

# Bad taste in architecture. Discussion of the popular in residential architecture in southern Ecuador.<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

After a period of academic interest in popular-culture studies at the end of the last century, interest in popular culture has diminished over the last years, or at least so it seems in the Western academic world. In the Ecuadorian community of architects and intellectuals, the matter is more alive than ever. Due to massive transnational migration, culture is undergoing noticeable changes. In this paper I discuss local interpretations of globalization in residential architecture in the province of Azuay, in southern Ecuador. I take the professional debate about architectural changes as a starting point for a reflection on academic theories about popular architecture, and their usefulness for understanding recent developments.

Since the beginning of the wave of transnational migration, that started in Azuay in the 1970s, new architectural expressions have altered cityscapes and landscapes. Whereas builders – principally transnational migrants – try to express an aspired-to social status and a cosmopolitan lifestyle in extravagant villas, established architects criticize the new architecture for breaking with local traditions. Over the last years, established professionals experienced a decrease in their monopoly on the design of the built environment, while non-established professionals have increasingly become involved in the process of making extravagant houses for ambitious clients in suburban areas. The established architects consider the new villas to be demonstrations of bad taste, built by peasants and lower-class citizens who do not know the appropriate styles. But due to the involvement of colleagues and the unclear status of the new architectural styles, it is a sensitive issue, not to be talked about openly.

Similar cases of contested architectural styles have been described in the literature. The cases illustrate the general difficulty of coping with stylistic changes and the social changes they represent. More importantly, they also demonstrate that academic thinking about architecture does not offer apt analytical tools to interpret those changes. As academic thinking is still based on a dichotomy between professional high-style and laymen's vernacular architecture, the dichotomy excludes other categories. I suggest that we reassess the roles professionals play in the development of popular architectural styles, in order to define more flexible classifications of architectural categories. With this text, I also want to stress that attention has to be shifted away from metropolises and toward intermediate and so-called peripheral cities and their surroundings, in order to analyze the impacts of globalization in lesser-known parts of the urbanized world.

## Introduction

Transnational connections are not limited to world cities (Hannerz, 2002). Increasingly, remote areas in less well-known regions of the world are also influenced by international trade, the export of labor and import of foreign currencies. Hence, they face socio-cultural changes. The southern province of Azuay in Ecuador offers an example of this. Azuay has approximately 600,000 inhabitants, dispersed over fourteen administrative cantons. Ecuador's third city, Cuenca, is the capital of Azuay and also of the canton Cuenca. Seventy percent of the inhabitants of Azuay live in the canton Cuenca: 277,000 in the city itself, and the other 140,000 in the rural areas of the canton (INEC, 2003).

Over the last decades, Azuay and its neighboring province Cañar have been dealing with the effects of massive transnational migration. In the second half of the twentieth century, when the principal industry of panama-hat manufacturing in southern Ecuador waned, an increasing number of people left the two provinces to look for a better future abroad. In the 1970s and 1980s, most people leaving the southern provinces were male inhabitants of rural areas, who went to the US illegally (Kyle, 2000). When a political and economic crisis at the end of the 1990s worsened the situation in many households in Ecuador, a new

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<sup>1</sup> This title is inspired by the title of Mary Douglas' essay 'Bad Taste in Furnishing' (1996).

migration wave started. This time, not only poor peasants from Azuay and Cañar headed for a new future in another country. People from all over Ecuador, from different social classes, males and females, left the country legally and illegally. This time they principally went to Europe, mostly to Spain and Italy (Jokisch and Pribilsky, 2002). Although exact numbers are hard to obtain, estimations for the whole country are that over a million Ecuadorians now live abroad. Whereas about 400,000 Ecuadorians are said to live in the US (some sources mention 700,000), the same number is calculated for Ecuadorians living in Spain (Jokisch en Pribilsky, 2002; ILDIS, 2003, 2004; INE, 2004). Compared to a total national population of twelve million (INEC, 2003), the percentage of Ecuadorians living abroad is unarguably substantial. On a regional scale, the impact is even more profound. Over 150,000 people are said to have left the city of Cuenca and its rural surroundings (ILDIS, 2004). Other cantons in Azuay, such as Girón, Chordeleg and Paute, equally faced high numbers of out-migration. Summed up, the province Azuay has seen a few hundreds of thousands of inhabitants leave in the last decades.

The people who stayed behind had to cope with some serious socio-economic and cultural consequences. Families fell apart and local communities weakened. A growing number of children were raised by others than their parents, a situation that often caused psychological distress (Pribilsky, 2001). But on the other hand, migration also generated an influx of remittances that became a pillar of the national economy. In 2003, national remittances mounted up to 1.5 billion dollars (Sánchez, 2004). Because Azuay was the province with the highest rate of out-migration in Ecuador, huge numbers of *migradólares* entered Azuay. A large part of the remittances was spent on house building. The Construction Chamber in Azuay estimated that in the year 2000 alone, about three hundred million dollars was spent on house building in the region (Serageldin et al., 2004: 9-10). The demand for consumer goods, construction sites and real estate was so high that it caused a local increase in the cost of living. At the beginning of the 21st century, Cuenca became the most expensive city in Ecuador (Serageldin et al., 2004: 9; *El Comercio*, 2003). Consequently, the rise in cost of living triggered more migration.

Transnational migrants did not only send remittances home. Also foreign cultural elements, varying from ideas for housing, to food, fashion and celebrations, entered Ecuador. For instance, at secondary schools, the national celebration of the Día del Escudo Nacional on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October has recently encountered fierce competition from the celebration of Halloween, which became very popular among students. In order to prevent national cultural traditions from disappearing, in 2003 the Minister of Education even prohibited the celebration of Halloween at schools (Ibarra, 2003). This and other incidents illustrate cultural transformations that coincide with current processes of globalization.

