

The (Im)Material Home: Exploring Older Migrants' Home Experiences
Situating within Material and Immaterial Settings of Home. An
Exploratory Study in Belgium

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Abstract

The older population is diversifying. Extensive research has shown the preference of older adults to age in place. Recent research shows that older migrants also prefer to age in place. However, not much is known about their reasons for doing so. Therefore, this paper focuses on older migrants who are ageing in place and explores their home experiences both in the material and immaterial setting of home. In-depth interviews using photo-elicitation with older migrants (n = 23) from Limburg Belgium were conducted. The results depart from older migrants' strong wish to age in place, which can be explained by the sense of familiarity the long-inhabited dwelling and neighbourhood provide, which concerns both a material and immaterial setting. However, the material setting of home can become a threat to ageing in place, as the interviews reveal, through physical obstacles and housing maintenance. Furthermore, the immaterial setting of home also comes into play as participants referred to their ethnic identity in discussing home experiences. The results further discuss the interrelatedness of material and immaterial settings of home. Interestingly, migration background did not always appear as relevant variable in older migrants home experiences. Instead, participants' interviews were more often imbued with age-related narratives. This shows the shifting influence of diverse variables (e.g. age, migration, gender), highlighting the importance of adopting an intersectional lens. Moreover, the results point to the dynamic nature of participants' sense of home, both in terms of 'age' (e.g. changing needs) and 'migration' (e.g. changing ethnic identity).

Keywords: older migrants; home experiences; (im)material home; ageing in place; sense of home; intersectionality

1. Introduction

The dwelling and neighbourhood are significant places in older adults' life (Lager et al., 2012), especially as they spend most of their time at home (Spalt et al., 2016). Understanding their experience of home, how they successfully create a sense of home but also what the obstacles are, is crucial. Indeed, most older adults prefer to age in place, often in their long-inhabited dwelling (Abramsson & Andersson, 2016), positively contributing to their wellbeing (Mulliner et al., 2020). However, as many older adults are reluctant to move, they often reside in unsuitable housing (e.g. high maintenance, poorly accessible), possibly obstructing ageing in place (Abramsson & Andersson, 2016), i.e. *“one's journey to maintain independence in one's place of residence as well as to participate in one's community”* (Rogers et al., 2020, p. 9).

In addition, besides a greying population, diversity in old age is also increasing. In Belgium, for example, between 2009 and 2018, an increase of 62.4 per cent in people of foreign origin aged 65 and over in Belgium was observed (Statistics Flanders, 2018b) as last century's labour migrants now make part of the ageing population. However, further research on older migrants' home experiences is needed (Chen et al., 2022), especially as in Belgium, not much research on this target group is available. So, further research on the intersection of home, ageing (in place) and migration (i.e. the ageing-migration-home nexus) is needed (Liu et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2021) to design adequate housing for a more diverse ageing population. Therefore, this study integrates environmental gerontology, migration and home studies to advance understanding of older migrants' sense of home. This is approached from an intersectional lens of age and migration, a neglected perspective (Ryan et al., 2021). For example, migration or ethnicity is not discussed in a recent scoping review on ageing in place (Pani-Harreman et al., 2021). Although Boccagni (2016, 2017; 2020) has substantially furthered our insights on the migration-home nexus, it lacks a gerontological perspective. Therefore, this paper will focus on the ageing-migration-home nexus. By exploring older migrants' home experiences, we aim to develop a better understanding of how 'home' and 'migration' intersect with age and, in doing so, add a gerontological perspective to the migration-home nexus (RQ1). Moreover, the paper focuses on the material and immaterial settings of home. Wiles (2007) points to their interrelatedness, and Boccagni (2017) – one of the leading authors on migration and home – highlights the interesting perspective of migration regarding this matter. To understand the relationship between the material and immaterial settings of home, this paper will situate older migrants' home experiences within these settings in order to explore the relation between the material and immaterial setting of home (RQ2). Finally, some studies imply that older migrants might experience old age (Cramm & Nieboer, 2017; Fokkema & Naderi, 2013) and home (Buffel, 2017; Hadjiyanni et al., 2012) differently. To consider this, departing from older migrants' home

experiences (cfr. RQ1), this paper will explore possible differences specific to having a migration background, with awareness of the risk of emphasizing differences inherent to migration (Dahinden, 2016) (RQ3).

To help answer these research questions, this study departs from mapping older migrants' home experiences. To substantiate the ageing-migration-home nexus theoretically, this paper brings together literature on the ageing-home nexus (Golant, 2015) and the migration-home nexus (Boccagni, 2017).

Boccagni (2017) defines home as *“a special kind of relationship with place – a culturally and normatively oriented experience, based on the tentative attribution of a sense of security, familiarity and control to particular settings over all others”* (Boccagni, 2017, p. 1). Security refers to a sense of protection from the outside world and an unquestioned identity, while familiarity refers to intimacy and comfort, but also to familiarity with a place (e.g. daily routines, stability). Control, on the other hand, refers to autonomy in the use of and self-expression within a place (Boccagni, 2017). Home can include multiple places, on multiple scales (e.g. households, cities, countries), both in the private (e.g. housing) and the public sphere (e.g. neighbourhood). Home is also fluid and can change over one's life course, especially following life (changing) events. Boccagni (2017) refers to this dynamic process of constructing a sense of home parallel to changing life circumstances and managing the gap between one's real and ideal home as 'homing'. A closely related concept concerns 'embedding'. Embedding points to the dynamic process of (changing) attachments and relations to people and places (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015) throughout life. Embedding can be impacted by both (changing) material and immaterial settings (Ryan et al., 2021) and is differentiated, meaning its degree and depth can vary for different relations to people and places (Ryan, 2018). Although 'homing' originates from migration studies (focussing on 'home') and 'embedding' from gerontology (focussing on 'place attachment'), both concepts encompass the dynamic nature of migrants' process of constructing a sense of home.

Looking at the ageing-home nexus, the theory of residential normalcy (Golant, 2015) offers an interesting perspective as it focuses on the rationale behind older adults' wish to age in place. It concerns the person-environment fit between older adults and their environment. Residential normalcy is established if older adults experience a sense of mastery (i.e. control and competence) and a sense of comfort (i.e. pleasurable experience, familiarity) within their home environment. If older adults lack mastery or comfort, they experience an incongruent residential experience that is countered through coping mechanisms (e.g. changing one's mindset, behaviour, or environment).

