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Paradise lost? Rental housing insecurity and the lived experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns, Australia

Rana Dadpour^a, Lisa Law ^b and Nick Osbaldiston^c

^aThe Cairns Institute, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia; ^bCollege of Science and Engineering, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia; ^cCollege of Arts, Society & Education, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the housing experiences of amenity migrants, focusing on the challenges of rental housing insecurity in Cairns, Australia. Through episodic narrative interviews with a purposive sample of 27 amenity migrants who moved to Cairns between 2016 and 2021, we explore how housing insecurity affects their life satisfaction and consider the implications for urban planning and policy. Our findings reveal that many amenity migrants in Cairns face significant challenges in navigating the rental housing market, which negatively impacts their sense of belonging and overall life satisfaction. Participants reported struggles with rental housing affordability, suitability, and availability, which often led to compromises in their living conditions and a sense of frustration and uncertainty. These challenges were found to have significant impacts on their mental well-being, social integration, and overall quality of life. Importantly, the study reveals that housing insecurity can prompt amenity migrants to consider re-migration as a coping strategy, as they seek more stable and affordable housing options elsewhere. We argue that planners must take a proactive role in addressing housing challenges in regional cities like Cairns, through the development of inclusive and responsive housing policies that cater to the diverse needs of amenity migrants.

Practitioner Points

- Rental housing security is a key factor in amenity migrants' satisfaction and integration into new communities.
- Without affordable, adequate, and appropriate rental housing, amenity migrants choose to 're-migrate' to new destinations, seeking better prospects.
- Responsive urban planning that addresses the diversity and affordability of rental housing helps meet the needs of amenity migrants.

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Amenity migration; Cairns; community integration; housing; quality of life; re-migration; rental housing

1. Introduction

Amenity migration, the movement of people to regions with desirable natural, cultural, and/or recreational resources to enhance their quality of life, has emerged as a significant trend in recent decades (Gurran 2008; Moss 1994). Driven by a desire for a better quality of life and a connection with nature (Williams and Hall 2000), this phenomenon has manifested in diverse locations, from the US Mountain West and coastal North Carolina (Crawford, Bradley, and Marcucci 2011) to mountain resort communities in British Columbia, Canada (Moore, Williams, and Gill 2006) and the Patagonian Andes in Argentina (Otero et al. 2006). Amenity migration is characterised by individuals' pursuit of lifestyle improvements and emphasises personal fulfillment and well-being (Brehm 2003). However, it is important to recognise that amenity migration is a perceived and relative concept, and the factors that attract some individuals

to a particular location may also drive others to leave (Gosnell and Abrams 2011).

Amenity migration has been particularly pronounced in regional areas offering unique natural landscapes and lifestyle opportunities, such as Cairns, a tropical tourist city in north Queensland, Australia (Buckle and Osbaldiston 2022). The city's appeal, rooted in its 'tropical urbanism' (Law and Musso 2020), attracts a diverse population, ranging from transient tourists to long-term residents. The city's proximity to the Great Barrier Reef and the Daintree Rainforest, coupled with its relative affordability compared to larger cities, has made it a popular destination for amenity migrants seeking to improve their quality of life (Dadpour and Law 2022).

Regional cities like Cairns often struggle to accommodate the rapid changes in their housing markets caused by population growth driven by factors such as amenity migration, leading to declining affordability and various social problems (Osobaldiston and

CONTACT Rana Dadpour  rana.dadpour@jcu.edu.au

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Picken 2014; Rowley and McKenzie 2012). These changes can result in a higher risk of displacement for amenity migrants due to rising rents or property sales, exacerbating housing insecurity (Hulse & Milligan 2014) – i.e., ‘the loss of, threat to, or uncertainty of a safe, stable, and affordable home environment’ (DeLuca and Rosen 2022). This insecurity can significantly impact migrants’ well-being, sense of belonging, and overall quality of life (Easthope 2014). The impacts are particularly pronounced in non-metropolitan areas, such as Cairns, where community integration plays a vital role in life satisfaction (Beggs, Haines, and Hurlbert 1996).

Compared to long-term residents, amenity migrants often have different housing needs and preferences, such as a desire for flexible and adaptable housing (Glumac and Fabra 2018). However, the literature remains scarce in this regard. Moreover, given the traditional focus of migration research on large metropolitan areas (e.g., Buch et al. 2014; Vasiliou et al., 2017), there is a dearth of insights into the housing experiences of amenity migrants in regional cities, which face unique challenges and opportunities. Our study aims to bridge these gaps at the intersection of migration and housing studies by exploring the experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns, specifically in relation to renting, and how these experiences influence their decisions to either stay in Cairns or re-migrate to another location.

Through episodic narrative interviews conducted within a framework informed by spatial epistemology, we delve into the stories of amenity migrants to understand the nuance of rental housing for amenity migrants. Our findings shed light on how rental (in)security influences amenity migrants’ quality of life and further decisions to undertake re-migration, a topic that, to our knowledge, has not been explored in the context of amenity migration before. Re-migration, in this study, refers to the phenomenon of amenity migrants to Cairns considering or deciding to leave in search of better life prospects, often due to housing challenges and unmet expectations.

