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# *"You Need to Come Here... to See What Living Is Really About". Staging North American Expatriation in Merida (Mexico)*

Eve Bantman-Masum

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## 1. Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement brought Canada, the United States, and Mexico closer than ever. Almost two decades later, the process of North American integration has also led to a closer relationship between the three American peoples.<sup>1</sup> While Mexicans continue to move up North, in search of a better life and more work opportunities, a growing number of both Canadian and U.S. citizens now choose to relocate South of the border. Part tourists, part residents, Canadians and Americans are resettling in Mexico to lead the good life—to spend less, afford more, and enjoy themselves. This article explores the way this mobility is staged among the Anglo expatriate community in Merida, capital city of the state of Yucatan, focusing on the discourse around buying and renovating local houses. This complex discourse is replicated in many genres—the expatriate autobiography, the expatriation handbook, the interior design coffee-table book—while the existence of beautiful and affordable houses in Mérida is promoted on local websites, videos, and during the Merida House and Garden Tour.
- <sup>2</sup> This work is based partly on fieldwork conducted in the Yucatan in 2010-11, and partly on a literature review of four related genres. The case study is prefaced with a discussion of tourism and expatriation in Mexico, leading to a review of autobiographies and expatriation handbooks designed to help newcomers relocate abroad, and more specifically in Mexico or Merida. From there, we will first look at how expatriates

perceive local houses, and then describe the local real estate market. The last part will be dedicated to the Merida House and Garden Tour, a weekly event hosted by the English Library in Merida (MELL) and simultaneously a community ritual during which representations of house renovation come alive. Both writings and tour provide a powerful incentive for an increasing number of foreigners—U.S. citizens and Canadians, as well as Mexican expatriates in the United States—to come and lead the good life down in the Yucatan.

## 2. Perspectives on tourism and expatriation

- 3 For at least a century, U.S. citizens have been establishing themselves south of the border, into Mexico, forming large expatriate groups in Mexico City, Guadalajara, Cuernavaca, San Miguel de Allende, Puerto Vallarta, Oaxaca, and recently, Cancun. Immigration to Mexico has steadily intensified over the last decade, leading to the formation of hundreds of other, smaller communities of both U.S. and Canadian citizens in Mexican towns of all sizes across the country. There have been surprisingly few studies on expatriation, and existing works have mostly focused on the numerous and growing retiree communities (Lizarraga Morales), and on North and Central Mexico (Bloom in San Miguel de Allende, Truly on Ajiic, Croucher on San Miguel and Ajiic).
- 4 Today, both the idea of expatriation and our understanding of the process are evolving very rapidly. In her recent essay on U.S. expatriation, Nancy Green charted this history over the last two centuries, insisting on the changing meaning of departure. Initially a synonym for nation-building, expatriation has been successively redefined as a form of immigration closely related to economic entrepreneurship, as a questionable, potentially unpatriotic, practice, and lastly as an expression of global mobility and privilege. Green's insights into U.S. expatriation are of course relevant here, particularly her review of the lasting influence of expatriation to Europe and her call for more studies on North-South migration (Green). Indeed, except for notable exceptions, expatriation is largely absent from academic literature on migration in North America. Conversely, and somewhat ironically, writings by expatriates continue to shape the expectations of readers tempted by relocation.
- 5 As far as Mexico is concerned, studies of expatriation must be traced back to scholarship on tourism, mostly published over the last decade. In spite of a well-established tradition of tourism studies, spearheaded by the *Annals of Tourism Research*, very few scholars had explored Mexico's tourism before the early 2000s (notable exceptions include Daniel Hiernaux, Pierre Van der Berghe, and Quetzil Castañeda). Thomas Clancy's *Exporting Paradise* (2001) was the first of a series of books to systematically describe and interpret the history of tourism in Mexico. In the following years, Dina Berger's *The Development of Mexico's Tourism* (2006) and Nicholas Bloom's *Adventures into Mexico* (2006), among others, signaled the emergence of a new academic interest for tourism. Close scrutiny revealed the highly heterogeneous nature of tourism, resulting in more specialized studies by geographers, historians, and anthropologists. The connection between tourism and expatriation was pointed by various authors, including Bloom, Truly, and later Croucher. Expatriation should be examined as the last step in a complex process of mobility that commonly encompasses a tourist experience in Mexico. Nowadays, a growing number of Anglo tourists to Merida are in fact looking for a house to buy.

