

## HOUSING VACANCY IN ATLANTIC EUROPE: ORIGINS AND EFFECTS ON SMALL TOWNS IN GALICIA

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**ABSTRACT** – Since 1950, the countryside of Western Europe has been affected by profound socio-spatial changes. Due to net migration and the nuclearisation of families, the urbanisation process has led to demographic growth in rural areas relatively close to big cities. This has led to an increase in mobility and the development of a lifestyle that centres around the suburban model, which has contributed to the depreciation of older buildings. After three decades of policies to aid the construction of new buildings, numerous vacant older houses can be found in Western Europe. At a time when the suburban model is being called into question by politicians, vacant housing is at the heart of the demographic, economic and political issues of rural areas. Housing is said to be vacant when it is not being used for all or part of the year, neither as a primary residence nor as a secondary residence or for short stays. The Spanish countryside, especially Galicia, has numerous vacant houses. In the small towns of Galicia, the area studied, vacancy is generally over 20%, broadly higher than the “normal” rate (for property speculation) of between 6% and 8%. This vacancy rate includes both older, abandoned housing and new construction. Subsequently, the increase in empty homes in Galicia is the result of two processes. First of all, the abandonment of rural space and the disappearance of its family units. Secondly, the overvaluation of new constructions and urban spaces, which accentuate the depopulation of many traditional nuclei.

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**Keywords:** Housing; small towns; Galicia; social dynamics; political effects.

**RESUMO** – EDIFÍCIOS ABANDONADOS NA EUROPA ATLÂNTICA: ORIGENS E EFEITOS NAS CIDADES PEQUENAS NA GALIZA. Desde 1950, o espaço rural da Europa Ocidental tem sido afetado por profundas alterações socio-espaciais. Devido à migração líquida e à nuclearização das famílias, o processo de urbanização levou ao crescimento demográfico nas áreas rurais relativamente próximas às grandes cidades. Isto provocou um aumento da mobilidade e do desenvolvimento de um estilo de vida baseado no modelo suburbano, que contribuiu para que os edifícios mais antigos fossem menosprezados. Após três décadas de políticas de apoio à construção de novos edifícios, é possível encontrar inúmeras residências antigas desocupadas na Europa Ocidental. No momento em que o modelo suburbano está a ser posto em causa por políticos, as residências desocupadas estão no centro das questões demográficas, económicas e políticas das áreas rurais. Uma residência é considerada desocupada “quando não está a ser usada durante a totalidade ou parte do ano, nem como primeira residência nem como residência secundária nem para curtas estadias”. O espaço rural espanhol, especialmente a Galiza, tem inúmeras residências desocupadas. Nas pequenas cidades da Galiza, a área de estudo, a taxa de desocupação é geralmente 20% superior à “normal” (para especulação imobiliária) de entre 6% a 8%. Esta taxa de desocupação inclui tanto as residências antigas como abandonadas e também de nova construção. Como consequência, o aumento das residências desocupadas na Galiza é resultado de dois processos. Em primeiro lugar, do abandono do espaço rural e do desaparecimento das suas unidades familiares. Em segundo lugar, da sobrevalorização da nova construção e espaços urbanos, que acentua o despovoamento de muitos núcleos tradicionais.

**Palavras-chave:** Habitação; pequenas cidades; Galiza; dinâmica social; efeitos políticos.

**RÉSUMÉ** – LES LOGEMENTS VACANTS EN EUROPE ATLANTIQUE: LEURS CAUSES ET LEURS CONSÉQUENCES DANS LES PETITES VILLES DE GALICE. Les campagnes de l’Europe occidentale ont connu de profondes mutations socio-spatiales depuis 1950. Le procès d’urbanisation, dû au solde migratoire et à la nucléisation des familles, a provoqué la croissance démographique des espaces ruraux proches des grandes villes. La généralisation d’un mode vie centré sur le modèle pavillonnaire a contribué à dévaloriser les bâtiments anciens. Après trois décennies de politique d’aide à la construction de bâtiments neufs, de nombreuses maisons anciennes sont devenues vacantes. Dans un contexte de remise en cause politique du modèle pavillonnaire, elles sont au cœur d’enjeux démographiques, économiques et politiques. Un logement est dit vacant lorsqu’il n’est pas utilisé, en tout ou en partie de l’année, comme résidence principale ou secondaire, ni même pour des séjours temporaires. Les campagnes espagnoles et, en particulier, celles de Galice, présentent de nombreux logements vacants. Dans les petites villes galiciennes, la vacance dépasse généralement 20%, soit un taux très supérieur à la «normale» (6 à 8%), admise par la spéculation immobilière. Il s’agit tant de logements anciens abandonnés que de constructions nouvelles. L’augmentation du nombre des maisons vides résulte de deux processus: abandon de l’espace rural par ses unités familiales ou sur évaluation des nouvelles constructions et des espaces urbains, ce qui accroît le dépeuplement de nombreux centres traditionnels.

Logements, petites villes, Galice, dynamiques sociales, effets politiques.

**Mots clés:** Logement; petites villes; Galice; dynamiques sociales; effets politiques.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 20th century, profound changes affected the rural areas of Europe (Diry, 2004). These changes significantly altered the role of the countryside: an economy based essentially on agriculture gave way to residential and recreational activities, which relied on the development of transport infrastructure (Madeline, 2006). After this, the amenities offered by the countryside led to its becoming attractive (Champion, 2001; Legras, 2016) and to a confirmed demographic recovery (Hirczak, 2011), especially in areas close to big, medium-sized and small cities (Dubuc, 2004).

