

# FROM “MUD HOUSES” TO “WASTED HOUSES”: REMITTANCES AND HOUSING IN RURAL HIGHLAND ECUADOR

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Migration is often aimed to build migrants' own house in their places of origin. In rural highland Ecuador remittances sent from the US are habitually used to build houses which have changed the housing landscape of many villages. This paper describes the housing landscape of a village, Xarbán, and how it has changed over the last fifty years due to migration and remittances. It unpacks the reasons why many of the recently built houses remained empty or inhabited by only one or two people. It particularly explores the impact of migrants' legal status abroad on their housing decisions and behaviour. Finally, the article looks for positive impacts of these so-called “wasted houses” on migrants, their relatives and non-migrant villagers. Remittance houses' do have positive effects which are different for female and male villagers.

**Keywords:** remittances, housing, legal status, gender, Ecuador.

## **1. Remittances for housing purposes in rural Southern Ecuador**

In many different locations worldwide remittance houses are very important in rural areas<sup>1</sup>. In rural Ecuador, migration is often targeted at the specific objective of building one's own house, and migrants go through much hardship in order to save enough to build a concrete house. This is usually the first big expenditure made by migrants after daily expenses are covered and debts repaid. The rural landscape of the region has experienced quick changes as a result of international migration and remittances. It has

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<sup>1</sup> For instance for the Mexican case see FLETCHER, Peri L. *La casa de mis sueños*; GRIGOLINI, Silvia. *When houses provide more than shelter*; PAULI, Julia. *A house of one's own*.

gone from a scenario of scattered small houses made of mud to a situation of large concrete houses. Many of these remittance houses remain empty for long periods of time. For this reason they are sometimes called “casas botadas” (wasted houses). Are these houses a complete waste of resources? Why do migrants and their families assign such amount of resources to build large houses in their rural areas of origin instead of using the money for other purposes or buying properties somewhere else? Are their decisions economically and/or socially irrational? Do not have these “wasted houses” any positive impacts at all? In this paper I deal with these questions in the specific context of the Ecuadorian village of Xarbán (a pseudonym).

After presenting the research site and a brief methodological account, section two describes the housing landscape in the village and unpacks the local links between migration and architectural change, applying the concept of “migrant architecture” to Xarbán. Section three analyses the reasons behind the presence in the village of houses funded with remittances from the US which remain empty. Final section inquires about the positive effects of these remittance houses and how these effects deploy.

### **1.1. The village of Xarbán and the fieldwork data**

Xarbán is a small rural village in Southern Andean Ecuador in the province of Azuay, with a population of 2,032 people according to the 2001 Population Census. The province of Azuay has been the locus of research for a number of authors concerned with remittance houses. Abbots conducted her doctoral research in the rural parish of Jima<sup>2</sup>. Klaufus specifically focused her research on architectural changes due to international remittances in the city of Cuenca and its outskirts<sup>3</sup>. Kyle also provided some insights on remittance houses in two rural parishes of Azuay<sup>4</sup>.

The findings in this paper are part of a bigger research project on material and social remittances to rural Ecuador from the US and Spain. Remittances for housing purposes stood out right from the beginning of the fieldwork as a crucial issue. Data is based on a standardised questionnaire (covering 15% of the total village population), in-depth interviews and five months of participant observation in Xarbán. Among other issues, the questionnaire was designed to capture information about links between

<sup>2</sup> ABBOTS, Emma-Jayne. *“It’s the Modern Way of Life”*: Food, Mobility and Time Politics among Newly-Wealthy Campesinos in Highland Ecuador.

<sup>3</sup> KLAUFUS, Christien. *Bad taste in architecture*; KLAUFUS, Christien. Globalization in residential architecture in Cuenca, Ecuador.

<sup>4</sup> KYLE, David. *Transnational peasants: Migrations, Networks, and Ethnicity in Andean Ecuador*.

remittances and housing. For five months I lived in one of these remittance houses.

International migration in Xarbán permeates every single aspect of the villagers' everyday life. Very few households have no relatives abroad. Migrants from the village massively concentrate in the borough of Queens in New York City. In a context of diminishing agricultural fertility and microfundia, within a national context of economic and political crisis, irregular international migration to the US became the only way forwards for most male working-age villagers in the 1990s.