One of the most visible cultural changes related to transnational migration in Azuay was a change of architectural styles in house building. In the second half of the twentieth century, transnational-migrant families in villages and suburban neighborhoods replaced their small two-room houses with two- or three-story villas with urban facilities. Local architects describe these new houses as examples of 'bad taste'. They regard the architectural styles as import architecture, inappropriate for the Azuayan landscape, and not suited to the life people in rural areas are believed to live. They regret the disappearance of the old adobe architecture that they regard as autochthonous, and they fear a dominant influence of North-American architectural styles. This rather pessimistic view of local professionals contrasts with some of the more optimistic interpretations of creolization in the international globalization debate in which creolization and hybridization are regarded as sources of new local or national cultures (e.g. Hannerz, 2002; García Canclini, 1995; Matos Mar, 2004). So how are we to interpret the effects of globalization on local architecture? And are there any theoretical concepts to do so?

Elsewhere, I have interpreted the discourse of local architects in southern Ecuador as a reaction stemming from their threatened social position and their loss of the monopoly on local representations (Klaufus, forthcoming). Here, I want to explore the matter theoretically. Established local architects not only work as professionals, but they are also involved in academic teaching at the local university. As such, they are part of the international intellectual community, engaged in theoretical reflections on architecture. Mary Douglas states in a text about bad taste in decoration, which inspired the title of this paper: "The discourse about dislike and ugliness is more revealing than the discourse about aesthetic beauty" (Douglas, 1996: 50). In this case, discussions about good and bad styles are embedded in international theories about architecture, so the local discourse reveals how theories are used on a local level. The international academic discourse about architecture has long been rooted in a dichotomy between architecture as a form of art (so-called high-style architecture), and the people's architecture, alternatively called vernacular, folk or popular architecture. This paper is about the classification of those categories.

Based on participant observation in a lower middle-class suburban neighborhood in Cuenca between 2001 and 2004, interviews with about twenty local architects and several social scientists, and visits with architects to rural areas around Cuenca, I describe the changes in popular architecture over the last decade and the reactions of established architects. After this description, I continue with a review of current classifications of architectural types in international literature on architecture. The discussion at the end of this paper will go into the flaws of the conceptual dichotomy and make some suggestions for a different view.

## Academic architectural movements in Ecuador

Architects in Azuay are part of an international imagined community of highly-educated professionals in architecture. They have been trained and intellectually formed at a local university, modeled to European standards and connected to the international architectural discourse. It is thus worthwhile to look for a moment at the origins of the European academic models for the training of architects and its spread to the new world, as well as to twentieth century movements in international architectural thinking. They form the frameworks for current architectural thinking in Azuay.

Although monumental architecture has always been part of different histories and cultures, formal academic education in architecture dates back to eighteenth century Europe. The first generations of highly-schooled architects were trained at the École des Beaux Arts and the École Polytechnique in Paris. Those two institutions laid the basis for two main schools of thought in European architecture (Benevolo, 1971: 5-9; Rabinow, 1989: 47-57). The tradition based on the beaux-arts educational system regarded architecture primarily as a form of art. Schools based on the polytechnic system, on the other hand, considered architecture principally as a science instead of an art form; architecture was treated as a technical domain by which society could be shaped and molded. Over the course of the centuries, the approaches of architecture as art and architecture as a science became intertwined, and educational systems in Europe and elsewhere differed along a continuum in how they balanced the two approaches.

Although increasingly new insights about the influence of social context on form and space use were included in educational systems, the stylistic qualities of design hardly lost their importance. The beaux-arts tradition prevailed in most curricula, even at the end of the twentieth century. Architects were seen as experts who could distinguish between good or appropriate forms and styles, and bad or inappropriate ones. Not only architects, but also urban space designers and other members of the so-called planning elite, safeguarded the creation of visual coherent spaces:

[T]here arose a whole host of professionals – engineers, architects, urban planners, and designers – whose entire mission was to rationalize the fragments and impose coherence on the spatial system [...]. These professionals, whose role became more and more marked as progressive urban reformers acquired political power, acquired [a] deep [...] interest in the concept of *homogenous, abstract, and objective space* [...] (Harvey, 1985: 14, my italics).

This resulted in a professional discourse that not only emphasized aesthetic qualities in the built environment but also regarded those qualities as something that can be measured objectively.

At the end of the twentieth century, some scholars in cultural theory started to question the formalistic primacy in architecture and the scientific postulates on which they were based:

Traditionally, architectural discourse has been largely a discourse of form. In general it has been dominated by debates that evolve around questions of style. These debates have tended to be grounded on little more than moralistic arguments that seek their authority in terms such as ‘sincerity’ and ‘appropriateness’. Such debates have been trapped within the realm of symptoms. Invariably they have failed to probe any further, and to investigate the underlying causes (Leach, 1997: xiv).

Notwithstanding this critique, in the twenty-first century discussions about form and style still prevailed in the literature.

But let me first return to the origins of academic schools in architecture in Ecuador. The European educational system served as a blueprint for universities in other parts of the world. Consequently, Western ideas about architectural forms and good styles were spread to other continents, also to Latin America. In the case of Ecuador, the Universidad Central (state university) in Quito started preparations to open a school of architecture in the 1940s. The Uruguayan architect Gatto Sobral was appointed to

design the academic curriculum. He based the curriculum for Ecuador on the Uruguayan training system, which in turn was based on the French beaux-arts tradition (Benavides Solís, 1995: 67-80). After the first experiences in the Quito school of architecture, new schools and faculties were opened in other cities. For example, the faculty of architecture at the Universidad de Cuenca (state university) opened its doors in 1961. Because the curriculum was modeled after the Uruguayan educational system – and thus the European system – the emphasis on coherent and sophisticated visual appearance of buildings became the essence of academic architectural training in Ecuador.