Material & immaterial settings of home

Home is constructed and (re)negotiated within both a material (e.g. housing) and immaterial setting (e.g. social relations) (Boccagni, 2017).

The material setting of home involves, for example, safety, comfort, and proximity to amenities. If sufficiently present (e.g. walkability), they are considered age-friendly home functions (Hinkema & Egter van Wissekerke, 2019). However, neighbourhoods and dwellings are often not optimal in facilitating ageing in place (Abramsson & Andersson, 2016). If basic material aspects of home become challenging, think of negative affordances such as stairs, heavy doors (Kuoppa et al., 2020), or demanding maintenance issues (Coleman et al., 2016), this can hinder everyday life. As such, the material setting of home can affect people's life satisfaction (Diener & Tay, 2015) and subjective wellbeing (Steptoe et al., 2015).

The immaterial setting of home, on the other hand, concerns emotional, symbolic and relational aspects (e.g. relations with significant others such as family, friends, and neighbours). Social interactions, for example, contribute to older adults' sense of home (van Hoof et al., 2016). For older migrants specifically, a sense of home is constructed through the proximity of people with the same ethnic-cultural background (Buffel, 2017). Although previous research stresses the importance of ethnic social networks to the meaning of home (Curtin et al., 2017), it is also important to be aware of the growing diversity within diversity, also known as super-diversity, which requires looking beyond ethnicity when it comes to diversity: Other factors such as religion, identity, cultural values, language, individual capital etc., intersect (Vertovec, 2007). In addition to face-to-face social relations, online connectivity cannot be overlooked (Hinkema & Egter van Wissekerke, 2019), especially in the light of migration, as such tools allow migrants to be in multiple places at once (Li et al., 2014), fostering the (re)creation of the meaning of home (Boccagni, 2017). Social relations are at least as important to 'home' as its material setting, but more important is that the material and immaterial setting of home should not be considered completely separate, as they are often intertwined. Emotional attachments to material aspects of home (e.g. dwelling, furniture) make these places meaningful (Wiles, 2007). For example, social relations contribute to the homeliness of material settings as they provide feelings of security, control and familiarity (Boccagni, 2017). Another example of this intertwinement concerns the importance of long-inhabited dwellings (i.e. material) – which are especially relevant in researching older adults – because of their symbolic meanings, such as memories and routines (i.e. immaterial) (Boccagni, 2017).

From an interdisciplinary point of view, different literature strands highlight elements – within both material and immaterial settings of home – influencing the construction of home. Studies on older adults identified different contributing elements, for instance, home experiences, identity construction (Lien, 2009), expressing identity within the home (van Hoof et al., 2016), meaningful personal belongings, home comforts (e.g. favourite chair), social relations, autonomy (Board & McCormack, 2018; van Hoof et al., 2016) and length of time spent and memories made in the home (Vanzella-Yang, 2019). Studies on home and migration (Boccagni, 2017; DuCros, 2019) discuss spatial settings (e.g. dwelling) and communication with left-behind family and friends as contributing to one's sense of home. Research on older migrants identifies social relations with people from the same ethnic background, negotiating identity (Liu et al., 2021), social connections, a transnational neighbourhood (Ahmed et al., 2021), the proximity of family (Liu et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2021), social and psychological attachments to place (Buffel, 2017), familiarity with the neighbourhood (Yazdanpanahi & Woolrych, 2022), and comfortable living conditions (Zhan et al., 2017) as contributing elements to one's sense of home. A language barrier (Ahmed et al., 2021; Zhan et al., 2017), poor housing conditions, poor access to amenities (Ahmed et al., 2021), deterioration of infrastructure, and accumulation of disadvantages throughout life (Buffel, 2017) obstruct older migrants' sense of home.

Older migrants: Individual capital & the life course

In making sense of older migrants' home experiences, it is important to consider their individual capital or resources, including social relations, homeownership, language, and migrant status. When it comes to ageing in place, the options available to and explored by older people depend on individuals' unique positions in life (e.g. availability of social support) (Peace et al., 2011). This position is determined by the complex intersection of factors such as ethnicity, gender, age, and individual capital (Vertovec, 2007). Noble (2013) stresses the unique position of migrants who have to navigate new physical and social spaces with their values, norms and rules. Boccagni (2017) also highlights this unique position of the migrant. For example, migration is followed by a dynamic process of recreating home and experiencing belonging to multiple places (Boccagni, 2017). However, migrants are often faced with inequality and accumulated disadvantages (Buffel, 2017), also in terms of their capital and the resources available to them. Such inequalities can affect migrants' (re)creation of home, both on a material and immaterial basis (Boccagni, 2017).

In addition to migrants' capital, several authors point to the importance of incorporating life course experiences in studies on ageing, home and migration. For example, older adults' relations to places change over time, becoming more personally defined by, for example, health concerns (Löfqvist et al., 2017). Also, belonging (Ryan et al., 2021), familiarity, safety (Löfqvist et al., 2017) and relations to home can change throughout the life course (Boccagni, 2017), such as acquiring a transnational or dual identity (Robles-Llana, 2019). Significant life course events (e.g. migration) affect decisions concerning living arrangements in later life, again highlighting the accumulated (dis)advantages in individuals' lives (Smith et al., 2021). Housing in later life should be flexible and fit the changing needs of one's life course (Mulliner et al., 2020).

2. Methods

To explore older migrants' sense of home, 19 in-depth interviews (four couple interviews) with older migrants from various ethnicities were conducted (Table I). The following search criteria were applied: (1) 60 and older, (2) 1st, 1.5 (migrated as a child) or 2nd generation migrant, and (3) living in Limburg, a province in Belgium known for its labour migration history. The final sample included 23 participants (16 female, 7 male). All but one participant (aged 58) met these criteria. However, we included her as she sat in on the interview with her husband, met all other search criteria and provided valuable insights. Participants were recruited in various ways (i.e. via community workers, municipal employees, personal networks, and snowball sampling), which resulted in a diverse sample. The interviews took place in participants' dwellings, as this facilitates conversation about both the physical environment and less tangible elements of the home, such as social relations (Novek et al., 2012).

