



Aalborg Universitet

AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

Second homes in a Mexican town - Made in the US

Balslev, Helene

Publication date:
2014

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Balslev Clausen, H. (2014). Second homes in a Mexican town - Made in the US: Tourism, citizenship and transnationalism. Paper presented at New Perspectives on Second Homes, Sweden.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- ? Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- ? You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- ? You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Second homes in a Mexican town - *Made in the US*

Tourism, citizenship and transnationalism

Helene Balslev Clausen, PhD

Tourism Research Unit, Copenhagen

Aalborg University, Denmark

balslev@cgs.aau.dk

Introduction

We are in Mexico in a town in the Northern part of Mexico with a huge flow of tourists mainly due to the town's historic colonial style city center, cultural events and a transnational North American community that live half the year in this Mexican town. They are second homeowners and spent from October to March/April in this town.

This paper seeks to examine the way the transnational group of North Americans frame their active involvement through everyday practices and discourses in order to gain influence in the construction of space (the town) – particularly I will analyse how transnational dynamics/processes provide this group of second home owners with partial rights to impact substantially the tourism development and the social politics in the community. I seek to capture the complexity of citizenship through the proposition that citizenship is partly produced by the practices of the excluded; this opens up for the terrain for rights to non-formalized actors which in multiple ways performs changes in the formal and informal relationship between the national state and the citizen and through which we can understand the strains and contradictions in nation-state membership.

Their practices provide them with a platform of power and resources from which they are able to negotiate and this give terrain for acknowledging formal and informal practices (e.g. Levitt 2001; Glick-Schiller 2002; 2004) and opens for geography of politics that destabilizes formal meanings of the citizen. Even though the second home owners are not fully recognized as such, they can nonetheless function as

bearers of partial rights. Then, the difference between having and not having citizenship is becoming blurred as entitlements are increasingly challenged by claims beyond the nation-state. This leads to I argue that the North American second homeowners destabilize the formal meanings of citizenship.

As this case study illustrates second home owners' from the North going to the Global South cannot be seen only in a local context and even less when it is two countries (Mexico/US) that have such a long and rich tradition with each other.

The Setting, Álamos

I will invite you to a stroll in the ethnographic setting that is located in the state of Sonora in northern Mexico, 350 kilometers from Hermosillo, the state capital, and 50 kilometers from the largest population center in the region.

The North Americans live from October to March/April in the town in their second homes. It is families with their kids attending the public school, couples with older kids that attend college in the US and retirees. This community consists of 360 persons and the town counts approximately 12000 inhabitants.

Álamos is notable for having a historic city center with colonial houses, cobblestone streets, framed by bougainvilleas and other decorative plants, all painstakingly maintained, and entirely clean. Many of the doors stand ajar or their upper half is kept open, so that it is possible to see the lush gardens sheltered inside. The town is surrounded by verdant mountains, and also famous for its picturesque landscapes. The houses in the historic center are. In the historic city center are a mission-period church and a small central plaza.

Álamos has gained regional and national recognition for the cultural music festival, Dr. Ortiz de Tirado, but also for several events held annually, including film screenings and painting and photography exhibits. Having this set of artistic events, which surpasses what other similar-sized towns in the region offer, is extremely important for tourism in Álamos.

The North American second homeowners live in the area described above. Nevertheless, not all of Álamos looks like that section.

Walking from the city center toward the Alameda, we come to an old riverbed that is dry throughout most of the year. On the weekends, there is a *tianguis* (an open-air market) here. In this area, the difference between the houses that we left behind and those that are located along the river is quite stark. The buildings are much more modest than are those in the center. They do not have a uniform style, but most can be described as cubes or rectangles superposed one on the other. For the most part, the doors are made of metal, as are the windows. Rather than being a matter of taste, the use of this material is driven by the need for security. Assorted materials have been used in building these homes; some even seem to be only half-finished. The streets are not cobbled nor are they paved. In short, this part of el Álamos looks a lot like many other neighborhoods throughout Mexico.