During the first decades of the Quito school of architecture, locally trained architects merely copied foreign models and designs. The global dominance of the International Style and its modernism, based on functional and rational design and propagated by architects like Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, influenced the architecture in Quito in the mid-twentieth century. Concrete buildings with designs characterized by straight lines and horizontal elements appeared from the 1950s onward, first in Quito and later in other cities as well. About two decades later, sociological theories such as the work of Manuel Castells entered the architectural curriculum (Benavides Solís, 1995: 71, 103). Architects became more socially oriented. Due to a growing international critique of the dominance of International Style modernism, and a rising awareness of the importance of local culture, discussions began in Ecuador concerning idiosyncratic Andean and Latin American values in architecture and urbanism.

While in Quito the modernist adagio still prevailed, in Cuenca a counter movement developed. The first generation of academically trained architects became more inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's organic modernism than by the rigid forms of their European colleagues. Influenced by publications that called for a Critical Regionalism (Lefaivre and Tzonis, 1991; Frampton, 2002), they wanted to develop an architectural approach, more adjusted to local craftsmanship and the natural landscape. In Frank Lloyd Wright's work, Cuencan architects admired the perceived harmony between buildings and the natural environment. Influenced by his work, architects designed buildings made with local materials such as natural stone, brick and tiles. Over the course of three decades this new approach resulted in all sorts of rustic houses that became known under the collective term *la Arquitectura Cuencana*.

Though not a style in the strict sense of the word, *la Arquitectura Cuencana* became a professionally appreciated architectural language with some characteristic features. The buildings regarded as examples of *la Arquitectura Cuencana* are mostly detached villas, surrounded by lush gardens, built in spacious neighborhoods in and around Cuenca. The clients for whom the villas were designed belong to the upper class. The building materials are generally not covered by plaster or other protective layers, but left in view in order to demonstrate local craftsmanship. Some formal elements underline the rustic look, for example large chimneys and eaves. Many houses have an internal greenhouse or glass-covered patio, and a central fireplace – both are elements that incorporate nature in the interior. The first generation of local architects that produced such houses was followed by new generations in the 1980s and 1990s. The younger generations of locally-trained architects used modern urban building technologies in designs that continued to look rustic. *La Arquitectura Cuencana* became a means for the well-off to express their sophisticated cultural manners and good taste in architecture, with respect for local culture.

The rustic appearance was meant to express a relation between the built and the natural environment, but it was not meant to resemble too much the rural vernacular architecture of lower-class peasants. Rural houses were seen as humble houses adapted to a 'peasant way of life'. *La Arquitectura Cuencana*, on the other hand, represented a sophisticated urban lifestyle. Rural architecture was seen primarily as a functional architecture, whereas in *la Arquitectura Cuencana* aesthetic qualities prevailed (as was generally the case in so-called high-style architecture as Leach's quotation makes clear). Luxurious villas superseded the functional demands of elite households. The architectural language communicated the codes of cultural competence of the owners. Gradually, *la Arquitectura Cuencana* developed into an appropriate architectural style, designed by highly-esteemed architects, for the representation of the elite in the Cuenca region (Klaufus, forthcoming). In this way, through architectural aesthetics, urban architects and their clients constructed a social distinction between themselves as a cultural elite, and the popular sectors of society (cf. Bourdieu, 2000; Gans, 1999). In the social hierarchy and the worldview elite architects had constructed, *la Arquitectura Cuencana* corresponded to ideas about 'good' taste, as formulated in international architectural theories. Pastoral as it may appear, *la Arquitectura Cuencana* was, and still is, part of an urban elite culture used to differentiate the elite from lower-class citizens with their popular/vernacular architecture.

## New architectural trends in suburban Azuay

Until the 1970s most houses outside Cuenca's urban core, situated in the province's suburban and rural areas, were one- or two-story houses with an average of two or three rooms that were multifunctional. Sleeping and the storage of goods were the main functions of the house. An important part of social life took place outside, on the land, in the street and on the patio. Two-story houses had a gallery on the front side, decorated with wooden banisters. The kitchen was generally housed in a small, separate building; a bathroom did not exist. Houses were constructed of wood and adobe, and roofs were covered with locally-produced tiles. The facades were left untreated – which gave them a natural-colored look – or were plastered in white. All materials were mined or purchased near the building location (Zambrano Vásquez and León Samaniego, 1993; for photographs of rural houses in Ecuador in the first decades of the twentieth century, see Collier and Buitrón, 1949).

House building was basically a communal event. It was based on the reciprocity of participation in *mingas*. *Mingas* are collective workforces still used in the Andes to construct public works like roads and sewers. In the old days, *mingas* were part of a self-build process that enabled people to make their own house in a pre-industrial society. The collectivistic nature of house building was also expressed in rituals. The foundation of a new home, for instance, was celebrated in the community with a ceremony called *Huasi Pichana*, literally 'the sweeping of the house' (Aguiló, 1992: 310 note 46). House building and the accompanying rituals were ways of acting out a sense of community and belonging (Gose, 1992).

From the 1970s onward, parallel to the culmination of the first transnational migration wave, the morphology, building techniques and social use of domestic architecture gradually started to change. Increasingly, houses were built of industrial construction materials like brick, concrete, asbestos, steel and glass. Galleries were no longer common and front facades were made of bricks, left visible, or plastered and painted in bright colors. The designs became more complex as balconies, terraces and dormers appeared. Instead of a small number of multifunctional rooms, houses were now designed with a larger number of separate, uni-functional spaces (Zambrano Vásquez and León Samaniego, 1993). Although labor-intensive parts of the construction work were still executed in *mingas*, the hiring of paid construction workers became common. This was a logical consequence of the fact that many building projects were initiated by male, transnational migrants living abroad. Often, while the men earned the money and made decisions about the design from a distance, their wives coordinated the building activities on the spot. Not only did the designs invoke industrialized building techniques and thus specialized labor, the absence of the head of the household made the organization of *mingas* more complicated. Labor-intensive construction methods were thus increasingly replaced by industrial methods, and *mingas* by paid labor.