- 6 Today's mass tourism and Anglo expatriation to Mexico— to be discussed next—must of course be viewed as consequences of globalization—particularly of crucial improvements in transportation and communication. IT and cheap travel fares have undoubtedly facilitated Anglo relocation to Mexico over the last decade (Croucher, chapter 2). As a consequence, an experience that was once restricted to a minority has presently become an option for millions of Americans. But even before the current hype around the idea of globalization, U.S. citizens had travelled and resettled in Mexico, often to become major players of local economic development. Lisa Pinley Covert's examination of tourism promotion in San Allende covers the long-term impact of U.S. presence in the town, pointing to the interactions between Mexican politicians and entrepreneurs, as well as foreign promoters (Pinley Covert). This applies to the Yucatan Peninsula, our case-study, where Anglos have resided for over a century, boosting development and simultaneously promoting tourism and expatriation.
- 7 In the Yucatan peninsula, the largest group of expatriates may be found in the state of Quintana Roo at Cancun, with satellite communities scattered along the Caribbean seaboard—including one in Merida which has its own U.S. Consular Office. In fact, the first expatriates to have settled in the Yucatan lived in Progreso and Merida, one of the richest cities in the world at the turn of the nineteenth century. At the time, the local economy—a variation on the classic Caribbean plantation system—was booming, with haciendas producing and exporting henequen. A century later, thousands of Anglo residents are living in Merida, and spilling into all the adjoining beach towns. There are remarkable differences between beach communities (often nicknamed "Paradise") and town communities like Merida, the Yucatecan capital, explored in this work, to which we will return shortly. Not all expatriates wish to live in "paradise", with many opting instead for cities, particularly cities with a colonial center. These days, Merida, the capital of the state of Yucatan is ranked as a top destination for retirees in Mexico, leading to the arrival of hundreds of foreign residents each year. Though the retiree rush to Mexico is not a primary focus here, senior citizens do account for an ever-larger proportion of the total, growing population of Anglo-American residents in the country. This expatriation boom may aptly be described as the local manifestation of a wider trend whereby elderly citizens leave post-industrial countries of the North to relocate in the South (Baumann).
- 8 Officially, Anglos account for less than 1% of the total population of Mexico, but the Mexican Census grossly underestimates their importance. Officials record less than a million foreigners residing in the country (Inegi). However, the US Embassy in Mexico reports "*one million American citizens resident in Mexico and over twelve million American citizens visiting Mexico for business or tourism each year*" (U.S. Embassy). According to the 2010 Census, the total population of Merida is 781,146, and the number of foreign residents 1667 (Inegi). Interestingly, part-time residents are not registered as residents by pollers, even if expatriates who are based in Mexico regularly return to their home country. Privately, expatriates mention far higher figures, talking of more than 10,000 U.S. residents living in Merida. The official figures undoubtedly dwarf the importance of large national groups: in addition to U.S. and Canadian nationals, the country has long hosted vast groups of Italian, French, and Latin American residents (chief among which the Guatemalans).
- 9 In the absence of reliable statistics, we must rely on empirical data as well as expatriate narratives to describe the composition of the expatriate community in Merida. With a population of several thousand souls, this heterogeneous community includes a majority

of Canadian and U.S. citizens, joined by numerous Europeans. While senior citizens comprise a sizeable proportion of the whole, they belong to different groups: long-term residents, long-term visitors (returning tourists), or newcomers who have decided to relocate temporarily or permanently in Merida. There is also a surprisingly large population of working-age Anglos, including many businessmen and women – a fact noted by long-term residents<sup>2</sup>. Diversity results in great variations in class: this is one of the issues that will indirectly be discussed in this article. Although we cannot provide an accurate picture of income and asset distribution among the community, we will examine expatriate perception of upward mobility related to buying and renovating a house in Merida. Houses bought by residents vary from modest to exclusive, a result of differences in taste as well as purchasing power. Some expatriates are extremely wealthy, by both U.S. and Mexican standards, while the majority is wealthy only in comparison to the average Mexican citizen of Merida. In addition, acquiring a house in Merida routinely implies refurbishing it, a costly operation beyond the means of many natives of Merida. But buying and renovating a house will also translate in upward mobility due to steady real estate appreciation.

- 10 While Mexicans have always welcomed foreigners (particularly political refugees), they do not consider their country to be a natural recipient of international migration. The expatriation boom could create bitter controversy over government preference for foreigners and pro-American policies worsening U.S. political, economic, and cultural influence in Mexico. Until recently, even tourism was controversial among nationalists who routinely compared it to an unacceptable form of Americanization. In fact, the poor statistics on expatriation may be traced back to political uneasiness about the extent of recent Anglo migration to Mexico, and its impact on real estate, urban renewal, income distribution, etc. However, we shall see that this vision of immigration is slowly changing among Mexicans who increasingly endorse Anglo migration to Mexico. In 2011, the Merida City Hall conducted a poll to learn more about the expatriates' needs and assets. A growing number of Mexicans are also working for U.S. and Canadian citizens as maids, gardeners, builders, lawyers, realtors, etc. Elite and popular perceptions of Anglo expatriation are undoubtedly changing.
- 11 Because expatriation is now popular among North Americans, publishers have released many handbooks for readers who are considering the move. Books on expatriation may be subdivided into different genres—the autobiographical expatriation narrative, the handbook on how to move into a specific country or city, and the guides on how to do business or retire somewhere are the most common ones. Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* is a modern classic. It was first published in 1989 but is now a global best-seller—7 million copies have been sold across the world—translated into 22 languages. Mayle's opus, followed by several sequels, described his first year in Southern France, his discovery of the local culture and the risky but rewarding experience of buying and renovating an old farm in the Lubéron. Indeed, this type of travel writing typically mixes technical information about moving to a specific country with cultural material—i.e. generalizations about the local people and praise for the culture. Contrary to the narratives published by famous artists of the past, expatriation narratives recount the experience of the common man, not the exceptional individual.
- 12 Because of the long history of migration to Mexico, U.S. citizens have long written about living South of the border. Artists and intellectuals who wrote recounted their experience rarely discussed houses at all rarely. Political exiles preoccupied with their fate developed

a more socially engaged view of the experience (Schreiber). One of the earliest examples of the type of expatriate narrative we are considering here was published in 1974. Jack Smith's *God and Mr. Gomez* is an autobiographical tale about buying a land plot and building a house near the beach in Mexico. The subgenre had since flourished—a variation on this model, *Gringos in Paradise*, was published in 2006 by a contributor to the American Association of Retired Persons (Golson).

