

# The anatomy of houses

## Materialities of being at home

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**ABSTRACT:** This introductory essay proposes a reflection that discusses, reframes, and presents the thematic section hosted in this volume, that investigates houses at the intersection between recent trends in the anthropology of the house, the study of material culture, and the investigation of contemporary socio-cultural transformations. In the first paragraph, we contextualize the growing contemporary interest in houses. In the second, following Carsten, we sustain the idea that houses themselves should be placed at the heart of a research agenda, we present the approach proposed in this thematic section, we clarify what are houses and what distinguishes them in relation to homes and households and how, in the history of anthropology, these “objects” have been investigated. In the third paragraph, reviewing the main approaches to the theme, we delve into the notion of *société à maisons* elaborated by Lévi-Strauss. The fourth paragraph places the concreteness of houses back at the centre of the analysis, where normative and material forms are mediated, reproduced, and even contested or negotiated. In the last, we present the three articles hosted in this thematic section – and the afterword discussing them – that explore how houses and their materiality modify the world and deal with its transformations.

**KEYWORDS:** ANTHROPOLOGY; HOUSE; BEING AT HOME; MATERIALITY; MATERIAL CULTURE.

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*The anatomy of houses: Materialities of being at home*

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### *A growing interest*

In 1991 Mary Douglas published an essay interpreting houses as embryonic communities<sup>1</sup>. Through a pragmatic investigation of the domestic environment and reflection on the categories derived from Max Weber's *Verstehende Soziologie*, the anthropologist set out to re-conceptualise the notion of solidarity and show the mechanisms of domestic production and reproduction. The opening sentence of Douglas's essay reads: "The more we reflect on the tyranny of the house, the less surprising it is that the young wish to be free of its scrutiny and control" (Douglas 1991: 287). Setting aside the second part of the sentence, it is fascinating to note that the first part – if taken almost as a suggestion – points to a radically opportune way of thinking about these last two years in which the relationship among home, individual and society has emerged as a pivotal aspect of all of our everyday lives. At best, houses have constituted a place of protection from the pandemic, a workspace, hub of social relations, space for care and affection, and shelter from fear and pain. However, houses only represented all this only for some of the people who, first of all, had access to adequate housing. On the contrary, for all those who were not in possession of houses for whatever reason, the "tyranny of the house" manifested with two-fold violence generated by the daily presence of an absence.

This consideration does not stem from some academic habit of thought produced by an excessively situated and specialist gaze. Rather, there seems to be a growing interest in this ambiguous and everyday object cutting across society in the current moment. In Italy, for example, the literary arts (along with other fields) have recently displayed a certain attention to the theme of houses, seeking to investigate their "hidden sides", stories and social values. Given these premises, the house seems to represent a productive narrative metaphor for reflecting on society as a whole. One text currently enjoying great success with the public is *Il libro delle case* [The book of houses] (2021) by Andrea Bajani. The book is presented in the form of a series of seventy-

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1. This article is the result of a joint process of reflection between the two authors. However, sections can be divided as follows: Giacomo Pozzi: A growing interest; *Société à maisons*; Materialities; Paolo Grassi: Listening to houses; The contributions: a multilevel analysis of the house. This publication was made possible by funds from the IULM University of Milan, Department of Humanities. We would like to thank the reviewers and editorial board of *Anuac* for their constructive comments on this paper.

eight domestic scenes spread across approximately forty houses. Bajani's idea is not altogether original: it is about telling a story by describing the places where it takes place. In the contemporary pandemic period, however, this narrative structure appears especially engaging because it makes it easy for readers to identify with the subject. Another paradigmatic case is the novel *Casa è dove fa male* [Home is where it hurts] by Massimo Cuomo (2021). Here, it is the voice of a four-storey building on the outskirts of Mestre (Venice) that, with a clear and merciless gaze, recounts the lives of the tenants inhabiting the seven apartments that make up the building. Thanks to the narrator's privileged gaze, the reader enjoys the chance to secretly step inside the houses of other people, a prototypical obsession of this historical moment in which we are only allowed to (forcibly) experience our own homes. Other examples include *Non è mai troppo tardi* [It is never too late] by Stefania Russo (2020), a novel set in a residential complex called "the Monster" on the outskirts of Milan; *La vicina gentile* [The kind neighbour] by Aurelia Rossi (2020), focused on neighbourhood relations; and *Condominio Arenella* by Mariavittoria Picone (2020) that depicts life scenes from a Neapolitan condominium.