The urbanisation of the countryside that lies relatively close to the big cities of the Atlantic regions of Europe is linked to demographic dynamics and the nuclearisation of families (Bonvalet & Arbonville, 2006). This process has led to an increase in mobility and the development of a lifestyle that centres around the suburban model (Callen, 2014), which has contributed to older buildings being depreciated by populations with a low cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1979; Laferté, 2016). After three decades of policies to aid the construction of new buildings, numerous vacant older houses can be found. The historic centres of small towns are particularly affected by vacancy. This is what is presented in this article: a study of vacant housing in Galicia. Also, at a time when the suburban model is being called into question by European politicians, vacant housing is at the heart of the demographic, economic and political issues of rural areas (Callen, 2014). In this sense, Galicia presents some original cases. The region has registered a more accelerated urbanization process than other territories of Atlantic Europe, in particular French or British territories (Lois-González & Piñeira, 2011; Ferrás, 2012). It has also followed the pace of a speculative real estate bubble typical in the whole of Spain. A bubble that has resulted in an accelerated growth of urbanized space, while houses and villages were abandoned in a process of great intensity (Lois-González & Piñeira, 2011).

This article takes a top-down approach, from the global to the local. The focus will be on studying small towns in Galicia. The aim is to characterise housing vacancy at these different levels using multiscalar comparative analysis. At the regional level, statistics from institutional databases (Spanish National Institute of Statistics, INE) make it possible to identify the demographic and economic dynamics and their effect on housing. By studying these dynamics, the origins of vacancy will be explored by cross-referencing quantitative data with qualitative approaches. Lastly, to identify the social and political effects on the various towns in Galicia, a user survey and interviews of some of those involved in urban planning were conducted.

## II. GALICIA IN THE EUROPE OF THE 27 AND THE ATLANTIC REGIONS

### 1. A Peripheral Rural Region

Changes to the countryside are distributed unequally across Europe. On the Atlantic coasts of Ireland, France, Spain and Portugal, there are great disparities both between the

regions and within them. Proximity to large urban centres is an important factor in understanding these disparities. The areas on the Atlantic coast that are close to Metropolitan Paris or London benefit from their dynamics. But, overall, the Atlantic coast, which is dotted with urban centres and consists of a large, hierarchically organized network of hamlets, villages and small towns (Jousseume & Kali, 2014; Rodríguez-Gonzales, 2015), remains on the fringes of Europe.

Galicia, an Autonomous Community in the north-west of Spain that belongs to Atlantic Europe, also shares these characteristics. The «old agrarian complex» of Galicia, mentioned in the 1970s by Abel Bouhier in reference to the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century (Bouhier, 1979), is made up of small, scattered farms that are grouped into *aldeas* or *núcleos* (which could be translated as population centres) that densely occupy the area (Bertrand, 1977; Bouhier, 1979). One of the factors that explains the importance of the food processing industry in Galicia today is this distribution into farms associated with a smallholding land tenure system. This is the case in the east of Galicia where, in spite of the significant decline in agriculture since the 1960s (Torres-Luna, Bertrand, Lois-González, & Gomez-Nieto, 1993), agriculture and the food processing industry still play an important role (Marie, 2009).

Galicia is characterised by a network of hierarchically organized hamlets, villages and small towns (fig. 1). In fact, in Galicia there are seven main cities and, most importantly, five of them form a continuous urban axis from Ferrol-A Coruña to the Portuguese border, following the coastal strip from North to South, where most of the population of the whole territory is concentrated (Ferrás, 1996; Lois & Piñeira, 2011; Precado, Míguez, & Orosa, 2012). This space is defined as central, as it houses important urban and metropolitan areas such as A Coruña and Vigo, and outside of this space there are only the interior capitals (Lugo and Ourense) and a large set of small towns and county centres, which act as nuclei capitals for their rural environments (Pazos, 2015; Rodríguez-González, 2015). In these smaller centres (from 2 000 to 5 000 inhabitants) and especially in the more modest municipal capitals of the less urbanised periphery of the region, the phenomenon of vacant housing is best observed.

## 2. Demographic changes and their consequences for housing

If we begin by analysing the scale of Atlantic Europe, the evolution followed by rural areas is very different in each country (fig. 2). In the United Kingdom and Ireland, the early urbanisation process provoked intense processes of peri-urbanisation and growth of the most important metropolitan peripheries (Buller, 1991). In France the situation is similar and many Atlantic regions have benefited from the extraordinary growth of Paris and some regional centres (Nantes, Bordeaux, Rennes, etc.) (Brouard-Sala, Diguet, Godey, Marie, & Tertrais, 2015). In Spain and Portugal, the entire rural interior of the Atlantic territories is decreasing sharply. A decrease that increases in areas further from the main cities and in smaller nuclei (*aldeas* and municipal capitals in this order) (Aldrey-Vázquez, Lois-González, & San Román-Rodríguez, 2008).