- 13 The bulk of expatriate narratives was published after 1990, expounding on life in specific places. Readers tempted by expatriation may select destinations depending on their budget, needs, and aspirations. Favorite destinations for the wealthier set are located in Europe: France (Paris, the Dordogne, the Lubéron) or Italy (Rome, Tuscany). In the New World, Mexico is competing with other Central American countries, chief of which Panama. Books like Tony Cohan's *On Mexican Time: A New Life in San Miguel* (2001) clearly play a part in drawing Anglo Americans into deep Mexico. Unlike Smith and Golson who describe life on the beach ("paradise"), Cohan expounds on living in a beautiful colonial town. San Miguel de Allende features prominently in this literature, because it hosts one of the oldest and most famous Anglo expatriate community, and one that pioneered many strategies now reproduced in other Mexican cities. As intuited by Nicholas Bloom

The low cost of living and antique charm of these places ... make them destinations for growing numbers of American retirees. San Miguel de Allende's fifty years of American colonization makes the city a provocative urban premonition of what may happen elsewhere (Bloom, 191).

- 14 Indeed, there are now Anglo communities everywhere, replicating many features of the San Miguel de Allende model: development of expatriate clubs and institutions, real estate and hospitality boom, formation of a highly visible downtown "Gringo Gulch." But the reproduction of the San Miguel model across Mexico owes little to inevitability. Crucially, community expansion should be traced back to the existence of national and transnational social networks that allow and facilitate foreign mobility and minority entrepreneurship (Granovetter). Numerous groups and institutions operate at a national level, and are ready to help newcomers (Croucher, 35). Like many other towns, Merida possesses its own organizations and clubs, including several businesses specialized in expatriation-related services, from webzines to legal assistance firms or real estate agencies. This expatriate network is clearly driving the expatriate boom, promoting town and community, boosting house sales and the renovation business.
- 15 In addition to promotion originating in the network, handbooks on how to relocate are tapping into the profitable expatriate market. There are numerous such guides covering popular destinations, like the *Living Abroad* series which provides information on developed countries of the North (Italy, Spain, Japan, and France) as well as developing countries located for the most part in Central America: Costa Rica, Belize, and Mexico. *Living Abroad in Mexico* is but one example—several similar opuses have already been published, beginning in the late 1980s. All handbooks cover more or less the same topics: they give information about the country, its different regions, and important issues such as organizing the move, lodging and housing, education, and healthcare. Because Mexico is now a popular expatriation destination, candidates will also find books on specific cities. *Living in Merida*, first published in 2008, is the local guide. The first edition was written with the help of an Anglo resident in San Miguel de Allende (McCarthy & Kelley, 5), another example of networking and of the influence of San Miguel de Allende on other expatriate communities.

16 The Mexican expatriate network operates across cities and regions, covering the entire North American territory, and actively promotes the good life. Contrary to immigration, expatriation does not involve painful separation from the homeland. Book titles emphasize opportunities and well-being: *Live Better South of the Border*, *Leaving Easy in Mexico*, *Mexico: New Land of Opportunity*, *Tales of Retirement in Paradise*, all published after 1995, are recommended by *Living Abroad in Mexico*. Expatriation in Mexico is a specific form of immigration, from North to South, which is publicized and often experienced as a smart move. According to Sheila Croucher, author of the only general study on American expatriation to Mexico:

Americans ... are moving to Mexico in growing numbers. They cross the same geographic border as their Mexican counterparts, but are headed in the opposite direction and typically with access to a more advantageous array of economic, political, and cultural resources (Croucher, 2).

17 The situation of Anglo residents is therefore in sharp contrast to that of other immigrant and local groups. Even if there will always be exceptions, Americans and Canadians moving to Mexico clearly belong to the wealthy segment of the population in Mexico. In fact, they have moved to Mexico to lead the good life. Immigrants born in post-industrial countries of the West rarely join the ranks of working-class Mexicans; those who do work in Mexico tend to occupy high-paying, or at least enviable jobs. They tend to hire maids (there is a section on this aspect of expatriation in most handbooks, including *Choose Mexico for Retirement*, *Live Better South of the Border in Mexico*, and *Living in Merida*). As we shall see, crossing the border definitely feels like moving up the social ladder. Buying a beautiful, well-kept home in town acts a central pull factor for our Anglo expatriates.

### 3. The Mexican dream house and the market

18 Mexican houses take centre stage in this history of the good life down in Mexico primarily because they are comparatively cheaper than their U.S. or Canadian equivalents. Many of these houses are also special places: like San Miguel, Merida is a beautiful town, with a large colonial center and historic mansions built by Spanish colonists and nineteenth<sup>th</sup> century *latifundistas* and industrialists. The existence and availability of grand old homes is a central factor in luring North Americans into White City (one of Merida's most common nicknames). The town's outstanding architecture is an asset when examining the reasons why the city is now extremely popular with Anglo expatriates. Partly to satisfy lifestyle aspirations and partly due to favorable exchange rates, foreigners initiated a new trend, that of buying and renovating houses in the center of town. The trend soon resulted in a real estate boom, the classic corollary to the expatriate boom.