In the 1980s and 1990s, transformations were above all morphological. Neo-classical decorations such as arches and frontons became very popular. Those decorations were regarded as fashionable North-American style elements.<sup>2</sup> Houses were generally more extravagant than the ones built in the decades before. Architecture was used to communicate the assumed economic success of the owners in their adventures abroad (whether or not there was factual economic success did not matter, the suggestion of success was communicated), and as such it endowed the owners with social prestige. Occasionally, new migrant houses were equipped with luxurious facilities such as private sports accommodations, satellite dishes or elevators. The latest fashion in architecture during my stay in 2003 was the use of light-blue colored glass (first, brown was most fashionable and later on light blue became more trendy), and shiny, glazed (bathroom) tiles on the facades. Some owners of new, prestigious buildings had their names put on the façade, to make clear to the outside world to whom this wealth belonged. Gradually, the houses of transnational migrants and other newly-rich people thus became bigger, more luxurious and more visually outstanding.

Most people in my research area greatly appreciate so-called migrant architecture. People who do not have relatives abroad refer to recently-built extravagant houses as 'houses with models' or 'houses designed by professionals', to differentiate them from their own self-built homes that they label 'ordinary houses' or 'houses that do not have anything special'. Migrant families in my neighborhood who had a new house built often did so with the help of an architect, who could make drawings of the imagined model. The construction process was usually a combination of paid labor and self building and/or *mingas*.

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<sup>2</sup> Some architects referred to it as style typical for the southern states of the US. Benavides Solís (1995) mentions the popularity of a similarly neoclassical 'Californian style' that was already fashionable in Ecuador in the first half of the twentieth century. There seems to be an interconnectedness between architecture imported from the US and neoclassical elements.

Although a few examples of surviving adobe houses are still to be found in my research neighborhood, making adobe walls is now considered too time-consuming, physically too heavy and not prestigious enough to be an alternative to stone houses. The *Huasi Pichana* is celebrated occasionally, but for most people social celebrations have become too costly and communal feasts have lost their importance. House construction in the suburban areas is no longer a predominantly collectivistic event but a matter of individual consumption, whether or not the house is built with the help of professionals, relatives or neighbors.

There is a clear connection between the evolution of new architectural demands in popular architecture and the involvement of professionals. As the demand for extravagant designs increased, so did the involvement of professional architects and construction workers. Most houses erected by migrant families were built with varying levels of involvement by professional architects. For the application for a building permit, for instance, an architect's signature was always needed. Some professionals earned money just by putting their signatures on applications, while others designed plans or coordinated building processes. The architects working for migrants commonly were younger-generation architects or professionals outside the Cuenca elite circle. For them, the demand for remarkable and large houses was a niche in the region's highly competitive design and construction market. Parallel to the professionals who remained faithful to *la Arquitectura Cuenca*, another group of architects became dedicated to the production of migrant architecture.

Most old adobe houses in suburban areas in Azuay have now been replaced by brick and concrete buildings, varying on a scale from 'ordinary houses' to 'houses with models' and, at the other end of the continuum, very extravagant houses. Because of the social prestige it bestowed on the owners, migrant architecture became symbolically successful. This led to an increased demand, which in turn increased the number professionals working in the economic niche created by migrant architecture. As a result, migrant architecture became a catalyst phenomenon, out of reach for elite architects in Cuenca. Although transformations in architecture took place at a rapid pace, house building was still a bottom-up process, generated by families themselves. The changes in the built environment were closely related to changes in their individual and communal lives, not by some anonymous force from outside. As such, I consider migrant houses to be part of popular architecture.

### **Local discourse about bad taste in architecture**

The changes in residential architecture in suburban Azuay did not take place overnight. However, established architects and intellectuals in Cuenca took notice of them only a few years ago. When they realized that hardly any of the old adobe houses were left, a debate started. There was so much confusion over the causes, meanings and social consequences of the new eloquent architectural styles, that the subject became a sensitive issue, one which was called a 'taboo' by several architects – a matter not to be talked about openly. But the concealed opinions surfaced in every private conversation and every interview. It was impossible to talk about architecture without entering a discussion about migrant architecture. For established architects, migrant architecture was a phenomenon that worried them, because it challenged their worldview as well as their professional vision of good architecture.

In the discussions, established architects blamed transnational-migrant families for 'spoiling' the landscape with oversized houses. But first of all they regarded the architecture of new migrant houses as examples of bad taste. They found them 'kitsch' and 'grotesque'. One architect stated:

A very specific architecture has been determined that can be ascribed to migrants. In strict morphological terms, it is a mixture, a kind of eclecticism. It is a little bit of everything, because they put in a neo-classical entrance with modern or post-modern pillars et cetera, et cetera. Yes, it is a terrible mixture. It shows a very bad taste, a very bad taste (Interview local architect, 14 November 2002).

Besides their opinions about formalistic qualities, they also thought the new models were functionally inadequate for the life people in rural areas were believed (or supposed) to live, as is expressed in this statement:

In the countryside, we can see the destruction of folk architecture and the invasion of this new architecture. It is clear that those models have been transplanted from the urban to the rural areas. The forms, the materials, the technology, it is all meant for the city. [...]. They have been transplanted a-

critically, without attempts to adapt it to the countryside. So they stand there crying, as the saying goes. The houses cry, because they stand there side by side with vernacular architecture – the ‘architecture without architects’, made of adobe and roof tiles that blend into nature. And then, out of the blue, these gigantic brick houses with enormous dimensions appear, whereas rural vernacular houses tend not to be big. [Vernacular architecture] is a very cozy architecture, very cozy. Besides, from the point of view of their daily activities the [functional] program is different. They don’t need a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, a music chamber. We sometimes use spaces like that. But they, the peasants, prioritize the kitchen and space for their animals (Interview local architect, 14 November 2000).