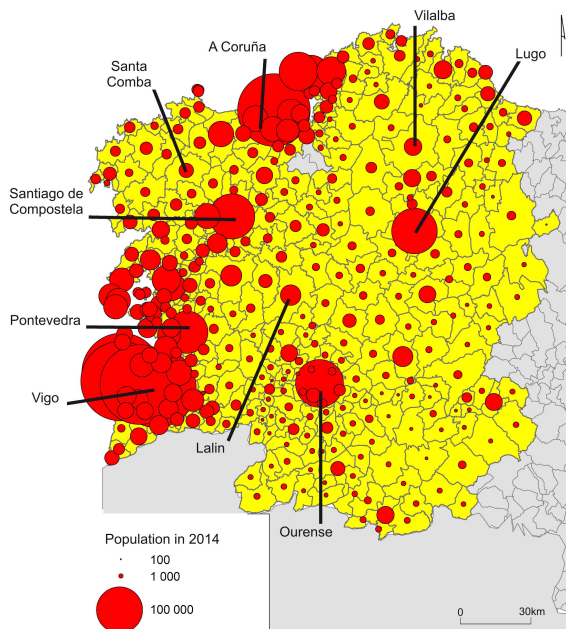


Fig. 1 – Population Map of Galicia by *municipality* in 2014. Colour figure available online.  
 Fig. 1 – *Mapa de população da Galiza por municipalidade em 2014. Figura a cores disponível online.*  
 Source: IGE (2014)

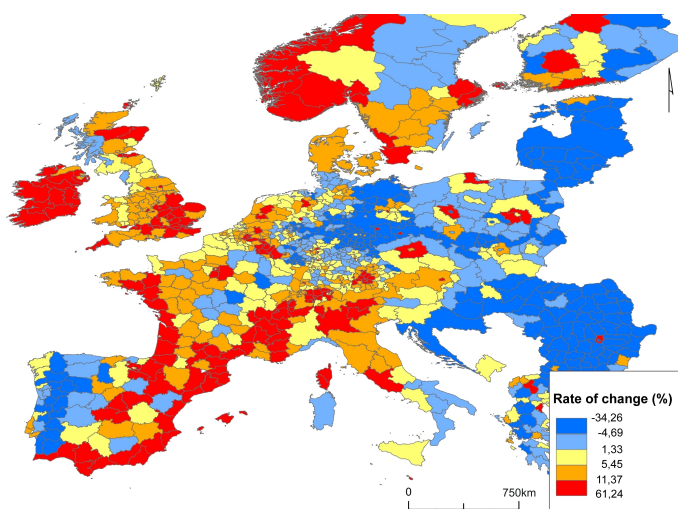


Fig. 2 – Changes in the population of Europe between 2000 and 2016 by NUTS3.  
 Colour figure available online.  
 Fig. 2 – *Mudanças na população da Europa entre 2000 e 2016 por NUTS3.*  
*Figura a cores disponível online.*  
 Source: Eurostat (2013)

In Galicia, population growth is particularly affecting the western provinces of A Coruña and Pontevedra, especially because of the boom in the cities and their outskirts along the Ferrol – A Coruña – Santiago de Compostela – Pontevedra – Vigo axis. In contrast, the population is returning to the rest of the region, especially the rural areas of the eastern provinces. In the east, 84 municipalities said to be “mountain communities” lost over 50% of their inhabitants after 1960. This was the result of massive emigration to other countries in Europe, including Switzerland (Bertrand, 1983; Lois-González & Piñeira, 2011).

The demographic dynamics make it possible to identify areas with demographic growth, which attract, and areas in decline, which repel. Whether or not an area is attractive has consequences for the housing vacancy rate. Less attractive areas are prone to a rise in the number of vacant housing, due to their being freed up by the departure of the inhabitants. In contrast, more attractive areas have a tendency to have fewer vacant houses but will produce a particular type of vacancy, vacancy due to expectation.

A house is vacant “when it remains unoccupied and is available for sale or rent or is even abandoned” (INE, 2011). An ideal housing vacancy rate that permits the property market to function properly lies between 6% and 8% (Driant, 1995). When it is under 6%, the housing market is considered to be tight. This causes vacancy due to expectation, i.e., holding on to a property while waiting for its price to rise. If the housing vacancy rate is over 8%, the housing market is considered to be soft. This leads to vacancy due to a lack of interest and vacancy due to the obsolescence of building. Vacancy due to a lack of interest occurs in rural areas and small towns because the owner is not interested in putting the property up for sale. Vacancy due to obsolescence occurs because the building does not match the wishes of purchasers. These two types of vacancy can be put together to explain significant vacant housing rates.

Researchers face an obstacle: statistics on the number of vacant housing do not exist for the European Union as a whole. There are only statistics on the percentage of housing without a usual resident. According to Eurostat, in the 2011 census:

“Occupancy statistics from the population and housing census refer to whether or not a housing was occupied by its ‘usual’ resident. Housing are therefore classified as being unoccupied if they are reserved for seasonal or secondary use (such as holiday homes) or if they are vacant (housing which may be for sale, for rent, for demolition, or simply lying empty and unused).” (Eurostat, 2013).

This definition therefore includes secondary residences, occasional residences (potential tourism) and vacant housing. It does permit a comparative cartographic approach to Europe (fig. 3). The map shows a strong contrast in the percentage of unoccupied housing between England and the rest of the Atlantic coast. Unlike the centre of the country, where the unoccupied housing rate is low (due to its proximity to Metropolitan London), the highest rates are in the south-west. In the rest of Atlantic Europe, Galicia is an outstanding example of these values, rural depopulation, together with the proliferation of secondary residences along the coast, explains these general values. Records that differentiate it from the United Kingdom, Germany and the central metropolitan regions of France, Belgium or the Netherlands (Brouard-Sala, 2015).