19 Before describing the actual houses, let us explain how the real estate market developed. The 1917 Mexican Constitution had banned foreign ownership of land in an effort to limit direct foreign investment, regain control of natural resources (most crucially oil), and reverse economic dependence on the United States. A first constitutional amendment known as the Foreign Investment Law was introduced in 1973: it allowed foreigners to purchase property anywhere in Mexico except in the restricted zone (50 miles from the coast and 64 miles from any border). But in the 1990s, after Nafta was signed but before it took effect, Mexican law was once again amended in significant ways, cancelling limits to foreign ownership of land. The 1994 amendment allowed foreigners to acquire property



through a bank trust (*fideicomiso*) in the restricted zone next to the coast, in places like Merida.

- 20 The reform triggered major changes in the local real estate market: by lifting the ban of foreign land ownership, the 1994 amendment opened a world of opportunities for foreign investors who could suddenly buy property everywhere in Mexico. Over the last 17 years, Mexico's real estate has become increasingly integrated into the wider North American market: cheap property attracted potential clients and professional realtors. These new foreign players drove prices up, creating a real estate boom that opened opportunities for brokers willing to help Northern investors. Suddenly, millions of Dollars were poured into dormant towns, transforming them into hubs for both Northern capital and immigrants. Nowadays, a significant proportion—the majority?—of foreign residents who do work are active catering to tourist or expatriate demand: they advertize, sell, or renovate houses; they provide information to visitors; they run businesses to meet foreign demand for special products or services (from legal assistance to yoga classes).
- 21 To be sure, many houses in and around Merida are astounding by U.S. and Canadian standards because they are unique, not jerry-built. They are routinely classified by type (the hacienda, the colonial mansion, old or recent houses), renovation style (restoration, modernization, complete reconstruction), location (in the historical center, in the modern parts of town, outside Merida), or use (retirement or relocation house). The hacienda—former master house at a plantation—is clearly the most expensive kind, while colonial mansions located in the historical center are both prestigious and in high demand. The hype around local houses has brought new goods into this real estate circuit, including more modest homes, and even ruins, both in and around the historical center. Historic, modest, as well as dilapidated houses often require substantial, hefty renovation or reconstruction work. Mexican houses sold by Mexicans to foreigners often require drastic revamping to accommodate their new owners.
- 22 Descriptions of houses abound in expatriate narratives, handbooks, city guides, as well as local websites, most importantly *Yucatan Today* and *Yucatan Living* (both were created by Anglo expatriates in Merida). *Yucatan Today* was founded in 1988 to cater to tourists, while *Yucatan Living*, founded in 2005, serves the expatriate community. Descriptions of colonial homes will typically praise building materials, solidness, stylishness, and comfort:
- The colonial homes in the historic center of Mérida combine European elements—the carved doors and high ceilings of Spain, for example—with the fine craftsmanship of Mexican artisans in tile, wood, and wrought-iron work. (*Yucatan Today*)
- 23 Colonials will make luxurious homes to many residents from the United States accustomed to living in new rather than old houses. Colonials will usually be composed of several areas: the house proper (living room, dining room, bed-rooms, bathrooms, and kitchen) and the garden and pool area. Descriptions published on *Yucatan Today*, *Yucatan Living* and other websites will typically introduce readers to strikingly luxurious houses. At a subtler level, they are also suggesting what it feels like to live in such a house:
- Enclosed gardens and inner courtyards not only give privacy and muffle street noise, they bring the outdoors inside, creating a sense of lushness and tranquility. Fountains, fish ponds, and swimming pools add a water element, creating a cool and peaceful environment (op.cit.).



- 24 Buyers often recall buying their Merida homes on impulse, just like Jack Smith and Barry Golson before them. But the abundance of information about local real estate and house renovation must surely have some influence on buyer behavior. Websites about local homes help readers make a better decision: handbooks and local websites guide readers in choosing and renovating a house that will meet their budget and aspirations. In the following excerpt, from a *Yucatan Living* article entitled *Houses of Merida Video: The Good Life*, notice how the writer combines description of architecture and interior design with more subjective information about Anglo lifestyle in Merida:

When you walk into this house, though, it is almost as if the house flings open its architectural arms in exuberance, inviting you to revel in all the space that it has to offer and you have to enjoy. This coral-colored room is quite large ... large enough to hold string quartets and audiences of 100 comfortably. Though unplanned, this room has wonderful acoustics and has been the site of more than a few musical events since it was built. (Yucatan Living)

- 25 Articles like this one encourage readers, who may already be thinking about buying a local house, to identify with the owners of this house. As we shall see, the writer's continuously describes the house as it is and as it feels: some of the description is factual but most of it is a projection. The reader's imagination travels freely from reality to dream life. Buying and renovating a house is about picturing oneself in a better, ideal place, a central motivation for expatriates who are, after all, leaving their former lives behind. In addition, the renovation and remodeling process will also be experienced as a creative experience. Interior decoration typically incorporates local elements as well as foreign features. Note how the description stresses the greatness of the house. Frequently, house renovation will be used to make a statement about class:

The elegant floor tiles from Mosaicos Peninsular (very Versace-esque!), the white-lined arches that march down each side and the beautiful flower arrangements add to the grandeur that is this Great Room. (op.cit.)