Situated at the interplay of housing and migration research, the paper is structured as follows: following this introduction, we present a literature review to contextualise housing within amenity migration discourses, focusing on insecurity in the rental sector. We then provide a description of the methodology, and its relevance to the research objectives. The results section presents the findings from the interviews, highlighting the challenges faced by amenity migrants in securing suitable and affordable rentals. The discussion integrates these findings into the wider context of amenity migration and housing, followed by relevant planning insights. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the study’s contributions to migration and housing literature.

2. Literature review

2.1. Amenity migration and housing in regional cities

There is a substantial body of research that examines the impacts of dynamic housing markets on migrant population in general. These studies have explored how housing availability, affordability, and suitability can shape the experiences of migrants in various contexts (e.g., Phillimore and Goodson 2008; Withers, Clark, and Ruiz 2008). Issues such as housing discrimination, overcrowding, and poor housing conditions have been identified as significant challenges faced by migrants, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Crawford et al. 2022; Huang et al. 2023). Moreover, research has highlighted how housing can serve as a crucial determinant of migrants’ social integration, economic mobility, and overall well-being in their host communities (Liu, Wang, and Chen 2017; Zheng, Song, and Sun 2020). However, there is a notable gap in the literature specifically focusing on the housing experiences of amenity migrants in regional areas like Cairns, Australia.

Amenity migration refers to the process of people relocating to regions with desirable natural, cultural, or recreational resources (Moss 1994). Unlike economic migrants, amenity migrants are often driven by non-economic factors, including the desire for a better lifestyle, a sense of community, and a connection to nature (Gosnell and Abrams 2011). Amenity migrants are typically well-educated and mobile individuals who have the flexibility to choose where they live based on their preferences (Glorioso and Moss 2007). They often seek out places that offer a slower pace of life, access to outdoor activities, and a strong sense of community (Osbaldiston 2010). Several factors contribute to the growth of amenity migration, including technological advancements enabling remote work (Gosnell and Abrams 2011), growing environmental awareness and desire for a more sustainable lifestyle (Moss 2006), and the desire to escape urban stress by moving to smaller communities (Osbaldiston 2010).

Amenity migrants have distinct housing needs and preferences, prioritising proximity to natural amenities, scenic views, privacy, and access to open spaces (Crawford, Bradley, and Marcucci 2011; Glorioso and Moss 2007; Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Moss 2006). These priorities differ from those of long-term residents, who often emphasise proximity to employment and established social networks (Li, Easthope, and Memmott 2021). While amenity migrants may be willing to accept higher housing costs for perceived quality of life improvements (Oviedo et al. 2022), regional cities welcoming them face challenges such as limited housing diversity, aging infrastructure, and resource

constraints for new development (Connell and McManus 2011; Costello 2009; Gurran 2008), creating a complex and understudied dynamic that can significantly impact the quality of life and well-being of this population (Argent et al. 2018).

Cairns, a regional city in tropical North Queensland, exemplifies a prime destination for amenity migrants. With a population of 169,312 as of 2021 (Cairns Regional Council 2022), Cairns is renowned for its proximity to the Great Barrier Reef, lush rainforests, and an overall environment that appeals to those seeking a tropical lifestyle. The city's natural amenities, coupled with its growing reputation as a gateway to outdoor adventure and eco-tourism, make it attractive to amenity migrants. Moreover, Cairns has historically offered more affordable housing compared to Australia's major metropolitan areas, further enhancing its appeal (Randolph and Tice 2014). However, the rapid population growth and increased demand for housing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic have strained the city's housing market, resulting in rising housing costs and declining affordability (Aussie and CoreLogic 2018).

The availability, affordability, and suitability of housing are key factors influencing the experiences of amenity migrants (Withers, Clark, and Ruiz 2008). These factors can either facilitate or hinder the integration of migrants, impacting their access to employment, education, and social networks (Phillimore and Goodson 2008). Moreover, housing has significant impacts on both mental and physical health, shaping daily experiences and long-term outcomes for migrants (Liu, Wang, and Chen 2017; Zheng, Song, and Sun 2020). Despite its appeal, Cairns presents significant challenges for amenity migrants, particularly in terms of housing availability, affordability, and suitability (Dadpour, Law, and Osbaldiston 2024). While amenity migrants may prioritise proximity to natural amenities, scenic views, privacy, and access to open spaces (Crawford, Bradley, and Marcucci 2011; Glorioso and Moss 2007; Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Moss 2006), these preferences can conflict with the limited housing diversity and aging infrastructure characteristic of regional cities like Cairns (Connell and McManus 2011; Costello 2009; Gurran 2008). Furthermore, Cairns' rental market is increasingly mirroring the challenges faced in larger cities, including escalating costs and socioeconomic disparities (Guaralda et al. 2020).

2.2. Regional rental market

Housing can be particularly challenging in the rental market of high-amenity areas like Cairns. Rental housing in high-amenity areas can be scarce, as property owners often prefer to rent to tourists for short-term stays rather than to long-term residents (Laitos and

Ruckriegle 2013). This scarcity can lead to higher rental prices and limited housing options for amenity migrants (Loeffler and Steinicke 2007). The median weekly rent in Cairns, standing at \$440, mirrors that of Brisbane and underscores a significant 7.3% annual increase (ABS 2021; ABS 2022). This figure, while seemingly moderate in comparison to larger Australian cities, belies the nuanced challenges faced by amenity migrants in Cairns. Moreover, seasonal fluctuations in rental availability and prices due to the influx of tourists and/or students can create additional challenges for amenity migrants seeking suitable and stable rentals (Morris, Hulse, and Pawson 2021; Sanchis-Guarner 2023). These challenges highlight the importance of renter security for amenity migrants in regional cities like Cairns.