However, it is not only the literary arts that have sought to capture the "imprisoned" lives unfolding across contemporary Italy: even Italian cinema seems to display a certain interest. One example is Nanni Moretti's latest movie, *Tre piani* [Three floors] (2021). Inspired by the Israeli writer Eshkol Nevo's novel, Moretti outlines life inside a bourgeois Roman apartment building, beginning from a dramatic event that upsets its equilibrium. The building not only represents the setting of the action, it is also one of the protagonists of the story, a living space involved in the whirlwind of relationships that bind together its inhabitants.

The Italian case, although not necessarily comprehensive, seems to be paradigmatic of a wider collective awareness: houses, which constitute a central element in most human societies, stands out as a necessary good and, at the same time – as in the case of the pandemic – a necessary evil, a limiting and limited place.

### *Listening to houses*

The thematic section organised by *Anuac* in this volume investigates the question of houses from a peculiar perspective, one developed at the intersection between recent trends in the anthropology of the house, the study of material culture, and the investigation of contemporary socio-cultural transformations. This section grew out of a panel held at the 14<sup>th</sup> SIEF (International Society for Ethnology and Folklore) Congress in Santiago

de Compostela in spring 2019. The panel, entitled “Listening to Houses: Tracking Politics, Poetics and Practices of Being at Home in the Contemporary World”, stemmed from the editors’ research interests<sup>2</sup> in dwelling, urban life, and socio-economic marginality based on field research in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Cape Verde, Portugal and Italy. Through our fieldwork, we essentially realized how houses condition and are conditioned by the trajectories of our research participants with their opportunities, chances, resources, and difficulties. By observing and analysing the demolition of informal neighbourhoods and consequent forced relocation of their residents in Portugal, eviction measures and squatting in Italy, urban regeneration policies on the outskirts of a Cape Verdean city, and the security logic-based and segregation-generating dynamics of Dominican and Guatemalan slums, we were able to grasp the profound significance of domestic structures and living in the daily lives of these groups.

Reflecting on these topics, we were thrilled by Carsten’s recent argument that contemporary anthropology should be more engaged in “listening to houses” (Carsten 2018). According to this perspective, houses should not be considered static objects, but rather “interconnections between individual trajectories, kinship and the state” (Ivi: 103). In other words, the politics, poetics, and practices related to houses represent a privileged standpoint for uncovering how socio-cultural changes are materialized, embodied and felt in everyday life by social actors. Carsten’s assertion places the house itself at the heart of a research agenda. Drawing on this perspective, we organised our panel at the SIEF Congress, inviting the participants to explore how societal transformations influence perceptions, praxes and ideas of houses and, dialectically, how certain perceptions, praxes and ideas of houses can act in turn on those same dimensions. Seven researchers from different European countries participated in the panel and three of them agreed to continue the discussion by contributing to this thematic session.

