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Luce Beeckmans



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A tale of two twin houses

Mirjana Lozanovska, *Migrant Housing. Architecture, Dwelling, Migration*, London, New York, NY: Routledge, 2019 (Routledge Research in Architecture)

Luce Beeckmans

Assistant Professor in Architecture and Urbanism related to Migration and Diversity (from September 2020 onwards)

Ghent University, Faculty of Engineering and Architecture

Department of Architecture and Urban Planning

Senior post-doctoral research fellow fwo (Research Foundation Flanders), affiliated to: Ghent University, Department of Architecture and Urban Planning

[head institution];

KULeuven University, Interculturalism, Migration and Minorities Research Centre;

Antwerp University, Urban Studies Centre

Central to Mirjana Lozanovska's latest book *Migrant Housing. Architecture, Dwelling, Migration* (2019) is the question whether we can consider the migrant house as a distinct category within architectural historiography. This is of course a rhetorical question, as the book in an unparalleled way points out how migrants' sociocultural inscriptions and contributions were hitherto completely lacking in the historiography of the architecture of housing. In her book, Lozanovska focuses on postwar migrant housing (1955-1975) of working-class immigrants within the transnational field between Southern Europe--the Republic of Macedonia in particular--and Australia. One highly original aspect of the book is that it addresses migrant housing at both ends of the migration chain. Hence, in addition to studying the material implications of migration to the immigrant cities, as is commonly the case in academic research, it also elucidates the homeland places of departure in the aftermath of the emigration. This results in a detailed architectural taxonomy of two types of migrant houses, one in the suburbs of Melbourne and one in the village of Zavoj.

The book is divided into three book parts (each consisting of three chapters), preceded by a general introduction. The rationale behind the three book parts remains somewhat obscure, but the first part engages predominantly in theoretical and methodological discussion and sketches the history of postwar labor migration as the broader context for the empirical research in the following two book parts. Part I opens by elaborating

2 | on ethical questions related to migrant subjectivity in writing and research and on the importance of a gendered perspective, referring to feminist migration scholars such as Sarah Ahmed¹ and bell hooks.² This is particularly relevant because Lozanovska's book is also the "migrant daughter's study." In this respect, the author's slightly apologetic tone seems unnecessary. Lozanovska's position as an author-subject results not only in a deeper and richer understanding of the migrant architecture in question, the fruit of over thirty years of longitudinal research, it also gives way to a highly personal account of postwar migrant housing which has the welcome potential to decentralize and provincialize a Euro-centric architectural historiography by adding missing histories from peripheral sites written by a woman for whom "(t)he house that Alberti canonises is not her house" (p.24). Although Lozanovska's book does not refer to them directly, it nevertheless clearly resonates with recent feminist architectural histories of migration. Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, for example, aimed at destabilizing certain historiographical presumptions by attributing architectural authorship to non-experts, such as migrants, who "may have lacked signature, but not significance."³

Particularly interesting is Lozanovska's elaboration of Tadao Ando's idea that the process of inhabitation involves "battles" with the house.⁴ Whereas Ando's notion of "battling" relates to how clients often do not feel at home in architect-designed houses, Lozanovska uses the concept to explain how the embodied dwelling habits that migrants bring with them often do not fit well with the local housing forms in the immigrant cities. In the subsequent physical "battling" between the migrant and the house, which deeply characterizes the process of migrant settlement, Lozanovska interestingly not only considers the agency of the migrant. By referring to the work of the architect John Hejduk⁵ and the psychoanalytical theories of Slavoj Žižek,⁶ she breaks with the conventional dichotomy between subject and object and conceptualizes the house as an active agent that draws the migrant into action.

Part II is central to the book, as it examines in detail migrant housing as an architectural construct. Lozanovska accurately describes how migrants have adapted, altered, extended, reorganized, and redesigned what she calls the "normative brick veneer house"

1 Sara AHMED, "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2009, p. 329-347. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/136787799900200303>.

2 bell HOOKS, "Black Vernacular: Architecture as Cultural Practice," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, New York, NY: The New Press, 1995.

3 Anooradha Iyer SIDDIQI, "Writing With: Togethering, Difference, and Feminist Architectural Histories of Migration," *Structural Instability E-flux Architecture*, 2018. URL: <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/structural-instability/208707/writing-with/>. Accessed 4 August 2020.

4 Tadao ANDO, *Tadao Ando: Beyond Horizons in Architecture*, edited by H.S. Bee, New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1991.