Renter security, which refers to the degree of stability, affordability, and protection that tenants experience in their rental housing (Hulse and Haffner 2014), is important because it provides tenants with a sense of home, belonging, and control over their living situation, which are essential for overall well-being and quality of life (Easthope 2014). Moreover, secure rental housing allows tenants to participate fully in their communities, form social connections, and pursue their personal and professional goals without the constant threat of displacement (Minnery et al. 2003; Stone et al. 2013). Housing is central to life satisfaction (Coates, Anand, and Norris 2015), and in the context of amenity migration, renter security can play a crucial role in the successful integration of newcomers into regional communities and their ability to contribute to local economic and social development.

Inadequate renter security can have serious consequences for individuals, families, and communities. At the individual level, insecure rental housing can lead to stress, anxiety, and poor mental health outcomes, as tenants constantly worry about their ability to maintain their home (Easthope 2014). This insecurity can also disrupt employment, education, and social networks, as tenants may be forced to move frequently or live far from their workplaces, schools, or support systems (Stone et al. 2013). At the family level, inadequate renter security can strain relationships, limit access to essential services and amenities, and negatively impact children's development and well-being (Hulse and Haffner 2014). At the community level, high levels of renter insecurity can lead to neighbourhood instability, reduced social cohesion, and increased demand for public services and assistance (Minnery et al. 2003). It can also negatively impact amenity migrants' settlement in their new destination.

Migrants' settlement decision-making is a multifaceted process influenced by a variety of factors including individual expectations, social networks, and environmental conditions (Rijnks, Koster, and McCann 2018). The complex interplay of these factors

shapes migrants' experiences and perceptions of their new environment, which in turn affects their decision to stay or move again (Haartsen and Stockdale 2018). When these expectations remain unmet due to challenges such as social isolation, material hardships, or housing difficulties, some migrants may choose to engage in subsequent migrations, a phenomenon we refer to as re-migration. Housing factors such as availability, affordability, tenure structures, market conditions, and quality play a significant role in influencing migration patterns, with effects on residential mobility, quality of life, and re-migration (Hamnett 1991; Mulder 2006; Seo and Kim 2020).

Re-migration refers to the patterns and processes involved when migrants move again after settling in a new location (*see* Kleist 2020). Re-migration is often used in the context of immigrants returning to their original country (Kleist 2020). But here we use it to refer to the phenomenon when amenity migrants decide/contemplate to engage in subsequent migrations due to various reasons. When the realities of amenity destinations do not align with migrants' expectations, the subsequent dissatisfaction can lead to considering re-migration (Matarrita-Cascante, Zunino, and Sagner-Tapia 2017).

While existing research provides valuable insights into various aspects of housing, renter security, and migration, there remains a gap in understanding the specific experiences of amenity migrants in regional contexts. Studies on amenity migration and housing have traditionally focused on the changes in housing prices and availability because of amenity migration (e.g., Cooke and Lane 2015; Waltert and Schläpfer 2010). However, these studies do not delve into the unique housing challenges and preferences of amenity migrants themselves. Similarly, research on renter security (e.g., Easthope 2014; Hulse and Haffner 2014; Minnery et al. 2003; Stone et al. 2013) provides a solid foundation for understanding the importance of secure rental housing, but these studies do not specifically address the experiences of amenity migrants in regional contexts. Furthermore, while research on the housing experiences of migrants (e.g., Phillimore and Goodson 2008; Withers, Clark, and Ruiz 2008) offers valuable insights, these studies focus on different types of migrants, such as refugees or economic migrants, and may not fully capture the specific challenges faced by amenity migrants who are often motivated by lifestyle factors. These gaps may exist because amenity migrants are often depicted as affluent (e.g., Glorioso and Moss 2007), whereas housing challenges and insecurity are typically associated with the lives of the poor (DeLuca and Rosen 2022). To address the gap, this paper, at the intersection of housing and migration studies, explores the experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns' rental market.

3. Methodology

This paper is part of a larger study on amenity migration and liveability in Cairns, which employed a mixed-method research design. This paper explores the findings from 27 episodic narrative interviews (ENI) delving into the lived experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns. The ENI method is recognised for its effectiveness in capturing the depth and complexity of personal experiences within their social contexts (Mueller 2019). It operates on the premise that reality is socially constructed and most comprehensively understood from the viewpoint of those living it (Creswell and Poth 2017). ENI excels at revealing the intricate connections between individual narratives and larger societal forces (Chase 2018). It facilitates a thorough examination of housing challenges and its impacts among migrants as it is conducive to eliciting 'small stories' – personal, everyday narratives that, while often overlooked, provide significant insights into individual lived experiences (Georgakopoulou 2006).