2. Our research interest focuses on the economic and social significance acquired by houses in the social housing neighborhoods, informal settlements, and marginal urban areas in which we have been working for several years. Since 2012 Giacomo Pozzi has been conducting ethnographic research in contexts characterized by housing vulnerability and territorial stigmatization. Namely, he has been working in Portugal (Amadora, Lisbon), Italy (Milan) and Cape Verde (Mindelo, São Vicente Island). His analyses focus on the entanglements between individual trajectories, welfare policies, and marginalization. Paolo Grassi has been working in San Siro, one of Milan’s largest social housing neighborhoods, since 2017. There, he developed a research project on structural violence and urban space (see Fava and Grassi 2020), collaborating with an action-research group made up of urbanists, architects and anthropologists called “Mapping San Siro” ([www.mapping-sansiro.polimi.it](http://www.mapping-sansiro.polimi.it), accessed on 01/12/2021)

The essays presented in this section question the value, meaning, and social, symbolic, and relational role of the house in three different ethnographic contexts, setting off from a profound interpretation of the material dimension of human shelter. Our intent was to fruitfully respond to Carsten's proposal using an ethnographic and comparative perspective that would highlight the differences and specificities found in several social contexts. Basically, we understood that it was necessary to indicate an "entry point" to begin listening to houses once again: just underlying the ever-present circularity between (built) space and social relations was not enough. We found this entry point specifically in the *materiality* of houses, their construction and the elements of which they are made. In the papers presented at the SIEF Conference as well as our fieldwork, the materiality of houses has gradually emerged as the critical focal point on which to develop an innovative multiscale investigation into "being at home", i.e. people's capacity to ensure their presence in the world – that is, in the sense of the Heideggerian term to  *dwell*  – starting from their ability to build their own refuge.

To delve more deeply into this perspective, we must first clarify the use of some terms. What are houses? And, moreover, what distinguishes them in relation to homes and households? As Samanani and Lenhard have pointed out, houses, homes and households have occupied a bizarre and "curious position" within anthropology: an essential background "upon which many of the most prominent theoretical questions of social science unfold", but also an element that has not always been properly discussed and conceptualised. In other words, houses, homes and households have not consistently been a "real" direct object of analysis (Samanani, Lenhard 2019). These three different words reveal the complexity surrounding an ambiguous object of study. "Houses" must be viewed as the material form of homes, regardless of the specific society we are addressing. "Household" instead generally refers to a common social institution that is designated by norms. Finally, "home" indicates the subjective perception of being embedded and "present" in the world (*Ibidem*). In addition, the terminology for this discussion should also include the actions of "homemaking" and "dwelling" that are related to the heterogeneous ensemble of practices, facts, values, imaginaries, discourses, moralities, and ideas that facilitate the capacity to "be at home" (Alexander, Hojer Bruun, Koch 2018).

Anthropologists focusing on houses, homes and households have pursued many different analytical directions over the history of the discipline. Indeed, these objects have inevitably been investigated according to the different approaches (Cieraad 1999) stemming from the heterogeneous

variety of interpretative paradigms characterising the development of anthropology: to cite only a few examples, as objects replete in symbolic meanings (Bourdieu 1977; Waterson 2009), as items of material culture (Leroi-Ghouran 1977), as loci of the domestic domain and household production (Leach 1954; Levi-Strauss 1979), as “perennial” institutional systems (Levi-Strauss 1984; Godelier 2013), and as inter-active belongings in specific environments (Ingold 2000) based on the capacity to grant sense and form to lived experiences (Heidegger 1993) and needs (Malinowski 1944; Sahlins 1972).

Beyond such efforts of interpretation, houses have also played a central role in the birth and consolidation of the ethnographic method. Most ethnographic experiences began in or passed through a house: from Morgan’s longhouse to Malinowski’s tent, from Mead’s Samoan *fale* to the Dogon house where Griaule collected some of Ogotemmeli’s stories, from Bourdieu’s “reverse” kabyle house to Miller’s bourgeois English home, human shelters have not only played a fundamental role in the history of the discipline but, in some cases, have also become symbols of anthropologists’ ability to develop an original and specific research method. Every ethnographer can be said to be subject to the “law of hospitality” (Pitt-Rivers 1977) whether literally or metaphorically, and must thus arrange to be hosted in some house from which his or her research germinates (Herzfeld 1992; Fava 2017).

