

## Recover Old Geographical Materialities in Rural Areas: Key Politics and Processes of (Dis)assemblages

By Angel Paniagua\*

*The current rural geography is at a crossroads of theoretical options. Geographical studies on processes of rural change usually have a social perspective, based on the loss of traditional populations and the immigration of new populations, and on the analysis of social-territorial conflicts between the locals and the newcomers. Rematerializing rural studies through experimental materiality is an interesting option to revitalize rural geography. The experimental process of recovering rural houses generates a fluid hybridization process between human-materiality realities, but it can also lead to a disassemblage process between people and materiality (rural house). In this contribution, various types of disassemblage processes of recovered material realities (rural houses) and the people who carried out the experimental recovery of the house are reviewed. The methodology is qualitative and is based on the examination of six case studies in rural areas of Spain. The disassemblage process generates new pluralities and material realities in peripheral rural communities.*

**Keywords:** materiality, rural, geography, artifacts

### Introduction

Current rural geography is at a crossroads of theoretical and methodological options that reflect the current complexity of the academic debate on human geography itself. (Re)Incorporating materiality back into the study of rural spaces is an option that can help revitalize geographic analysis (Paniagua 2021a, 2021b). Geographical studies on rural change have usually focused on a socio-cultural perspective with little attention to the role of old materialities. In this analytical context, recovering the study of old materialities in a new context of change can have multiple possibilities (Paniagua 2021a). One of these options is to integrate the processes of renewal and recovery of the rural house in the processes of assemblages and disassemblages of heterogeneous geographic realities (Murdoch 2006).

This contribution suggests different processes of encounters and assemblages and disencounters and disassemblages associated with the recovery of traditional rural housing. With this perspective, it is intended to analyze the multiplicity of human-material encounters in the same rural community that generate disparate processes of assemblages and disassemblages.

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\*Senior Researcher, Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), Spain.

**Assemblages and Disassemblages in (New) Material Rural Geography**

Deconstruct binary nature/society relations include non-human and other objects. Materialist approaches clearly recognize nature as a heterogeneous achievement of people and objects (Meehan and Rice 2011). The materiality recovery process usually ends with a hybrid human-non-human materiality experience. The new hybrid subjectivities are intimate relationships among social and material dimensions (Del Casino 2009). A new reality reconstructed after the recovery process, where there is usually a remarkable care in taking care of old materials and traditional material expressions, even reinforcing them as a sign of identity. Generating (new) materials in multiple ways (Whatmore 2003) produce a renewed plasticity in rural houses. The individual new buildings and the recovery of traditional materials suggest a selective vision of the rural past (Butler-Warke and Warke 2021). Making sense is a creative process where telling materials (Crang 2003) as an individual experience. As suggest Harvey “The material practices from with our concepts of space and time flow are a varied as the range of individual experiences” (Harvey 1989, p. 211). Individualized day-to-day lives, do not make sense of the world by way of abstractions, people make their own interpretations, by lay or expressive constructions of reality (Cloke et al. 2006). The rural experience combines realism, actuality and empirical dimensions, but also adds a postmodern vision of architecture and buildings, in the form of individualized homes associated with a certain new plasticity and vital differences that incorporate the geographical impacts of the new middle class in rural areas. The subjectivities between human and non-human artifacts are produced through situated encounters and reproduced daily (Meehan and Rice 2011, p. 60). The encounter human and new materiality (of rural house) is dominated by the feeling of rural idyll. The assemblage process originates a new politics of encounter where might experiment with new modalities of resistance in form of subjectivities of socio-environmental conflict and localized politics of human-material resistances are configured. Multiple and miniaturized (micro) urban-rural relations coincide with many forms inside the (rural) house.

But this process of recovering traditional materiality also ends in many cases with a process of (dis)assemblage between human desires and the new recovered materiality. There are three stages: (1) the first stage of experimental recovery of the new materiality, (2) the second stage of accommodation and hybridization with the rehabilitated house, (3) the third stage of disassemblage between people and the rural house. This process of assemblage to disassemblage generates feelings and emotions of rejection of the place and of the recovered house, in a vital process of tiredness and imbalance between dynamic emotions and a new reality that becomes rigid and finally causes a feeling of disenchantment (mutual) with the place and with the rural house. The place is associated with routines, obligations, rules, duties and finally monotony. The pleasure of the hybrid experience of the recovery of the rural house has disappeared and the monotony of the (small) place appears with the same daily faces and the slow pace of social life. The lure of peace, security and tranquility turns into individual suffocation and the anti-rural idyll appears (Bell 1997).