This paper examines the rental housing experiences of the participants and the challenges they encountered while navigating the rental market in Cairns. During the interviews, all 27 participants shared their experiences as renters, whether upon their arrival in Cairns, later in their stay, or throughout their time in the city. Even those who eventually became homeowners had to rent before purchasing a property, providing them with valuable insights into the dynamics of the rental market. Participants were selected based on their relocation to Cairns between 2016 and 2021, with a focus on those whose move was primarily motivated by amenity factors such as lifestyle improvements, access to natural resources, and a desire for a better quality of life. The five-year period criteria aligned with the study's focus on contemporary housing market dynamics and migration trends. Recruitment was achieved through purposive and snowball sampling methods, which ensured the inclusion of rich and diverse narratives. The sample's demographic composition was intentionally varied across age, gender, educational attainment, and employment status to enrich the representativeness and analytical depth of the study (Weller et al. 2018).

We explored the lived experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns, focusing on the challenges they face in securing affordable and suitable rental housing. Through in-depth interviews, we aimed to capture their diverse narratives, uncovering common themes and patterns in their housing experiences. By understanding the nuances of their stories, we sought to shed light on the complexities of navigating the rental market in Cairns and how these experiences shape their overall well-being and sense of belonging in the community. Ultimately, our research aimed to give

voice to the unique perspectives of amenity migrants and contribute to informed policies and initiatives that address their housing needs and foster a more inclusive community.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research methodology. Confidentiality and the option to withdraw without consequence were guaranteed to all participants. Informed consent was secured before conducting interviews, and sensitivity was exercised to prevent participant discomfort during the sharing of personal narratives. The research adhered to the ethical standards specific to narrative inquiry, which prioritise respect for the storyteller, their narrative, and the context of the narrative (Josselson 2007). These ethical practices, including using pseudonyms in this paper for anonymity purposes, were upheld to respect the participants' trust and preserve the integrity of the research process.

As these narratives should, we set our selection criteria to reflect a broad spectrum of the amenity migrant's community in Cairns, aimed at capturing a variety of experiences. The study's participant demographics, summarised in Table 1, reveal that the majority were between 26–45 years old, well-educated, and employed either full-time or part-time. The gender distribution was 63% female, 33% male, and 4% other genders. A significant portion (63%) held a university degree, with 41% possessing a master's degree or higher, and 67% were engaged in full-time or part-time employment.

Compared to the available Census data, our sample had a higher proportion of females (63%) than the 2016 Census data for movers to Cairns, which indicated 52.3% female and 47.7% male (Profile.id. 2021). Despite this difference, our study aimed to capture diverse experiences and perspectives, and the higher female participation may reflect their willingness to engage in the research. The age distribution of our sample aligns well with the Census data, with 30% of participants in the 26–35 years age group, corresponding to the 25–34 years age group that had the highest net migration to Cairns in 2021 (Profile.id. 2021). Our sample also included 52% of participants

Table 1. Participant demographics.

	Sample Percentages
Gender	
Female	63%
Male	33%
Other	4%
Age Group	
26–35 years	30%
36–45 years	52%
+45 years	18%
Education	
Tertiary Education (university or college)	63%
High School Certificate (HSC)	37%
Employment	
Employed	67%
Unemployed	33%

aged 36–45 years and 18% over 45 years, providing valuable insights into the experiences of a significant proportion of movers to Cairns across different age groups.

ENI allowed participants to share their experiences through a combination of narrative and semi-structured questioning, providing a rich understanding of their lived experiences (Mueller 2019). These narratives illuminate the hopes and struggles of migrants as they navigate their new social and spatial landscapes (Dennison 2021; Kordel and Pohle 2018). They reflect not only migrants' perceptions of housing market but also the broader socio-economic and cultural contexts that shape their stories (Gómez-Estern and de la Mata Benítez 2013). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. The software facilitates the systematic coding and categorisation of data, enabling the identification of key themes and patterns (Friese 2019). The use of ATLAS.ti enhances the transparency and rigor of the analysis process, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' narratives (Paulus and Lester 2016). However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of the analysis relies on the researcher's interpretative skills and the depth of engagement with the data (Friese 2019).

4. Findings

Our findings highlight Cairns as a prime example of a regional city where rental availability, suitability and affordability emerges as a key challenge for amenity migrants. Our participants shared their experiences with finding suitable rentals, dealing with real estate agents, and the challenges of high rents. There are stories of struggles in securing a rental property, especially when pets are involved, and issues with the quality of housing in certain areas. They painted a vivid picture of the challenges faced by amenity migrants, voicing their frustrations at the Cairns' housing market. Many stories concluded with personal reflections on their current living situation and aspirations for future housing. This included desires to move to different areas, upgrade their living situation, or find a home that better suits their lifestyle preferences and needs.

Reflecting broader trends observed (e.g., see Burns et al. 2021; Stawarz, Preist, and Coyle 2021), despite being traditionally more affordable (see Beer et al. 2007; Gurran and Phibbs 2015), our findings show that Cairns has experienced a tightening of its housing market. Merriana a retired woman for example was particularly concerned. Her sentiment, 'I do know at the moment... the [rental] market is iffy' captures the growing and common uncertainty in the rental market among the migrants. The variety of experiences we recorded emphasises the important role of

housing experiences in shaping amenity migration outcome, and migrants' ongoing satisfaction and quality of life in the new location. This is particularly evident in the narratives of those who found themselves struggling to secure rentals that meet their needs and expectations, leading to a sense of disillusionment and, in some cases, prompting considerations of leaving Cairns for other destinations.

