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The Remittance Landscape. A Photo Essay

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My ongoing research explores remittance landscapes across the Americas. This photo essay documents key images related to the contemporary human experience of migration and global flows of people and information. Remittances are defined by the World Bank as the portion of international migrant workers' earnings that is sent back to family members in their countries of origin. Remittance landscapes are places (houses, public buildings, infrastructure, and material ephemera) migrants and their families build using money earned abroad.¹ Places from the Southern Cone up to Canadian horse farms are embedded in a complex web of migration and globalization, both made and unmade due to the evolving activities and aspirations of migrants.

Focusing on the act of remitting foregrounds the connection between social life and personal desires, one the one hand, and the material transformation of the built environment in the context of migration on the other. The current definition of remittance –according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*– is a “sum of money or (formerly) a quantity of an item transferred from one place or person to another”. It is the sociospatial implications of this transfer that are of interest, one of which is captured by another, less common definition of the verb remit: “to postpone, put off, defer”. Remitting is simultaneously an action and a postponement. Depending on the situations of individual migrants, this deferment can result in a range of different migrant

¹ Migrants have been remitting to Mexico for over a century, yet major transformations in the built environment due to this flow is a more recent phenomenon.

attitudes toward –and project outcomes in– their hometowns. For some migrants distance and deferment lead to idealization of the hometown; they become boosters and invest considerable time and money into building the pueblo as they imagine it should be. For others, unforeseen events intervene, or they begin to identify with and invest in their immediate surroundings, sometimes abandoning dream homes.

Mexico receives more remittances than any country in North, Central or South America at over approximately \$20 billion dollars annually, and ranks as the fourth-largest remittance-receiving country in the world after China, India, and the Philippines.² Yet, remittances only account for approximately 3% of Mexico's GDP whereas they comprise over 16% of El Salvador's. The specific demographics associated with remittances result in highly specific remittance landscapes. Places with higher emigration, and historic and consistent both in-and-out migratory flows have mature, complex, remittance landscapes. Places with newer migration often reveal disjunctive features as traditional environments are juxtaposed to those newly produced in the context of migration.



Fig 1. Photo by Sarah Lopez. Ilobasco, El Salvador.

² According to the World Bank, worldwide remittance flows, predominantly to Third World countries, increased from \$72.3 billion in 2001 to an estimated \$432 billion in 2015.

Within the remittance landscape, the remittance house stands out as the most ubiquitous and prominent built environment change across Latin America. Houses are evidence of men and women's willingness to migrate to improve their own circumstances, and to disperse families across geographies in their attempts to secure a better life (ver Cohen; Fletcher; Lopez, "The Remittance House"; Lopez, *The Remittance Landscape*; Ettinger 2010). In this sense, they are examples of what Michael Peter Smith and Luis Guarnizo call "transnationalism from below", grass roots activism across borders.



Fig 2. Photo by Sarah Lopez. Oakland, California, USA and Guanajuato, Mexico.

However, families split by gender, or generation (as some members work in one location to support those remaining in another) incur a social cost as living at a distance from ones children is normalized. Initially it was often men who financed new homes or remodels for wives that stayed in the village sometimes referred to as a *cuna natal* or womb; remittance homes can be indicators of such an arrangement. Today, more and more women migrate north.



Fig 3. Photo by Sarah Lopez. Jalisco, Mexico.

Migrants who are working in the U.S. but building in El Salvador or Mexico also often look to U.S. suburban house-types for inspiration and design guidelines. By photographing homes they want to replicate, or purchasing house plans from standardized books on domestic architecture, migrants import more than the “look and feel” of U.S. homes, they often approximate the spatial and formal characteristics of such homes in plan.



Fig 4. Photo by Sarah Lopez. Jalisco, Mexico.

Throughout the Americas the courtyard house, with productive and critical outdoor spaces, has been replaced by one- or two-story modern homes that have front yards, large living rooms, open-plan kitchens, and individual bedrooms for all the children. Once built, such homes reveal a disjuncture as the formal characteristics of suburban house types interface with everyday spatial practices in villages, especially for the elderly who are often the only family members living in the homes day-to-day.



Fig. 5. Photo by Sarah Lopez. Jalisco, Mexico and Tamanique, El Salvador.

The materiality of the remittance house demonstrates the desire of individuals to express themselves; an expression that subsequently influences the desires of those who have never migrated. The primary vehicle for such expression is the house façade, which acts as a two-dimensional canvas broadcasting migrants’ successes abroad, as well as their tastes newly acquired in the spaces of migration. Classically-styled columns reinterpret the volumes and ornamental carving of Ionic and Corinthian orders; hand-sculpted detailing and expensive ornate metal work allow home owners and builders to represent a diverse set of experiences; Mexican craftsmanship is combined with “estilo Californiano” recessed yards, metal fences, carports and picture windows.³ The eclectic arrangements that transform a once very homogenous built fabric comprised of adobe or fired brick and teja tiled roofs can be interpreted as a post-modern appropriation of stylistic elements “from below”.

³ In the emigrant region of Los Altos, “estilo Californiano” or California style is a colloquial phrase used to signify architectural design influenced by what locals perceive to be Californian architecture.



Fig. 6 Photo by Sarah Lopez. Michoacán, Mexico.

Many migrants meet failure and hardship in the U.S. rather than a safe passage to a brighter future, and the various stages of abandonment and decay in the remittance house reveals vulnerabilities inherent to the project of migration. Rebar juts out from unfinished first-stories as cement block and fired-brick walls and ceilings await future invest. Sometimes, buildings are abandoned midconstruction falling into disrepair. Others appear to be perfectly maintained but are only lived in for a handful of weeks so that the owner can continue to earn the dollars necessary to maintain it. Those most opulent examples fall prey to vandalism.



Fig. 7. Photo by Sarah Lopez. Jalisco, Mexico.

Beyond the remittance house, migrants who have spent varying amounts of time in the United States are returning to homelands to open businesses that are sometimes modeled on their work experiences in the U.S. National and global franchises such as 7/11 are not common in the south of Jalisco, Mexico, where this road side “corner store” is located. “Car washes” are a micro-industry in rural localities often financed and managed by return emigrants. The owner of the “Beverly Hills” car wash in Los Altos de Jalisco is hoping that a Mexican clientele will justify spending surplus money on a luxury item.



Fig. 8. Photo by Sarah Lopez. Jalisco, Mexico.

Remittance landscapes also include transnational cemeteries, where some migrants who did not return to their hometowns in life chose to be buried in them in death. Tombstones financed by dollars erected in rural cemeteries mark migrants' gravesites. Some migrants pay for tombstones for family members who have never left their hometown. Nonetheless, burial plots associated with migrant families in certain high emigrant regions are often distinct from older peso tombstones.

The spaces of migration –whether they be the interiors of migrant dream homes or aspirational businesses– reveal that migrants are not necessarily choosing between two or more places, rather they are intensifying their relationships, connections, and networks to multiple localities. It is through remittance landscapes, and especially remittance homes, that we have material evidence of Intipuca, El Salvador as a direct hinterland of Washington, D.C., of Tepatitlán, Mexico as the transborder suburb of the Bay Area in California.

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