The initial attractiveness of the known community takes on a negative dimension (Willians 2016). On the contrary, the anonymity and animation of urban life are longed for. The views of individual heritage can coexist in the same community, but they can also have a change of meaning in the vital experience of individuals (Paniagua 2019). This makes it possible to revisit the idea of new materiality based on life experience. The individual production of a new materiality incorporates a process of cultural production of popular icons and values. The experimental histories of disassemblage are produced in a multitude of different ways, with a notable disparity of elements and components (Deleuze 1994) and with different rhythms. The process concludes with the sale of the new house to another owner who inherits and reinvents the process but on the material basis of a rehabilitated rural house. The new people-materiality encounter has a variable rhythm but can be long, which causes a period of abandonment in the use of the house. There are localized and latent politics of resistance to the new materiality with disparity of elements (Deleuze 1994, Zielinska 2020). The new owner has to adapt to the rustic style of the previous experience. An old house is no longer acquired, a rehabilitated old house is acquired and the possibilities of the new human-materiality experience are reduced to conservation and use. The renewal process of the new materiality has a cumulative essence. Disjunctions and contradictions usually occur between different moments of (material) place construction (Harvey 1996). Multiple and parallel encounters in the rural house reproduce the binary relations urban-rural and material-immaterial. As Philo (2011) suggests, “the material geography of the street (...) is made by (...) the largely immaterial geography of the words...” (Philo 2011, p. 365).

The process of (dis)assemblage of the place and the renovated rural house has different phases that are described as a process: (1) Intimate hybrid human-material (artifact) relations. An initial phase of normalization in the place where the (new) owner settles or goes seasonally and an accommodation with the new materiality and with the place is produced (Cloke et al. 1995). (2) Break hybrid. A second phase where dominates the feeling of obligation for the permanence and the seasonal movement to the place and the obligations of maintenance of the renovated house. (3) Latent hybrid. Finally a third phase of progressive disengagement between human and new materiality that ends with abandonment and sale. “We just want to get back what we invested” or “we’re almost gone” are the words that summarize the end of the disengagement process that materializes in the sale of the new materiality and the beginning of a new cycle of enrichment “others” human and “new” materiality. Connections and divisions reproduce the experimental life of human-materiality relations (Herman 2015). The dis-encounters relationship would have a circular character in the form of unstable relations characterized by the encounter/assemblage or dis-encounter/dis-assemblage.

As explain Meehan and Rice: “Cases as sites: distinct socio-spatial places when relations between actors and objects, non humans and humans are continually made and remade in everyday encounters” (Meehan and Rice 2011, p. 65). In the case of politics of new materiality in peripheral environmentality, where vernacular cultures and fragile heritage ecologies coexist, natural and cultural heritage struggle to dominate an original vernacular and popular heritage. The cultural heritage is

usually ignored in favor of attention of natural landscape in marginal communities and places. Sustainable and unsustainable assemblages of heterogeneous materialities coincide in the rural environment (Murdoch 2006). Close urban-rural connections are reproduced in the rural house.

## **Methodology**

Some rural geographical literature suggests the need for local geographic-based studies, so that certain key human and non-human voices may be heard and narratives can be described (Elwood and Martin 2000, Crang 2003, Hoelcher 2011). Only intensive qualitative research, based on selected and representative cases, can adequately identify relationships of individuals and objects and artifacts (Cloke et al. 2006). This contribution use qualitative methods able to analyze key micro cases of study with a geo-ethnographical approach (Elwood and Martin 2000, Hoggart et al. 2002, Hay 2003, Crang 2007, Riley and Harvey 2007). With this methodological design, the research carried out is of a qualitative and geo-ethnographic type (Dunn 2003, Crang 2007, Cloke et al. 2000). The geo-ethnographical approach attempts from an experimental vision of the individual (Hay, 2003), to establish the process of encounter with the new materiality (rural house). Encounters are always relational (Leitner 2012). Consequently, it is accepted that encounters can generate a constellation of multiple identities, depending on the mutual interaction between self and other (a new materiality). As Leitner (2012) suggests narrations habitually present strong emotions associated with the complexities of fluid encounters in the contexts of socio-spatial positionality of individuals. The rural house expresses assemblages and dis- assemblages of life course.