5. Housing experiences of amenity migrants in Cairns

The allure of Cairns has attracted a diverse array of migrants, including amenity migrants (*see* Dadpour and Law 2022). However, not all migrants have the same experiences when navigating the rental market, as their individual circumstances and needs can vary significantly. James, having moved with his large family of six children and an additional friend who was assisting with administrative tasks for their office, found themselves in a somewhat privileged position in the Cairns' housing market. 'We were looking for something a little bit bigger and higher price range than your standard sort of three to four-bedroom family house,' James explains, highlighting how their needs diverged from the norm. Living in a large five-bedroom house, they were not constrained by the typical demands and limitations faced by those seeking standard family homes. James notes, 'So we actually had quite a lot of options, we were able to rent it quickly' Their ability to afford a larger and more expensive property made it easier for them to find suitable accommodation. This ease was further facilitated by their status as business owners opening a new office, which seemingly brought reliability and financial stability in the eyes of landlords and rental agencies. James recalls, 'Because we came up saying we're opening an office and we're business owners, you know, we're opening a new business office, they just assumed that we were good tenants. So yeah, so we actually got the first house, [...] I was really relieved,' James concludes, expressing the unexpected ease of their housing journey.

However, not all amenity migrants in Cairns have been as fortunate as James. Despite their aspirations, many soon discovered that Cairns' housing market presents unexpected challenges. Their initial excitement about affordable housing soon confronted the realities of high rents and limited availability. Rahul, a senior manager, explains, 'Our goal was to buy property and everything, that's what attracted us to Cairns: property prices.' However, the reality they encountered diverged from their expectations. Many migrants face challenges when entering Cairns' housing market, often resorting to temporary accommodations until they were able to secure a permanent residence. For example, Ohad, a navy officer, and his

young family had to stay at a caravan park close to the city for a few weeks before they could finally rent a villa. These challenges are not just statistics but lived realities of migrants.

Gigi, a 40-year-old nurse who relocated from Brisbane to Cairns in 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, encounters the difficulties she faced finding long-term accommodation, due to limited availability. Gigi eventually had to settle for a shared rental without prior inspection. She explains, 'I wanted to find a place first, didn't want to move up here and not have anywhere to stay. Because hotels were too expensive [...] So, I rang a real estate agent, and she was actually really nice and told me about a shared house. And she was like 'give them a try. They are student and travellers.' So, I rang them up and they had only one room free. I took it while on the phone.' Shared accommodation was not a distant idea among amenity migrants to Cairns. 'I stayed in a shared accommodation for like two months and then during that two months, I was just looking for a place to rent' Bjorn encountered. Several participants experienced similar difficulties due to limited availability.

For a number of participants, navigating the Cairns' housing market meant facing even tougher choices. Clara, a housewife, and her family rented their house even before moving to Cairns from Melbourne. 'We were actually paying rent on the place, and we weren't living there for six weeks, but that was okay,' she explained, demonstrating a resilience often required in a competitive market. Despite the setback, Clara and her family chose to see it as a necessary step in securing the house that had caught their eye from the beginning. 'We ended up with the house that we'd already looked at online; we knew what it was like,' Clara noted, accepting the sacrifices made for a home that met their aspirations.

5.1. Lifestyle tax and housing insecurity

While narratives like the above illustrate personal, family, and financial sacrifices, they also reflect a broader acceptance among amenity migrants of the costs associated with such a desirable location. This sentiment is captured in the concept of *lifestyle tax*, as described by Bjorn, a junior real estate agent. He argued, 'rent is higher than I expected but I think it's just the tax you pay to live here.' Amenity migrants like Bjorn rationalise the higher housing costs as a form of lifestyle tax, a price willingly paid for the benefits of living in an amenity-rich locale. The notion of a lifestyle tax suggests that amenity migrants are willing to endure or even expect higher housing costs in exchange for their desired quality of life.

Many migrants who choose to move to an amenity-rich locale, such as Cairns, often find themselves

navigating a delicate balance between economic opportunities and quality of life (see Glorioso and Moss 2007). This trade-off is particularly evident in the housing market, where the promise of better living conditions and a higher quality of life can be a significant draw for potential migrants. However, the very same housing market that attracts these individuals can also serve as a formidable barrier, with high costs and limited availability constraining their options and forcing them to make difficult choices (see Birrell and Healy 2003; Peng and Tsai 2019; Withers 1998). For many amenity migrants, the decision to relocate to a place like Cairns is driven by a willingness to accept higher housing prices as a trade-off for what they perceive to be a higher quality of life (as explained by Oviedo et al. 2022). This mindset adds a layer of complexity to discussions around migration and affordability, as it suggests that for some, the benefits of living in an amenity-rich area may outweigh the financial costs associated with housing.