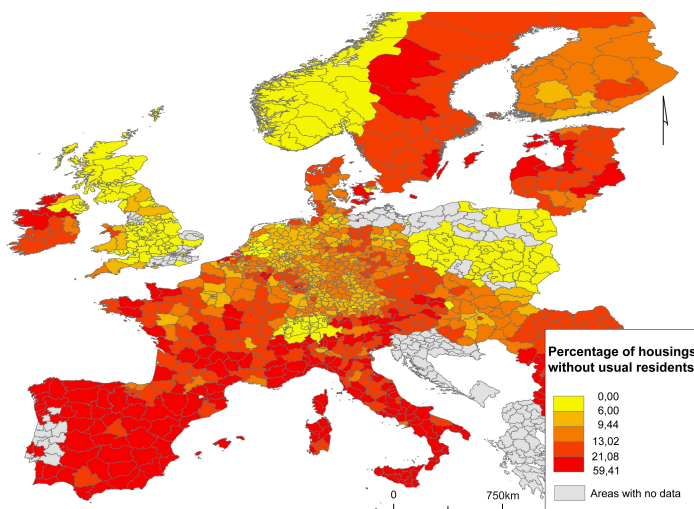


Fig. 3 – Percentage of housing in Europe without usual residents in 2011.  
Colour figure available online.

*Fig. 3 – Percentagem de alojamentos na Europa sem residentes habituais em 2011.  
Figura a cores disponível online.*

Source: Eurostat (2013)

In 2011, housing vacancy in Galicia reached a significant level (18%), while secondary residences accounted for 15% of housing there (INE, 2011). The vacancy rate is associated with vacant rural housing; however, some, especially in coastal areas, are secondary residences, as it could be observed in many other parts of Europe. Regarding vacant housing, there is a direct relationship between its importance and the level of depopulation of the rural municipalities in question. In the case of secondary housing, the uncontrolled construction in many coastal areas during the real estate bubble between 1980 to 2008, has much to do with its high representativeness.

It is this large number of vacant housing in the rural areas of Galicia and in particular in small towns that is of particular interest to the rest of this article. After analysing the housing vacancy rate in small Galician towns using a statistical approach based on institutional databases and data from a field study, the social and political effects of this phenomenon will be studied.

### III. VACANT HOUSING IN SMALL TOWNS IN GALICIA: A STATISTICAL APPROACH

#### 1. Housing vacancy according to the institutional databases

Galicia therefore has numerous vacant housing units: around 300 000 in 2011 (INE, 2011). The increase in vacant housing was particularly strong between 2001 and 2011. These were mainly houses built before 1900, and for the most part before 1950. At the

same time, the vacancy rate for recent housing, i.e., those built after 2000, has increased considerably. The increase is linked to the intensity of construction: the construction of new housing meant that others that were not reoccupied were abandoned.

In Galicia and more generally in Spain, construction was so intense in the 2000s that numerous older housing units were abandoned. Also, the fact that older homes in rural areas and small towns were not reoccupied after the death of their inhabitant was another, notable cause of the demographic decline in these areas. The increase in the number of vacant recently built housing is explained by the 2008 property crisis, which forced numerous owners to abandon the homes that they had built or were in the process of building.

In addition to the statistics on Galicia as a whole, the map of housing vacancy at the municipal level (fig. 4) helps to sharpen the analysis.

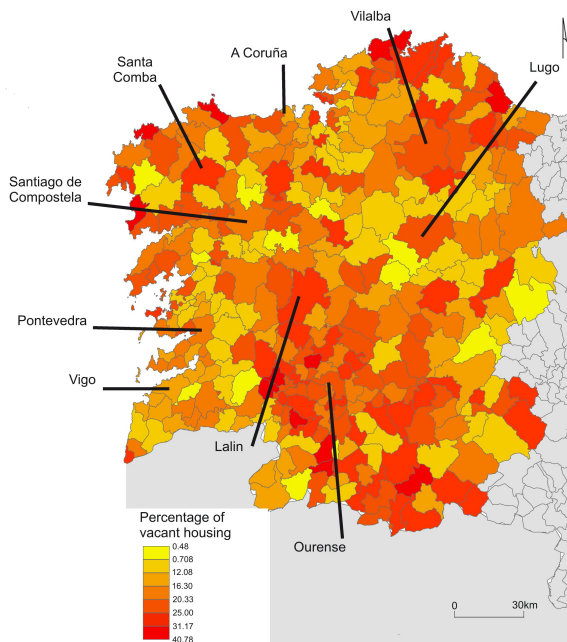


Fig. 4 – Map of vacant housing in Galicia in 2011 (%). Colour figure available online.

Fig. 4 – *Mapa de alojamentos vagos na Galiza em 2011 (%)*. *Figura a cores disponível online*.

Source: INE (2011)

In 2012, a majority of municipalities had a vacancy rate of over 12%, which is much higher than what is considered the “normal” rate. The areas with the lowest vacancy rate form an axis between Pontevedra, Santiago de Compostela and A Coruña (excluding coastal communities) plus some municipalities bordering on Lugo. Elsewhere, however, the housing vacancy rate is high compared to the regional average. Secondary residence vacancy is concentrated in the coastal areas. In fact, during the 2008 property crisis, numerous Galicians built one, two or even more secondary residences, especially close to the coast (Lois-González, 2009). The figures for the 2000s are not only applicable to the coastal area but also to the rest of Galicia.