As Hoggart et al. (2002) indicate the aim is to achieve a close encounter through intensive qualitative methodology. Ultimately, this is to establish and define the explanatory value of each case. The encounter has been used in the sphere of rural geography to analyze the micro experience of relations between humans and non-humans in the sphere of rural communities (Holloway, 2002). In the area of the geography of (rural) tourism, the micro-analysis of encounters has been used to understand the ways that morality mediates the touristic encounter with places (Mostafanezhad and Hannam 2014).

The methodology has consisted of contacting owners who sold their property through “idealista”, a real estate portal, between spring 2021 and spring 2022 and selecting the most significant cases of experimental histories in representative peripheral areas in the north of Caceres province, North of Guadalajara province, “Sierra Norte” of Madrid province or in the Southwest of Soria province (Figure 1). The representativeness of the case studies is due to the meaning as a variant of the case study according to the personal characteristics of the owners, the process of encounter-disagreement with the rural house, the location of the rural house and its history in the town and the sale process (Hoggart et al. 2002, Dunn 2003).

**Figure 1.** Study Cases (Left to Right): V. Plasencia, Caceres; Cancencia, Madrid; Medranda, Guadalajara; C. Henares, Guadalajara; P. S. Esteban, Soria; Atauta, Soria



Constructed from key cases, the stories attempt to exemplify various types of encounters. Six stories, conducted in a particular year, have been considered from a narrative and geo-ethnographical perspective. As Dunn (2003) explains research using case histories might typically involve 5 or 6 carefully-selected types. Geo-ethnographical studies do not attempt to be representative but to explore and discuss ideas for the academic progress of geographical studies through the study of cases. In some previous studies, this is achieved through the highly intensive analysis of contrasting the cases of only three farmers (Holloway 2002).

It is possible to speak of unstable circular processes of micro assemblages-disassemblages-assemblages-disassemblages..., with cumulative and consolidate effects in new materialities. In a village there would be a multiplicity of circles of dis and assemblages associated with a singular and particular heterogeneity of a locality.

### Study Cases: The Politics of (Dis)encounters

Cloke (2006) suggests that rural geography is at a crossroads between a return to the material (place) perspective or a continuation of the socio-cultural thinking. The relational encounters can contribute to rematerialize the analysis of rural spaces (Cloke 2006, p. 25). The hybrid relations can help revitalize human-non-human (material) encounters (Whatmore 2002). Less relevance has been granted in rural and human geography to the analysis and relevance of (dis) encounters and their

implications in the hybrid politics of (rural) places. Constructed and deconstructed spaces are expressed through successive encounters and dis-encounters. As suggest Harvey “places are constructed and experienced as material ecological artifacts” (Harvey 1996, p. 316).

Living in rural areas is an individual experience mainly associated with different socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of place (Woods 2011). International rural geography has progressively shifted towards micro-foci that are more concerned with providing new typological orientations on research than an overall representatively.

Type 1. One type is the family house that is rehabilitated to dedicate it to its own use or to a rural tourism business but that is sold due to family reasons or due to the inefficiency of the business activity. There would be two subtypes: the owners who reside in the town in another house and the owners who reside in an urban nucleus. The owners manage the sale of the house directly to maintain control in the disassemblage process.

Disassemblage 1. (January 2022). The Lanchuela in Villar of Plasencia on real street 18 (north of Cáceres), is a historic house dating from 1855 and recently restored, preserving the traditional architecture and the traditional wooden framework in order to dedicate it to a rural tourism business with a grant of CEDER Caparra. It is an old farmhouse with two floors, a patio, 5 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, 2 storage rooms and two living rooms. Its start-up process is due to the cessation of the business after the mandatory opening period for the collection of the public subsidy. The family resides in Madrid and they go very little to the town now due to the lack of attractiveness they see in the rural area. “Going up to town is an obligation”, in addition to the expenses of keeping the house open. The house is owned by the elderly mother and managed by the children who reside in Madrid. It has no mortgage charges and the sale is set at 130 thousand euros, little more than the real cost of rehabilitation.

Disassemblage 2. (February and July 2021). A renovated vernacular house in Canencia, a small village in the north of the province of Madrid. It is a rustic stone house rehabilitated for 10 years by the owners, after an inheritance adjudication process. There was a feeling of recovering the family heritage, the mother's house, the family home of all life, where the current owner spent her childhood. The owners live in another house in the same town and the son has decided to emigrate and live in an urban area, so they decide to put it up for sale as they do not need two houses in the same town and need to support the son financially. At the end of the rehabilitation of the house of 220 m<sup>2</sup> with two floors and under roof, with 4 bedrooms and a living room, they decide to sell it for 175 thousand euros. The house is not registered property which makes it difficult to sell. The charm lies in the experience of the rehabilitation process that lasted for 10 years and that has helped prevent the disappearance of the original family building.

