaning both for migrants and for sending communities.¹ It may be the family house, refurbished and extended thanks to remittances; or a new house or flat or construction plot in the nearby town, or even in big cities, especially for international migrants (Rahman & Fee 2012). This is especially true in the case of wealthy migrants who 'have made it abroad' and who can afford to develop transnational, multi-sited investment strategies, including joining the real-estate frenzy that seems to have taken hold of India.
- 2 Even though India has been the largest receiving country of remittances for almost a decade, the presence and the impact of international migrants'² money on Indian metropolitan landscapes have so far gone largely unnoticed, except for several publications which are not from the field of migration studies but from urban studies (King 2004, Dupont 2005, Brosius 2010). Following the call for more diversified research on the impact of international migration on India that Carol Upadhyia and Mario Rutten (2012a) made recently, we postulate that this is yet another field where research is needed in India if we are to understand the complexity of transnational circulation and what it is doing to India, especially to major cities in India, a country of massive emigration flows.
- 3 In this article we consider the city as the product of complex interactions and interventions by a wide range of individuals, collectives and institutions. The 'transnational turn' in migration studies (Levitt & Nyberg-Sørensen 2004)³ has prompted a new way of considering cities in the light of migrant circulation, and how migrants, through their investments, are integrated in the complex mechanisms of city-making

(Smith 2005). We argue that by locating the role of international Indian migrants as shadow actors of the metropolitan fabric we may enhance our understanding of India's rapidly changing urban dynamics. This would also contribute, from a different perspective, to the ongoing debate on the 'worlding' of Indian cities (Ong & Roy 2011), by analysing the way Indian cities are becoming increasingly involved in the global circulation of people (*i.e.* migrants), goods (*i.e.* money) and ideas, and aesthetic norms and tastes that define new types of urban spaces, especially residential areas.

- 4 This article develops three case studies in a concise, complementary and chronological manner. We focus on the channels of investment in real estate that have been made increasingly available to migrants from the eighties onwards, over a period ranging from the opening of the economy to foreign investments, to the rise of the private sector in urban development, the development of a political package dedicated to the diaspora by the Indian government, and the Internet revolution. The material presented here was collected during successive field trips to Bangalore as well as on the Internet in the years 2004-2012, in order to determine how migrants take and make a place in new residential areas. The three short case studies presented here complement each other and shed light on each other, with the aim of interlinking migration studies and urban studies.

Migrants and real estate, at the crossroads of migration studies and urban studies

- 5 There is little ethnographic data about migrants' houses in India: M. Walton-Roberts (2004: 83-84), writing about villages in the Doaba region in Punjab, describes a landscape dotted with large houses belonging to migrants, even though many of them remain unoccupied; P. Venier (2010) has analyzed local development in Kerala's 'Gulf pockets'; Upadhya and Rutten's project focuses namely on changes in the landscape of small towns in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat.⁴ Yet these few micro-scale case studies that focus on rural areas and small towns have not really discriminated between the different types and destinations of migrants, and they were conducted by scholars specialising in migration studies, who did not relate them to wider urbanization dynamics. By contrast, a large amount of literature devoted to North and West Africa (regrettably, mostly in French) has established a relationship between migration and urbanization in countries of massive emigration: in Morocco, migrants' houses have boosted the development of the lower urban strata *i.e.* the burgeoning of small towns in rural regions prone to massive emigration (De Haas 2009); it has also played a significant role in extending suburbs around major cities such as Dakar and Touba in Senegal, or Rabat in Morocco (Bertoncello 2010, Tall 2009, De Haas 2009). Following the suggestion Jennifer Robinson (2006: 171) made in her major publication, *Ordinary Cities*: 'the fundamental requirement for a post-colonial urbanism: the possibility to consider all cities within the same field of analysis', we suggest starting with this literature on Africa to look for similar dynamics that may be operating in India, especially in metropolitan cities.
- 6 For almost a decade now, India has occupied first place as the country that receives the largest amount of remittances, which has been about fifty billion US dollars since 2008 and represents a significant share of capital flow to India (Singh 2009, Ratha *et al.* 2011). The amounts remitted are difficult to track and to estimate precisely (Guha 2011), as well as the way in which they are actually spent (Singh 2006). However, household surveys

that have been carried out regularly since the 1990s by the Centre for Development Studies in Kerala show, for instance, that the improvement, building or acquisition of a house is a major expense for migrant households (Zachariah *et al.* 2003: 220-236), which corroborate international comparisons and generalizations about remittances (Rahman & Fee 2012). As far as the building or the purchase of a house is concerned, the political and ideological context that prevailed in India until the late nineties considerably limited such investments for migrants, as they and their money were looked upon with contempt, if not suspicion (Lall 2001). Generally speaking, it was difficult at the time to repatriate foreign currency or large amounts of money and to invest them in India; not to mention foreigners who were clearly discouraged from buying property in India, which penalised those Indians who had adopted another nationality after migrating, and more generally members of the old diaspora (Lall 2001).