However, this willingness to pay a premium for a perceived improvement in quality of life is not without its challenges. It can lead to a situation where amenity migrants find themselves struggling to secure suitable housing, as they compete with other migrants and local residents for a limited supply of affordable options. Elenore, a young teacher assistant, observe that the 'lack of housing at the moment is a pressing issue'. This dynamic can be particularly difficult for those with lower incomes or fewer financial resources, who may find themselves priced out of the market entirely. Sindri, a 28-year-old Barista, humbly confessed, 'It's definitely a struggle to pay my rent some months', providing a human dimension to this predicament. These sentiment echoes the experiences of migrants in other Australian cities as well (see Birrell and Healy 2018; Costello 2009). The acute housing shortage, particularly in terms of diversity (see Gibson and Law 2022), is a barrier to settlement and integration for many migrants. It can lead to increased housing insecurity and even homelessness (Dutta, Lhungdim, and Prashad 2016; Stonehouse, Threlkeld, and Farmer 2015).

The interdisciplinary body of literature on housing has predominantly characterised housing insecurity in terms of affordability (DeLuca and Rosen 2022). However, our exploration revealed that it extends beyond affordability. Several participants faced initial challenges with high rents and scarce availability, which evolved into frustrations with housing design and planning. Their stories, seamlessly integrated into the larger narrative, illustrate how issues like poor design and unsuitable layouts contribute to the overall housing challenges in Cairns, what Jordan, a trainer and dog owner, refers to as a housing crisis. 'I call it a housing crisis. [...] bad thing about the housing crisis is that [people] have no consideration of pets. The

way they deal with that is shocking.' Pet owners like Jordan face challenges in securing pet-friendly housing due to under-supply of pet-friendly rentals (see Power 2016). Jordan explained, 'We ended up looking at this house at [suburb]. And we're just like will you let us have a dog? Yes! [...] But the house is one of those new houses [...] it's got a really weird layout. I don't know who designed these houses. [...] I just hate them.' Jordan's frustrations with the pet-unfriendly housing market and poorly designed homes underscore the complexities facing new residents in Cairns.

Housing design and planning significantly affect amenity migrants' quality of life (see Pathak and Bajracharya 2022). Mia, a senior artist, explains, 'My daughter goes and sit on the balcony [...] She thinks it is crazy. She's like "look at where we live it's the fucking tropics, and we're building these shit houses".' Mia's honest sentiment reflects a common frustration among migrants concerning the design and planning of housing in their new locales. Similarly Jordan explains, 'The houses are all pretty much the same. When I take the dogs for a walk it can be disorienting [...] if it's not designed for the tropics why would you build this shit?' These narratives reveal a discrepancy between the expectations of the living environment and the reality of the available housing among amenity migrants.

It was not just the market forces or the housing design that were at play, but also the dynamics between landlords and tenants, which can exacerbate the sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction among amenity migrants, particularly for women. Annabelle's story, with her candid remarks, provides a personal insight into the gendered challenges faced in securing suitable housing. She explains, 'where I live is very cheap, because I'm a stripper and a saver. The place isn't as aesthetically appealing, and you know, some [landlords] take advantage.' Annabelle's experience highlights the vulnerability that women, especially those in marginalised professions, may face in the rental market (see Lazarus et al. 2011). Her story, being distinct yet relatable, represents a wider range of migrant experiences and the intersectionality of gender, occupation, and housing challenges. It shows that housing challenges in Cairns encompass a spectrum of issues, from the physical aspects of housing to the financial and social dynamics involved in securing a suitable living space, with gender playing a significant role in shaping these experiences (see Harten 2020).

The migrants' stories collectively underline a common theme of housing insecurity affecting life satisfaction among Cairns' amenity migrants. Housing insecurity is a significant stressor having profound psychological and emotional impacts on migrants who are often in vulnerable positions (see Bhat,

Jenkins, and Almeida 2020; Lee and Park 2011; Tripathi et al. 2018). It exacerbates feelings of exclusion and marginalisation among them and impede their access to employment and educational opportunities (see Lima et al. 2020). The housing insecurity in Cairns can precipitate social isolation and mental health concerns (Easthope et al. 2018; Teariki 2017; Ziersch et al. 2017) mirroring a national crisis in Australia (Stonehouse, Threlkeld, and Farmer 2015).

Gigi's experience is a testament to this, as a vegan and someone with a spiritual outlook who struggled to connect with her housemates in the shared house she moved in without prior inspections. 'I'm vegan in beliefs as well as diet. And I guess I'm a spiritual based, and you know I was finding that these people, the people I was living with, didn't even know how to connect with me. And a lot of the ways that they would connect would be by making jokes about veganism [...] It made me a bit insecure, and I had to move out.' For individuals like Gigi, housing transcends its role as a mere physical structure; it becomes a fundamental element of well-being, social integration, and identity formation, highlighting a deep interconnection between housing experiences and overall quality of life, well-being and sense of belonging (Ager and Strang 2008).

Amenity migrants, who may already be dealing with the psychological strain of adjustment and loss of social networks, find their challenges amplified by housing insecurity (see Bentley, Baker, and Aitken 2019). The uncertainty surrounding housing undermines the sense of stability and belonging among them, which are crucial to their well-being and the cohesive fabric of communities (see Karamujic 2015; Wessendorf 2019). The psychological and social impacts of these housing insecurities are profound, as exemplified by Gigi's struggle to find accommodation that respects her lifestyle and beliefs and Jordan's difficulties in locating a pet-friendly rental. Their stories are not mere anecdotes but reflections of a widespread issue affecting many in Cairns, illustrating the broader effects of housing challenges on mental well-being and social integration.