Vacancy also includes the peripheral areas of the region, especially to the north and east of Lugo, east and south of Ourense and between Ourense and Lalín. In many municipalities, the rate exceeds 20%. This is explained firstly by the mass exodus of inhabitants since the 1960s due to an economic structure that was still firmly anchored in agriculture and secondly to the failure of housing to meet the aspirations of the inhabitants (Aldrey-Vasquez *et al.*, 2008). This is the case in 84 municipalities said to be “mountain communities”, which lost over 50% of their inhabitants after 1960 (*ibid.*). Some small towns like Vilalba, A Fonsagrada, Becerreia and Sarria around Lugo and Castro Caldelas, Maceda, Allariz and Xinzo de Limia around Ourense were particularly affected.

Galicia therefore is unique in having two types of housing vacancy: recently built housing on the coast and in the rest of the area plus older housing, especially in the interior. It is now time to take a look at vacant older housing, which are to be found above all in rural areas and small towns.

In the rural areas of Galicia, the percentage of vacant housing dating from before 1950 (fig. 5) is over 20%. The east is the most affected: some *nuclei* have been completely abandoned and are deserted. Therefore, in the provinces of Lugo and Ourense the highest housing vacancy rates for older properties exceed 60%. In most of the *concejos* this is for older housing with no comforts. In Galicia as a whole, 40% are in bad condition (damp at the bottom of the building, leaking roofs, etc.). This figure exceeds 60% in most rural communities.

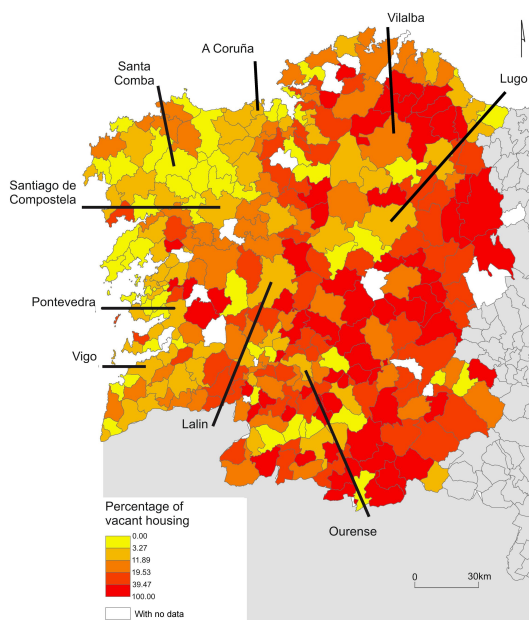


Fig. 5 – Map of vacant housing built before 1900, in Galicia in 2011 (%).  
Colour figure available online.

Fig. 5 – Mapa de casas vagas construídas antes de 1900, na Galiza em 2011 (%).  
Figura a cores disponível online.

Source: IGE (2011)

## 2. Housing vacancy according to the field study

As well as these first attempts to characterise the vacancy rate for older housing, the research looked in depth at four small towns in Galicia in 2016 and 2017. A questionnaire was also given to users, resulting in about 130 responses. The villages of Fonsagrada (Lugo), Monterroso (Lugo), Maceda (Ourense) and Santa Comba (A Coruña) were also studied. The work process followed in each case was as follows: 1) before the visit, the statistics of the Housing Census were reviewed, in total and by municipality parishes; 2) a tour through the streets of the nucleus capital took place to take photographs, then analyse them and prepare a first appreciative diagnosis; 3) the mayor was interviewed to have a qualitative first impression of the municipality, its history and its problems; 4) 30-40 tabulated questionnaires were carried out (with data on the homes, use, occupation, assessment of the residential situation, etc.), always with a numerical value; 4) finally, 6-7 interviews with relevant local people (presidents of merchants and cultural associations, municipal architects, councillors, etc.) were carried out. From this procedure, a complete radiography of the vacant housing problems of each case was obtained, which will be extrapolated in a later phase (fig. 6).



Fig. 6 – House converted into a garage, currently in ruins, Santa Comba, May 2015.  
Colour figure available online.

*Fig. 6 – Casa convertida em garagem, atualmente em ruínas, Santa Comba, maio 2015.  
Figura a cores disponível online.*

Source: Photo by Brouard-Sala (2015)

## IV. METHODOLOGY: SURVEY TO 30-40 TOWN RESIDENTS

The questionnaire was divided into three parts: a section on the characteristics of the housing, a section on general information and a final section on the respondents' feelings regarding the community. The first two sections were designed to be studied statistically.

The questions about the housing itself were designed to shed light on those that are currently inhabited. The questions asked about the type of housing, its general characteristics (number of rooms, habitable area and area of the plot), the type of energy used, the date of occupation and the purchase price or rent. These questions also made it possible to cross-reference the intrinsic qualities of the housing with the date of occupation and the purchase price or rent paid.

The questions regarding general information were asked in order to study the profiles of the respondents according to the average profiles of the inhabitants in the community found in the INE databases. The questions logically included the sex, age and number of people in the household but what was of most interest were the answers to the question on occupation.