Following a literature review, a semi-structured interview guide was set up, which covered past home experiences (i.e. life course experiences), (2) present home experiences, and (3) future home aspirations. Photo-elicitation was used to stimulate conversation about present home experiences through photographs. This study applied participant-driven photo-elicitation, meaning participants supplied the images (Copes et al., 2018). The participants received several photo assignments before the interview (e.g. take a picture of a place in your home or neighbourhood that you are attached to) through email or personal visits. However, this was not always feasible (e.g. no email, COVID-19 pandemic). In such cases, participants received the assignment right before the interview. If participants requested assistance in taking the pictures, the researcher took pictures on behalf of the participants. The photo-elicitation resulted in 130 pictures. Although photo-elicitation is especially useful for discussing the material environment, it also lends itself to discussing more intangible topics (Novek et al., 2012),

which we encountered in this study. Despite most photos ($n = 90$, 69%) being of the material home (e.g. spaces in the house such as the kitchen), this did not restrict conversations about immaterial aspects of home. For example, for some participants, pictures of a couch referred to housing choices, while for others, it symbolized being together with family. In total, 59, 70, and 27 pictures elicited a conversation about respectively the material (45%), immaterial (54%) or both settings of home (21%).

All participants signed informed consent and allowed to use the photographs in research publications. All names were replaced with pseudonyms unless explicitly requested otherwise. In 8 interviews, an interpreter (licensed $n = 3$, family member $n = 5$) translated the interview (consecutive interpreting). We strived to use professional interpreters. However, if participants did not want to, they were given the option to use a trustee (e.g. family member). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded in NVivo software using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A combination of inductive and deductive coding was applied (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) in which most initial codes were inductively generated (cfr. Step 2 of Braun & Clarke's guide) and some were deductively generated (i.e. key concepts in the literature such as familiarity and ageing in place). In doing so, 'ageing in place' emerged as the overarching theme, with several subthemes; (1) familiarity, (2) control, (3) identity, and (4) social relations.

3. Results

In discussing their present home experiences, as well as their future home aspirations, all participants – both renters and homeowners – strongly emphasized their wish to age in place (in Belgium):

“No, no no. I'm not leaving.” – Lotka (72)

“We will try to stay here as long as possible.” – Giacomo (74)

“I will stay here with my daughter until I die.” – Leyla (68)

In unfolding this topic, the importance of familiarity and control became apparent. Moreover, the results show the intertwining of participants' ethnic identity and social relations in their wish to age in place. In the discussion, these results will be situated within the material and immaterial settings of home.

3.1. *Ageing in the familiar environment*

Participants' strong wish to age in place can be explained by their emotional connections to their long-inhabited, familiar home. Place attachment was a much-discussed topic in the interviews. Participants are emotionally attached to their dwellings, which is why they feel at home. This study also found that time spent and memories in a dwelling and neighbourhood contribute to place attachment.

Participants expressed a strong sense of attachment on three different levels: (1) personal belongings, (2) the dwelling and neighbourhood, and (3) the country of origin.

The interview with Krysia (84) serves as an example to discuss attachment to personal belongings. Krysia left her long-time home due to its large size, the stairs, and the struggle to maintain the garden after the passing of her husband. Although she was still strongly attached to her previous house, she also expressed a sense of home in her new apartment. A possible explanation can be found in her personal belongings. For example, the cupboard (Fig. I) held special meaning to Krysia. She explained how the cupboard resembled the one in her childhood home. The cupboard contained other meaningful belongings, such as tableware gifted by family members. Moreover, she linked it to her previous dwelling:

"I find that so homely. Where we used to live, it fit just right, and here it fits just right too."

– Krysia (84), woman, Polish migration background

Other meaningful belongings were present throughout participants' dwellings (e.g. pictures of significant others, religious objects). For example, telling the story about the cupboard reminded Krysia of how she discussed the purchase with her late husband. Not only the cupboard itself but also the objects inside held meaning to Krysia. For example, the porcelain was gifted from significant others such as her mother, sister, aunt and friend. Therefore, such meaningful personal belongings within the home's interior could be helpful in re-establishing a sense of home within a new place.

“And that [letter] box, my husband won it with my grandson at a raffle at school and when they won it, they said ‘that is something for Babcia’. I am Babcia [grandmother in Polish]. So then, of course, I brought that with me here.”

– Krysia (84), woman, Polish migration background

Overall, participants were very attached to their dwelling and neighbourhood. Participants who had recently moved (to a more age-friendly dwelling) remained within the same neighbourhood or city. Although most older people prefer to age in place, moving within a familiar area might contribute to constructing a sense of home within the new dwelling. For example, Alfonso (77) and Luciana (74) moved to a more age-friendly home within the same neighbourhood they had lived in for 56 years. Because they already knew the surroundings and neighbours, they immediately felt at home: *“We have always lived here so we know almost everyone”*. Moreover, the interviews revealed the importance of memories to place attachment. For example, Paola (63) expressed a strong emotional connection to her childhood home which can be explained by the time spent there. However, there also seems a migration-specific element at play:

“Back then, there were many Italians in that neighbourhood [...] It was the same as in Italy [...] Those were the golden years [...] When I see that house, oh, I have such heartache. I am jealous that he [the current owner] has that house. You grew up there. It's just like it is your house.”

– Paola (63), woman, Italian migration background

Consequently, it is not surprising that participants also express a strong place attachment to their country of origin. First-generation migrants have spent part of their youth there. This study revealed that second-generation migrants were also attached to their country of origin. They often refer to the many vacations spent there and the stories shared by their parents. Jan and Lotka (husband and wife) did not spend time in Poland as a child (due to the political situation). However, they still express a strong place attachment to Poland because of the immersion in Polish culture during their childhood (e.g. Polish clubs, singing Polish songs):

*“The first time I went to Poland, I kissed the ground [...] Why? Because I was in my homeland *laughs*.”*

– Jan (74), man, Polish migration background

Despite the strong attachment to the country of origin, participants preferred to age in Belgium. The first reason is family. Participants lived close to their (grand)children, which they did not want to sacrifice. Interestingly, some participants even referred to the pain their parents had to endure following migration (i.e. leaving their own family behind or having to say goodbye to their migrating children):

“I did not want to suffer like my parents suffered for me. I did not want to be separated from my children.”