Type 2. Another type of orientation is made up of those who came from outside and leave the place again. The sale is usually managed by local real estate agencies. There are two subtypes: upper new comers ex-urban class and lower new comers ex-urban class. There are examples in neighboring municipalities:

Disassemblage 3. (January 2022). The case of upper new middle class is in the main street of Medranda, a town located in the north of the province of Guadalajara. It is a traditional house of the rehabilitated area of 191 m<sup>2</sup>, with two floors with an attic and an upper terrace of more than 20 m<sup>2</sup>. The popular house is originally built in 1815. The owners are selling it due to poor use and disenchantment with the initial romanticism due to the rehabilitation of the house, which preserves stone elements characteristic of the area on the façade. It is sold for 90 thousand euros, a price with which it is simply intended to recover the amount invested in the new rural house, completely renovated inside with an urban taste and decoration.

Disassemblage 4. (January 2022). Low class new comers. It is a town house for sale in the town of Castilblanco de Henares, located on Mayor Street 11. This town is located in the north of the province of Cáceres. The house is sold for 37 thousand euros, a price that includes the cost of the reform. The house is distributed on two floors of 80 m<sup>2</sup> total, with two bathrooms. It is completely renovated and maintains a storage room-“fresquera” in the basement. It is a good example of popular architecture from Alcarria region. The rehabilitation was carried out to have a house in a town, but then there was a progressive disenchantment, and the need to recover the investment made: 'we need the money'. The town does not have any public services, not even a bar, and it was an obligation to go there.

Disassemblage 5. (March 2021). Upper class new comers. It is a rustic house in Piquera of San Esteban, a district of the municipality of San Esteban de Gormaz in the southwest of Soria, on Subida to the Iglesia street. It is a set of two houses representative of the traditional architecture of the area converted into two dwellings, a main one for the owners and a secondary one for the guests. The main house has an area of 245 m<sup>2</sup>, 3 bedrooms, and is being sold for 170,000 euros. It was rehabilitated in 2015, respecting the exterior structure of stone and adobe brick. The two-bedroom secondary home is sold for 98 thousand euros, with 151 m<sup>2</sup>, with a shared patio of 80 m<sup>2</sup>. They are sold separately due to the limited use that is granted to the houses. The owners reside in a high-level town in the Madrid metropolitan area (Majadahonda).

Disassemblage 6. (March 2021). Middle/low class newcomers. Popular house in Platerías street in Atauta, district of San Esteban de Gormaz in the south of Soria. The owner, who lives in Madrid, completely renovated it inside, maintaining the traditional exterior style, to have a quiet place to go with relationships, but then she hardly uses it: “it’s too lazy to go...”. It is sold in total for 100 thousand euros, practically the cost of the rehabilitation, with an area of 180 m<sup>2</sup>, distributed over two floors and 3 rooms. The interior rehabilitation maintains an urban style that contrasts with the rural exterior.

## **Conclusion**

It is possible to conceive of “space as a simultaneity of multiple trajectories” (Massey 2005, p. 61) dominated by the micro spatial politics of specificity. Understanding rural localities as hybrid assemblages (Woods 2011, p. 42) in a complex network of heterogeneous relations (Murdoch 1997) where constellations

of trajectories, encounters and histories (co)exist (Massey 2005). Encounters change in nature on a daily and mundane basis. In this perspective it is possible to place the process of experimental recovery of the new rural house. The politics of hybrid tensions in rural houses suggests a permanent becoming, where transgressive politics of new materiality in rural (external side) and urban (internal face) are situated. With a continuous exchange between immaterial to material. Different houses reflect different micro-tactics of resistance in fluid processes of exclusion and inclusion.

The experimental process of creating the new materiality can conclude with a permanent human-materiality hybridization process, but also with a dis-assemblage process driven by a differential subjectivity. Geographical studies have usually insisted more on assemblage processes than on disassemblage processes of recovered or restructured realities. It is also possible to situate this process in heterogeneous dynamic realities, which would have a cumulative character. Consequently, the processes of disassemblages would constitute expressions of an unstable hybrid reality where relations are in permanent negotiation. They would be particular or individual rearticulation processes in the context of plural hybrid rural communities.

The rural houses express old singularities and new singularities in the form of successive changes in the idea and functionality of artifacts (rural houses). The rural houses are hybrid entities that bring together materiality and spatial divisions (topographies) and new society(ies) and spatial relations (topology).

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