- 26 This renovated house is inspired by both tradition and global trends in interior design. The end product is a grand home that seems destined to host prestigious guests and events. Colonial homes may actually be very similar to modern houses; many are large, fully-equipped homes with a front and back part separated by a central pool/garden area. Sophisticated electrical appliances, pools, fashionable furniture, and art are generally absent from middle-class Mexican households. Such renovation process therefore transforms classic Merida homes into luxurious places, turning houses into symbols of upward mobility. In the process, many expatriates are also transformed into real estate and renovation experts, just like the writer of this short piece:

Beyond that, away from the house, is a large open-air swimming pool with plenty of places to sit in the sun (...). This garden has shade under an open-air poolhouse with a red-tile roof, with seating for lounging and dining and enjoying the view. (op.cit.)

- 27 This description is tailored to help readers picture themselves living in the house. The writer suggests that the living is easy in a house that seems destined to entertain guests or simply relax to contemplate its beauty. Mentions of the good life abound in expatriate narratives that elaborate on the virtues of relocating abroad. The renovated home symbolizes a new way of life, promoted in expatriate narratives, handbooks, web magazines, as well as interior design volumes. The local houses are systematically presented as dream houses and act as mesmerizing representations of what life could be like in Mexico: expatriation is repeatedly depicted as a pleasurable experience of exclusive home comfort. Simultaneously, buying and renovating houses is not just about

lifestyle: it is an experience in upward mobility, partly as a result of the real estate boom. Compiling information provided by handbook writers about houses, it becomes apparent that buying and renovating a house in Merida is good business too. Between 2004 and 2008, the price for a small colonial house—described by *Living Abroad in Mexico* as “a small two-bedroom, two-bathroom house with a big sala (living room), dining room, kitchen, and a small garden area, in the heart of the historic center ” jumped from \$ 12,500 to \$ 60,000 (Luboff, 159-160; Merida Verde, 76).

- 28 Discussions about the value of real estate abound in the literature on expatriation. A potential buyer may get a fairly good idea of the market by reading these accounts and updating them with regular visits to specialized websites. Upon arriving in Merida for the first time, many buyers are already familiar with the local house scene. In Merida, they will be able to gain access to even more specific information, such as the very accurate descriptions of specific neighborhoods in the local expatriate handbook, *Living in Merida*. All writers insist on the fact that foreign buyers are making a good deal. This cannot be discarded as mere business: expatriates working in real estate are making a living out of it but they are also genuinely trying to help. Because houses are cheap by American standards, those who can afford to buy a house in Merida will get a lot in return for their Dollars. Access to local property is therefore a key step in the expatriation process as a form of upward mobility. When local experts signal that the local house market is rapidly internationalizing and adjusting to North American standards, they are registering the impact of expatriation on real estate. Quoting prices for the second edition of *Living in Merida*, the writer is careful neither to encourage nor discourage readers:

Renting and leasing are very reasonable in Mérida compared to other desirable cities and town. ... The rental and leasing scene in Mérida is so attractive that some expats never do get around to buying, although, with an 8-15% per year appreciation of real estate values over the last ten years, renters might do well to consider a purchase if that works for them. (Merida Verde, 75-6).

- 29 The figures are also very misleading: house values have tended to stagnate in recent years, because of the subprime crisis but also because most buyers favor the cheaper houses to be renovated rather than the grand remodeled expatriate homes. Prices for renovated homes mentioned by Luboff and the 2011 edition of *Living in Merida* are strikingly similar, at about \$ 350, 000 (Mérida Verde, 26). However, most expatriates seem to favor affordable houses because they will have to survive on limited income when they move to Merida. To expatriates, the real estate boom is both an asset—as houses become more valuable, owners become wealthier—and a liability. As prices wax, chances of living comfortably in Merida wane. The renovation process, though tedious, is a necessary step in the path to upward mobility. The people who bought colonials for \$ 15,000 and sold them for \$ 300,000 clearly moved up the social ladder. At the same time, owners of renovated houses will also transition from one social group to the next because they will get more out of life in a beautiful colonial house maintained by housekeepers paid on average \$ 50 a week. In the eyes of expatriates, acquiring a house is now intricately linked to a second process—that of upward mobility.