– Alfonso (77), man, Italian migration background

Being satisfied with Belgium is the second reason to stay. Participants referred to good health care and social security, sometimes lacking in their country of origin. The third reason to stay is being used to life in Belgium and, consequently, unable to adapt to life in the country of origin anymore. Due to the significant time spent in Belgium, some participants mentioned the difference in culture and mentality with their country of origin, implying they are more used to Belgian ways:

“I’m not like them [Moroccans] anymore. They talk a lot and pay many visits. I can stay, but I must come back at some point.”

– Rabiaa (67), woman, Moroccan migration background

“I see the difference between the mentality over there and the mentality over here, that clashes [...] They reason completely different.”

– Nico (68), man, Italian migration background

It should be noted that some participants did have thoughts about moving back to their country of origin. However, the three aforementioned reasons kept them from doing so, again strengthening their wish to age in place. Although most participants did not intend to return, they all travelled to their country of origin, ranging from going once every other year to spending several months per year in the country of origin. Through this transnational lifestyle, participants maintained family relations and fostered feelings of belonging. However, the relation to their country of origin can also shift over time. For example, Giacomo (74, Italian migration background) recently started exploring other vacation destinations than Italy, and Seyma (61, Turkish migration background) would like to go to Turkey more often once her daughter is married and has moved out.

3.2. *Declining control: A barrier to ageing in place*

Participants indicated that their strong desire to age in place did not come without challenges. The interviews revealed that older migrants also strongly prefer to age in place. However, a decline in health led to concerns among participants about physical obstacles within the dwelling. For some, this hindered day-to-day life, confronting them with declining mobility. For example, Krysia described how the bathtub obstructs her everyday life (Fig. II):

“I don't need a bath [...] I'm getting older, I need to step out over the bath. You've seen that I have a handle there. I always have to check whether the suction cups are still secure because they regularly fall off and make a hell of a noise when they fall into the bath [...] I'm 84, and one wrong move and you fall, and I'm on my own.”

– Krysia (84), woman, Polish migration background

Yet, most participants did not want to consider moving to a residential care facility, now or in the future. Due to their prominent wish to age in place, participants found ways to remain in their dwelling. The results showed that participants had already considered changes or adaptations in the dwelling to age in place. For example, low kitchen cabinets, which required bending down, would be replaced with drawers. Luisa (64) said: *“I want a new kitchen, with drawers. I can't bend through my knees anymore, so I want that to be more comfortable”*. The bathtub, which requires stepping over, would be replaced with a walk-in shower, and the stairs would be avoided by moving the bedroom downstairs. Some participants had already made housing choices to facilitate ageing in

place, such as building a home with all main functions on the ground floor. Eleni is an 83-year-old woman of Greek origin. She is a first-generation migrant and has lived in Belgium for over 50 years. Since the passing of her husband, her daughter has lived with her for practical and emotional support. They both have their own living room to ensure each other's privacy (Fig. III).

It is important to note that homeownership also comes into play, as it enables owners to adapt their dwellings, as opposed to renters. Some participants who rented their dwellings discussed this limitation of their sense of control over their home environment. For example, as Krysia further elaborates on her bathtub, she refers to a lack of ownership in renting her dwelling: *"I can't change that. It is not mine"*. However, this does not mean renting negatively affects one's sense of home. Alfonso (77) argued: *"It is our home, not our property, but our home"*. Paola expresses her wish to age in place and not being dependent on her children. Although she rents her home, she has thought of how to adapt her interior in order to age in place if her mobility declines: *"Then this room [living room] will become my bedroom. I will put a bed there, a decent bed, and then shield it a little bit. Then I don't have to do those stairs, they are steep."*

Besides housing suitability, participants also elaborated on the increasing load of housing maintenance. For some participants, fulfilling maintenance chores resulted in a feeling of control. However, for other participants, maintenance tasks generated feelings of stress, as was the case for Paola:

*"I no longer feel like doing that [the garden's upkeep]. My ex-boyfriend used to help me, but I can't cope alone.
It's starting to get heavy for me."*

– Paola (63), woman, Italian migration background

Despite most participants' preference for a garden, the garden's upkeep (e.g. mowing grass) requires much physical activity, which can become increasingly burdening with age. This had different effects on participants. In order to retain control over their home, participants considered moving to an apartment and undertook action to reduce the garden maintenance (e.g. placing artificial grass, hiring a gardener).

Participants' strong wish to age in place combined with their often unsuitable dwellings could become challenging or hazardous over time. For example, some participants recounted having fallen (e.g. slipped, fallen down stairs),

which in some cases led to life-threatening situations. However, even after falling, the wish for autonomy seems more important to Krysia: *“When I tell people that I fell, they tell me to get a fall-detection alarm. Then I say ‘oh, I don’t know about that’. I don’t want to think about that yet.”* In addition, none of the participants mentioned the possible impact of this lacking person-environment fit on their sense of home.

3.3. *Dual identity vs ageing in place*

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed their ethnic identity directly or indirectly. Some participants, primarily first-generation migrants, identified with their country of origin, while others explicitly distanced themselves from their country of origin. However, most participants expressed a dual identity (e.g. identifying as both Belgian and Turkish). So, not only are participants attached to both countries, but they also construct their identities from both places. Participants’ ethnic identity also seemed to reflect to their sense of home. For example, Paola (63, Italian migration background) expressed a dual ethnic identity, resulting in her feeling at home in Belgium and Italy. Yet, despite experiencing a dual identity or primarily identifying with their country of origin, participants’ wish to age in place – in Belgium – remained strong.

In further exploring participants’ dual identities, three focus points were highlighted, the first being complexity. Multiple interviewees were inconsistent in expressing their (place) identity throughout the interview. Some of Krysia’s (84) accounts (referring to identity, not nationality) demonstrate this; *“I have always felt Belgian”, “I am Polish”, “I am not Polish”*. The second one highlights individual diversity. For example, in reasoning why she would not return to Italy, Luciana (74, 1.5 generation) expressed a strong place identity towards Belgium, referring to it as her homeland. Interestingly, her husband Alfonso (77, 1st generation) considered it his second homeland. He attributed this to the difference in length of stay. However, despite their differences in identity, both participants wished to age in place in Belgium. The third focus point concerns fluidity. Participants’ accounts indicate that their place identity can differ over time and place, but also depending on the people surrounding them. Giacomo (74) provides an example of time: *“I used to be really Italian-minded”*. Alfonso (77) provides an example of place: *“At home, I am Italian. Outside our house, we are in Genk, in Belgium”*. Krysia (84) provides an example of surrounding people: *“As a travel guide [from Belgium to Poland], I have to feel Belgian. To them, I am not Polish, I am Belgian”*. Moreover, some participants were perceived as strangers in their country of origin. This was hard for some if it did not align with their place identity. However, a distinction between “being perceived as a stranger” and “feeling like a stranger” should be made. Some participants who feel strange in their country of origin find it difficult to adapt to the different mindset, especially after living in Belgium for most of their lives.