Less than 5% of the registered migrants in the questionnaire hold regular legal residency in the US. Their irregular legal status makes them very vulnerable and unable to circulate between the US and Ecuador. As, I will show later, the irregular legal status of most migrant villagers plays an essential role in their housing decisions.

The table below summarises data from the questionnaire regarding changes in housing conditions as a result of remittance reception. It shows the different percentages of households that have built, bought or refurbished their house since they started receiving remittances. It also shows changes in furniture and other house equipment.

**TABLE 1: Percentage of surveyed households which have experienced changes**

New built house	84%
Bought house	17%
Refurbished house	18%
Furniture	59%
Electrical appliances (blender, washing-machine, etc.)	62%
Electronics (TV, computer, etc.)	62%

Source: Data from the questionnaire

An overwhelming majority of interviewed households have built a new house in the village after receiving money from their migrant relatives in the US. I move now to describe the evolution of the housing landscape in Xarbán.

## 2. The housing landscape in Xarbán

Xarbán spreads along a main paved road that links the village with the canton capital. The parish centre comprises a small square where the church,

health centre, local authorities and several little shops are located. Following the main road, the houses are scattered uphill following five well-trodden paths, and an extra one downhill path, as well as many tiny trails, *ad hoc* most of the times. Looking at the houses it is clear that there are three types of accommodation very different from each other: the old small mud houses, block houses with an open-plan and the most recent large concrete houses, as it can be seen in the next photo.

**PHOTO 1:  
A view of Xarbán**



Source: Photograph by the author

Vernacular rural architecture in highland Southern Ecuador is based on the use of mud. In rural Azuay three traditional Andean building techniques developed: adobe (wattle-and-daub), baharaque and tapial, all of them based on the use of mud. They are locally known as “casas de tierra” (mud houses).

Adobe (wattle-and-daub) is, out of the three techniques, the simplest one. Mud (usually clay) is battered and mixed with straw with the help of a cow, horse or ox. The shaped blocks with wooden frames are laid down to sun-dry for around a month, turning from time to time to obtain a homogeneous result. Once fully dried, they are used as bricks. In some cases, wooden rafters are inserted to prevent the mud walls from bending. In the technique of baharaque battered mud, it is directly applied over a weave of canes and thin sticks. This technique is quite often used in the second floor of adobe constructions, as it is lighter than the mud bricks (Photo 2). Finally, in tapial buildings, the mud walls have been sealed off with concrete, in the outside and the inside of the building. Sometimes, a metal net is introduced to make the walls more stable. The need to make periodical repairs is lower, but still it lasts less than concrete or block walls. All three construction styles are roofed with clay tiles.

**PHOTO 2:**  
**Photo of an empty baharaque house with adobe foundations**



Source: Photograph by the author

The main disadvantage of the mud houses is the need to mend the walls from time to time and its size and height as they are usually one-storey. With the traditional techniques the only way of getting taller houses is to increase the thickness of the walls. The main advantage is their ability to absorb heat during the day and release it during the cold Andean nights. Bricklayers were the ones who set the foundations with stones, led the work of putting up the walls with window and door wooden frames, and finally tiled the roof.

In the village, a diminishing number of people still live in mud houses. Many of these constructions are neglected. Some of them collapsed, while others are used for temporary purposes as stores for agricultural tools for instance. No new houses are built with any of these techniques.

Since the 1960s concrete-block houses started to spread throughout the village (Photo 3). From the one- or two-room mud buildings (one room for sleeping, one for cooking), concrete houses are usually bigger. They also have an open structure, where all rooms open to an external corridor or terrace. The outdoor space in the house is still preponderant.