5 Lozanovska in particular refers to Hejduk's "subject/object." John HEJDUK, *Vladivostok, Riga, Lake Baikal: A work by John Hejduk*, edited by Kim SHKAPICH, exhibition catalogue (Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, 22 January-16 February 1980), New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1989.

6 Lozanovska in particular refers to Žižek's statement that "at its most radical the object is *that which objects*, that which disturbs the smooth running of things..." Slavoj ŽIŽEK, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006 (Short Circuits), p. 17.

(a detached villa-like type of building consisting of a supporting wooden or steel frame concealed with an exterior layer of bricks which is perceived as “the cultural norm” in Melbourne’s suburbs). Hence, while migrants did not invent new housing models, the “battling” did produce a distinct architecture. For a number of spatial entities, such as the “front matter,” the terrace and the “house-world,” Lozanovska precisely documents the architectural details that visually differentiate migrant houses from conventional brick veneer houses - although it would have been useful, especially for non-Australians, if the “normative brick veneer house” from which migrants depart were described with equal detail and visual material. By building on Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of “opus operatum,” “taste,” and “habitus,”⁷ she argues that a series of “tell-tale details” mark the architectural distinction of the migrant house. Yet, Lozanovska also posits that visual, stylistic, or ornamental categories alone do not suffice to understand the deeper meaning of the distinctive appearance of the migrant house, since they do not address the socio-spatial transformations of the house. Indeed, while lion sculptures, baroque balusters or the “wrong” color of brick form visual manifestations of difference of the terraces, her analysis shows how rituals of drinking morning and afternoon coffee have totally reversed the traditional orientation of the houses towards the backyard and away from public visibility into frontward oriented houses with social spaces, such as terraces, on the public side of the houses. Acknowledging these socio-spatial transformations requires, according to Lozanovska, “rethinking architecture as cultural productivity,” an ambition which lies at the heart of this book. However, at the same time, one wonders about the extent to which the significance of notions of “tell-tale *details*” and “diaspora *aesthetics*” (emphasis added), however appealing, are sufficiently grasped. The ambition to work towards a “sociocultural historiography of architecture” explains, however, why Lozanovska interweaves architectural theory predominantly with cultural theories rather than with insights from migration or transnationalism studies as one would have expected.

The most innovative concept introduced in the book is probably that of the “twin house.” As Lozanovska explains, it mediates between two prevailing, yet opposing, approaches to migrant housing. In the first one, migrant houses in Australia were “absorbed into a matrix of sameness within the brick veneer houses, but were not discussed as part of the content of sameness” (p. 60). In the second, more general one, migrant houses are often described by means of theories of alterity and otherness (p. 207). Yet, the apparent similarity of migrant housing to “normative” (vernacular) housing in Australia is exactly what disrupts the very process that structures “othering.” The “twin house” concept thus allows a shift away from a dual “other-center” framing to a discourse about “parallel existence.” It shows that migrant housing evolved in parallel with “normative housing,” sharing broadly the same housing model and home-making aspirations, yet negotia-

7 Pierre BOURDIEU, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgements of Taste*, [First published as *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement*, Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1979 (Le sens commun)], Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

4 | ting these issues materially between two or more cultures. The “twin house” thus has the merit of transferring the intellectual burden from an “explanatory and legitimating account” of migrant housing to a “reorganisation of the architectural parameter of the normative house construct” (p. 208). Although Lozanovska develops the concept of the “twin house” only in chapter 9, which in fact reads as a conclusion, she laid the foundation for it in Part II, in which she documents (but does not yet theorize) the “twinness” of migrants’ houses with local vernacular housing in both Melbourne and Zavoj. Yet, while she identifies the “twin house” in Melbourne as a place of “existential territoriality,” the “twin house” built by emigrant descendants in the village is not built for inhabitation, but for securing property rights and therefore rather represents a “patrimonial territoriality.”