The study of houses, homes and households was specifically developed as part of scholarship in the anthropology of kinship, even though classic studies by Radcliffe-Brown (1950), Evans-Pritchard (1940), or Fortes (1949) did not recognize the house as the chosen place for the reproduction and the perpetuation of kinship. In fact, until the mid-twentieth century kinship was seen as the primary system responsible for providing a stable political structure in stateless societies (Carsten 2003: 35). However, the way in which anthropologists studied kinship also changed as part of the general disciplinary shift of the 1970s and 1980s. Subsequently and thanks to the influence of feminist scholarship (see Goldstein 2003), “the everyday significance of what went on in houses – domestic labor, child-rearing, the economy of the household – came increasingly under scrutiny” (*Ibidem*: 36). Revisiting Lévi-Strauss’ insights into the principle of reciprocity, American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins recently proposed that kinship be considered “mutuality of being” (2014). According to this perspective, being related thus means sharing a “common existence” and participating in being culturally constructed in different ways. Although vague and not devoid of problematic aspects (see Shapiro 2012), this formulation has breathed new

life into the debate on kinship and placed the dimension of sharing at the centre of this subject. What then could be our starting point for observing the central role of sharing in making kinship? Following Carsten, we can start by focusing on houses. In her words, “kinship is made in houses through the intimate sharing of space, food, and nurturance that goes on within domestic space. And because being ‘made’ is usually opposed to being ‘given’, houses are good places to start examining that theme” (Carsten 2003: 35).

### *Société à maisons*

Given these premises, it is no coincidence that one of the most fruitful and stimulating debates to have characterized the anthropology of the house in the past (including the recent past) was fuelled by a structuralist anthropologist who paid particular attention to issues of kinship: Claude Lévi-Strauss.

As argued more fully elsewhere by one of the editors of this thematic section (Pozzi 2021), in the first edition of *La voie des masques* (1975) Lévi-Strauss briefly discussed Franz Boas’ problematic description of the kinship system of the Kwakwaka’wakw (at the time known as the Kwakiutl), a Native American society based in northern Vancouver Island. Boas had encountered difficulties in identifying their fundamental social unit and consequently in choosing appropriate terminology: he first used the term *gens* to refer to the “elementary cell” but then he corrected himself by instead using the term clan; finally, he chose the native word *numaym* (*numayma*). This categorical ambiguity spoke to the impossibility of clarifying the apparent instability and coexistence of multiple types of lineage and marriage. Lévi-Strauss decided to work towards resolving this ambiguity, leading him to formulate the notion of *société à maisons* (Dominici 2019: 186-187).

According to the structuralist anthropologist, the *numayma* should not be considered an isolated case (as he himself had initially claimed, in agreement with Boas) but rather one possible example of a very common structure, the *maison* (house). In fact, Lévi-Strauss argued that this structure could be found practically everywhere, in medieval Europe, among the indigenous North American population the Yurok, and among the Kwakwaka’wakw. In the words of the French anthropologist, the *maison* is “[Une] personne morale détentrice d’un domaine composé à la fois de biens matériels et immatériels, qui se perpétue par la transmission de son nom, de sa fortune et de ses titres en ligne réelle ou fictive, tenue pour légitime à la seule condition que cette continuité puisse s’exprimer dans le langage de la parenté ou de alliance, et, le plus souvent, des deux ensemble” (Lévi-Strauss 1983: 1224; 1979: 48).

This definition identifies the house as a corporate entity possessed of composite properties of tangible and intangible assets such as “land, power, and wealth” (Samanani, Lenhard 2019: 2). The *maison* is a social structure that transcends individuals with the aim of ensuring its own perpetuation. As a moral entity, it is able to replace “blood” as the sole defining element of group identity. The rules of the kinship system are strategically subverted and sacrificed – although not abandoned – in order to ensure the survival of the house. Viewed in this way, the house thus represents a symbolic, unconscious and operational social structure developed by the group, a structure that is able to survive over time thanks to the transmission of the deeds of ownership. In other words, the *maison* is responsible for the structural stability of society (Hamberger 2010).