**PHOTO 3:**  
**Open structure house paid with international remittances**



Source: Photograph by the author

The most common pattern is to hire a specialised bricklayer, called *maestro*. *Maestros* have no formal training. They tend to be hired based on the houses they had previously built or some kind of family relationship. Unsurprisingly, most houses show very similar designs. They are only partially adapted to fit in the available land plot, and to fit owners' financial capacity regarding size. Not much creativity is allowed beyond number of rooms and storeys. Changing tastes and materials challenge bricklayers' knowledge. Some buildings, particularly from the early stages, show serious construction mistakes (both in the treatment of materials and the house structure), due to *maestros'* lack of acquaintance with new materials and designs.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a new type of houses started to be built in Xarbán (photo 4). The main distinctive feature of this third construction phase is the closed structure of the houses. Stairs are not longer external. The indoor space becomes preponderant to the detriment of open spaces such as corridors and terraces. Some houses incorporate flashy ornamental elements, such as spiralled columns or bull's-eyes. However, these houses are still the exception in Xarbán.

**PHOTO 4:**  
**Photo of the most impressive house in the village**



Source: Photograph by the author

These houses show contrasting phenomena: from the external aspect to the lack of furniture inside (or even tiles on the floors, or electric system). In fact, the house depicted in photo 4 is unfurnished. Even in inhabited houses furniture is kept to its minimum: beds, tables and chairs. For the aspect of the façades it is difficult to imagine this empty indoor panorama. Their façades are usually carefully painted with bright colours. The bright façade painting has several functions. First, it has a psychological role for migrants. Through the videos and photos their relatives in the village send them, migrants follow the evolution of their houses. Being able to see the house fully painted provides some sort of psychological relief, of accomplished work. This psychological effect supplements the more social role pointed out by Klaufus, “a neatly finished and completed dwelling is reserved for the relatively rich who succeed in living like “real” urbanites”<sup>5</sup>. Secondly, keeping the house neatly painted makes it difficult for others to know if the

<sup>5</sup> KLAUFUS, Christien. *Dwelling as representation: values of architecture in an Ecuadorian squatter settlement*, p. 363.

house is inhabited or not. I found it very difficult in my first weeks in the village to accurately say if a house was inhabited or not. The neat aspect of the façade, and the fact that quite often relatives use these houses for specific purposes (as for instance hanging out clothes to dry) makes it difficult for outsiders, some of them potential thieves, to know if the house is inhabited or not. With the whole remittance-houses fever, spurred by the urban elites and mass media, migrants’ houses are perceived as a locus of infinite wealth, and an easy target for thieves. Finally, choosing bright colours for the façade is a relatively cheap way to express one’s own singularity. The cost of external painting is relatively low compared with any other construction works.

Although the three house-types described are quite clear in the village, change is not strictly linear. The construction phases overlap. Open concrete houses are still being built with international remittances from the US. On the other hand, some architect-designed houses in the village (although a very small number) have not been paid with international remittances.

## **2.2. Housing and migration: can we talk about “migrant architecture”?**

As most of my informants agree, it is just about possible to live on a daily basis in the village. Agricultural production and casual paid work allow non-migrants to survive. However, saving to build one’s house or buy a house is something out of range without migration. During the 1960s and 1970s cash to build open-structure houses came from seasonal internal migration to the Coast and the Orient. Migration to the US took off at the end of the 1980s and became mass migration throughout the 1990s providing the resources to build the current houses with “plata de los Estados Unidos” (US money).

The changes in house styles in the 1960s and 70s were the consequence of several unrelated variables. First of all, the relative costs of mud houses in the village went up as a result of deforestation. Wood that was previously freely available in the communal lands in the high part of the parish, disappeared<sup>6</sup>. Secondly, the economic life in the village became increasingly monetized. Peasant families supplement their agricultural income (usually in-kind) with internal seasonal migrations to the Coast and the Oriente. These movements, besides providing cash for the family, exposed migrants to different building techniques.

<sup>6</sup> This was not only the result of housing procedures, but also of their over-exploitation to sell in the nearby town of Gualaceo (where most people still cooked with an open fire at the time) and to burn in the tile ovens scattered around the whole parish.