Lozanovska’s conceptualization and theorization of the “twin house” is particularly strong, even to the extent that one wonders why she has not chosen it as the book title, especially since the current title “Migrant Housing,” perhaps chosen for reasons of a clever (academic) marketability, does raise some questions. Firstly, although Lozanovska herself refers to Sarah Ahmed’s⁸ seminal article in which the term “migrant” is considered too reducing as a concept of migrant ontology, the title is not completely free of such essentialization. Secondly, although Lozanovska accurately distinguishes between the migrant *home* and the migrant *house* (the material anchoring of the home) by dwelling on a rich body of scholarship (although astonishingly not mentioning Paolo Boccagni’s important work on migrants’ home-making or “homing”⁹), she does not elaborate on the term “housing,” while it somehow suggests an institutional involvement or at least reinforces the impression of generalization. Moreover, as the book describes the very specific houses built, adapted, transformed, and recrafted by postwar Southern European migrants in Melbourne and Zavoj, it should perhaps better unpack this specificity (for instance because it is almost impossible to compare the emigrant house in Zavoj to the “remittance house” described by Sarah Lynn Lopez,¹⁰ although both are the product of return migration). In fact, a comparative perspective on migrant housing, though suggested on the back flap of the book, is generally lacking and the literature study is relatively Australia-focused. Lastly, and perhaps most fundamentally, in the book “migrant housing” refers to two entirely different phenomena: the migrant house in the immigrant city and the migrant house in the emigrant village *after* arrival. Although it is Lozanovska’s strong merit to bring both together in one book, the (architectural features of the) two migrant houses are so strikingly different, that it is not entirely clear if they can both be captured by the same term. The element that actually connects both houses most, is their “twinness” with vernacular architecture due to migrant agencies. In that

8 See note 1.

9 Paolo BOCCAGNI, *Migration and the search for home: Mapping domestic space in migrants’ everyday lives*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016 (Mobility and Politics).

10 Sarah Lynn LOPEZ, “The Remittance House: Architecture of Migration in Rural Mexico,” *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2010, p. 33-52. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20839348>. Accessed 5 August 2020.

sense, it is somehow strange that Lozanovska, the co-author of a seminal article entitled “Is the migrant house in Australia an Australian vernacular architecture?”¹¹ states as early as page 2 that “(h)ow migrant housing contributes to theories of vernacular architecture may be the subject for a following book.” It seems to be a central topic of this book, too. Indeed, it often appeared as if Lozanovska’s objective was not only to define migrant housing, but also to redefine Australian vernacular architecture by adding new layers of non-Anglo-Celtic architectural histories to it.

The last part of the book focuses on the architectural documentation techniques used in the fieldwork, with a major focus on Zavoj. Already, in the previous chapters, it became clear that architecture has much to offer to migrant studies in terms of method. Interesting sections, detailed photographs, and hand-made drawings are proof that the visual is a powerful vehicle for conveying the argument to the reader. In addition, this book shows that visualizations can be mobilized as instruments of analysis. A Suzanne Hall-like¹² drawing, for example, connects migrant houses in Zavoj to the immigrant cities of their owners, showing the expanded global presence of postwar European migrant housing and the circulation of postwar European migrant home-making and house-building strategies, resulting in a diasporic architecture of twinness (or “diaspora aesthetics” in Lozanovska’s words) that links cities transnationally (p. 160). Unfortunately, the book also demonstrates that the Routledge format does not do justice to this kind of visual approach, since the black-and-white images do not make it possible to see that the brick is the “wrong” color, and the sections are reduced so drastically that they are illegible. Lozanovska’s excellent research deserves a reproduction-quality of the same level.

This book is a *must read* for anyone interested in the intersection between migration and architecture. It is not an *easy read*, however. The fine-grained, detailed architectural analysis goes hand in hand with an enigmatic book structure. The dense theorization alternates with literary and autobiographical text. Although certain points are reiterated several times, side arguments are just as numerous. Intentionally or not, Lozanovska gives us lots of homework in terms of deciphering. In this sense, the text is not an effective one. But it is an affective text. And this is exactly what the topic needed: an author who is able to intertwine academic scrutiny with (female) sensitivity. As such, this book is in more than one way ground-breaking in re-negotiating the disciplinary boundaries of architectural theory.

11 Mirjana LOZANOVSKA, Iris LEVIN and Maria Victoria GANTALA, “Is the migrant house in Australia an Australian vernacular architecture?,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2013, p. 65-78. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41945724>. Accessed 5 August 2020.

12 Suzanne M. HALL, Julia KING and Robin FINLAY, “Envisioning Migration: Drawing the Infrastructure of Stapleton Road, Bristol,” *New Diversities*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2015, p. 59-72. URL: http://newdiversities.mmg.mpg.de/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2015_17-02_04_Hall.pdf. Accessed 5 August 2020.

- 6 | Keywords: migration, architecture domestique
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