- 7 However, both the move to embrace economic liberalization at the beginning of the nineties and the development of the 'diaspora policy' since the end of the nineties⁵ (Therwath 2007) have geared the environment towards migrants' investments. It also coincides with the boom of the real-estate market and the development of a proper professional real-estate sector in India, with major repercussions on the way urban space is produced, namely in metropolises (Auclair 1998, Searle 2009, Jaitley & Varrel 2010). The following questions therefore arise: how does migrants' money enter the Indian real-estate market? How do migrants make choices about where and what to buy or to build, thus turning themselves into city builders? How have these long-distance practices been reshaped by the substantial political changes over the last two decades?
- 8 Not surprisingly, Migrants who can afford to initiate such strategies, especially those investing in a new house 'back home', which is different from their initial one, belong to the wealthy section of the Indian migrant population. This category of migrants has attracted a lot of attention to success stories abroad, with particular interest in highly skilled professionals who have settled in the USA (Kapur 2010). So far, any probing of the financial aspect of their relationship with their country of origin has focused mostly on philanthropy (Verne *et al.* 2009) and on the transfer of higher education and research (*e.g.* investments in hospitals, colleges) (Khadria 1999). Nevertheless, it turns out that such migrants have also developed strategies to invest their earnings on a transnational scale, namely by investing in the Indian real-estate sector which has flourished over the last two decades: a large-scale survey conducted by Kapur (2010: 93-4) in the USA among Indian migrants shows that 33% of respondents declared having purchased land or real estate as a way of investing in India, while 28% have deposited their money on an Indian bank account. Let us bear in mind the porous and rather artificial distinction between remittances and investments: a substantial part of the money that is invested in real estate in India may come from migrants directly as well as indirectly (Kapur 2010: 105-6). However, one should not overlook the social and cultural role of such a purchase in the relationships between international migrants, their family and their community of origin in India (Upadhyya & Rutten 2012b: 8). Moreover, this purchase may be attributed a changing role over time, regarding the ever possible hypothesis of returning to India (Varrel 2010).
- 9 Some enquiries into this new category of real-estate customers have been carried out in the field of urban studies. It is worthwhile noting several contributions based on an analysis of advertisement media created by real-estate companies for marketing housing projects: street hoardings, advertisements in the English press, luxurious leaflets

distributed by companies (King 2004, Dupont 2005, Brosius 2010). It is difficult to deduce the extent to which reference to 'NRIs' in such widely circulated material is (also) meant to impact a broader audience, since the 'NRI label' has increasingly become associated with quality (Brosius 2010: 81). Here, reference is made to Asher Ghertner's remark (2011: 281) about migrants being 'world-class subjects' *par excellence*, who mediate or justify the circulation of new norms of aesthetics and forms of urbanism. Migrants are swallowed up in—if not willingly mistaken for—the elusive yet all-inclusive category of 'middle class that has become central to many debates about urban spaces (Fernandes 2006). Nevertheless, according to Ghertner, it would seem fitting to draw attention back to the migrant section of customers, investors, owners, sometimes inhabitants of new residential areas that are labelled 'global', as this may create a new way of examining how Indian cities have become global according to a methodology that directly addresses channels specifically developed for migrants. Hence, studying the metropolitan fabric through the transnational lens may heighten our understanding of the complexity at work under the 'global' label.

- 10 In this respect, the fact that the case studies presented here are located in Bangalore is no mere coincidence. Janaki Nair (2004) has perfectly demonstrated how Bangalore's strong colonial history and early decisions to develop key academic institutions and high-technology industries paved the way for the success of what is now the country's fifth city. On the one hand, Bangalore has become associated with the image of 'the strongest alternative incarnation of Indian modernity' (Khilnani 1999:148) that turns out to be appealing on an international and transnational scale.⁶ On the other hand, its economic specialization has made it not only one of the capitals of Indian talent (Voigt-Graf 2004), but a 'gateway city' according to Binod Khadria (2004: 5) or an 'outpost' according to the title of Carol Upadhyaya and Vasavi's book (2008). For these reasons, Bangalore is an appropriate site for investigating how international migrants become part of the Indian metropolitan fabric.

Three different angles and moments for identifying transnational channels to real-estate investment

- 11 One of the purposes of this article is to join the methodological debate in transnational studies in answer to Thomas Faist's call (2012) for methodological innovation in order to understand the multi-faceted, multi-directional dimensions of transnational flows. Instead of a strict multi-sited approach (Marcus 1995, Falzon 2009) which is largely favoured in transnational studies, here we will explore how migrants are able to purchase a house in a metropolitan location, from various perspectives that are interrelated at different levels in the fabric of urban space. Choosing this situated, yet multiple, approach stems from a suggestion by Michael Peter Smith in his seminal work on transnational urbanism: 'a useful research strategy, namely comparing different transnational networks from the same country of origin in a single transnational city' (Smith 2005: 239). Here we diverge slightly from Smith's suggestion by looking at various channels through which migrants' money goes back to one metropolitan city in their country of origin. We will analyse different frameworks that condition how money flows into the real-estate business in Bangalore: the legal and political framework *i.e.* the State; the economic framework *i.e.* companies in the real-estate sector; the transnational

framework *i.e.* devices that enable the circulation of information and that help migrants to invest.