With migration to the US cash became available in quantities never before seen. At this stage differentiation appears among migrants and between migrants and non-migrants. Architect-designed houses enable migrants to express their creativity and success in the village. The legal environment also encourages the importance of architects. Canton urbanism regulations rule that new houses in the urban part of the villages must have a building plan. Architects unheard of in previous phases, must be hired in order to have the required plans. The urban part in Xarbán is in fact quite small. It is restricted to the few streets around the village square. Whoever manages to buy a land plot in this area (where land is most expensive), must also have enough funds to hire an architect. Building one's own house in this sector of the village is a sign of success *per se*. Living in this area also means the presence of a sewer system, better transportation conditions and easy access to the village shops, as well as visibility. The most elaborate houses in the village gather in this urban part (Photo 4). Contrary to the bricklayers, an architect's professional training allows him to introduce variability in the design of the house. Bricklayers have a very limited range of options to offer to their clients. With bricklayers' models, migrants have little chance to express their creativity, or to show success through their house.

As seen, architectural styles in rural Xarbán have been profoundly altered in the last 50 years. What is questionable is the issue of how consistent these changes are. Can we talk in Xarbán of new architectural and living styles resulting of the current international remittance inflow? In other words, can we bracket houses recently built in Xarbán as "migrant architecture"?

According to Klaufus migrant architecture differs from previous architectural styles in the size and the origin of the designs and materials<sup>7</sup>. In Xarbán, new houses tend to be bigger than houses built in previous phases. International remittances provide a cash inflow never seen before in rural Ecuador. Differences in size are striking due to the small size of the traditional Andean *adobe* house. It is not only that current migrants' houses are big, it is also that previous houses were very small, making the contrast more accentuated. The second main feature is the origin of the materials and designs. Not only Klaufus, but other authors researching in rural Southern Ecuador as well state the foreign origin of these new houses' models. Pribilsky, for instance, mentions the North American origin of the houses' design in the village of Jatundeleg<sup>8</sup>. According to him, "migrants not infrequently took their ideas for their new homes from what they saw overseas. They sent

<sup>7</sup> KLAUFUS, *Bad taste...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> PRIBILSKY, Jason. *La chulla vida: gender, migration, and residence in rural Mexico*, p. 108.

snapshots of homes they admired in the United States for local architects to replicate in the rural Andes”<sup>9</sup>. It is not uncommon in Xarbán for migrants to send snapshots or building-plans from the US. However, the replication is not as straightforward as Pribilsky’s statement suggests. Architects are not usually hired in Xarbán. Most villagers go for the experienced bricklayer option, as a much cheaper alternative. Many of my informants in Xarbán have told me about the design of their houses. Their migrant relatives have sent them photos or pictures of houses they have seen in the US or in magazines. Quite often, the hired bricklayer in Xarbán has been unable to reproduce the model; either because of land plot features, or most often due to lack of know-how. Most of these houses ending up being no more than slightly different from the standard design, whereas some of them are openly awkward as if anything is missing.

In Xarbán migrants and their relatives have little room for choice. Unless one can afford to pay an architect, there is a clear lack of choice. The migrants’ agency that the term “migrant architecture” suggests is far from a reality in rural Xarbán. Architect-designed houses in Xarbán are still a minority in the village. For all these reasons the term “migrant architecture” does not accurately capture the architectural reality in the village of Xarbán. Migrants’ creative input and room for decision are rather limited in this rural location.

### **3. The impact of migrants’ irregular legal status abroad on their housing-decisions: “wasted houses” (casas botadas)**

Most of the remittance houses in Xarbán stay empty. It is quite common that big houses of up to three storeys are only inhabited by one or two people. A common criticism heard in the Ecuadorian academia and press is directed towards these empty houses<sup>10</sup>. Migrants and their families are blamed for “wasting” remittances in houses that stay empty. They are “casas botadas” (wasted houses). According to these widespread discourses, if migrants were not building these big houses, they could free a huge amount of resources to invest in Ecuador and help the development of the country. What these voices state is that instead of becoming development agents through their money, migrants are foolishly wasting their money in conspicuous architectural consumption. These discourses have at least two inherent problems. First of all, it is migrants’ legal situation in the US which

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>10</sup> BORRERO, Ana. La migración: estudio sobre las remesas de divisas que ingresan en Ecuador, p. 85; JARAMILLO, Diego. Globalización y cultura: del hogar a la casa fetiche en la arquitectura popular azuaya, p. 190.

prevents them from living (albeit temporarily) in their houses. In Xarbán, out of the 213 registered migrants only 11 hold legal residence abroad (5%). Secondly, there are few alternatives to building houses in the village. The business environment in rural Ecuador is not favourable. There are almost non-existent business opportunities in places with poor basic infrastructures, and far away from main population centres.