5.3. Re-migration

The story of Tom, a construction worker, and his partner facing the stark challenges of Cairns' housing market, is an indicative of a broader pattern where the lack of affordable rentals is not just a local problem but a catalyst for wider demographic shifts. 'My girlfriend's father had enough space to allow us to rent a room from him, which helped us save money for our next place. It's 1% availability, it's almost insulting. [...] You go to inspections, there are 70 applications, on the very best day! It's not fair [...] as my girlfriend and I have realised, we have no other options but to

leave Cairns.' Tom's experience echoes a common theme that transcends individual narratives, revealing how acute housing shortages not only force residents to the periphery (Li and Song 2009), but also potentially drive them to consider leaving Cairns altogether.

The stories shared by the amenity migrants in our study revealed that many were considering leaving Cairns as a response to the persistent housing crisis in Cairns. In fact, for a significant 51.8% (14 out of 27) of the participants, housing insecurity was cited as a reason for them to contemplate leaving the city. Literature confirms that reliable housing is a key indicator for migrants to successfully settle in their new community (Huang and Chen 2022). Our findings support this notion, suggesting that housing insecurity can disrupt the process of community integration and threaten migrants' settlement outcomes.

As new opportunities or difficulties emerge, the idea of re-migration gains traction, potentially altering the migrants' future plans (Scholl 2013; Seebauer 2017). Marcus, a mine worker, exemplifies this trend. His frequent thoughts on leaving Cairns often revolve around the daily frustrations with the rental market. In his own words: 'It's like how much do I have to do to allow you to let me have a roof over my head. It needs to be some give and take with rental properties. [it] is a bit rough.' This sentiment reflects a broader issue faced by many migrants – a need for mutual flexibility and understanding in the housing sector, which is often lacking.

Marcus's experience is not an isolated one; it mirrors the sentiment of several others in our study who are willing to uproot once more, should the promise of a better quality of life and housing opportunities appear from elsewhere. 'If I find a good job somewhere else, we'll go,' Marcus adds, showcasing the readiness to embark on yet another migration journey, with his family and pets in tow, in search of a place that feels more like home. For people like Marcus, the struggle to find acceptable housing often forces them into poor living conditions. When migrants are forced to settle for less desirable housing, their quality of life will decrease, affecting their well-being and sense of community (see Baker et al. 2016; Coates, Anand, and Norris 2013), highlighting the complex nature of Cairns' housing issues that go well beyond the simple metrics of supply and demand.

For migrants like Romina, a young university student, such challenges plant seeds of doubt about her future in Cairns, potentially influencing her decisions about family life and long-term settlement. The added pressure of academic commitments and the desire for a vibrant community life sharpen the edges of an already challenging housing market for people like her. 'I'm not hugely optimistic [about the housing market in Cairns], If I were to have kids, I would be looking even more to move [...] I don't really want

to move back home and move back in with my mom and dad [...] I don't know what do' says Romina, weighting her options to leave Cairns. Such sentiments highlight the dynamic nature of migrant life and the ongoing quest for a locale that provides a sense of belonging and community (see Olwig 2012)

Nina's story provides a clear window into the complexities of re-migration as the interplay of market forces and social integration (see Wu 2004; Zheng, Song, and Sun 2020). As an accountant servicing major businesses across Australia, Nina's profession allows for remote work, yet the local economic conditions in Cairns have a direct impact on her quality of life and prompt considerations of relocation. Nina describes her dilemma, pointing out that the sense of community that once attracted her to the area has faded, influencing her decision to leave. 'It is my decision to leave [...] the closing of my business, the studio aspect of my business, I can't pay the rent.' Martin, a middle-aged tradesman who had moved to Cairns seeking a fresh start and new opportunities, also found himself disillusioned. 'I thought moving to Cairns would be a fresh start, but the housing situation is shit, prices are too high, we're moving again,' shared Martin, reflecting the sentiment of being caught between the desire for stability and the need for affordable living conditions. Sarah, a young stay at home mother of a newborn, expressed her frustration more pointedly: 'We came here for the lifestyle, but we didn't sign up for this kind of [rental] stress [...] We're seriously thinking of moving to Mareeba, our money goes further there.' Sarah's experience underscores the trade-offs that migrants are forced to consider – between the allure of Cairns' lifestyle and the practicalities of housing costs.

It was evident in the narratives that decisions to engage in re-migration were not easy to be taken, as it involves additional upheaval and the emotional toll of re-establishing oneself yet again. 'It feels like we're giving up on our dream of living in Cairns, but what choice do we have when the rent eats up most of our money?' said James, an older IT assistant voicing his concerns about housing affordability as his lease renewal approaches. This sense of defeat and resignation can accompany the decision to move on, a sentiment that is echoed in the broader literature on international re-migration (see Cooke 2011). For migrants like James, re-migration reflects a critical juncture in their life journey, where the quest for stability and community is weighed against economic realities. For them, the prospect of re-migration is a reluctant but necessary strategy to achieve stability.

As illustrated in the narratives, the decision to re-migrate is a response to a housing market that fails to meet the migrants' needs for stability and a sense of belonging. This process is not just a physical relocation but a significant life event that involves

reassessing personal and family goals, often under the pressure of economic constraints and social uncertainties. However, it is important to acknowledge that our findings do not include the perspectives of those who have already left the city, which may limit the understanding of the full scope of re-migration dynamics.