For this architect, there is a marked difference between urban and rural lifestyles; a difference that is embedded in his worldview and that he wants to see represented in architecture. In his opinion, rural inhabitants should respect the ‘architecture without architects’, a description referring to Bernard Rudofsky’s book of the same title (1998 [1964]). As appears from the following examples, local architects were indeed familiar with international definitions of vernacular architecture. ‘Architecture without architects’ was the most used benchmark for measuring the qualities of the new architectural styles in Azuay.

The above-cited architect was not the only critic. Many architects and local scholars criticized the new trends in architecture. A local social scientist called the new houses “monsters of cement” because in this scholar’s opinion the architecture breaks with the architectonic harmony of traditional architecture; whereas another architect called them “fetish houses” in a Marxist way, because he thought the aesthetic opulence was a superficial kind of showing off; it was conspicuous consumption that signaled alienation (Borrero, 2002; Jaramillo, 2002). Another architect expressed the opinion that migrant architecture did not conform to the “established aesthetic codes” (interview, 21 November 2002). Based on this observation he concluded that most of the villas must have been built *without* an architect’s involvement, hence illegally, because an architect’s involvement was needed to obtain a building permit. Thus, contrary to the above cited architect, this colleague still regarded the new architectural styles as ‘architecture without architects’. In his opinion the involvement of professional architects was lacking, while it would have been needed to safeguard the aesthetic quality.

A few others referred specifically to the fact that some of their colleagues were somehow involved in the construction of migrant architecture. They primarily blamed those ‘bad’ architects for their share in the transformation of suburbia and the rural landscape. However, members of the cultural elite of Cuenca not only pointed toward others, they also blamed themselves. One architect told me he and his colleagues “had been sleeping for the past ten years,” and now it was almost too late to stop the process (Interview, 5 December 2002). As connoisseurs of art and culture, they thought it their duty to safeguard the quality of the built environment in the whole Cuenca region, not least because *la Arquitectura Cuencana* had always had a good reputation, which was now visually and symbolically contested by the new migrant architecture.

In the discussions, architects, and the cultural elite in Cuenca in general, neglected the social changes that laid the basis for the architectural transformations in the first place. The above quoted phrase of the architect stating that peasants usually do not need a living room or music chamber and that they instead prioritize a kitchen and shed for the animals, reflects a functionalist view of vernacular rural houses, also omnipresent in international architectural discourse. In reality, social change had already taken place. But it was the change of architectural *forms* that generated discussions.

In order to make sense of the changes, local architects drew on academic theories about architectural form. Especially the essentialist ones, in which forms are separated from meanings and in which forms and materials were said to express inherent values, were applied. For instance, an established architect said that, apart from a subjective interpretation of aesthetics in which people could have different opinions, it would also be possible to make a “pure formal analysis”, a literal reading of architectural forms at ‘face value’ that in his view would provide an objective analysis. He said that such a literal reading of forms would prove that the new architecture was not appropriate for a rural environment (Interview, 21 November 2002). Another architect expressed his belief that building materials have right and wrong uses, depending on the environment in which they are used. He based his view on the writings of European architects. He pointed to an Inca ruin as a key example of good architecture, because its materials were used in the right way, in harmony with the natural environment. On the other hand, he considered the eclectic architecture of migrant houses in rural villages as inherently bad, because he considered the forms superficial and the materials lacking a connection with the environment. He said that in his point of view,

migrant architecture had nothing to do with the highly-esteemed vernacular ‘architecture without architects’ (Personal communication, 8 March 2005). So again, migrant architecture was seen as explicitly *not* vernacular.

To summarize: in the Azuayan architectural discourse the two most familiar classifications are high-style urban architecture, exemplified in *la Arquitectura Cuencana*, and vernacular architecture, characterized as buildings made with non-industrial materials, constructed by non-professional builders, appropriate for a rural peasant lifestyle. Migrant architecture was not considered vernacular, but it was not regarded as high-style architecture either, because it evolved outside the domain of the established architects (although lower-rank professional architects have been involved). The new architecture, in their view, did not respect the dominant aesthetic codes for rural building. It was something with an unclear status. This unclearness contributed to the sensitivity of the subject, which turned it into a subject not to be talked about openly. Migrant architecture was seen as a manifestation of bad taste. However, established architects differed in their opinions on whether it was bad because it *was not* an ‘architecture without architects’ (that is, because architects were involved, so it was no longer regarded as traditional self-built vernacular architecture) or precisely because it *was* an ‘architecture without architects’, whereas architects should have been involved to guide the aesthetical choices. Migrant architecture was thus seen as a kind of ‘out-of-control’ popular architecture and nobody knew where it was heading. ‘Architecture without architects’ was the most commonly used point of reference, but the conceptual framework made local discussions difficult, because the theory only showed what the new migrant architecture was *not*, not how it could be interpreted. The new popular architecture did not fit the scale.

### **Vernacular architecture in academic discourse: other cases and discussion**

This kind of discussion is not limited to southern Ecuador. Similar debates on values represented by architectural forms have been held in other parts of the world. In Vancouver, for instance, Anglo-Canadian inhabitants of an upper middle-class residential neighborhood protested against the “monster houses” of Chinese immigrants. Their protest was also framed in terms of conflicting architectural styles. The Anglo-Canadians preferred neo-classical style houses in green surroundings as an expression of their identification with the old British aristocracy. The Chinese immigrants, on the other hand, preferred big modern-style houses on treeless lots. The modern forms stressed their newly acquired economic success, whereas the treeless lots were in line with Feng Shui principles. The fact that old trees were cut down to clear the lots for construction, as well as the size of the new houses and the architectural styles the immigrants used, aroused discussion (Mitchell, 1998; Ley, 1995). In the Azuay and Vancouver cases, the language used to criticize the specific architectural style were the same: both in Vancouver and Cuenca critics refer to the houses as “monsters”. The cases are also very similar in the way residential architecture plays a central role as an arena, where conflicting social and ethnic identities are fought out. In both cases, the indirect cause of architectural changes was labor migration (as part of globalization) and the upward social mobility it generated.