This description is important due to the tourism development in the town as it is only in the North American part of town that tourists spent time. The eco-park, the bird watching and hotels, restaurants, guided tours all take place in this part.

Methods

I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews and ethnographic participant observations in Álamos supplemented with supporting data from other sources beyond the town. I collected materials, including historical documentation, official statistics, and cultural programs at the municipal, state, and federal levels. Fieldwork for this study was conducted during 2013, however, I have done fieldwork regularly in the region during the last nine years. Furthermore I participated in and observed several meetings at a regional and national level and conducted interviews with key persons both within the governments, institutions and NGOs related to the Pueblos Mágicos Program or the tourism sector. Also, I actively participated in daily life and in events, in order to observe non-verbal attitudes that people might not normally talk about, such as, family structures, relationships between friends, and social distinctions, which in this case provides important insights to understand the conflicts in the community. The qualitative interviews were conducted with a total of 36 households, and focused on tracing people's actions and interactions in relation to tourism activities since its

initiation, and exploring their rationales and perceptions.

Mobilities to Álamos

Two main migratory flows from the North America to Álamos occurred during the twentieth century. A principal difference between the two was the interest that the second wave has shown for getting involved in the socio-cultural life of the community. The first North Americans with visions regarding tourism arrived to the town in the 1950s and visited Álamos only to relax and enjoy the environment. He bought several more or less destroyed colonial style houses and started to sell to North Americans visiting him using his transnational networks to establish his real estate and tourism agency.

However, not until the second flow of second home owners in the 90s that the North American community strengthen their presence as to influence in the political scene in the Mexican town because this flow seek to fulfill certain dreams about the “authentic” Mexico, and also showed a keen interest in supporting development in the Mexican community itself (Clausen 2008a). This flow constitutes the most recent migratory flow, and it seems that these inflows are not going to end. Indeed, this is not the only place in Mexico where this same category of immigrant is present¹ (Clausen 2008).

This group has founded four non-profit organizations to solve local social needs and problems that actually lie within the local government’s responsibilities. The North American organizations created in Álamos have mechanisms that monitor their internal operations and the fulfillment of the groups’ objectives. Additionally, these institutions precisely define the recipients of their aid.

Two of the charity organizations are providing financial support to single mothers and poor families with school seeking kids; others are providing shelters to homeless dogs and conserve an eco-park in the outskirts of the town. Most of the North Americans living in Álamos spend at least a part of their time working on with activities related to these transnational non-profit organizations benefitting the marginalized Mexicans

¹ Groups of North Americans have established communities in various cities in states like Yucatán, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Sonora, and Sinaloa.

in the town. A lot of the tourists (Americans) in Álamos donate money to these organizations and the guided tours in town are only using voluntary guides (they are North Americans – and one of the ways to collect money to the non-profit organizations).

The explicit objective for these transnational organizations is to solve social problems and to create wellbeing of everyone. However, the decision by this group to create charity organizations has to be placed within the cultural context of North America, where the formation of charity and nonprofit organizations is a cultural tradition, just as is volunteerism.² By saying this, I am only trying to point out that this is not a matter of an isolated effort by a particular group but rather it is part of an institutionalized practice (Clausen 2008).

The work of the North American group is perceived as responsible and rational, within the framework accepted in Western world. In the environment in which the North American nonprofit organizations operate, one of the most important organizations is, without a doubt, Álamos' municipal authority. On one hand, city administrations in Mexico ought to be run under the same principles of order, efficiency, and control that their North American counterparts follow. On the other, the different historical practices in Mexico and in the United States have the consequence that both the daily practices as well as the meaning that they have manifest in distinct ways in each country. Mexican municipal, state, and federal governments operate under models that, at times, are far removed from the minimal rules that are accepted as being a guarantee that the basic premises of bureaucratic rationality will be fulfilled. Because of that, Mexican governments have had many problems with legitimacy, a situation that is reproduced by the presence of corrupt practices (Clausen 2008b). The Mexican community has an image of these North Americans as industrious and organized people, and that impression is encouraged and reinforced by the establishment of these charity organizations, and above all, because of the contrast between the non-profit organizations and the inefficient local government that fails to fulfill its social responsibilities. The organizations experience