A question was therefore added in order to better understand the relationship between the inhabitant and his or her housing: On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your home? If the score was less than five, some questions would definitely be asked about the ideal home. The last questions were more open and concerned the opinion of the inhabitants about their community. In fact, these open questions led to long answers and allowed the people who were answering, if they felt confident, to expand on the subject. So, the question "How would you rate life in the community?" allowed people to give their opinion on the image that they have of that village or small town. Other questions were implicit in this one: How did they view the level of commerce? What changes had they seen in the centre? The second question made it possible to look at their relationships with the community. It was therefore possible to assess the relationships between the inhabitants and perhaps to see the population's social and spatial relationships of domination or exclusion. The last question concerned the relationship between those who answered the questionnaire and their neighbours. It was intended to show a close social link. In fact, it was found that often people did not know their neighbours. The question asked about both the social links between neighbours and intergenerational links. With this question it was also possible to see whether one form of housing is a greater or lesser vector for social links or not.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using matrices that depended on the type of interviewee.

From these surveys a mismatch was found between older housing and the aspirations of the local population. The respondents and those involved in urban planning mentioned the wish of the inhabitants to live in a recently built house or flat so as to have access to comforts. This is the result of significant propaganda by the Spanish government in favour of construction and offering tax advantages to new construction (Bourdieu, 2000; Lois-González, 2009) in cooperation with the banks and property developers (Bourdieu, 2000; Bugeja, 2011).

The dynamic generated is simple: old houses are losing their traditional population (by death or migration), while the urban planning of A Fonsagrada, Monterroso, Maceda or Santa Comba, continues to be expansionist; it is based on building new houses and urbanised areas in the periphery of the nucleus. Here the hegemonic logic is followed

throughout Spain (Brandis, 2007; Rullán, 2012) and Galicia (Lois-González & Pino-Vicente, 2015), generated in the main cities and their peripheries, and extended to the whole territory. Many residents who remain in the nucleus or young people who purchase a house, buy in these more comfortable and better equipped new residential spaces. This way the growth is in the external part of the locality, while the abandoned housing in the traditional centre increases.

This idea could be analysed as a process of disparaging older housing and favouring recent housing. This is the «value transfer process» effect (Gravari-Barbas & Ripoll, 2006, p. 9) on a more or less unrealistic desire to elevate one's social status (Lois-González, 2009).

As mentioned, an important factor in understanding the vacancy rates for older housing in the rural areas of this region appears to be economic reasons. Indeed, a lack of work pushes residents to emigrate to find a job (Aldrey-Vasquez *et al.*, 2008). The phenomenon even appears to be one of the key processes in understanding older housing vacancy rates in Galicia. The phenomenon of employment-related emigration is even more important today since almost 70% of those surveyed mentioned a lack of jobs in rural areas. Most of the respondents and those involved in urban planning (60%) emphasized this fact to explain the number of vacant houses. Their being abandoned is also a result of inheritance issues, and even finding out who the owner of a house is when trying to purchase one: the identity of 40% of the owners of older housing in the east of the region is not known (interview with the Rianxo restoration office, another village studied and mentioned later on).

So, from the survey and the interviews, it seems that a preference for certain types of housing depends on the household's social class or group. This is the case for older houses, even if it was found in the answers to the questionnaire that all social groups occupy this type of building, as shown in the graph below. Depending on the type of older house, its condition (more or less restored or in ruins), its geographical location (isolated or not) and its value (monetary and symbolic), these houses are favoured (by choice or by default) by different social groups. Rodolphe Dodier, a geographer of the peri-urban area of Western France, noted similar findings (Dodier, 2012), showing certain similarities to Atlantic Europe.

Two types of social groups can be identified for the popular classes. First, farmers with a modest income, workers and pensioners with a low pension who live in isolated houses in the country, generally owned by them (fig. 7). These people have always (or mostly) lived in the same house. The house generally has few or no comforts and its condition does not worry its resident. The second group is made up of the unemployed, workers, pensioners with a low income and retailers close to retirement living in houses in a village, which they own or rent. These houses generally have few comforts. These people live there by obligation, either because they are unable to rent anything else or because they work for the owners. They have generally always lived there. Older houses often have little financial value, between €40 000 and €60 000 (interview with the estate agency).

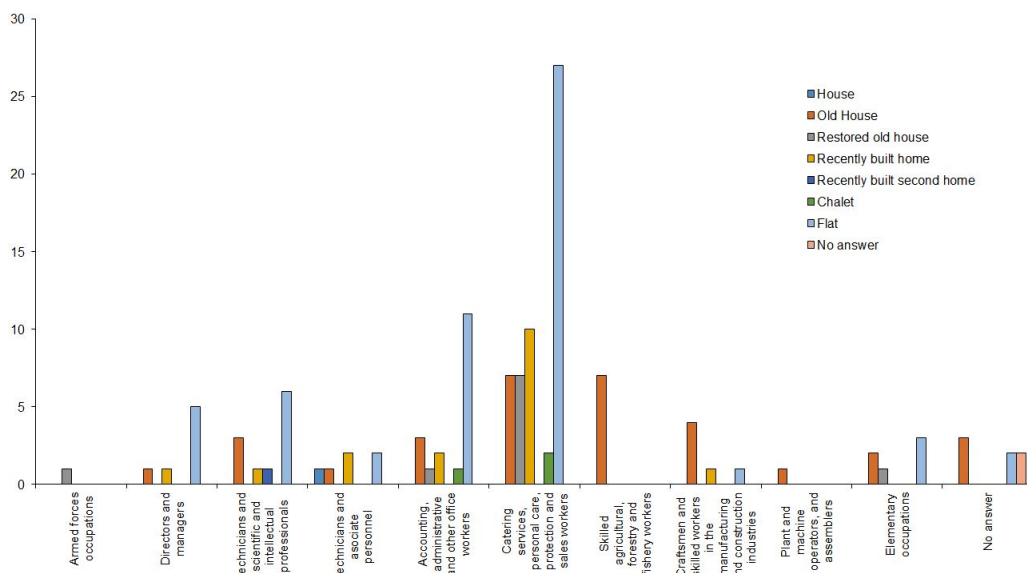


Fig. 7 – Type of housing occupied by profession in the examples studied. Colour figure available online.