Another example is the so-called *chicha* or *chola* architecture in lower-class settlements with large populations of rural migrants in Andean cities such as Lima and La Paz.<sup>3</sup> There, indigenous architectural forms became mixed up with urban forms and industrial building techniques. Several architects have expressed their opinion on the appropriateness of those hybrid forms, and they all focus on the aesthetic aspects, just as their Azuayan colleagues do and, according to Leach, just as international scholars in architecture tend to do. Jorge Burga Bartra (1993), for instance, asserts that the use of materialistic ‘extremes’ in *chicha* architecture in Lima, such as the combination of industrial aluminum window frames and hand-made roof tiles, is not only an expression of bad taste, but also contributes to the loss of authentic Andean vernacular architecture. He considers *chicha* architecture in spontaneous settlements in Lima as a bad copy of high-style architecture. He describes houses made the *chicha* way as ‘masquerades’ that make inhabitants unrecognizable, even to themselves. Burga Bartra claims that an analysis of architectural forms demonstrates this masquerade (note the similarity with the form analysis that Azuayan architects propose; Burga Bartra uses the same method to demonstrate that new architectural forms are a social threat). For instance, the fashionable use of sheds in façades that look like tiled roofs, do not have the same cultural meaning as the ‘original’ tiled roofs in rural vernacular architecture. In his view, they are

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<sup>3</sup> *Chicha* is the name of corn beer that forms part of traditional Quechua culture. In Lima the term is used to refer to the popular culture of rural migrants. The term *chola* is used to refer to people of mixed white and indigenous descent.



optical illusions and therefore inauthentic. At the same time, however, he admits that the use of *chicha* decorations is not restricted to lower-class inhabitants of spontaneous settlements. His criticism thus lacks empirical evidence that social differentiation is acted out through *chicha* architecture.

In La Paz, similarly ‘mixed-up’ architectural forms have been detected, but here they are usually referred to as *chola* architecture. Contrary to Burga Bartra, architect Carlos Villagómez (n.d.) considers the evolution of new architectural forms to be a positive development. He interprets the new architecture as a sign that formerly repressed social classes had now found effective visual means of expression, to communicate the message that they have to be taken into account; that they can no longer be ignored in urban space. So instead of characterizing new architectural styles as a problem, he defines them as a challenge and an opportunity for defining new manifestations of cultural identities (cf. Hannerz, 2002: 74). Peruvian anthropologist José Matos Mar (2004) equally sees Lima’s *chicha* culture as a sign of successful emancipation of a formerly oppressed group of indigenous rural-urban migrants. He even regards *chicha* culture as part of a new national culture. Whereas Burga Bartra regards *chicha* architecture as a symptom of the degradation of high-style architecture (because he regards the new architectural forms as bad copies of high-style architecture), hence as cultural homogenization, Villagómez regards *chola* architecture as an ingredient of new definitions of local culture, hence as part of a heterogenization process. The opinions of the Azuayan cultural elite are closer to those of Burga Bartra than to those of Matos Mar and Villagómez.

In Holland, discussions about bad taste in architecture arose after architect Carel Weeber published a pamphlet in favor of more individually developed, private housing (Weeber, 1998). In a country where uniform public housing set the tone, the idea of individual families having their houses built stirred up debate. Established professionals feared a vulgarization of architecture, and a degradation of the urban image in general. After a few successful projects, the general climate changed. The government encouraged more involvement of citizens in housing. Nowadays, municipalities often reserve parts of new development projects for individual developers, because they enhance local identity formation.

On an empirical level, there are many struggles over architectural styles, coinciding with forms of modernization, commercialization or globalization. As professionals are often involved in the discussions, they use their expertise and dominant academic frameworks to distinguish between right and wrong. Interestingly, though, on a theoretical level conceptions of the popular in architecture have not really been adapted to the new dynamics, as they are often based on the old definitions of high-style and vernacular. I will give a short review of the scholarly views on vernacular architecture, but before I start, it is important to repeat that the academic discourse on architecture is still divided into two academic domains. Buildings designed by academically-schooled architects, trained in Western architectural thought and values, are generally referred to as Architecture with a capital “A”. High-style architecture embodies architectural production based on the idea that architecture is a form of art and a science. This category of so-called high-style architecture, based on Western architectural norms and values, is principally espoused by architectural theorists, art historians and sociologists. For buildings not regarded as Architecture with a capital “A”, unambiguous denominations do not exist. They are principally referred to as vernacular, traditional, indigenous, folk or popular architecture and are often the objects of study by anthropologists and geographers.

Since the eighteenth century, vernacular architecture has been a recurring research subject in ethnography. Anthropological studies focused on the social and cultural aspects of vernacular architecture as representations of social organization. After Rudofsky wrote his seminal work *Architecture without Architects* (1998 [1964]), anthropologists became more interested in comparative research on vernacular architecture world-wide, and anthropological analyses of architectural aesthetics became a new focus of attention (see for instance Amerlinck, 2001; Waterson, 1997; Schefold et al., 2003).