² These organisations that I analyse are equivalent to the so-called Hometown Associations (HTAs), in the sense that their purpose is to develop or help a community. The key difference is that HTAs organized by Latin Americans have the objective of developing the community of origin, whereas in our case, the purpose is to develop the destination or receiving community.

an increase in the number of applications for assistance in recent years from Mexican families. Many families in Álamos are no longer turning first to the local government for help - the very government that ought to provide aid for the neediest families as part of established public policy - primarily because people believe it is worthless and corrupt—shows not only the lack of confidence in the government on the part of its own citizens but it is also evidence of the high level of institutionality that has been achieved by the North American organizations in this Mexican community³ (Clausen 2008b).

The efficiency gives the organizations outward legitimacy and strengthens the myth (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). In this way, the organizations pave the way for re-affirming the group's particular collective identity within Álamos, based on the national traits of the immigrant group.

Then, as established in studies by Sassen (2006) the nation-state is no longer to be seen as the sole governing power, but as only one class of several types of powers in the complex system of power, where the North American group emerges as a new significant actor creating an alternative parallel power structure within social politics. As established by Somers (1993), our findings shows that the North Americans' practices and non-formalized "rights" paves the way for this group to gain influence due to the social position and the social relations of the group and its interaction (through the non-profit organisations) with the local and regional government.

Notably, the Mexican constitution prohibits foreigners from involving themselves in the country's politics. The second homeowners are aware of this prohibition, but do engage local Mexican governments on issues of concern to the their community—whether development, safety and security, garbage collection, or historical preservation (48). For Mexico, concern about foreigners, particularly Americans,

³ The local government does not work with the organisations that are meeting social needs that have gone unmet by the state. However, this does not stop the government from positioning itself as a strong actor in other spaces. For example, officials will insist on speaking Spanish when the North American community invites them to meetings to organize cultural events. According to several interviews with the municipal president and other officials, both at the local and state level, the U.S. community has little influence over, or importance for, community development. This is said despite El Pueblo having, for one example, very low illiteracy rates compared to other towns with similar demographic characteristics.

meddling in the country's affairs is not new (and hence the reason for the Constitutional prohibition against it).

As suggested by Soysal (1994) and Sassen (2006) this study perceives participation in civic activities to the benefit of the community as dimensions of citizenship practices, which are enacted informally.

This because, on one hand, these practices allow the North Americans to identify themselves as members of Álamos, and on the other hand the Mexican community recognizes the group (e.g. looking for economic help at *Amigos de Educación* before trying the local government; and accepting the *History Club* to collect historical material that should be part of the local museum's collection) and thereby legitimises the group's presence and actions.

This way, the Mexican community produces an at least partial recognition of the North Americans as full social beings. With the foundation of the non-profit organisations based on transnational practices the group engenders strategies for legitimizing informal forms of membership and their identities as members of a community of second home owners residence and assume some of the features of citizenship identities.

This means that these non-profit organizations have a double function. On one hand, they respond to specific problems of poverty that the government has not been able to solve; on the other hand, they give the North Americans significant legitimacy and provide them with membership of the community. Even if it is not the explicit purpose of these organizations to intervene in defining the local policy agenda or to win political positions—and the immigrants do not see themselves going in that direction—the organizations' impact has had repercussions of that type. Because of their resources, the North Americans oblige the governments to take into account the initiatives by this non-Mexican resident population.

Through an active participation it is possible for the group to enter the local tourism committee that proposes future projects for tourism development in the community. This enables the North Americans to form part of the decision making process for tourism development at a local and regional level. As reflected in the quotes below

the visions for and the take on tourism development in the community is for from agreed upon.