*Fig. 7 – Tipo de moradia ocupada por profissão nos exemplos estudados. Figura a cores disponível online.*

Source: Brouard-Sala (2017)

Craftsmen and small business owners, i.e., individuals belonging to what could be called the rural “petite bourgeoisie” (Bihl, 1984, p. 103), generally live above their business and therefore in a house in the village. It has been refurbished with income from the business and from the jobs of other members of the family, who are also residents of the house. The “small management class” (ibid., p. 99) (public employees, accountants or office staff) was also found to have a secondary residence, a house in the country or in the village for weekends or holidays. This house was purchased or inherited, and has been restored. These older houses increase in value and are worth over €100 000, or even over €150 000 (interview with the estate agency).

Entrepreneurs, the liberal professions, upper intellectual and scientific professions, etc., who have come from abroad or from the big city, buy older houses with a strong symbolic value, and these have generally been restored. These houses are scarcer and therefore more expensive, over €200 000 (interview with the estate agency).

The main residences for foreigners, especially the English, are quite important as they in particular purchase older houses with a low value in order to restore them. The houses that they purchase, like those of the popular classes, have a low value, or even lower, of around €40 000 (interview with the estate agency).

To conclude this section, it can be seen that the social groups that were proposed and their corresponding type of housing are not enough to stem the tide of vacancies among older housing. These groups were chosen to better understand the preferences of the

population that continue to live in these small municipal capitals. From their answers it is clear that the most affluent groups tend to prefer new residential spaces, be they houses, villas or above all flats. Regarding the old houses, their occupation depends on the possibility of inheriting them directly and the beginning of a modest restoration trend is confirmed. However, it should be noted that we only interviewed current residents, because many of those born in these towns or villages have already gone to live abroad, to major cities or new peri-urban areas.

## V. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EFFECTS ON SMALL TOWNS IN GALICIA

### 1. The social effects of housing vacancy

The high rate of vacancy for older housing is due to two reasons: the demographic decline of the rural areas and small towns in Galicia and the push by the Spanish government to construct new housing. But these two elements are not sufficient to explain why traditional housing has been abandoned for new houses. In fact, the particular feature of the Atlantic regions of Spain, including Galicia, is the social effect of the popular classes imitating certain local elites when building new houses. After high emigration from Galicia to South America at the start of the 20th century, a large number of migrants returned to the country from the 1950s and 1960s. They had a great influence on housing as they built huge mansions that the Galicians call “*indianos*’ houses”. This was explained to us by the historian Maria Gomez Alvite:

“They wanted to be seen to be different and show off their social status. It was a display of their prestige. The method of construction imitated the houses in the places in America where the emigrants had been. To differentiate them from the rest, the houses had outside staircases, terraces, ceilings that could not be seen from the outside because of the balustrades. These houses were built above all in the centres of small Galician towns, even if one does find some examples in isolated rural spots.” (Interview with Maria Gomez Alvite).

These prestigious houses, with a strong symbolic and monetary value, are now occupied by the local bourgeoisie (sometimes still by *indianos*) and also by the upper classes from Madrid with a strong cultural capital. These houses were a source of envy for the local population, who wanted to imitate them. As Maria Gomez Alvite explained:

“There was a tendency for the indigenous population (or the natives) to be considered a lower social class than those who had re-immigrated from abroad and built enormous houses: the *indianos*. This situation caused the indigenous population to abandon their traditional stone houses and build new cement and brick houses. From the 1960s up to the end of Francoism, because of the general economic growth, was a time when all these new houses that imitated urban construction sprung up. Building a new house in a rural area, during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, continued to be a way of showing off, in other words, of being noticed by the neighbours and showing that you were at the top financially.” (Interview with Maria Gomez Alvite).

Today, traditional stone houses always lie abandoned or in ruins and some have been destroyed. This trend toward new construction between the 1960s and 1980s, and during the property bubble at the beginning of the 21st century made local construction lose some of its identity. In this sense, Galicia has followed the great periods of urban growth in Spain, although always with some years of delay. There was massive growth from 1950 to 1980 in the main cities, generating a model that was imitated in county capitals in well-located villages. Since the 1980s urbanisation has grown increasingly in the urban peripheries and along the entire coastline, following an accelerated dynamic since the 1990s until its abrupt interruption due to the 2008 crisis (Souto-González, 1988; Brandis, 2007; Lois-González & Piñeira-Mantiñán, 2011; Rullán, 2012). Undoubtedly, this dynamic was promoted by a long period of development associated with our entry into the European institutions, which contributed to an improvement of infrastructures and economic diversification throughout the territory, through the investment of large structural and cohesion funds.