Participants did not just wish to age in place in Belgium, but more specifically, in their often long-inhabited dwelling, emphasizing the material setting of home. Interestingly, their dual identity was visible in their dwellings. Housing choices enabled them to adapt the dwelling to their liking. Personalization in the home's interior contributed to participants' satisfaction with their current dwelling. One particular case stands out. Rabiaa (67, Moroccan migration background) has lived in Belgium for over 45 years. She had taken a picture of her favourite chair (Fig. IV) and her “*Moroccan room*” (Fig. V), as she called it. Rabiaa expressed that she really wanted one Moroccan room. The rest of the interior was not specifically decorated in a Moroccan style. Interestingly, Rabiaa expressed a dual identity throughout the interview and in her interior: combining Belgian and Moroccan styles. In other participants' dwellings, expressions of their identity – albeit dual, ethnic or Belgian – were also present. In addition, identity was also reflected in the public sphere. Municipalities like Genk and Maasmechelen are known for their diversity, which also reflects to the material environment (e.g. ethnic shops). For example, Paola's interview revealed how personal belongings can reflect one's identity while also showcasing the close link to place attachment. Paola expressed a dual identity and photographed a plant she had brought back from Italy (Fig. VI). She explained that the smell reminds her of her youth in Italy and evokes memories of her parents. She stresses that she takes good care of this plant because it makes her happy. Perhaps this “Italian” plant in Paola's Belgian dwelling represents her dual identity. After explaining the meaning of this plant, she discussed how her dual identity reflected to her sense of home:

“[I feel] Belgian, I was born here [...] Italian is in your blood [...], so I had two sides. I was at home there and here.”

– Paola (63), woman, Italian migration background

Also, the presence of ethnic shops was important to participants for various reasons: (1) finding “their” meals or ingredients that cannot be bought elsewhere, (2) reflecting their ethnic or multicultural identity, and (3) being able to speak their mother tongue. However, participants stressed that they use ethnic and non-ethnic shops because, nowadays, many ingredients specific to their cooking culture are also available in non-ethnic shops. Therefore, most participants visit non-ethnic shops regularly (partly due to proximity) and ethnic shops less often.

3.4. *Social Relations*

In elaborating on their home experiences, participants pointed out the importance of social relations. For example, most participants kept in touch with their left-behind family by regularly travelling to their country of origin. For some, the country of origin felt like home, while others labelled it a vacation destination. For first-generation migrants, when visiting their ageing parents, they became aware of the distance between themselves and their parents. Halina (70, Polish migration background) says she realizes every time she travels back from Poland that this could be their last goodbye. Another way to maintain relations with left-behind families is communication through social media. Participants indicated that maintaining contact is easier this way. Before the common use of cell phones and social media, participants experienced more homesickness. Most participants also loved being able to see their family through video calls. Phone and video calls also enabled participants to retain a sense of home in their country of origin without physically being there.

“Because I see my sisters on WhatsApp, I don’t seek out Turkey as much.”

– Nadira (61), woman, Turkish migration background

However, this was not the case for all participants. Leyla (68, Turkish migration background) shares that seeing her family on the screen increases her homesickness. Social media also enabled some participants to find and contact relatives out of touch. Also, migration background can account for variances in maintaining transnational relations. For example, Halina, a first-generation Polish migrant, struggled to keep in touch with her family due to the communist regime that censured, organized and sometimes even forbade contact.

In addition to international social contacts, participants stressed the importance of family living close by, as it enabled more interactions and opportunities for social support. The closer family lived, the more interactions and opportunities for social support took place. In one case, Seyma (61) had an adjoining backyard with her adult son and his family. Not only did this result in frequent interactions and mutual support (e.g. Seyma brings over food, her son mows the lawn), but she also labelled the passage to her son’s property as a place of special meaning (Fig. VII). Besides family, neighbours were also mentioned as a source of social support. Overall, participants were very satisfied with their neighbours. Neighbours were frequently considered friends or family.

The following quote showcases how this links to social support. Moreover, if family does not live close by, perhaps neighbours can fill that gap of social support and interaction:

“Here, the neighbours, we are like family [...] My brother in Antwerp cannot get to me in time, whereas here, the neighbours, you only have to knock [on their door], and they are immediately here. And vice versa.”

– Massimo (63), man, Italian migration background

Social relationships are also an important source of support for older adults regarding maintenance, facilitating ageing in place and a sense of control. Participants’ family members and neighbours helped with various maintenance tasks (e.g. garden upkeep, chores). The loss of support (e.g. loss of a spouse) can result in maintenance issues. Especially older female participants – who tend to live longer than men – often faced challenges alone, putting them in a vulnerable position. For example, Krysia (84) moved to an apartment because she could not keep up with the maintenance of her long-time house and garden after the passing of her husband. Two other female participants expressed anxiety concerning maintenance if they would lose their spouse.

4. Discussion

4.1. The ageing-migration-home nexus: Exploring older migrants’ home experiences

(RQ1)

Participants’ strong wish to age in place could be partially explained by familiarity with the known environment regarding routine and orientation. Theories on both the ageing-home and the migration-home nexus have emphasized the importance of familiarity in constructing a sense of home (Boccagni, 2017) and experiencing residential normalcy (Golant, 2015). Participants referred to the many memories made and time spent in their dwelling, which would positively affect their familiarity, and, consequently, their sense of home, which aligns with previous research (Vanzella-Yang, 2019). Also, especially participants who are homeowners can count on stability in terms of housing. Concerning the emotional aspect of familiarity (Boccagni, 2017), our results point to the importance of place attachment to older migrants’ sense of home, which can also explain participants’ strong wish to age in place. Place attachment is an emotional connection to place (Sébastien, 2020). Similar to non-

migrant gerontological findings, our participants were attached to their dwelling, which increases with age (Abramsson & Andersson, 2016). Participants also expressed attachment to their personal belongings. Such objects held emotional value (van Hoof et al., 2016) and evoked positive memories, possibly compensating for a decline in social relations in later life (Sixsmith et al., 2014). A migration-specific finding concerns the expression of place attachment of some participants to their country of origin. However, most did not consider moving back and preferred to age in place in Belgium. Our results pointed to three reasons for staying in Belgium, extending previous findings on Turkish migrants (Buffel, 2017) to migrants from various ethnicities. Also, the literature points out that the better migrants feel in the country of settlement, the less likely their wish to return to the country of origin, and the more time spent in the country of settlement, the less likely migrants are to return to their country of origin (Bonifazi & Paparusso, 2019).