This notion proved highly successful. It was adopted, in some cases uncritically, by several anthropologists (see Macdonald 1987; Waterson 1988, 2009; Fox 1987, 1993). Towards the end of the twenty-first century, however, two influential volumes contributed to a critical rethinking of the concept, emphasizing the limits and potential of the *maison* notion (Haddad 2014). The first volume, published by Carsten and Hugh-Jones in 1995, critiqued the taxonomic intention behind the concept. *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond* represented the first coherent attempt to reformulate the concept of *maison* and critique its inherent structuralist paradigm through an original approach based on ethnographic cases, mainly in Latin America and Southeast Asia. The second volume, *Beyond Kinship: Social and Material Reproduction in House Societies*, edited by Joyce and Gillespie in 2000, took a more interdisciplinary approach to discussing the theory. It proposed further developments in the use of the concept even while maintaining a critique of the evolutionist and classifying spirit of the original notion.

Without going into too much detail, for the purposes of our argument here it is sufficient to note that both Carsten and Hugh-Jones’s text and Joyce and Gillespie’s highlight the surprising lack of interest in the material dimension of the house. In Levi-Strauss’ meaning, in fact, the *maison* was treated as a container to be filled. Instead, as comprehensively demonstrated by both volumes, the concreteness of houses must be taken into consideration as an emblematic dimension in which normative and material forms are mediated, reproduced, and even contested and negotiated (Carsten, Hugh-Jones 1995; see Miller 2005).

### *Materialities*

Given this general configuration, our aim is to promote an interpretative approach that reflects on socio-cultural dynamics starting from the materiality of houses in order to partially resolve the lack of interest in the materiality of houses that characterized the discipline up to a few years ago. The study of the houses, homes and households from the perspective of material culture is not new to anthropology. As suggested by Miller (2001: 4) who theorized materiality by approaching mere things as artifacts, thereby transcending the dualistic distinction between subjects and objects, “the emphasis was on the home as a representation of normative order through symbolic contrast. [...] Other approaches at that time emphasized the home as a stable foundation or anchor to kinship and domestic life”. While this thematic section certainly does employ a processual notion of house encompassing imaginaries, memories and feelings, it also places the concreteness of houses back at the centre of the analysis where normative and material forms are mediated, reproduced, and even contested or negotiated, as some feminist writings on domestic dimensions specifically remind us (Abu-Lughod 1986). In other words, “The Anatomy of Houses” seeks to make an original contribution to anthropological discussion by focusing on materiality as a basic and “driving force” propelled by humanity’s attempts to modify the world and deal with its transformations so as to bring it into “accord with beliefs as to how the world should be” (Miller 2005: 6).

According to Buchli (2013: 7), author of *Anthropology of Architecture*, three thinkers are key to the discussion of built form and its materiality. The first is Alfred Gell, who contributed to the debate with his work on the Maori meeting house “as a distributed object and distributed mind” (1998); the second is Claude Lévi-Strauss with his reflection on house societies (1987); and the third is Pierre Bourdieu with his work on Kabyle houses and the notion of habitus (1977; 1990). In addition, we would also cite Daniel Miller’s work on material culture and home possession (2001; 2005) and Tim Ingold’s reflections (2007) on materiality in architectural forms as well as his focus on the semiotic and mental aspects of form and the inherently relational quality of materials.

From the point of view of urban anthropology, represented in this case by Jaffe and de Koning’s (2016: 28-32) introductory volume, two aspects have received particular attention in analyses of houses and their materiality specifically: architecture and domestic space. On the one hand, architectural structures have been analysed mainly in terms of their relational and power

dimensions, influenced by both official goals and everyday practices (Cfr. Buchli 2013). On the other hand, studies on domestic spaces have focused primarily on the organization, decoration and use of houses (Dei 2011; Douglas 1991; Meloni 2011; Miller 2010). Nevertheless, anthropologists also study much more through the lens of houses: material techniques, economic and political structures, cosmologies, group dynamics, kinship, rituals, gender relationships, and so on. Houses could thus be seen as representing the intimate and dense core of every society – a “petrified time” (Roche 2000: 83) – and, at the same time, probably one of the few universal aspects of every cultural configuration (Appadurai 2000). As stated by Miller, “if home is where the heart is, then it is also where it is broken, torn and made whole in the flux of relationships, social and material” (Miller 2001: 15).