## 4. Showcasing the community, re-inventing the American dream

- 30 One house that was indeed a bargain is that which now hosts the English Library in Merida (MELL). The story of this specific building captured the visitors' attention on Wednesday March 16th, 2011 for one of the last House and Garden Tours of the season. The event is a unique occasion to stage house renovation and promote the expatriate lifestyle as a symbol of both upward mobility and community values. MELL has been running the weekly tour from October to March (high season) for over a decade. Visitors must pay \$ 200 MEX (about \$ 20 USD) to attend, and the fee provides funding for the Library, the most important community institution. The tour typically brings together expatriates, part-time residents, returning tourists, potential retirees, as well as first-time visitors. It is a fascinating moment, an occasion to showcase the community and its values for both insiders and outsiders to contemplate. Houses are embodiments of the expatriate dream life in Merida, and are staged as such during house visits like the House and Garden Tour, as well as virtual visits of houses available online.
- 31 On 16 March 2011, the tour opened with a short history of Mérida, its architectural tradition and heritage, and the story behind the Library. The house was bought for \$ 8,000 and donated by the owner (a single North American lady who had retired in Merida) to the Library upon her death. The anecdote had the crowd whooping with glee at the low sum paid to acquire the house, but the tour leader, a local real estate agent and interior designer, had clearly anticipated the reaction and added that prices are now much higher and that this modern construction could not be counted to be very valuable anyway. The real value of the building lies elsewhere—MELL is a rallying point for the expatriate community. In the past, before the rush to Mexico, it was the only meeting place for expatriates, and provided many crucial services to them, making books in English accessible to all, helping newcomers connect with other foreign residents, and organizing events that the entire community could attend. Today, the Library continues to welcome new residents but is also actively publicizing the achievements of the local expatriate community, best epitomized by the house restoration activity.
- 32 This House and Garden Tour consists of a guided walk around several recently renovated houses (three houses on 16 March 2011—all owners were Anglo Americans). Interestingly, a grander house tour had been organized the weekend before by Merida Verde, the charity that publishes *Living in Merida*. On March 16th, the visit always began with a short presentation by the tour leader who described the original condition of the house before it was renovated, situating the type of remodeling operated by the owner (colonial restoration, a mixture of old and new, modernization, complete makeover, etc). Owners were present to welcome visitors and answer questions about the renovation. They had left pictures of the house on tables for visitors to visualize the change: in the last house, they showed blocks of concrete and mud, slowly forming into walls and floors, and miraculously becoming a house. These grim photographs were displayed on the fashionable concrete kitchen table of a grand modern, with ceiling reaching 10-15 meters high. Lines of visitors formed around these testimonies to the resilience of expatriates who struggled to make their dream villa come true. The crowd stared at the pictures and then at the house around them, discussed the works, and marveled at the result. Many

participants, hoping to buy a house soon, also talked to the owners and tour guides about how to proceed with renovation.

- 33 During the tour, participants were allowed to wander around the house for twenty minutes, forming lines to visit the terrace, taking pictures of different rooms. They sat on sofas, exchanging views with other visitors but also rehearsing for the life they might soon be leading. Comments tended to focus on hard work, style, and wealth. The scene was repeated in the two other houses. Visitors treated owners with deference, acknowledging their taste, sound sense of profit, and insightful understanding of life. Very few Mexicans (a couple with their teenage son) attended on March 16th, and almost all visitors (35 in total) were English speakers. Since most of them were approaching retirement age, including many toying with the idea of buying a house in Merida, the Tour also served as an introduction to the local real estate market. Information about prices and costs was logically part of the exchange. The fact that expatriates profit from the real estate boom was not kept secret: the tour leader willingly acknowledged that a lot of expats including himself make a living out of buying, renovating, and selling restored houses. One of the houses was actually his. Tourees therefore gained access to experts who might in the future help them with practical issues (buying a house, planning a renovation, finding contractors, etc).
- 34 But even as the Merida House and Garden Tour connects potential buyers to real estate professionals, it serves another vital function—capturing the imagination of all visitors who experience, for the duration of the tour, the sweetness of life in a Merida home. Moving to Merida and acquiring a beautiful colonial house is a defining moment in the lives of community members because it allows them to reconnect with long-lost values. The value of renovated houses lies not only in the money that can be extracted from them but, more importantly, in a community ethos—similar to the Protestant Work Ethic—which glorifies hard work, entrepreneurship, genius, and private property. The Tour stages the ethos of the expatriate community in Merida, whose members take pride in having superior values—love for local culture and a great sense of hospitality. The members are welcoming, willing to share their experience in how to lead the good life. Frankness and kindness are essential features of the house tour narrative, which provides an occasion to define and display the values of the local expatriate community. Implication in hospitality and charity often go together: after all, Merida House and Garden Tours both showcase the homes of members of a prosperous community and provide money to non-profit organizations staffed by a majority of expatriates.
- 35 The renovated house is not just a real estate product, but also a home, and as such, a vehicle for the American Dream. In Merida, families will be able to afford a beautiful mansion with rooms for the kids, a garden for the dog, and parking for the car. Commodities will be cheap and neighbors will soon become friends. The value of houses is therefore both economic and symbolic. To many, the city of Merida stands as an alternative to urban sprawl and the grim reality of the real estate market in the United States. Sprawl—characterized by the absence of a center where citizens can live, interact, work and shop—has become the negative symbol marking the decline of American values. To many, it acts as the antithesis to the American Dream (Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck). In the historical center of Merida, expatriates live next to neighbors, shops, monuments, public buildings, and parks. Overall, this makes their lives fuller: residents stress that the people of Merida felt like family to them now<sup>3</sup>, praising the thoughtfulness of strangers they had missed in the United States<sup>4</sup>.

36 Because it is deeply meaningful, the Tour is a particularly pleasing, mesmerizing experience for both insiders and on-lookers, one that is often replicated virtually online. Films introducing renovated houses may be found on the websites of *Yucatan Today* and *Yucatan Living*, and on *in the Yucatan* which produces videos about houses, real estate, and realtors. All sites feature house tours as well as real estate videos, two separate but closely related genres: while houses are goods to be traded, homes are synonymous with values and lifestyles. Altogether, videos and house tours (whether commercial or cultural) illustrate the complex meaning of house renovation as both an increasingly popular path to upward mobility and a vehicle for community values. That the value of Merida houses is both economic and sentimental is obvious in the language used to describe them in the numerous articles and videos posted by expatriates on local websites. Many English-speaking realtors in Merida are now copying this powerful discourse on houses and playing on Anglo nostalgia for the old days now miraculously returned. In the words of Jim Mann, a real estate agent who moved to White City ten years ago: "You need to come here. You need to see. You need to feel. You need to experience Yucatan, to see what living is really about" (Briehl). One need not even mention houses, because references to lifestyles and community values suffice. Over time, the narrative around houses has become self-explanatory.