- 12 The three cases also oppose different moments in time and contexts in the relationship between India and its migrants. As a starting point, the first case presents the context in the 1980s when remittances were supposedly strictly limited and monitored by the Indian State, but when there was less suspicion towards migrants and there was an economic crisis. The other two cases are set at the turn of the century, at a time when there was a shift in the balance of State control in the economy in favour of the private sector, parallel to the development of the diaspora-orientated policy (*cf. supra*).
- 13 Firstly, starting on a micro scale, we trace back over the making of a neighbourhood in an attempt to locate the role of migrants' investments in what has become a prime residential location in an Indian metropolis. The second and third part shift the focus to the processes through which migrants become the owners of properties located in new residential areas: the second part questions the development of a specific real-estate market for migrants, based on investigations carried out in the real-estate sector itself; the third part is based on a dematerialized field, examining exchanges on a web forum dedicated to real estate that is very popular both in South India and in the diaspora. As every case study illustrates a specific approach, methodological considerations will be further explained at the beginning of each part.
- 14 The first two case studies are based on doctoral and post-doctoral field research that was carried out in Bangalore between 2003 and 2010 (Varrel 2008, 2010). The third is a result of my participation in the *E-diasporas Atlas* research programme (2009-2012) (Diminescu 2012). More information about the methodology and material used for each case study will be given in each part.⁷

'Many NRIs live there': the making of a neighbourhood in the 1980s

- 15 This part analyses the history of the area commonly known as 'Dollar Colony', a high-profile residential neighbourhood that sprang up in the 1980s in the northern pericentric area of Bangalore. De Neve and Donner (2006: 11) have shown the relevance of the neighbourhood scale when addressing transnational processes in India: *'It is because of its mediating and translating role that the neighbourhood is an appropriate locale from where to start conceptualizing the interconnectedness of places, peoples and cultures in a globalizing world.'* In order to understand the history of this area and the exact role of migrants in its making, I held interviews with members of the Residents' Welfare Association, including migrants who had returned home and who had purchased a house there while still abroad during the first half of 2009. I added to these by using various types of information collected in the course of regular field trips over the period 2003-2009.
- 16 This example highlights the fact that efforts had already been made during the pre-liberalization period at local or State level to mobilize migrants and to potentially benefit from their remittances or investments, before the diaspora policy in the late 1990s-2000s (Lall 2001: 247, Carsignol 2011:87). 'NRI colony/city' projects and residential areas/townships specifically developed for migrants have mushroomed on the periphery of Indian million-plus cities and beyond, over more or less the last three decades, for instance in the Doaba region.⁸ Such attempts were aimed notably at attracting much

needed foreign currency, but with little success in most cases (Therwath 2007). Bangalore has its 'Dollar Colony' that is a somewhat similar type of project and an area popularly identified as a place where many NRIs own property, which is alluded to rather humorously in the title.

- 17 'Dollar colony' is currently a posh residential area located in a pericentric part of the city, officially known as Rajmahal Vilas II. The landscape is characterized by quiet, well-tarred streets planted with trees. The initial master plan included 560 individual two- or three-storey houses (Figures 1 & 2). The whole area is extremely well-maintained and does not house a shop or commercial venture of any sort. The similar style of most houses, all built less than thirty years ago, conveys an impression of ordered and modern planning that is worth noting. Nowadays it is on a par with the city's most upmarket residential areas, inhabited by high-profile individuals.
- 18 In 1982 the (regional) State government declared the layout an area where High-Income Group houses would be developed, inspired by early initiatives in New Delhi. It aimed at refilling the empty coffers of the State. The initial price of a house was nearly three lakh rupees, which was a considerable amount at that time. It initially targeted senior bureaucrats and high-ranking executives of public companies, thus designing the elite character of the future residential area. However, selling the plots turned out to be a long and difficult task, partly because of the remote location of the area at that time. Following the 1984 elections, the newly elected government, faced with diminishing amounts of cash, demanded immediate payment, which prompted many initial buyers to opt out, as construction had hardly started. In order to make quick money out of this project, the authorities then started selling the houses to anyone who could afford the total amount in US dollars or any other foreign currency, and even to foreigners; hence the nickname given to the area.