There are at least three more reasons to build a house in one's own home-village instead of renting out, building or buying property somewhere else. Firstly, the vulnerability that the irregular legal status attaches to migrant villagers in the US forces them to try to build their house as quick as possible as the fear of deportation is always present. Building in one's own village in Ecuador is the cheapest option, although with little future business opportunities for returnees. It is a common practice for parents with enough land to donate land plots to their children while they are still alive. These donations usually take place when the child gets married. A high percentage of newly married couples do not have to buy land (or just a part of it) in order to build their houses. This is a strong incentive to build houses in the village. Migrants' vulnerability unpacks in a second way. According to one of my informants, buying property in the US is not an option. In terms of procedures, it should not be a problem as it is not buying a car or renting a house in the US. However, if one is deported, one cannot take care of the property any longer. If s/he has not finished paying for it, it is quite likely that the money already paid will be lost. The relative cost, compared with a house in Ecuador, is another reason why migrants prefer to build or buy houses in Ecuador instead of in the US.

A second reason to build in one's village is the result of the combination between the irregular legal status in the US and the weak Welfare State in Ecuador. Everyone in Xarbán is well aware that no irregular migrant can stay in the US without working. Staying beyond their working age in the US is not an option. On the other hand, in rural Ecuador for the peasants who in 2009 are entitled to retirement pension (*Seguro Campesino*, Peasant Insurance), their monthly pension is insufficient to make ends meet. Remittance houses play an insurance role in this context of absent or precarious social security. Many of my informants express their concerns about their old age. It is possible in Xarbán for elderly people to cover their minimum requirements in terms of shelter and food if they have a house and land to raise small animals and grow crops. In this sense, building a house is seen as a safety net for the future, in case everything else goes wrong, because "brick lasts".

Finally, the third reason to build in one own’s home-village is more culturally-driven. In a country with a high proportion of peasants, land is still imbued with strong cultural meanings. The struggle for land is still a hot issue for my older informants. They can still recall their grandparents being landless *huasipungueros*<sup>11</sup>. This internalised feeling becomes mixed in the case of migrants with the strong and unsettling sense of mobility. Houses are then immobile assets for people who are primary defined according to their mobility. Building a house in one’s own home-village, where one was born and most of the villagers are related by blood or marriage, is investing in roots of concrete. It is important not to downplay the emotional role that remittance houses play for migrants. For people who have experienced situations of homelessness or precarious housing (prior or during migration), a proper house is a must. In a sort of over-compensation migrants erect their dream houses at the core of their migration goals. The physical entity of the house can act as an emotional substitute for the home<sup>12</sup>. It is in the remittance house’s material presence that the shared project of people living apart becomes real.

As seen, the fact that most remittance houses stay empty is the result of immigration policies well beyond migrants’ agency. These houses play essential roles usually overlooked in the literature in the lives of migrants and their families as I will explain in the next section.

#### **4. Positive effects of remittance houses**

In Xarbán these houses have clear positive effects. Remittance houses impact on migrants’ lives but they also have effects on other villagers’ lives. They directly affect migrants’ lives as remittance houses in Xarbán involve a three-folded upward residential mobility in terms of independence, size and location. Traditionally newly married couples live with one of the spouses’ family in small mud houses poorly located. Remittances allow the wife and the kids who stay put in the village to move away from their parents’ or their parents-in-law’s house. Houses built with US money are bigger, with longer-lasting materials and better located by the main village roads. A female villager, whom I interviewed, bitterly complained about her current housing conditions. She lives in a crowded house with her husband’s family. She does not get on well with her in-laws. Her husband works long hours

<sup>11</sup> A form of semi-slave labour abolished with the Agrarian Reform which only started in Ecuador in 1964.

<sup>12</sup> CONWAY, Dennis. *Transnationalism and return: ‘Home’ as an enduring fixture and ‘Anchor’*, p. 267.

as a bricklayer, so she spends lots of time in the house with her in-laws. She dreams of having her own house:

More than anything else I want my husband to migrate. We do not have a house here [...] Because my dream is to have a house. I do not want to live here forever [the house of her parents-in-law]. It is not my house. It is not that I do not like living here. But it would be nice to have a family, wouldn't it? In a very beautiful house with my son (21 year-old female, father and two brothers in Queens).