In analysing the data, the topic of ethnic identity was prominent. The results point to its complexity and fluidity over place and time. Ethnic identity was often related to, derived from, and expressed within specific places, highlighting its presence within the home's material setting. In this study, such places concern the dwelling, the neighbourhood or particular places in the country of origin. Many participants also found it important to have shops close by that reflected their identity. Research shows that the proximity of ethnic shops stimulates the creation of a sense of home (Buffel, 2017), and superdiverse neighbourhoods (like Genk and Maasmechelen) can promote migrants' sense of home (Ryan et al., 2021). In participants' homes, they could express their identity without judgement from outsiders, which, according to Boccagni's definition, would result in a sense of security. For example, Rabiaa could furnish her home according to Belgian and Moroccan culture, in line with her dual identity.

In line with non-migrant gerontological research (Brim et al., 2021), our results have highlighted the many physical obstacles (e.g., stairs, bathroom accessibility) participants encounter due to their strong wish to age in place. Hence, their sense of security (Boccagni, 2017) in the often long-inhabited dwelling is at risk. However, most participants did not experience this loss of security, as they were convinced of their ability to age in place despite facing (future) obstacles (e.g. unadjusted housing when encountering increasing health issues). This is an example of adopting coping mechanisms such as changing one's behaviour, mindset or environment to tackle incongruent residential experiences (Golant, 2015). Hence, despite being much-discussed, physical obstacles within the residence were never considered to (negatively) impact participants' sense of home. Here, comfort and control are valuable concepts to consider in our discussion of the possible implications of the lacking person-environment fit in later life. Golant (2012) states that the presence and balance of both results in residential normalcy in later life. Also,

comfortable living conditions positively affect one's sense of home (Zhan et al., 2017). Therefore, it is remarkable that physical obstacles within the residence – obstructing comfort – did not negatively affect participants' sense of home. A possible explanation can be found in the preference to age in place, meaning the pros outweigh the cons (Sixsmith et al., 2014). Many participants accept the often inadequate dwelling with physical obstacles. Adaptive behaviour (e.g. navigating physical obstacles) increases the subjective feeling of control and links to successful ageing (Golant, 2012). As participants in this study could tackle or work around physical obstacles within the dwelling, it did not decrease their feeling of control. Because control is one of the three properties of the home experience (Bocagni, 2017), and this was not severely impacted, it might explain why participants did not report a negative impact on their sense of home. Although we only discuss this “balancing” concerning physical obstacles, we argue it also applies to other home experiences, such as balancing relations to multiple places (e.g. country of origin and settlement). However, parallel to Golant's theory on residential normalcy, if older migrants were to experience a decline in control over their environment (e.g. due to obstacles they cannot overcome), we argue this could lead to severe hazards, such as falls, and could negatively impact their sense of home. Further research on the (future) impact of severe housing unsuitability among older migrants is needed.

4.2. *The (Im)material Home: Tension or Overlap? (RQ2)*

The four main themes that emerged from the interviews with older migrants can be situated within the material and immaterial settings of home. Interestingly, all themes except for ‘declining control’ can be situated within both the material and immaterial settings of home. Bocagni (2017, p. 22) states that “*migrants' experience of home is unique in casting light on the tension between the material basis of home and its immaterial facets – the emotional, relational and imaginative ones*”. Exploring this possible tension, it seems that immaterial aspects of home (e.g. relations to place) give meaning to material settings of home (Wiles, 2007), suggesting a strong relationship between both, which also became apparent in the results.

First, the neighbourhood is a material setting of home where much time is spent in later life and is important in providing access to amenities. For example, participants stressed the importance of the proximity of ethnic and non-ethnic shops. Material aspects of the neighbourhood (e.g. sidewalks, benches) can hinder or facilitate older people's social relations with neighbours (Carroll et al., 2020). Mobility can foster social relations by gaining access to significant others, possibly outside of the older adults' immediate environment (Pinto & Sufineyestani, 2018), while the physical space of an age-friendly neighbourhood can facilitate social connections (e.g. stimulating

conversations on the sidewalk, park benches) (Carroll et al., 2020). This shows the neighbourhood's interconnectedness with the immaterial setting of home.

Second, identity cannot be detached from the material setting. For example, the expression of one's (ethnic) identity in the home's interior (e.g. Moroccan room, Italian plant). Ethnic shops within the neighbourhood also relate to identity, visibility and participation, which are important to creating a sense of home in a public environment (Boccagni, 2017).

Third, our results indicate that maintenance issues in later life can disrupt relations to place. Coleman et al. (2016) also show this can negatively affect wellbeing. These examples show that home's material and immaterial settings influence each other. The material setting of home serves as a source of feeling in place in later life (Peace et al., 2011). Physical aspects of the dwelling and neighbourhood affect feelings, relations and meanings of place and vice versa. Therefore, rather than tension, an overlap with mutual influences might be a better alternative. Regardless, one cannot be considered separate from the other.

4.3. Older Migrants, Different Needs? (RQ3)

Acknowledging the individual's active role in homemaking, we cannot ignore some specific individual characteristics of the participants. Considering migrants' unique position and capital (Noble, 2013), one might wonder whether migration background can account for differences in home experiences and, consequently, sense of home.

This study appealed to existing knowledge from various disciplines, including studies on older adults in general, to which our findings on older migrants have similarities. It is essential to be aware of such similarities while acknowledging the needs and experiences of older migrants in research on home in later life. For example, the strong wish to age in place, facing physical obstacles and housing maintenance challenges and valuing the proximity of amenities. Here, it seems that migration background does not affect the home experience in later life.