The transnational group sees the Mexican community and the locals as resources in itself to develop further tourism as reflected in this statement:

“Haven’t you seen the houses at the entrance [to the Pueblo] ... it looks absolutely horrible when you enter [the Pueblo] but we can’t do anything even though we tried our best because it is a Mexican family and they don’t have the same idea as we [the American community] do (...) all kinds of different houses ... Just take a walk on the other side of the river then you will see a lot of confusing constructions (...) it doesn’t give a very good impression in general ...” (Interview, North American, 7th of January 2013).

Integrated in their idea of sustainable development is the sociocultural rooted idea of addressing the need and social problems of the community (helping low income families with scholarships and single mothers). Arguably tourism works as a tool to redistribute resources and makes it possible for the North American to manifest themselves in the decision making process regarding for instance to build an airport on the outskirts of Álamos or to negotiate with the local government for street repairs in the barrios where the North Americans live -before repairs are made in the barrios where the Mexicans reside -arguing that these things are needed to attract for instance more tourists. This way, the immigrants negotiate their position and membership in the community and we are seeing the possibilities of various types of rights bearing subjects beyond the citizen.

I suggest though that how they operate and how they solve those local problems do **not** pave the way for lessening inequality but empowers the North American second home owners as a group and provides them with a type of membership and partial rights of the community.

In this study second homes are consumed for its amenities, its housing environments, and an imagined Mexican rural lifestyle. The new consumers appear as tourists, and

second home owners, all embodying a particular often idealized image of the countryside. As stated in several research articles the characteristics of second home tourism, such as the long duration of visits in the destination area, imply that certain impacts on change are more prominent and imply the development of different sets of social and economic relationships than would apply to leisure or business travel.

In this case the second home owners do not appreciate the same aspects of the local community as the local population, they clearly differ in their view of future development in the second home community. The North Americans do not agree on the development, taking place in the Mexican part of town where the population has submitted projects concerning the construction of a huge supermarket chain or ugly constructions according to their view.

Second home owners are usually more conservative and less positive towards change as instead they care about the physical qualities of their second home environment and therefore tend to favor land use control and preservation. Then they as such, pose a fundamental challenge to local social cohesion and political organization. The community conflicts are now intimately bound up with pressures caused by the presence of this new group of second home owners. Even though they are not allowed to interfere in local politics or politics at all as stated in the Mexican constitution.

However, these transnational practices challenge traditional theories of citizenship and this case shows that it is not exclusively about rights and freedoms but also concerns the articulation of identity/belonging and other components of citizenship, such as participation and responsibility. This form of citizenship is particularly interesting/relevant in the context of globalization as it extends beyond nationality.

Epilog ...

This case study forms part of a larger research project initiated in 2012 where we analyze Mexican towns with North American communities residing there or communities with North American second homeowners. North Americans are increasingly buying second homes in foreign countries, notably in Mexico (Kelly 2000; Croucher 2012). The last decades there have been an increased flow of North Americans in their mid thirties buying second homes in Mexican communities in the Mexican/US border states. However, this type of mobilities is poorly studied,

although we believe their influence is important to acknowledge and access (Clausen 2008; Clausen & Velázquez 2010) and also as stated by Müller (1999) and Hall (2004) second homes are significant to understand the nature of contemporary mobility and regulation, and the insights that such discussions may bring to our understanding of contemporary society. This paper aims to address this research gap by examining how a transnational group of North American second home owners in a Mexican community through tourism activities seeks to create local and regional development. The paper argues that the group of second home owners through its established transnational practices and rights of membership influence and impact significant the tourism development and the visions for the town and the region in order to develop and reconstruct a distinct social space (corresponding to the global imaginaries about Mexico) they want to be actively members of. However, and interestingly they do not have any wish to become Mexicans or obtain dual citizenship. These North American communities all over Mexico lead me to some general understandings of the importance of the U.S. citizens going to Mexico have so far been underestimated, not just as a general event but also as a factor of economic, social, political, and cultural significance.