Remittance houses in the village not only have positive effects for migrants and their close relatives. They also have more diffuse effects throughout the whole village. The most noticeable impact is on the labour market. Remittance houses provide working opportunities for non-migrant male villagers or returnees. Construction workers are hired locally, and relatives are strongly preferred. Skills are important but not essential, as stated by a local bricklayer:

I knew nothing about construction. I used to be a shoemaker. I started working with an experienced bricklayer. He taught me everything I know now. Sometimes we did not know how to do things. We have to figure out each time. How to work with new materials, etc. (56 year-old male, one son in the US).

Construction work in the village is directly related to remittances from the US. With the current crisis, the speed of new constructions has slowed down. Many houses stay unfinished as the money from the US stopped coming. Nonetheless, villagers are positive about the effects of the financial crisis over the longer term. Very few people have returned to the village as a result of the lack of employment opportunities in the US. Some people are using the crisis to justify their return, when usually there are other more personal problems triggering their decision.

Construction work is one of the few employment opportunities available to villagers who have no further education and no savings. This source of income has allowed them to build their own houses. Remittance houses act as a levering mechanism to narrow down the growing gap between those who receive remittances and those who do not or not enough, as not all migratory ventures are equally successful in terms of monetary returns to the family in the village.

The effects of these remittance houses at the local level are gendered. They provide job opportunities for male villagers. Female villagers' lives are also affected by these houses. Following are some examples to illustrate this

point. Señora Blanca (61 year-old female, 5 children in Queens) lives alone in a three-storey house her son has built with remittances. Before moving into her son’s house, she lived away from the village centre, in her husband’s house. Her son’s house allowed her to move out from the family house and away from a husband she does not get on well with. The case of Señora Zoila (76 year-old female, 3 children in Queens) is more extreme, as it involves pervasive domestic violence. She lives alone in her son’s remittance house as well. She used to live in her parents-in-law house with an alcoholic and abusive husband. She eventually managed to move out of this marital nightmare thanks to the son’s house. Señora Amada (68 year-old female, one son in Queens) managed to move away from an abusive husband who used to beat her up with great violence. She still has physical consequences from the beatings she suffered from her still-alive husband. She found a safe haven living with her daughter-in-law and her grandchildren in the big house her son built with remittances from the US. Had it not been for the remittance houses, Amada would have not been that welcome to move in with her daughter-in-law into a smaller property. Remittance houses, as in these three examples, have improved the lives of many women in the village.

All these three women were close relatives of migrants in the US. However, remittance houses also improve the lives of those who do not have relatives in the US. Building a house in Xarbán can take several years. In order to avoid squatters or village youngsters using the unfinished houses during the weekends, poorer relatives or villagers are invited to stay in the unfinished construction. During my fieldwork, I came across the case of an old lady who used to live alone in a neglected *adobe* house at the top of the mountain. She currently lives in an unfinished remittance house much closer to other houses and the main road. She is not a relative of the house owners. However they decided to ask her to move to the house to prevent youngsters to use the premises for partying and drinking.

These are just a few examples of how remittance houses provide the opportunity to improve living conditions, not only in a material way but more importantly in the general well-being of migrants’ relatives and villagers in general. As seen, these improvements are gendered and deployed in different ways.

## 5. Conclusion

Remittance houses in highland Azuay are a constant element in most of the mountainous landscape of the province, as they are in the accounts by the local press and academia. Remittance houses usually introduce different

designs and materials as migrants get exposed to new architectural styles and housing conditions in their destinations. They tend to be bigger and more elaborate, as international migration provides resources unavailable for those who stay put. The current construction phase in Xarbán started in the 1990s and still continues. It is enabled by international remittances from the US, mainly metro New York. However, the phenomenon is not new. Previous construction phases were the result of internal migration. There is a clear continuity, albeit not linear, between residential phases. Changes in building styles have taken place regarding materials, construction techniques, space structure and uses.