37 Sales pitches now typically encompass more than one realm: descriptions of houses will refer to the solidness of colonial architecture, to the house as a combination of tradition and modern comfort (justifying the added value brought by the renovation, and praising the creative re-use). To expatriates, houses mean more than just than money: they stand for a loftier ideal, a transformative experience that allows them to reconnect with long-lost values. Part business, part lifestyle, the hype around buying and remodeling houses is also about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. To many North Americans, moving to Mexico is more appealing than staying in the United States or Canada where many have found they can no longer afford to live well, a recurrent idea in the literature about renovating Mexican houses. Collectively, the expatriate community is therefore doing more than just a profitable real estate operation: they are salvaging heritage, not just for the United States but also for Mexico. Again, from Jim Mann's commercial:

One of the wonderful things here is the wonderful architecture, the beautiful old houses here. So many had fallen to disarray. So many foreigners—and Americans especially—have looked at magazines, dreamed of owning one of these old colonial homes and been able to live the lifestyle of a day gone by, a golden day (sic). (op.cit.)

38 Interestingly, the house renovation movement has attracted a lot of praise from both insiders and outsiders—architects and interior decorators, as well as visitors. Articles on renovated houses in *Yucatan Living* systematically elicit comments from Mexican readers living in Merida, elsewhere in Mexico and abroad, complimenting foreign expatriates who have understood the greatness of Mexico. The following comments were posted in response to the article for the renovated colonial house described earlier:

"Jose ..." said on July 11th 2010: "Thanks for showing what many expatriates are doing and contributing to beautify this unique and magnificent city of Merida. (...) There is a significant number of newcomers from the United States and Canada and other parts of the world who live in less ostentatious surroundings with an equal, or perhaps better, quality of life compared to what they left behind. Merida happens to be a "Mexican Metropolis" proudly endowed with world class facilities to make life less stressful and comfortable for all of us who consider ourselves very lucky to live here.

"Alex ..."said on July 26th 2010:

"I am a Mexican citizen that is looking forward to return to his country. I don't have a lot of money but I would like to know how much do you think I would need to buy and remodel a 2 bedroom house in Merida. (...) I love the houses if merida (sic) segment of your website, thank you for all your beautiful work." (Yucatan Living)

- 39 Both readers thank the editors for showcasing the houses as well as renovators who have restored the colonial houses and revealed the existence of outstanding architectural heritage to the world. The two comments also illustrate in very different ways the global dimension of restoration. Rather dramatically, Jose talks of a "Mexican Metropolis" in highly patriotic language which includes, rather than excludes, expatriates who have propelled Mérida to world class status. Simultaneously, he has integrated the idea that for many foreigners, moving to Merida means moving upward. Equally significant, Alex's post signals an interesting inversion: Mexicans now consult foreigners to learn more about Merida. The discourse on House Renovation reveals complex evolutions in Mexican nationalism: expatriates act as Mexican nationalists when they renovate local houses and showcase local architectural heritage; as a consequence, they are regarded as patriots by Mexican nationalists like Jose.
- 40 An interesting example of how expatriates become model citizens in Mexico may be found in Joanna van de Gracht de Rosado's *Magic Made in Mexico*. This expatriate autobiography was published by a Canadian resident who moved to Merida in 1976. She describes herself as equally Yucatecan and Canadian, and exhibits great pride in the local culture. As a long-term foreign resident, she was obviously struck by changing patterns of immigration into Merida and her book includes bittersweet remarks on the recent expatriation boom: newcomers tend to be retirees, whose goal is not necessarily to become full-fledged Yucatecans, nor even to become part of Mexican society at all. While she seems to disapprove of this, she interprets the new interest in houses as a sign of understanding and appreciation of the local culture—a positive contribution to Merida:
- Initially, most new foreign residents struggle with the language, but after a period of time, they find they have learned enough "to get by". Others go pass that point and take classes to further improve their Spanish. Many buy crumbling older houses and tastefully restore them, enriching our city (Van der Gracht, 102-4).
- 41 Positive accounts of house renovation abound, and our last example will further illustrate the relationship between house restoration and upward mobility. Praise for North American renovators may be found in interior design books devoted to local houses, particularly the landmark opuses published by Merida experts Joey E. Carr (writer) and Karen Witynsky (photographer): *The New Hacienda* (1999), *Casa Yucatan* (2002), and *Hacienda Style* (2007)<sup>5</sup>. Similar books have been published on many types of dream houses: in this field, Mexican houses are competing with equivalents in the South in Morocco, Cuba, Argentina, etc. Books like these, published in English, tend to essentialize local styles for foreign rather than local readers. They also feature houses that more often than not belong to foreigners—here prominent members of the expatriate community. These books typically contain glamorous, colorful, full-page pictures of outstanding mansions as well as comments on the art of discovering, renovating, and decorating houses in the Yucatan. The authors systematically praise owners, individuals who glimpsed greatness where others saw nothing but ruins. Because the following excerpt deals with hacienda renovation, the owners may be said to belong to the wealthy segment of the population.