Given the intricate personal stories and the multifaceted socio-economic elements at play, it is evident that housing for Cairns' amenity migrants is not merely a commodity. It is a pivotal element in the matrix of life satisfaction and belonging, with the potential to either anchor or unsettle the migrant spirit. These experiences call for a more compassionate and informed approach to urban planning and housing policy, one that recognises the diverse needs and aspirations of all residents. As cities like Cairns continue to grow and attract new residents, it becomes increasingly important to address these challenges, ensuring that the housing market is inclusive, responsive, and conducive to building a cohesive and vibrant community.

6. Urban planning perspective

To address the housing challenges faced by amenity migrants in Cairns, urban planners must navigate a complex landscape of regulatory and market forces. While planners can advocate for and facilitate the development of affordable housing, their direct control over housing provision and rental market regulation is often limited. Planners can influence housing outcomes through zoning policies, incentives for developers, and collaborations with other stakeholders, but they must also contend with broader economic and policy factors beyond their immediate control (Gurran and Phibbs 2017).

For instance, inclusionary zoning policies, which require developers to set aside a portion of new housing units for low- and moderate-income households, can be a powerful tool for increasing the supply of affordable housing (Schuetz, Meltzer, and Been 2009). However, the effectiveness of such policies depends on market conditions and political will. In Sydney and Melbourne, inclusionary zoning policies has contributed to a modest increase in affordable housing supply, yet its success has been uneven across different contexts (Gurran et al. 2018). In regional cities like Cairns, where the housing market dynamics differ from larger urban centers, planners may need to adapt these strategies to local conditions, potentially by combining zoning policies with other measures, such as community land trusts, density bonuses or public-private partnerships (Queensland Department of Housing and Public Works 2017).

Moreover, planners should look to jurisdictions that have implemented innovative approaches to

housing challenges. For example, recent research by Gurran and colleagues on the impact of short-term rental platforms like Airbnb in regional coastal centres provides valuable insights into how the proliferation of such platforms can exacerbate housing shortages and drive-up rental prices (Gurran, Zhang, and Shrestha 2020). In response, some jurisdictions have introduced regulations to limit the impact of short-term rentals on the long-term housing market, such as capping the number of days properties can be rented out or requiring registration of short-term rentals. Planners in Cairns could explore similar regulatory measures to mitigate the impact of short-term rentals on housing availability for amenity migrants.

To address these challenges, planners should consider implementing a range of policy measures that go beyond traditional zoning and land-use planning. For example, incentivising the development of diverse housing types and tenures, such as density bonuses, co-housing and adaptive reuse of existing buildings, can help increase the supply of suitable housing for amenity migrants (Gibson and Law 2022; Schuetz, Meltzer, and Been 2009). Streamlining planning approval processes for these innovative housing models can further facilitate their development (Gurran and Phibbs 2017). Moreover, planners should work in collaboration with other stakeholders, such as community organisations and social service providers, to develop holistic support systems for amenity migrants (Teixeira 2009). By taking a comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of amenity migrants, planners can contribute to the creation of more welcoming and sustainable communities in regional cities like Cairns.

Overall, while planners play a crucial role in shaping housing outcomes, their influence is often mediated by broader economic and policy contexts. By adopting a proactive and inclusive approach, grounded in practical examples, and informed by research, planners can contribute to the development of more sustainable and equitable communities in regional cities like Cairns. This study's findings highlight the importance of understanding the unique needs and aspirations of amenity migrants and developing targeted strategies that promote their integration and well-being.

7. Conclusion

This study has provided an exploration of how housing security affect amenity migrants in Cairns, a city representative of many experiencing rapid urban growth and housing challenges. The qualitative approach, centred on narratives, has offered insights into the lived experiences of these migrants, revealing the interconnections between housing stability, life quality, and re-migration. The findings of this study

highlight the impact of housing security on the life satisfaction and possible settlement outcomes of amenity migrants in Cairns. While housing challenges are not unique to amenity migration, the specific needs and expectations of amenity migrants, such as a desire for lifestyle improvements and a sense of community, can exacerbate the consequences of housing insecurity in this context.

The implications of this study are far-reaching. Firstly, it underscores the need for a more empathetic and informed approach in urban planning and housing policy. The struggles of amenity migrants for stability, belonging, and integration within their new communities must be acknowledged and addressed in housing policy frameworks. This is particularly crucial in the context of competitive housing markets, where the quest for affordable and suitable housing can become a formidable barrier to achieving life satisfaction.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of considering the broader socio-economic impacts of housing insecurity for amenity migrants. The trend of re-migration not only affects individual migrants but also has broader implications for regional development, community cohesion, and social integration. As such, addressing the housing needs of amenity migrants is not just a matter of individual well-being but is also integral to the overall sustainability of our regional cities.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the fields of migration studies and housing. It calls for a holistic understanding of the housing needs of amenity migrants and the development of inclusive and compassionate approaches that can mitigate the challenges of re-migration. By doing so, it aims to promote more inclusive environments where amenity migrants can find not just a place to live, but a place to thrive. The insights gained from this study can guide future efforts to ensure that cities like Cairns can effectively meet the diverse needs of their migrants, fostering communities where everyone can achieve a high quality of life.

Disclosure statement

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ORCID

Lisa Law  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0095-7588>

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