In this paper I have argued that migrants and their families do not have that much room for manoeuvre, as other authors have implied they do<sup>13</sup>. The term “migrant architecture” does not accurately describe the residential reality of migrants and their families in rural areas of the province. Houses built with remittances in rural highland Ecuador are not as ostentatious as press and academic accounts state.

Houses built with international remittances in rural Highland Ecuador are very visible, as they are in many other locations<sup>14</sup>. As a result, remittance houses have a number of strong images and criticisms locally attached. According to authors mostly belonging to the urban elites and middle classes, remittance houses are constructions out of place, with alien materials and design. They are inadequate for their rural surroundings<sup>15</sup>. For white urban elites and middle classes in Ecuador the countryside is a bucolic image where they spend weekends and holidays. They hold a distorted view, where the countryside is just scenery and not a real place where many people live, usually in harsh housing conditions. It does not matter that small houses built with traditional Andean techniques provide often precarious living conditions for their dwellers, as long as they keep a gracious harmony with the surroundings. Images about remittance houses convey the picture of highly standardised buildings. These images portray these houses under a negative light.

I have discussed in this paper two reasons for the spread of countless descriptions of architectural conspicuous consumption regarding remittance

<sup>13</sup> COLLOREDO-MANSDELD, Rudi. Architectural conspicuous consumption and economic change in the Andes; KLAUFUS, *Bad taste...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> See for rural Northern Portugal DE VILLANOVA, Roselyne *et alii*. *Casas de sonhos*; for rural Spanish Andalusia RHOADES, Robert. *From caves to mainstreet*; and for rural Northern Ecuador COLLOREDO-MANSFELD, *op.cit.*

<sup>15</sup> KLAUFUS, *Bad taste...*, *op. cit.*; JARAMILLO, *op. cit.* p. 194; BORRERO, *op. cit.* p. 85.

houses. First, there is an emphasis on the outside of the houses in rural Ecuador by absent migrants. This way they can easily fool casual on-lookers and preventing their empty properties from being vandalized. These elaborated façades usually leads to accounts of houses out of place. Secondly, it is important to note that these negative images are spurred by the elite urban groups who are critical of remittance houses in the rural environment. The images popularly associated to remittance houses’ are the response of specific Ecuadorian social groups who feel threatened by the changes brought in by international migration. This way they are stigmatising rural migrants. Their message is that though migrants and their families have the money to equate traditional higher-status groups, they are still the same ignorant peasants who foolishly waste their money. None of my fieldwork data supports any of the images conveyed about remittance houses in rural Ecuador. Houses are in fact smaller in scope and cost, and migrants and their families in rural areas have indeed little room for manoeuvre.

The usual criticism that remittance houses are wasted houses (*casas botadas*) aims to blame migrants for their irrational housing decisions. However, migrants’ legal status in the US determines many of their housing decisions. Most migrants are in an irregular situation in the US which prevents them from living in their remittance houses. In order to counter-balance the often-made criticisms about remittance houses, I have argued in this paper that in fact remittance houses have positive effects. These effects are gendered and spread throughout the whole village.

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### Resumo

#### **Das “casas de barro” às “casas desperdiçadas”: remessas e habitação na área rural montanhosa do Ecuador**

Muitas vezes, a migração tem como objetivo a construção de uma habitação no lugar de origem. Nas áreas rurais do planalto do Equador as remessas enviadas desde os EUA são comumente utilizadas para construir casas que mudaram a paisagem de muitos povoados. Este artigo descreve a paisagem arquitetônica em um desses povoados, Xarbán, e como ele mudou ao longo dos últimos cinquenta anos, devido à migração e às remessas. Analisam-se as razões pelas quais muitas das casas recém-

*construídas permanecem vazias ou habitadas por apenas uma ou duas pessoas. De forma específica, se aprofunda o impacto do status jurídico dos migrantes no exterior em suas decisões e comportamentos em relação à moradia no Equador. Finalmente, o artigo analisa os impactos positivos destas chamadas “casas desperdiçadas” sobre os migrantes, suas famílias e, em alguns casos, nos não-migrantes. As “remittance houses” têm efeitos positivos diferentes para mulheres e homens.*

**Palavras chave:** remessas, habitação, estatus legal, gênero, Equador.

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