The author's commentary elaborates on the connections at work between the local and global spheres:

The overall heightened interest in architectural preservation and adaptive reuse has fueled Mexico's burgeoning restoration movement in the last decade, catapulting restored haciendas and colonial homes into the international spotlight with their new extended lives as luxury hotels and unique homes. Nationals and foreigners alike are rescuing and reviving Mexico's architectural treasures, and sparking design inspiration throughout the world (Carr and Witynsky, 2007, 16).

- 42 These books are not just about great houses, but also—strikingly—about superior lifestyles and owners. The renovators' ability to identify artifacts of exceptional origin and outstanding value has earned them a place among a cosmopolitan elite of aesthetes. In a masterful act of upward mobility, renovators now stand on a par with members of a local, even global elite of prestigious home lovers and owners. This way, the discourse on houses and renovation becomes a variation of the wider discourse on expatriation as a form of privilege analyzed by Nancy Green. This version of the house narrative systematically stages houses of self-evident beauty in deep, contrasting colors: brick-red restored walls set against lush green landscape gardens sitting next to the turquoise, tranquil water of a pool to lounge by. To readers, Merida houses stand as promises of a dream life in retirement, semi-retirement, part-time residency, or merely during a relaxing holiday. To residents, the glossy surface also reflects the growing importance of a respectable, well-integrated expatriate community.

## 5. Concluding remarks

- 43 Buying and renovating a house is only a step—albeit a crucial step—in budgeting the move away from life on a limited income in the United States and Canada. The hype around buying and remodeling houses in Merida signals the existence of a vast community of Anglo expatriates. This community is driving the local real estate boom, with foreign residents active as buyers, sellers, realtors, and renovators. Beyond mere economics, interest in Merida homes is deeply related to respect for tradition, both local and foreign. Colonial mansions capture the imagination of North Americans, indicating not just wealth, but the possibility of it for those smart enough to work for it. At a symbolic level, renovating a house is a sign of genius, an occasion to display many forms of capital (social, cultural and economic) and intelligence in realizing the intrinsic value of local real estate. For all of these reasons, the owner will naturally move upward, and in a gesture of democratic spirit, will show the way to others. Renovating houses in shambles is also a very meaningful contribution to the Mexican majority in Merida: it shows respect for tradition and understanding of the value of local heritage; it also participates to the regeneration of Merida, a local manifestation of a wider trend for urban renovation and gentrification that is transforming decaying urban centers worldwide. For all these reasons, expatriate passion for buying and remodeling local houses has elicited praise from local Yucatecans, proud to live in a safe and prosperous city.
- 44 With instability now a permanent feature of the economy in the West, a growing proportion of middle class Americans are less frightened by expatriation. While retirees have attracted more attention than others, many working-age citizens are also leaving the United States and Canada. Economic slump in the United States has resulted in growth for expatriate communities in Merida, throughout Mexico, as far as Panama, and



beyond. Expatriates have felt both the negative and positive impact of globalization, and so have Mexicans. Alongside tourism, expatriation is booming in the Yucatan, burgeoning resident communities of foreigners are translating into economic opportunities for Mexicans too. Clearly, not every Mexican is in a position to benefit from the presence of high-spending Gringos: housing costs are shooting up and cheap local businesses have been forced out of *Centro Historico* for the same reasons. But the expatriate community is truly pumping money into Mérida. Even if it is fostering tensions, the Gringo Gulch is also easing them, allowing Mexicans to benefit from North American prosperity without having to cross the border. To a certain extent, North American immigration to the Yucatan can therefore be viewed as a mutually beneficial development in the protracted history of U.S.-Mexico relations.

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## NOTES

1. For lack of adequate terms, we shall be referring to U.S. and Canadian residents/expatriates as Americans, North Americans, or Anglos. There is no English equivalent for the more specific Mexican terms *estadounidense* and *gringo*.
2. Long-term resident with a Yucatecan husband, interview with author, Mérida, March 2011.
3. Long-term working-age resident, phone interview with author, April 2011
4. Retiree living in Merida for 5 years, interview with author, March 2011
5. While we have focused on colonial houses in the center of town, the above-mentioned books dwell on the more prestigious hacienda buildings, except for *Casa Yucatan*.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article explores discourses of expatriation in Merida (Mexico) developed in autobiographies, handbooks for expatriates, local house tours, websites and videos, as well as interior design books. In the city of Merida (Mexico), buying and remodeling a colonial home has become a central theme in expatriation narratives. North American expatriates have become house renovation experts and are fueling a local real estate boom. But for U.S. and Canadian residents, the houses of Mérida also embody lofty community ideals—upward mobility, the American Dream, the Protestant Work Ethic, and even nationalist pride.

Cet article analyse le discours de la communauté nord-américaine de Mérida (Mexique) tel qu'il est développé dans les récits autobiographiques, guides pour expatriés, visites guidées, sites internet, vidéos, et livres de décoration. L'achat et la rénovation de maisons est désormais un thème central des récits d'expatriés qui sont devenus des experts de la rénovation de belles maisons. Cette activité alimente la croissance et le dynamisme du marché immobilier en Amérique du Nord, mais par-delà leur valeur marchande, les maisons de Mérida permettent de définir les idéaux de cette communauté : la possibilité de l'ascension sociale, le Rêve Américain, le respect de la tradition et le goût du travail, jusqu'au sentiment nationaliste.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** expatriation, immigration, Mexique, Amérique du Nord, spéculation immobilière, communauté

**Keywords:** Mexico, North America, real estate, community

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