Building on these insights, we thus suggest considering houses as sites of experience and meaning-making: their design reflects ideal social relations, but their use transforms and negotiates such relations, making them “real” places. Houses can represent (temporary or permanent) “fixed points” in the biographies of our research participants (Pozzi 2020a; 2020b); they may constitute “dots” or markers in an increasingly liquid, inconstant, and flexible social reality. Indeed, although we recognize that houses are not immobile objects, we suggest that they can nonetheless mean stability, permanence, and protection, including in the imaginative form of an ideal goal, investment, or desire (Grassi 2019). Moreover, houses do not stand in opposition to the current moment’s characteristic “-scapes”, transnationalisms, or mobilities (Appadurai 2013). Rather, as most of the papers in this Special Issue ethnographically show, houses are complementary to these concerns. They are a sediment of these processes or a “break” in them. The “social construction of houses” is therefore affected by contemporary dynamics connected to uncertainty and movement. For all of these reasons, houses are privileged standpoints for uncovering the ways in which contemporary transformations are materialized, embodied and felt (Augé et al. 2016).

In general, the history of anthropology tells us that houses are complex products of societal transformations; at the same time, however, they can also be active *loci* that promote change. These dialectical elements invite us to consider houses as a necessary part of a broader process. There are many factors driving the theoretical necessity of considering different ways of “being at home”: transnational migrations, economic crises, logics of exclusion, wild urbanization, and touristification as well as the contemporary pandemic experience are some of the phenomena that are changing the experience of dwelling. If we take up Carsten’s call to “listen to them”, therefore, houses speak about identities but also political, economic,

and ideological processes. They constitute a point of connection among and a concrete result of these elements. They can uncover – to quote Tonkiss – both “the politics and practice of small incursions in material spaces, the possibilities these open up, and the forms of sociality they might entail” (Tonkiss 2013: 315).

*The contributions: A multilevel analysis of the house*

This thematic section presents three articles that ethnographically explore – at a global level – how houses and their materiality modify the world and deal with its transformations. The articles cover a very broad geographical spectrum, addressing three countries (Laos, Bolivia, and Tunisia) on three different continents. The research was conducted at different times, between 2012 and 2020, before the Covid 19 pandemic exploded. All the essays show the centrality of the house and its material dimension in the construction of individual subjectivity and community bonds, beginning from an awareness that the house, in the three different contexts investigated, represents “a foundational unity of community” as stated by Alderman in relation to Bolivia. However, the articles formulate this approach in specifically original ways: Stolz’s article mainly underlines the phenomenological dimension, Alderman’s the symbolic and ritual aspect, and Pontiggia’s the historical and materialist level.

Rosalie Stolz explores the relationship between materiality and houses through the concept of soundscape. In the uplands of northern Laos where bamboo and timber houses once prevailed, concrete houses are now on the rise. Drawing on experiences (including her own) of staying in both types of houses over the course of long-term ethnographic fieldwork among the Khmu, Stolz analyses the experiential difference of living surrounded by different materials from her and local inhabitants’ points of view. Her discussion shows that Khmu houses are a social entity that simultaneously embrace and unite their residents and the household group, connecting them with other houses, ancestors, and house spirits. Focusing on this cultural and social dimension, Stolz’s paper inspired by the phenomenological approaches to sociality in and across houses developed by Christine Helliwell (1996; 2006) and Catherine Allerton (2013) describes a materiality in the making – represented by the acoustic and relational dimensions of these new concrete houses – that is reflected in certain social changes. The article highlights “the implications” of changing housing materials, building on Elinoff (2016) to explore the implementation of “[...] new modes of political and moral being and belonging that remake, but do not completely disassemble, existing hierarchies of power” (Elinoff 2016: 612f.).