Figure 1. A view from above on Dollar Colony (2006)



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Figure 2. A house with initial design, unchanged, in Dollar Colony (2006)



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- 19 This radical move motivated by the urgent need for foreign currency indirectly broke with the official ‘studied indifference’ (Parekh 1993) towards migrants which had prevailed up until then. This initiative carved a niche for migrants to invest in India, since at that time they faced strict restrictions elsewhere on amounts to be remitted and on the importation of foreign currency. In fact, while the land belonged to the State which could not alienate it, it was only possible for foreigners to acquire the building. Thus it was also able to cater to Indian migrants who had lost their Indian citizenship on being naturalized in a foreign country. It enabled them to invest in this project and thus to have access to property in an area destined to become an elite neighbourhood. In addition, this fast-track process opened channels to the outside: even though most buyers were not migrants, informants acknowledge that many acquired property by getting hold of foreign currency through family members and business relations who had either settled abroad or who were travelling abroad. As a result, in 2009, the representatives of the residents’ association estimated that only one fifth of all house owners were or had been migrants, but the process of acquisition definitely makes this area a local product of transnational flows and connections.
- 20 Nevertheless, the intricacies of the sale and acquisition period explain the difficulties in determining in a simple manner what a migrant’s property is: who is to be considered a (former) migrant, and there what is a migrant house? What about houses inhabited by non-migrants when they are members of families dispersed on an international scale, with typical transnational features such as a pattern of frequent visits? How do we know if a house was bought fully or partly with remittances, and is there a significant threshold? This case proves to be heuristic in highlighting the significant yet limited presence of migrants which elucidates the deceptive character of local clichés and place names, *i.e.* the quotation in the title to this part as well as the nickname for the area. It also points to the methodological difficulties in pinpointing their impact on the ground. It underscores the impossibility of drawing any simple correlation between the development of specific spatial forms of urbanization, such as a residential neighbourhood, and a category of customers with allegedly more cosmopolitan tastes (King 2004).

- 21 This example illustrates how the political and regulatory contexts defining access to land and real estate property, as well as the conditions for sale and payment, shaped this real-estate project in such a way that it especially appealed to migrants, thus creating an area in which their investments, if not their presence, are concentrated. In this particular case, one of the positive factors was the derogatory priority that was given to those who were able to pay in foreign currency, including US dollars, at a time when migrants were kept at a distance from the Indian economy. Consequently, this splendid, State-designed area was ready to be made into a desirable area for successful international migrants willing to invest, because it guaranteed the value of the investment for a public that was particularly cautious about its investments.⁹ Nevertheless, this case is typical of the derogatory schemes developed before liberalization as a one-time experiment to serve a specific purpose (providing the State with foreign currency).¹⁰ How salient are these remarks in the 2000s, when liberalization resulted in the development of upmarket residential areas being handed over by the State to the private sector, while central government was trying to reconnect with the Indian diaspora, namely to attract its investments to India, through dedicated measures? Both should have opened a wider door to migrants' investments in real estate, questioning the level of their involvement in the real-estate boom in India in the 2000s.

Reaching out to NRIs: real-estate sector strategies in the 2000s

- 22 If we are to talk about the real-estate boom and rapidly changing urban landscapes, where are NRIs in what has become a vibrant market? This second part offers a real-estate sector perspective in order to identify both the diverse strategies developed to address prospective migrant buyers and the migrants' response.
- 23 Interviews were held between 2004 and 2006 with staff (at managerial level) from seven real-estate companies all of which develop upmarket housing projects in Bangalore, with architects operating in the same city, and with journalists and consultants specialized in real-estate marketing.¹¹ In the period leading up to these interviews and after them, an extensive search was made on the Internet for documentation, specialized magazines were consulted, as well as key local English newspaper supplements, and visits were made to sales offices and property fairs.
- 24 The real-estate booms in Bangalore, first in the mid-1990s, then at the beginning of the 2000s, has come and gone with the coming of age of a local professional real-estate sector. The professionalization of this sector namely involved the hiring of experienced advertising and communication professionals, hence the development of sophisticated marketing tools, both offline and online. I will focus here on online tools as they are more significant for potential buyers who have settled abroad and they have hardly been analyzed so far (for an analysis of typical offline material, see: Brosius 2010, Dupont 2005, King 2004). They largely comprise sophisticated websites with a number of fancy multimedia gimmicks: downloadable brochures, updated pictures of construction sites, video tours of model apartments, subscription to newsletters, plug-ins that enable a potential buyer to make a down payment or to chat with a sales executive, etc. They have all become commonplace for major real-estate companies that target the upper-middle

classes to market new types of costly 'products', such as villas in gated communities or flats in integrated condominiums.

- 25 Interestingly, the addition of a 'NRI' tab on the first page of the website has become part of the regular template for such websites. Here, as in offline material (*cf. supra*), this has a performative effect on non-migrant customers, as a sign of distinction but also proof of a sense of professionalism. More specifically, such tabs generally provide access to Q&As about the specific provisions for NRIs' investments and the repatriation of funds. They often include links to official resources, such as the Reserve Bank of India's website, or to financial partners. Indeed, these online devices constitute useful resources for customers located abroad, especially for the tech-savvy, highly skilled and well-paid part of the Indian diaspora.
- 26 Since the beginning of the 2000s, another new phenomenon can be observed: the organization of trade fairs abroad which market Indian real-estate company projects. Such fairs are usually organized by communication firms that gather several Indian real-estate companies and travel to countries hosting a sizeable Indian migrant population: the USA, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Singapore... In some instances, itinerant fairs exist which tour the Indian community 'hotspots' in the country, with the support of local partners: for example, according to the catalogue of the fifth 'India Property Show', this exhibition travelled across the USA, taking place successively in 2010 at Sunnyvale in California, Houston in Texas and in New Jersey (Figure 3). This is where Indian real estate becomes embedded in ethnic business, *e.g.* economic activities catering to Indian migrant communities abroad (Waldinger *et al.* 1990): they develop partnerships with local entrepreneurs, community organizations and associations, etc.