Many attempts have been made to define the essence or the basic features of vernacular architecture and its changes over time. Paul Oliver, who wrote several books on the subject, defines vernacular architecture as an “architecture of the people, and by the people, but not for the people” (Oliver, 2003: 14). Other scholars have made similar descriptions in different terms, such as ‘traditional’ architecture (Bourdier and AlSayyad, 1989: 6), ‘non-pedigreed’ architecture (Rudofsky, 1998 [1964]), and ‘non-academic’ architecture (Glassie, 2000: 20). In an attempt to differentiate vernacular architecture from high-style architecture, Oliver states:

The architect determines the forms that seem appropriate to the needs of a particular building or building complex within a society [...]. The individual within a tribal or folk culture does not become

the form-giver for that society; instead he employs the forms that are essential to it, building and rebuilding within determinants that are as much symbolic as physical or climatic (Oliver, 1975: 12).

In Oliver's definition, not only is self-built or community-built architectural design contrasted with designs made by architects; he also draws a sharp contrast between societies with planning elites and tribal or folk cultures. Others disapprove of his rather evolutionist views of vernacular architecture and the stereotyping of societies that produce it (Kellet and Napier, 1995).

Some architectural forms are just not that easy to classify, as Oliver himself noted when he included self-built houses in urban lower-class settlements in a separate chapter in his book on vernacular architecture worldwide. In that chapter, he regards spontaneous house building in spontaneous settlements as an architecture of the populace (Oliver, 2003: 210-233). However, he does not consider this to be a kind of 'new vernacular', as Lisa Peattie suggested (1992). Peattie threw up the question as to whether shantytowns could be seen as forms of new vernacular. Reacting to this idea, Oliver states:

If the waste products and discarded materials of the city are regarded as the 'local materials and resources' some may consider these factors as justifying such an argument. However, though some settlements may have a phase when traditional houses are built on the fringe of a city, the majority of squatter houses are erected without a tradition (Oliver, 2003: 225).

No tradition means no vernacular, is thus what Oliver says. Amos Rapoport, on the other hand, does call houses in spontaneous settlements examples of vernacular design. He uses a theoretical continuum of environment types. His argument regarding spontaneous houses as vernacular is that, based on this theoretical continuum, "spontaneous settlements [are] closer to traditional vernacular than to any other type of environment and farthest from professionally designed, or "high-style," environments" (Rapoport, 1988: 55). Kellet and Napier (1995) equally support the idea of spontaneous architecture as a specific kind of vernacular. They warn against classificatory frameworks that overstress societal types and types of labor relations as indicators of the vernacular. To them, houses in spontaneous settlements are specific forms of vernacular architecture, because they are built by people themselves in a non-professional environment.

Although Rapoport and Oliver put different accents on the matter, they agree on the definition of vernacular housing as spontaneous and particularly non-professional forms of housing. When they say that spontaneous houses can be regarded as special kinds of vernacular, they do so precisely because they claim that architects were not involved. My Azuayan case, however, shows that often it is hard to draw a clear line between professionally designed environments and non-professionally made environments, because architects are sometimes involved in house-design processes in otherwise unplanned environments. Rapoport seems to acknowledge this when he notes that upgrading activities can transform 'vernacular' environments into 'popular' environments, for instance "through the imposition of explicit legal codes and regulations" (1988: 57). When upgrading occurs, professionals are sometimes involved to apply legal regulations. In that case, it is no longer vernacular but popular architecture, so he states. He does not further define 'popular' environments. He solves the analytical ambiguity by using another denominator.

The emphasis on the non-professional character of spontaneous architecture probably stems from the fact that most scholars regard vernacular buildings first of all as responding to functional prerequisites, and less as visual demonstrations of fashion or lifestyle, a view that resembles those of architects in Azuay. This stance is also comparable to Bourdieu's description of working-class taste where "a systematic reduction of the things of art to the things of life" is said to take place (Bourdieu, 2000: 5). I do not agree with this reductionist view, not even in the case of 'regular' houses in spontaneous settlements and less so in the case of the explicit use of fashionable and extravagant forms in migrant architecture. But at least it makes clear why, according to dominant theory, migrant architecture can not be classified as vernacular: 1) it is sometimes designed or constructed with the help of professionals, and 2) its forms are carefully chosen to impress others.

I do not want to discuss denominations here. Whether new architectural transformations are named 'vernacular' or 'popular' is a meaningless discussion to me, unless we take a careful look at the classifications the categories are based on. I think Kellett and Napier (1995) are right in their warning that societal types and labor relations cannot be taken at 'face value' as principal indicators for deciding whether or not architecture is vernacular. But contrary to their proposal to change focus from process analysis to the analysis of artifact characteristics, I propose that we do not overstress formalistic features

either, because they already tend to get so much attention. Besides, formalistic analyses tend to generate essentialist ideas, not being related to the social context the forms evolve in. Instead, I suggest we look more carefully at the context and at the actors involved in the building process. In the 1980s, the same discussions were taking place about the definition of 'self-built' housing in spontaneous settlements. Ward (1982: 200), for instance, argued then that self-built housing can include different levels of paid labor (construction workers), but it can still be called 'self-built'. I think that the same principle that Ward applied to paid labor in squatter houses has to be applied to involvement of architects in migrant architecture. The Azuayan case shows that people in suburban settlements are still very much dependent upon their own initiatives in house building, but at the same time professional architects are sometimes involved. The settlements I looked at evolved spontaneously, so the houses can still be considered vernacular/popular even though they are not always made by 'laymen'. If I understood Kellett and Napier well, this is also what they meant with their plea for a better analysis of labor relations.

Why should we reconsider the role of professionals in the classification of popular architecture? Lower-class people building their own houses are not a static group, nor are architects. In Azuay, transnational migrants now play the role of private developers in house building. They choose a house design and they choose professionals (construction workers and sometimes architects) who can make their dream house. Amos Rapoport's assertion that houses are upgraded through the imposition of legal codes has also been the case in Azuay. Since the municipal department for urban control in Cuenca professionalized its task and extended its control during the 1990s, builders constructing without a permit risk a fine. As a logical consequence, house building often became a co-production of individual owners and professionals. If non-professionally designed houses were to be encouraged because of their 'authentic' qualities, then inhabitants of suburban settlements would be encouraged to disrespect the law, something that could hardly be the intention, neither of local architectural discourse nor of international theory on vernacular/popular architecture.