However, some unique elements of older migrants' home experiences were identified. Participants' place attachment and sense of home consist of multiple places, including the country of origin and settlement. This connection to the "old home" is reflected in their identity, housing and amenity preferences, and everyday life (e.g. phone calls with left-behind family). Moreover, older migrants' ageing experience is affected by thoughts about returning to their country of origin. Also, many participants expressed their identity – albeit dual, ethnic or Belgian

– in the dwelling. These findings align with a recent study arguing that migrants who have lived in Belgium for longer tend to have cross-over interiors (De Vos & Geldof, 2019). In some cultures, it is customary for children of participants to live with or care for their older parents, facilitating ageing in place. Hence, this study shows that migration background can, but not necessarily does, result in different home experiences. Although this paper explored the intersection of age and migration, the intersection of many more characteristics determines one's unique position in life.

So, it seems that in analysing older migrants' home experiences, their migration background comes into focus only in certain situations. Participants' narratives were mainly imbued with age-related home experiences. Therefore, to understand older migrants' home experiences, it is crucial to be aware of their individual and complex reality created by various intersecting variables that come into focus in different contexts.

Moreover, the results highlight the need to adopt a dynamic lens in researching older migrants' home experiences. Several key authors in migration studies have recently pointed out the need to move away from static notions towards dynamic conceptualisations (Boccagni, 2017; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015). For example, Boccagni (2017) situates home experiences between the real and ideal home (i.e. 'homing'). Recent research shows that older adults' current material setting does not always align with their (future) housing preferences (Abramsson & Andersson, 2016). For example, their preference for not having stairs, housing adaptations, low maintenance, and proximity to significant others increases with age (Mulliner et al., 2020). Participants' thoughts or actions to adapt the dwelling to age in place show their efforts to move from their real to ideal home and their ways to retain control over their environment (Golant, 2015). More importantly, Boccagni (2017) stresses the importance of changing needs throughout life, resulting in an evolving sense of home parallel to these changes. Declining health is a clear instance of such changing life circumstances that can impact changes in needs. Consequently, the ideal home participants have created over their life course might not be optimal anymore, affecting day-to-day home experiences. Another example concerns changing relations to people and places throughout life (i.e. 'embedding') (Ryan et al., 2021; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015). For our participants, embedding takes place on a local and transnational level, as they sustain relations to places and people in both the country of origin and settlement. In doing so, their sense of home is also constructed in both places (Liu et al., 2021). However, their degree of embedding is differentiated and subject to change (Ryan, 2018). While some participants actively invested in their embedding to the country of origin, others gradually viewed their country of origin as a vacation destination, suggesting a process of disembedding.

Concepts such as “homing” and “embedding” help our understanding of the dynamic nature of older migrants’ home experiences. These dynamic processes change over time and place(s), setting themselves apart from more static notions such as “home” and “embeddedness”. Moreover, this dynamic nature shows the active involvement of the individual in constructing their sense of home.

To summarize, specifically looking from the gerontological perspective at the intersection of home and migration, participants wish to age in place, which takes place mostly in their long-inhabited dwelling in Belgium. On the one hand, in doing so, participants’ security is at risk. Like most older adults, many participants lived in unadjusted housing (Abramsson & Andersson, 2016), hindering their ability to age well, and safely, in place. On the other hand, our results highlighted how ageing in place facilitates participants’ sense of familiarity (e.g. place attachment, memories made & time spent in the long-inhabited dwelling) and control (e.g. housing choices, identity expression, managing physical obstacles, housing maintenance). Overall, most participants’ experiences seem to be situated in both material and immaterial settings of home. Although it is important to acknowledge the possible additional challenges older migrants face due to their often vulnerable social-economic position (King et al., 2017), the results point to the rather limited role of migration background to their home experiences and sense of home. A possible explanation can be found in other aspects that counteract this vulnerable position, such as family support (King et al., 2017).

5. Conclusion

This study explored older home experiences from the perspective of the ageing-migration-home nexus. Results show that participants wish to age in place in the country of settlement, despite some of them maintaining relations with the country of origin. This study highlights older migrants’ dispersed and multi-scalar sense of home. In exploring participants’ strong wish to age in place, the importance of control and familiarity became apparent, while a lack of security could threaten participants’ sense of home. Also, the dynamic nature of home was highlighted as home is subject to changes throughout life (e.g. shifting identity, migrating, ageing).

Both material and immaterial settings of home – which are strongly interrelated – are relevant to older migrants’ sense of home. Concerning ageing in place and supporting interventions, balancing both settings is important (Sixsmith et al., 2014), not only focusing on the material dimension (e.g. housing interventions) without considering the immaterial setting. As relations to home (e.g. emotions, symbolic meaning) often result in older

adults choosing to live in less adequate housing (Abramsson & Andersson, 2016), it is important to consider this immaterial dimension of home in a healthy balancing act with the home's material dimension as it could positively affect older adults' ability to age (well) in place. Therefore, home's (im)material settings should be considered coherent rather than opposed.

This study uncovered differences in older migrants' home experiences due to their migration background. However, many findings align with existing knowledge on older adults in general, which questions whether a migration-specific approach is needed. Given the interrelatedness of individual capital, the material and immaterial settings of home, these results advocate including migration-specific aspects of home in gerontology and home studies without 'overculturalising'. Perhaps, differences due to migration background can be considered additional focal points complementary to existing knowledge. This study also confirms the importance of incorporating life course experiences in research on ageing and migration as the (im)material home changes over time.

Based on these findings, we recommend that an intersectional lens is adopted in research on the ageing-migration-home nexus as it can uncover not only areas of difference but also similarities in the gerontological literature, pointing to the importance of not over-emphasizing the role of migration background as the sole source of difference between older adults with and without a migration background. Moreover, this intersectional lens could also be adopted in health care and housing design policies and practices as it enables caregivers and (interior) architects to identify migration-specific aspects (if present or relevant) to consider. With older migrants also preferring to age in place, home care should be tailored to a diverse older population. Currently, healthcare professionals experience barriers in providing care for older migrants (Claeys et al., 2023). Furthermore, by sensitising designers via an intersectional lens, they can consider age-friendly housing adaptations that also consider migration background. However, further research on this matter is needed.