Figure 3. Catalogue cover of the fifth 'India Property Show'

Our Fifth Property Show in USA

Welcome to
INDIA PROPERTY SHOW
in USA - September 2010
Exhibition Catalogue

Sept 18, 19
The Domain Hotel
(formerly Radisson Hotel)
1085, East El-camino Real,
Sunnyvale, CA 94087
Tel: 408-247-0800

Sept 21, 22
India House
8888, West Bellfort Street,
Houston, TX 77031-2406
Tel: (713) 772-7722

Sept 25, 26
Holiday Inn
3050, Woodbridge Ave.,
Edison, NJ 0887
Tel: 732-661-1000

Timings : 12 noon to 9 pm
ENTRY FREE
Lecture on NRI investment in Real Estate at 5 pm every day

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- 27 The following extract from an interview conducted with two employees from a mid-rank company operating only in Bangalore, is extremely interesting with regards the way some companies have developed a transnational vision and a comprehensive strategy to address migrants' demand:

We have a databank of customers abroad, mostly people in the Gulf... The US market opened more recently, we have just participated to a fair there, we visited five cities... We build this databank through exhibitions, people come and give their contact, plus networking, they come to know about us through friends, colleagues. We have an office representing our company in London, then another local realtor representing us also in the Gulf. Advertisements and website are different things. The website is useful for information: people browse, then they come to the fair or they contact us through the website.¹²

- 28 This displays a high level of multi-local organization, guaranteeing the company's presence in different diaspora 'hotspots' and through various channels. It is all the more striking as this is not a major company on the Bangalore scene.
- 29 The multiplication of these various marketing tools and initiatives that unambiguously target the migrant clientele infers the emergence of a transnational real-estate market centred on properties in India.
- 30 Interviews conducted with sales and marketing representatives highlight migrants' limited contribution to the real-estate boom: the percentage of migrants among their total clientele was usually quite low, between 10% and 15%, for these particular companies and, according to respondents, on the Bangalore market as a whole.¹³ Only one company in my sample boasted an unusual proportion of NRI customers, *i.e.* 30-40%, and according to its representative, only a few companies in Bangalore had such a high proportion. The precise reasons for this shall be developed later (*cf. infra*). Furthermore, none of the interviewees were able to mention a project that had, for the most part, been sold to migrants, contrary to what was observed in African cities (Bertoncello 2010). Generally speaking, the diaspora is merely considered a niche market by well-established real-estate companies. This proportion may vary according to the type of product. Luxury products are often aggressively marketed abroad, especially in North America, and as a result the percentage of migrants may amount to one third of the total amount of buyers for such upmarket projects. Lastly, the inclination to invest in India varies according to the country of residence. It is no coincidence that a few companies boast an unusually high percentage of NRI customers, *i.e.* 30-40% (*cf. supra*). These companies have a well-rooted presence in the Gulf countries where migrants cannot settle down permanently, hence the wealthy section of this population can afford to invest in real estate in Indian metropolitan cities.
- 31 Nevertheless, it must not be inferred from this that there is a strict correlation between real estate investments in India and the probability of returning to India. Sales executives explain that they also market abroad projects that clearly have a rental profile and are not meant to be occupied by wealthy families returning from life abroad. For instance, it is now quite common for the same enclave to contain both large luxurious apartments and smaller ones (one- or two-bedroom flats) located in separate buildings, eventually with free access to amenities such as a clubhouse. Customers located abroad, just like those living in India, may as well buy the smaller ones as an investment. Indeed, migrants are not immune to the real-estate frenzy that has taken over Indian society. The

development of property management services, often by the same real-estate company that initiated the project, caters especially to such investment-oriented buyers and absentee owners. The rise in real-estate prices in India and the emergence of a pool of prospective well-paid, white-collar tenants in fast-growing metropolitan cities have made real estate an investment that may be regarded as the most profitable and safest, even for migrants. It is also another way of diversifying savings at a time when there are fewer and more uncertain options in host countries, rather than a simple portfolio investment. The following extract from an interview reveals complex speculative strategies developed by migrants; such strategies were mentioned by several respondents:

I was interviewing the sales manager of a small real estate company that had recently launched a project for a luxurious gated community. He asked me for a break in order to answer to a customer calling (skyping?) from California, but I could listen to the whole conversation. The customer had paid a substantial deposit for a house in this project (yet to be constructed) but he wanted to step out, in order to make a longer-term investment with that money. The vendor convinced him to transfer his deposit to the second phase of the project that would not be constructed before five years, by promising a substantial price escalation meanwhile, which would increase his profit when reselling. In none of the two cases was the customer willing to occupy this house, his purpose was only investment-driven.¹⁴

- 32 This example shows how the real-estate market has become a speculative investment market for some migrants abroad, just as for Indian residents.
- 33 The flip side of the coin is the possible impact on how real-estate projects are conceived and developed to meet the requirements of prospective buyers. If located abroad, the latter may require an even better guarantee that the value of their investment will increase. According to real-estate professionals, such customers favour two types of project and company. One type corresponds to small projects developed by landowners-cum-developers, who sell flats or plots of land to people through social networks that generate trust. This is a well-travelled path of investing back home, but it requires strong home connections and trust. The other perhaps more 'modern' type corresponds to large upmarket condominiums or villa compounds, developed by prominent companies that put forward partnerships with foreign consultants (*e.g.* architecture, landscaping firms) and internationally recognized quality certifications. Such operations may be regarded as providing better guarantees and securing the value of the investment for prospective buyers who would consider themselves as more prone to fraud because of the long distance. As a consequence, these projects fit into international standards, which has an indirect impact, for instance, on imports to India of architectural models, floor plans, interior design, as suggested by King (2004). Migrant buyers therefore indirectly contribute to the development of a type of residential space that has without a doubt reshaped the landscape and skyline of Indian cities over the last decade, and which has changed the standard of residential private spaces.
- 34 Based on the observation of marketing techniques and on interviews with professionals from the sector, this second case helps us to specify the mechanisms through which migrants' investment strategies are developed, even though it is difficult to locate them precisely. They have undeniably contributed both to the success of certain companies that have developed a strategy to target them directly, and to the development of certain types of turnkey residential spaces. Even though migrants are merely a subcategory of

customers, initiatives developed by some companies explain the existence of a transnational market.

Web platforms as sites for developing transnational real-estate strategies

- 35 In this third part we turn to the quintessential ‘space of flows’, *e.g.* the worldwide web. Throughout the last decade it has become a key channel for transnational practices. There is ample evidence that the Indian diaspora has turned this tool into a major way of structuring itself since the early days of the Internet (Leclerc 2012: 1-3). Conversely, social science has developed various methodologies to examine how migrants make use of ITC tools to maintain and sometimes develop new forms of long-distance relations, and how it reshapes transnational practices and diasporic configurations (Diminescu 2008, Nedelcu 2009). Here we will dwell on the development of Internet tools that help migrants to take part in the dynamics of the Indian real-estate sector. This is the most recent case, as it explores an online forum, which did not exist in 2004. We aim to analyse how such virtual spaces indirectly (re)shape the urban fabric by giving the diaspora direct access to the real-estate market, thus influencing it. Methodologically, this approach is based on pioneering research carried out by Mihaela Nedelcu and Dana Diminescu on migrants’ websites. Nedelcu (2002) proposes what she calls ‘netnography’, *i.e.* to observe website architecture, online exchanges and their potential offline outcomes. Dana Diminescu (2012) has gone a step further by providing systematical tools to explore relations between migrants’ websites and to develop comparisons between different diasporic groups or long-distance mobilizations.
- 36 The material used here comes from more extensive research conducted as part of the ‘E-diaspora Atlas’ research programme (2009-2012) (Diminescu 2012). After selecting and compiling 225 websites related to real estate and to migration, the relationship between them (through hypertext links) was mapped and analyzed. Based on this comprehensive database, our focus was on observing the exchanges taking place on an online forum during the period March 2010-November 2011, inspired by the ‘netnography’ methodology developed by Mihaela Nedelcu (2002).
- 37 Real estate companies in Bangalore are highly visible because fierce competition forces them to develop sophisticated corporate websites (*cf. supra*). Besides, on the whole there are plenty of websites dedicated to Indian real estate on the Internet that also refer to the Bangalore market: famous portals like Indiaproperty.com, redirecting users to company websites; online journals and magazines; the websites of various consultancy and financial firms. A few of them specially target migrant users by capturing search engines through an aggregation of keywords; for instance, the website NRIRealtyNews.com. More generally, this key topic is addressed by a large part of the many websites making up the Indian diaspora’s virtual space. Here we further analyze the way in which this topic evolves on a well-known forum portal, Return2India (www.r2iclubforums.com). This portal is somewhat original as it hosts multiple forums dedicated to migration-related topics that are clearly more like those in North America. There is a tab on the front page specially dedicated to real estate. Stemming from a discussion group that dates back to 2002, it was created in 2007 and boasted more than 35,000 registered users in September 2011, with half of them claiming, at the time of their registration, to be born in India but