In contrast, as shown above, some older housing are still inhabited by certain groups and social classes, depending on their economic and symbolic values. The houses that have not been restored are mainly inhabited by the popular classes in the rural, working-class and popular areas of Galicia (Aldrey-Vasquez *et al.*, 2008) and in agricultural areas (Marie, 2009). In general, older, unrestored houses have heating, electricity and insulation problems. They have been rented out, often with very low rents, and the cost of heating and lighting them has resulted in non-payment of the rent or the heating or electricity bills, generally causing the tenant to be evicted. This is what can be called the vicious circle of unfit housing. The poor condition of a home, or its unfitness, can lead to a tenant being evicted as well as tough living conditions, due to choosing to cut back on heating or lighting.

In addition, when housing vacancy is significant and concentrated in the centre of a small town, it has the effect of making a negative impression on users. In the answers to the questionnaire, 30% of the respondents talked of their small town in negative terms. A poor image of the community was found, with common themes being the loss of population, businesses, services and jobs. The terms “dead” or “deserted” town were used in some cases to define life in this community. These images refer to the deterioration of life in the centre of the village. Empty houses, and above all dilapidated ones, add to and bolster the negative impressions of users. The number of vacant, dilapidated housing demonstrates the desertification of these areas and their loss of dynamism, and sends a negative signal to potential new inhabitants.

## **2. The political response to housing vacancy**

The political response to devaluation often starts out in Galicia as restoring housing, especially vacant older buildings. The response may be from the government, as in Spain's *sustainable rehabilitation programs* (sustainable restoration programs). However, it seems that these are not sufficient if they are not allied with a strong local policy in

favour of restoration and a global approach to revitalising small towns. Through the *rehabilitation offices* (restoration offices), the Spanish government has made this one of its main focuses, with a number of examples in Galicia, including Rianxo in the province of A Coruña.

Rianxo is a fishing village with a compact structure and very dependent on fishing (as in other cases studied (Bueu or Cambados in Pontevedra, etc.)). The development of residential housing has been carried out with strictly urbanistic criteria, resorting to the General and Partial Plans and Integrated Rehabilitation Areas (ARI), far from other cases located in the rural interior, where the European rural development funds had much to do in the processes of intervention and improvement of residential heritage (Lois-González & Pino-Vicente, 2015).

The Rianxo revitalisation project was studied in an interview with this small town's restoration manager. Rianxo is on the coast and has around 10 000 inhabitants, and as the manager said: "It has a good quality of life". The restoration office was set up in Rianxo in 2009. The manager and the mayor are trying to create a synergy through a number of programmes (created ad hoc) to revitalise the centre of the town. It is the historic centre of the small town that is the focal point.

Today, as well as job creation programmes, leasing a commercial unit and restoring watermills and Christian crosses, the town's flagship programme is restoring homes. The programme mainly consists of publicising restoration. It started with a three-day forum to inform people about and encourage restoration. All purchasers of a property in the historic centre of Rianxo must now restore it if this had not been done previously. Then, when property owners or potential purchasers come to the office, the manager offers them financial and technical assistance for restoring their house. He points them toward restoration technicians and helps with financing. By mid-2016, more than 90 houses in the historic centre of Rianxo and some in other parts of the town had been restored.

The procedure followed by the rehabilitation office consists of addressing the owners of empty houses, studying their real estate situation, the possibilities of use and future economic profitability, and recommending a rehabilitation process that is always voluntary. The financial aid to this process is explained, however it always encounters 10% of missing owners (compared to 40% we have found in the villages of the interior). In the end, 90 houses in the historic centre of Rianxo have been restored, a significant figure, which now is to be followed with another specific program of commercial property rentals and offices to young people. The idea is for them to access rents at a moderate price, while subsidising the owners. In this sense, previous examples from Portugal have been followed, although it is the public administration that takes all the credit by managing the program against the passivity of the private real estate agencies.

Indeed, in some coastal areas and compact nuclei, policies of recovery of vacant houses with good results have been developed. For this, it is necessary to use strictly urbanistic instruments (which do not exist in the smallest municipalities). It is relatively easy to contact the owners of the houses and to find young people willing to use and occupy the rehabilitated buildings.



## VI. CONCLUSION

There are different types of vacant housing, but the structural vacancy rate for older and recent housing in small towns in Galicia seems to be an interesting way to start to study the devitalisation/revitalisation process in small town centres in Galicia. It seems therefore that the weakened Galician economy led to migration from the rural areas (especially small towns) to big cities, and also to other regions and countries. This migration, which is socially selective, led to the impoverishment of these centres and therefore to an even higher rate of vacant housing due to the release of houses that were not reoccupied. In this regard, this article aims to be a first result of a wider investigation, even when some conclusions have already been reached. Thus, depopulation generates the phenomenon of empty housing, which is not resolved with the return of those who left or with the arrival of families from other places. These prefer to build new houses, following the logic of urban growth on the edges of cities, towns and villages that has brought a process of urban development planning, widespread in Spain, Galicia and its rural areas.

Until recently, the old houses have deteriorated and lost their real and symbolic value, as opposed to speculative building processes, at the edges of the towns and in higher buildings. This dynamic is widespread and is only beginning to be corrected in some cases, where preserving urban plans and the delineation of Integrated Rehabilitation Areas allow the recovery of a significant number of vacant houses. This has been determined in the example of Rianxo that responds more to the typology of coastal and fishing village, than to that of a rural nuclei capital of a commercial nature in the interior. In these, local rehabilitation plans, apart from rural development funds, begin to recover empty houses. But, for the moment, only in the traditional, historical centres, of the villages. It is an initial process, as has been analysed, that does not even extend to the rest of the municipal territory. Nevertheless, lessons for the future can be learned from it regarding a better use of the built heritage.

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