Jonathan Alderman presents the insights of lengthy ethnographic fieldwork with the Kallawayas, Bolivian shamanic-healers, aimed at understanding how – specifically from a cosmological and ritual perspective – people’s relationships with houses might change as a result of changes in their materiality. Alderman describes the way houses in the rural Bolivian Andes represent, mainly through their materiality, a significant mediator in relations between humans and nonhumans. The article examines how the house, known in Quechua-speaking communities as *wasi*, is constituted as a person in its own right and how rituals around the house connect its inhabitants to sacred places through the house. The case study thus provides a fertile opportunity for ethnographically examining the making of “the social organisation around the environs of the house” and how these “social relations are constituted through ritual and the material nature of the house itself”. Thanks to the materials used in their construction, houses in the rural Bolivian Andes become “a personified representation of the mountain”. Indeed, the mountain provides various materials the local community uses to shape their houses and homes: “mud for the walls, kindling for the fire, shrubs used in mixing building materials, wood for the roof, and grass for the roof-covering”. In conclusion, the paper examines the role of the house as a nonhuman being in itself and as a conduit between its inhabitants and local place deities; furthermore, the house in this article also becomes a metonymy for or – in the words of the author – a “fractal representation” of the wider social structure.

Stefano Pontiggia describes and analyses precarious dwellings in the mining town of Redeyef, Tunisia. Describing three different houses, Pontiggia sheds lights on the extent to which a socioeconomic context generated by a long history of deprivation affects peoples’ lives and relationships to homes. In this setting, the materiality of houses refers to historical processes and social expectations in a space of political and economic marginality. Pontiggia bases his analysis on two key concepts: “home-spectations” and “houses-to-be”. The first refers to “the expectations of success and social integration that locals, especially young men, place on home ownership”; the second one represents an innovative and original “ethnographic object” that may prove useful in adopting Carsten’s (2018) suggestion of treating houses as biographical objects capable of shedding light on “the multiple entanglements that houses illuminate between the lives and relations that are enacted within them and the historically-inflected social and political contexts in which they are situated” (Carsten 2018: 114).

In the final paper, an invited discussant, Irene Cieraad, senior researcher in the Department of Architecture, Delft University of Technology (the Netherlands) and author of the fundamental book *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (1999), reflects on the thematic section, dialoguing with the main issues raised by the three author's proposals and arguments.

Taken together, the introduction and four contributions cast an innovative gaze on a branch of anthropology that has pursued multiple analytical directions over the history of the discipline, focusing on the material aspects of dwellings or, more precisely, taking those aspects as a fascinating starting point to then move beyond them. Given that contemporary societies expand by destroying ecosystems, returning to domestic space means rethinking our way of existing and, therefore, of inhabiting the entire planet. As Stolz states in this thematic section, in agreement with other authors such as Carsten (1997; 2018), Carsten and Hugh Jones (1995), Howell (2003), Janowski (1995), Sparkes and Howell (2003), and Waterson (2009), "[...] houses are more than mere physical shelter". Paradoxically, we can most effectively understand this point by beginning from an in-depth, thick analysis of their materiality.

To conclude, we would like to take on the words of Daniel Miller when he argues that "the life of anthropology comes from its insistence on seeing the world through perspectives we would never have even imagined if we had not forced ourselves into the site from which other people view their worlds. For this reason, material culture studies that focus on the fine-grained developments in material and social relations of the home become once again the vanguard for contemporary anthropology" (Miller 2001: 15-16). Without any pretence of seeking to represent the avant-garde of contemporary anthropology with this thematic section, these words invite us to grasp the centrality that this theme has represented for the discipline, not so much for its conservation and survival as to promote changes and transformations within it. Understood in this sense, the house is always a starting point.

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