resident abroad, mostly in the USA. It is of particular relevance to our topic, since the volume of discussions on real-estate-related topics had reached such proportions that since 2010 they have been transferred to a sister website: IndianRealEstateBoard.com [IREB].¹⁵ This website is accessed directly from R2iclubforums.com by simply clicking on the 'real estate' tab, which means that users can easily browse back and forth between the two websites with a simple click. Discussions are organized by threads according to various entries: by city and city areas; by real-estate company; by project; plus a couple of general discussion threads about local news. There are also topics on how to finance property purchases with valuable input on the specificities of international fund transfers, taxes to be paid by non-residents, etc. It is worthwhile noting that most users are interested in the purchase of residential property, either flats or houses, rarely plots. This in itself hints at a bias in the behaviour of prospective migrant buyers, who are less inclined to buy plots as it would subsequently require an additional effort to have a house built there, at least to prevent any encroachment, which proves extremely complicated from abroad. The forums provide users, wherever they may be, with a floor for instantaneous discussions about matters that are extremely localized; for instance, the status of work on a building site in an Indian city. By logging in and surfing the discussions, it is possible to monitor transnational exchanges of information between prospective buyers located in India and abroad. They can usually be easily identified as migrants and non-migrants, either by informative logins (say: SuryaCanada, for instance) or by the fact that their profile displays some basic information, such as their place of residence.

- 38 Contrary to my initial assumption that non-migrants would be the primary informants, these flows of information are also multi-directional: some migrants may display detailed knowledge of local real-estate markets in India, Indian legislation and sectorial business dynamics. In a sense, such forums are virtual places where transnational practices of investing in real estate in India can be closely observed by analyzing the differentiation of roles between migrants and non-migrants, which cannot be taken for granted: the former are not necessarily those asking the questions; they sometimes turn out to be (though not necessarily) well-informed thanks to personal visits, to relatives and friends, or to frequent discussions with real-estate professionals, like the one described in the second part. Both parties may also have hidden agendas in order to attract others to invest in the same project, by disseminating misleading information for example. This prompts us to reconsider any simplistic vision of migrants as cash cows, easily manipulated by real-estate brokers and malicious acquaintances. If we consider the high level of traffic on forums and the intense exchanges on some topics, these forums obviously represent a valuable source of information for prospective buyers located abroad. Furthermore, regular attempts by real-estate professionals to influence discussions¹⁶ testify to the importance this forum has acquired: these 'intruders' may indeed sometimes pose as prospective well-informed buyers, usually with the intention of speaking highly of a project or company, or to disseminate the realtor's version in case of any litigation.
- 39 Besides providing migrants with the capacity to act as informed urban citizens, these forums may build bridges for action, which may take at least two forms. Firstly, in a few cases where a developer fails to deliver a project on time and turns out to be a fraud, buyers connect via the forum and rally together to put pressure on or even to sue the company for a speedy completion of the project or to recover their deposits. Such forms of customer self-organization are obviously of particular interest to migrants and they

represent original forms of long-distance consumer mobilization. This kind of mobilization is of a non-political nature—even though there are general discussion threads where personal opinions and critics on political issues are often expressed—thanks to the anonymity of logins, which makes it an original form of long-distance mobilization. The second sort of action is the setting up of discussion groups for property owners within the same project, or of investors in the same city. Such groups are set up by members who create forums with restricted access where direct action may be discussed and decided upon. Thus, the development of such platforms enables users, including a sizeable share of migrants, to develop well-informed, comprehensive purchase strategies characterized by what seems to be greater agency.

- 40 This last case study illustrates a deterritorialized space of discussion where flows of information circulate transnationally and have an impact on how the city is built on a micro-scale, by influencing prospective buyers' choices, whether they are migrants or non-migrants.

Conclusion

- 41 The peculiar structure of this article which combines three case studies, each addressed using a different approach, both fulfils the imperative for innovation in the study of transnational phenomena as formulated by Thomas Faist (2012) and takes up the suggestion to study different channels in one location as put forward by Michael Peter Smith (2005). As such, it contributes to the methodological debate on how to capture transnational flows at local level in India, which was recently revived by Carol Upadhya and Marco Rutten (2012a).
- 42 The three precise moments in time presented in these case studies show how wealthy Indian migrants develop transnational practices of investing in real estate, thus turning themselves into actors in the making of Bangalore. The first part of this article identified obvious transnational connections in the making of an upmarket neighbourhood in the very constrained context of the 1980s, prior to the major political shift towards economic liberalization and the development of policies in favour of Indian migrants and the Indian diaspora. It underlines the fact that migrants are elusive subjects. In the second part we highlighted in a more precise manner how migrants actually enter the real-estate market by exploring the strategies developed by the real-estate sector to attract prospective migrant buyers, thus analyzing migrants' investment strategies and the emergence of a transnational sub-market that is part of the overall real-estate frenzy in India. Through 'netnography', the third part analyzes the direct relations on the Internet between individuals scattered over different countries, in order to optimize their investment strategies and to secure their property purchases in India, which reshape and strengthen the transnational flows and migrant agency in brand-new ways.
- 43 This article has traced the outline of a largely ignored dimension of transnational connections between migrants and their home country; that is remittances and investments, which deserve more systematic attention in India, as in Asia as a whole, as Rahman and Fee (2012) recently pointed out. The efforts made by the real-estate sector to reach out to these prospective buyers and the emergence of online platforms for direct exchanges call for more attention to be paid to such immaterial flows and transnational practices in the field of migration and transnational studies, as they materially reassert the relationship between migrants and contemporary dynamics at stake on Indian