Concerning this study's limitations, as our study has an exploratory focus and our sample is limited and due to purposive convenience sampling, these findings cannot be generalized to the older migrant population. For example, as our sample only included two participants over 80, our insights into the "oldest old" migrants are limited. This study only includes older migrants, which limits our exploration of RQ3. Therefore, a comparative study would be valuable in further exploring this matter. Although we adopted an intersectional lens, this was limited to the intersection of some axes (e.g. migration and age). Therefore, further research on the role and interrelatedness of other variables (e.g. gender, class) is needed. We have mainly focused on the influences of

(im)material settings on a sense of home, regardless of its positive or negative impact. Therefore, further research on the nature of these influences is needed.

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Figures & Tables

Online: colour

Print: black & white

Table 1 Overview of the participants in this study

Participant	Age	Migration background	Migration generation	Housing type	Renter or owner ¹
Leyla	68	Turkish	1 st	House	Owner
Seyma	61	Turkish	1 st	House	Owner
Hatice	65	Turkish	1 st	House	Owner
Giacomo	74	Italian	1.5	House	Owner (usufruct)
Luisa	64	Italian	2 nd	House	Owner
Jan	74	Polish	1.5	House	Owner
Lotka	72	Polish	2 nd	House	Owner
Krysia	84	Polish	2 nd	Apartment	Renter
Paola	63	Italian	2 nd	House	Renter (social housing)
Massimo	63	Italian	1 st	House	Owner
Isabella	58	Italian	2 nd	House	Owner
Nico	68	Italian	1.5	House	Owner
Belma	62	Turkish	1.5	House	Owner
Halina	70	Polish	1 st	House	Owner
Alfonso	77	Italian	1 st	Apartment	Renter (social housing)
Luciana	74	Italian	1.5	Apartment	Renter (social housing)
Eleni	83	Greek	1 st	House	Owner
Rabaa	67	Moroccan	1 st	Apartment	Renter (social housing)
Nadira	61	Turkish	1.5	Apartment	Renter (social housing)
Fatima	64	Moroccan	1 st	House	Owner
Ahmad	60	Moroccan	1 st	Apartment	Renter (social housing)
Ibrahim	70	Turkish	1 st	House	Owner
Zehra	64	Turkish	1 st	House	Owner

¹ In Flanders (the Northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) about 72% of the population owns the property they live in (Statistics Flanders, 2018a). Our sample is in line with this trend as 16 out of 23 of our participants are owners of their house.



Fig. 1 Krysia's cupboard filled with tableware



Fig. II Krysia's bathtub



Fig. III Eleni's own living room



Fig. IV Rabiaa's favourite chair



Fig. V Rabiaa's 'Moroccan room'

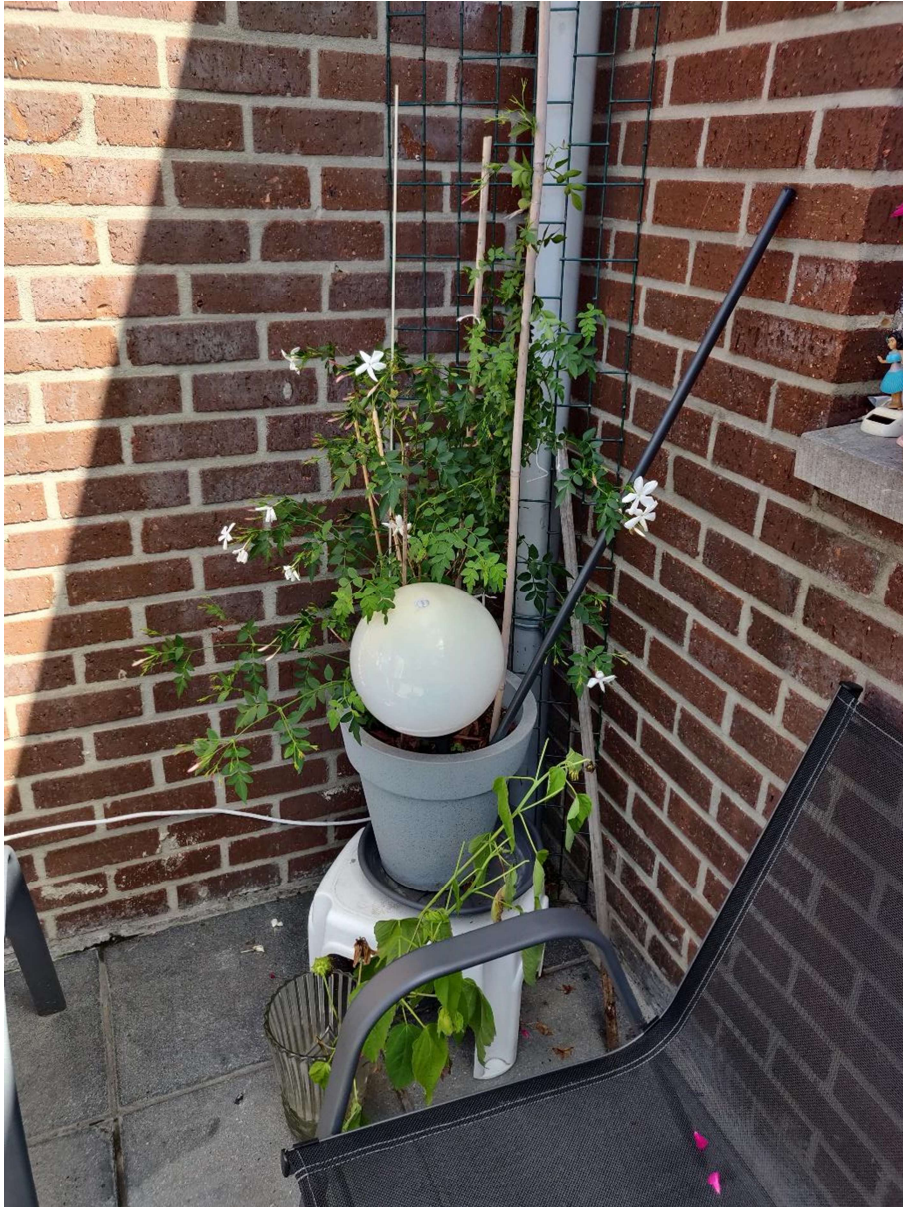


Fig. VI Paola's 'Italian' plant



Fig. VII Passage to Seyma's son