It is not only from a pragmatic stance migrant architecture that needs classification more specific than describing what it is not. We must also consider the phenomenon of academic romanticization and exotization of the research subject. By stressing the dichotomy between architecture 'with' and architecture 'without' architects, between high-style and vernacular, scholars not only overestimate high-style, but also exoticize vernacular. Nezar AlSayyad, for instance, states:

There is an implied bias in our work toward preserving what can still be preserved of traditional dwellings and settlements. This bias seems to stem from the fear that if these settlements change, as some of their residents may desire, we will lose our research subjects and hence our means of livelihood. As a discipline, the study of traditional dwellings and settlements, no matter how young, seems to have fallen into the trap of constructing a social reality dependent on its own particular jargon (AlSayyad, 1989: 530).

Self-built or community-built architecture is often still considered more autochthonous and authentic than architecture made with the help of professional architects. Dutch anthropologist Irene Cieraad makes a similar statement. She notices among Western anthropologists a general lack of interest in Western domestic architecture. She criticizes the lop-sided interest in non-Western architecture and attributes it to the evolutionist presupposition that architecture in their own part of the world has lost its symbolic values (Cieraad, 1999: 2; see also Vellinga, 2005). I add to this that the same goes for 'modern' or Western-looking houses in Third World countries. They are easily disqualified as non-traditional, hence non-authentic, both by local architects and by international scholars.

On a local level, globalization in the form of transnational migration and modernization of urban building techniques has resulted in changes and transformations of architectural styles. To the villa owners, their 'houses with a model' are valuable assets that they owe to themselves, not to the state, to developers or to elite architects. Migrant architecture in Azuay thus signaled three things to me. It showed me that modern, industrial architecture can be as much an architecture of, by and for the people as 'regular' spontaneous architecture, already included in mainstream theory. It made me aware that from the perspective of dominant theories migrant architecture in Azuay can only be classified by what it is not. Therefore, there is a necessity to confront new and changing paradigms, more in line with globalization and with the changing roles of laymen and professionals, and their interactions in house building. And finally, it signaled that more studies are needed in so-called peripheral areas to compare this trend in Azuay with others, in order to understand the impact of modernization and globalization on a local level.

## Conclusion

In Azuay, the construction of an upper-class architectural style called *La Arquitectura Cuencana* was parallel with the development of an effective language in architecture, preferred by the lower classes. This new architecture, which is often referred to as 'migrant architecture' because it was generated by transnational migrants, is an architecture "of the people and by the people, sometimes made by professionals for the people", to use a variant of Oliver's definition. The houses of transnational migrants are visually different from the old adobe and wooden houses, but they are still the outcome of self-developments and therefore they are part of vernacular/popular architecture. Most houses are now built with some degree of professional involvement, while occasionally *mingas* are held or the *Huasi Pichana* is celebrated. Traditional methods and rituals thus coincide with modern building techniques. Different kinds of labor relations are juxtaposed. New kinds of interactions between architects and self-builders have developed, as both self-builders and professionals have become diverse groups. Settlements in Azuay undergo social and cultural changes that make it difficult to pinpoint them as traditional or modern, rural or urban. Therefore, settlement characteristics and labor relations are ambivalent and cannot be used as indicators of architectural classifications, as is often done in studies on vernacular architecture.

In a concealed discussion about transformations in architecture in Azuay, local established architects considered migrant architecture a kind of 'out-of control' popular culture, neither deserving to be called high-style (which they associate with *la Arquitectura Cuencana*), nor vernacular in the sense of an 'architecture without architects'. To them migrant architecture was an undesirable result of globalization that had caused a rupture in rural traditions. Their framework was based on international academic theories about vernacular architecture, especially its connotation as being a traditional, laymen's activity. Essentialist formalistic analyses were sometimes used to show that the new models were examples of 'bad taste'. The same discussions have been held in other cities and countries. All were somehow related to the ambivalent role of professionals in the design process. Either established professionals criticized individual house builders for building 'bad-taste' architecture, which was attributed to the fact that no experts were involved; or they criticized them for building with 'bad' architects. Either way, the real 'architecture without architects', representing local, traditional values, was seen as being threatened, while new architectural manifestations were defined as to what they were not.

To develop more accurate conceptual tools for analyzing new forms of popular architecture, I suggest that the roles of professionals and laymen in self building be less seen as separate roles. Neither self-builders nor professional architects are static groups. As a result, not all popular architecture in the Third World is personally built by lower-class laymen, and not all architects there are dedicated to the production of so-called high-style architecture. In the same line of reasoning that Ward used to define 'self-building' in squatter settlements, modern houses in suburban settlements or villages can be considered part of popular/vernacular architecture, even if professionals are involved. They are still the results of self-development. Another conclusion is that in order better to understand the effects of modernization and globalization on a local level, more studies about architectural transformation in peripheral areas are needed.

Signals of contempt are never hard to pick up, Mary Douglas said, and that was indeed the case in Azuay. As the making of stylistic categories contributes to the making of moral categories, I used the Azuayan case to reconsider academic classifications and the moral categories that we as scientists create. I noticed that architectural theories are still very much based on a static view of vernacular architecture and the people involved in building, and that a view of modern or Western-looking popular architecture in Third-world countries is almost non-existent. Academia uses its own discriminators, by which migrant architecture could easily be dismissed as being vulgar. A more flexible view of popular architecture, one that includes professional involvement, could possibly help Azuayan transnational migrants and Azuayan professionals to openly discuss the merits and drawbacks of new popular styles.

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