territory and in Indian society. Conversely, we argue here that the debate on the 'worlding' of Indian cities needs to take into account the 'international migration' dimension as a major yet discreet mode of bringing metropolitan cities to the rest of the world, which throws new light on Sunil Khilnani's words (1999: 148) to describe Bangalore: 'the capital of Non-Resident India'.

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NOTES

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2. In this article the term '(international) migrants' is used in an inclusive manner to designate Indian migrants (officially referred to as Non Resident Indians [NRI] according to Indian government terminology) and migrants who no longer possess Indian citizenship [officially referred to as Persons of Indian Origin [PIO]], either because they have adopted another citizenship or were born abroad to Indian parents. The term 'diaspora' will also be used in an inclusive manner to encompass both NRIs and PIOs.
3. The transnational approach was initiated in the 1990s as an attempt to revive the field of migration studies and to overcome methodological binaries, especially the analytical dichotomy between the country of origin and the country of residence. The transnational approach lays emphasis on 'the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement (Basch *et al.*, 1994: 6, quoted by Levitt & Nyberg-Sørensen 2004: 2) and on the ubiquitous character of circulation. See the general introduction to this volume for more details.
4. Material, pictures and reports are available on the 'Provincial Globalization' research project website: <http://www.provglo.org/>.
5. After decades of 'studied indifference' (Parekh 1993) towards migrants and the diaspora, by the end of the nineties the Indian government had developed a comprehensive policy to (re)connect with its diaspora, led by the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs that was created in 2004. This includes lifting restrictions on migrants and members of the diaspora wishing to remit their income and to invest in India and on the creation of various dedicated fast-track processes, as well as the creation of a quasi-double citizenship, the Overseas Citizenship of India (Therwath 2007). One of the aims of this policy is obviously to encourage migrants to contribute to the growth of the Indian economy.
6. This image also received some acknowledgement at a central (national) level when the first Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs, Jagdish Tytler, suggested making Bangalore the country's first 'NRI city' at the annual function of a Bangalore NRI association in July 2004 (personal observation, 2004). This announcement was never really followed through or implemented, but it is yet another indication of the image associated with Bangalore as far as international migration is concerned.
7. This research, especially the funding of field visits to India, was financed by various grants: PhD fellowship, French Ministry for Higher Education and Research (2002-2005); travel grant, French-Indian Scientific Exchange Programme, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris (2009); Agence Nationale pour la Recherche (2010-2012); Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (2010-onwards).
8. I would like to thank Christine Moliner for this information.

9. Here we will not question the personal considerations that may be involved in the decision to buy a house in India, regarding projects to return, to retire in India, etc. I developed a discussion on the delicate issue of return migration in a previous publication (Varrel 2010).

10. This scheme does not seem to have been replicated. I came to know about another location called 'dollar colony' on the southern periphery but, according to one informant, its remote location seemed to have hindered its development.

11. Most of the material was collected in the mid-2000s, and then completed with extracts from the specialized press and by holding selected discussions with key informants in 2009-2011.

12. Marketing and sales managers, interview by author, Bangalore, December 2004.

13. Since the year 2001, the figure generally put forward by Indian authorities and the Indian media estimates that the Indian diaspora amounts to about 25 million Indian migrants *and* people of Indian origin abroad. Hence migrants represent at the most a mere 2% of the total population of India.

14. Interview by author, Bangalore, December 2004.

15. The details about the history, membership, contents of the website were taken from it. I had no direct contact with its administrators.

16. Employees of real-estate companies and brokers are not supposed to be active undercover on the website. If a member is suspected of being such an employee, it can be banned from forums. It occasionally creates some tension in the discussions when someone is accused of fraud by other participants.

ABSTRACTS

This article explores the role of international Indian migrants in metropolitan dynamics in India by identifying the different channels through which they invest in real estate, thus making themselves actors of the urban fabric. By adopting a chronological perspective, it analyses the articulations between economic liberalization, the diaspora-orientated policy of the Indian government and the relations between the wealthy section of migrants and India, their country of origin. Here we aim to demonstrate the importance of investigating the financial dimension of transnational flows, which has been largely overlooked by migration studies, as well as the necessity to consider migrants as actors in the 'worlding' of cities in the Global South. One key methodological point here addresses the exploration of online tools developed by the corporate sector as well as by migrants and which have become platforms for an emerging transnational real-estate market.

INDEX

Keywords: migrants, remittances, real estate, internet, India

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