

# New Geographical (Im)materialities in Rural Spaces for a Renewed Countryside in the Global North. Some Key Comments in the Rural Geography Debate

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**ABSTRACT:** From the point of view of the new (im)materialities and the relevance of vernacular house in the process of rural change and restructuring, this contribution comments some possible innovative ways of research in rural studies. The objective of the study is to bring the attention about the relevance of vernacular houses in the process of global rural change and restructuring and their particular expressions in localities and vernacular houses. The methodology is qualitatively based on auto-biographical and ethnographical research based in three houses of study in a marginal rural area of central Spain. The main conclusions suggest a process of hybridization of people and vernacular houses with two different circuits: new comers and traditional populations.

**Keywords:** Territory; Materialism; Place; Encounter; Hybridity; Community; Rural geography



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## 1. Introduction: Theoretical Background in the Context of the Current Rural Geography

Perhaps more than ever, the research topics on rural studies that emerge in various parts of the world have had a certain connection. The new (im)materialities around rural restructuring processes is an emerging field at a global level [1]. This is seen in various geographical settings, but with different formulations resulting from socio-cultural elements but also from architectural traditions and local and rural planning [2]. From political economy approach the issue of new houses and villages appears clearly in the analyzes of rural restructuring processes, initially linked to key spatial scenarios in the process of change as Great Britain [3,4], but more recently associated to place in Latin America or China.

In some recent publications we pointed out the relevance of new materialism as a new starting point for the progress of rural studies [1]. Within the framework of this new materialism, styles of resistance and differentiation between places emerge in the new construction of rural space. The new experimental perspective of materialism currently acquires notable importance for a new interpretation of the processes of change in rural areas, especially at a micro level based on a revitalization of popular housing and a reinterpretation of old rural routes and landscapes. Places as home is a key argument in the post structural identities [1].

The heritage of feelings and the duplicity of landscape are key - and usual - arguments in the new areal differentiation and conceptual tensions in rural studies. Post-structuralism politics creates differences, in multiple forms of politics of difference [5–8]. Jackson in 1996 [9] suggest with the concept of vernacular landscape the relevance of personal relationships in small spaces. Mobility and change are the key to the vernacular landscapes, and vernacular is associated with peasant but probably not with the aristocratic sphere. In this sense vernacular have a local form: ‘Spaces in this vernacular landscape thus indicate personal relationships, and then indicate in no less complicated manner the involved of the conflicting tradition of community’ [9] (p. 329).

Everyday micro-differences and political subjectivity is the key relevant point of view of Eyles in 1989 [10] (p. 116) ‘in the context of everyday life with be seen the dialectic relationship between individual and society’. The everyday life is not a static phenomenon, it is a dynamic process. The individual is a relationship with the context and structure, and in this sense the everyday life is in a social context and believable personal world. In this argument the styles of everyday life are a routine and identification with place and familiarity with the rural context and the new materialities and vernacular houses. The encounters affect emotions. In this orientation the encounters in place are

associated with a close encounter with high intensity and strong events or on the contrary an un-event or discounters' filters with negative emotions. The process of encounter and disagreement generates feelings in the vital/individual to recover the live of new materialities of rural houses [11]. As suggested recently in Paniagua 2023 and associated literature quoted in this contribution: 'one of the options to integrate new materialism in the processes of rural change is through the successive processes of recovery and leave of the renovated heterogeneous rural materials, mainly rural houses' [1] (p. 10). From this perspective we analyze three case studies of rural houses in peripheral rural areas of Spain [11,12].

In definitive, the objective of the study is to bring the attention about some innovative ways of research in geographical rural studies from the point of view of the new rural (im)materialities and the relevance of vernacular houses in the process of global rural change and restructuring. The gap in this field of study is pointed out in the review of the literature, by pointing out the lack of knowledge on the topic analyzed.

## 2. Methods and Study Area

Biographical studies founded on personal narratives that have been used to study processes of spatial and rural marginalization and in the construction and deconstructions of otherness, emphasize the relevance of micro location the study area [13]. Some recent trends in rural geographical literature point off the relevance of micro studies based on marginal rural narratives, biographical trajectories and emotional discourses [14]. Only intensive qualitative research, based on selected cases, can adequately identify the process of relationships and strategies of people and individuals in place [15]. To fill this research gap in geographical rural studies, this research uses intensive qualitative methods with a biographical orientation approach to (auto) ethnographic experiences and feelings [16,17]. Through this research method, the researcher lives experiences and their variable connection with feelings and ethical values that establish their own individual stories are able to be detailed in particular place [18–20]. In form of close links between heritages, rural cultures and subjectivity, to demonstrate the continuity of intimate connection between individual biography and the biography of rural landscape in place. Willianson in 2018 [21] suggests that auto ethnography connects the personal ethnographies in a new social, environmental and cultural spatial framework. Auto-ethnography involves a researcher writing about a research topic of great personal relevance and intimacy, and situating their lived experiences within the social context in a specific rural environment [22]. In auto ethnography the usual division of socio-cultural orientations between self-other is ignored in the research process and the narrative refers explicitly to the individual author experiences and emotions. This also influences the way of writing which affects the researcher's own experience.

To check and contrast whether the dynamics were emotionally linked to an area or, on the contrary, to the story of a house, three cases were analyzed in February 2023. Thus, three houses were visited in previously well-known areas, but with no family history in them, in the northern sierra of Guadalajara and Madrid. Of the three houses visited, one was sold by inheritance and two by new arrivals in February 2023. All three lost interest in the property and the place (Figure 1). The selection of the study area was intended to be representative of the remote and marginal rural areas of the interior of Spain. At the same time, the selection of the three study houses was intended to reveal the existence of different circuits of new materialism in the vernacular houses with different speeds.



**Figure 1.** Study area.

### 3. Histories and Stories of Renovated Houses: Histories of New Materialities or Stories of Encounters and Dwelling in the North of Guadalajara

Case 1. House in San Mames, in the municipality of San Mames-Navarredonda, which is at an altitude of 1100 meters, a small municipality with 61 inhabitants in 2022 in the Sierra Norte de Madrid (Figure 1). The owners who sell the house for 175,000 euros carried out the transformation years ago, coinciding with their acquisition, from a farm house to a recreational/country house. The renovation respected the structure of the house and the traditional beams of native wood, also the arrangement of rooms around the patio. The old stable became a painting laboratory. The tool store rooms were transformed into a storage room for the chairs and tables for recreation nights in the patio. The house is not very big, about 170 m<sup>2</sup> and is prepared especially for the summer. The owners who reside in Madrid sell it when they reach a mature age in which they do not enjoy the displacement and the place. The pleasure of a recreational house becomes the obligation of visiting the property. They want to sell it and as soon as possible, the enchantment of the house and the place has passed, like the lives of its owners. The house is located in the context of wild nature in the northern mountains of Madrid and is being sold through a regional real estate agency. The house needed to be rehabilitated and the rooms and ceilings were too small. Its dimensions were from another stage and functionality that has already passed.

Case 2. House in Medranda, a town with its own town hall and located at an altitude of 807 meters, in the Sierra de Guadalajara with 68 inhabitants in 2022 (Figure 2) [11,23]. They put it up for sale for work reasons that do not allow it to be enjoyed regularly, in a quantity of 85,000 euros. The current owners bought a traditional house originally built in 1815 and rehabilitated it respecting the structure but with changes in the colors of the façade, more to the current taste. There is also a redecoration of the interior of the house, even with a huge jacuzzi. In the transition from the agrarian to the postmodern house, urban taste is introduced into the decoration that definitively seals the loss of its original agrarian-rural functionality. In the summer of 2022, the town bar closed. For any service it is necessary to go to the county seat about 9 km away, ‘five minutes by car’. The house is located in the immediate natural environment of the town and further away to go by private vehicle. The house is sold through a real estate agency specializing in the sale of rustic goods. Personally, I did not like the style of the interior decoration of the house, although I did like the charm of the town.

Case 3. House in Torrebeleña, a town annexed to Cogolludo municipality in the Sierra de Guadalajara, at an altitude of about 900 meters, and with 43 inhabitants in the year 2017. It is a sale by inheritance in an amount of 95,000 euros (Figure 3). When the last owner from the town of Torrebeleña died, the four heirs sold it as they had no interest in life on the property that required reforms. The last owner lived alone and only partially rehabilitated the house, the façade and the first floor, but this reform meant the transition from agricultural housing to a rural one by transforming the old stables into the living-dining room of the house, maintaining traditional details, like the old trough-feeder for animals as a bottle rack to the postmodern taste. The house is around 300 m<sup>2</sup> and was partially renovated in 2014. There is only one social bar in the village, which is open mainly during festivals and summers. For any service it is necessary to go to the county seat - Cogolludo - 9 km away, but always ‘five minutes by car’. The house is situated in the rural environment of the village and in the furthest of a cultural nature. The house is sold through a regional real estate agency. I really liked the house, it was a well-oriented partial rehabilitation, but it required a lot of paperwork due to the magnitude of the reform. In the negotiation process they sold it to another, you are already negotiating with several potential buyers at the same time and you have to make decisions quickly. These are the new times of the real estate business in unpopulated areas. But I did not feel the pity of others in my origins. That was not my town; it was a town that I liked in a charming area. A feeling I have had in many places.

### 4. Conclusions and Discussions

The process of new materialism is a parallel process of hybridation between house and people. In all three cases, the house is situated in the context of nature at three levels: local, rural environment (immediate rural-natural place around the village) and wild nature, which refers to an extended context. The houses selected in the beginning could reflect styles by areas or places, which are actually personal styles or by houses expressed in the individual experimental process of recovery and transformation of agrarian functionality to recreational-rural functionality. All are sold through local or regional a real estate agent (cases 1, 2, 3), which represents a turning point in the sales processes for properties in these areas that previously remained within the extended local community. Some expressions appear repeatedly and suggest the subjectivity of distance in marginal areas: ‘Just a coffee’ (Case 2) or ‘five minutes by car’ (Case 3).

The cases of study suggest a pluralization of micro life worlds at home. The diverse people may see improvements of these everyday life in different ways based on the relevance of place-house in the material condition of everyday life in close relation with other cases of study [24–26].

Finally, the comparison between these areas with previous research [12] suggests different maturation processes in the replacement of new foods, already in the second generation in other area (case 2) [12], as it is an area with a tradition in recreational houses, while it is in a more initial stage in the area of the North Mountain of Guadalajara. In any case, it is possible to suggest a specific genealogy of place [27,28] and the houses as a confluence of multiple and variable processes. The genealogies of materiality have a double circuit with academic and new facts - empirical - routes [29] in the form of old and new materiality [30] in the wider context of post structural and postmodern geographies [31].

At this moment coexist a double circuit: (1) the circuit of new comers to new comers more mature (cases 1 and 2), (2) and the circuit to traditional populations and houses, inheritance process (transitional phase to new comers) and new comers (Case 3). These two circuits coexist in themselves and even in towns, but on a regional scale it is possible to consider areas that may be more evolved than others.

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Not applicable.

## Informed Consent Statement

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

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