The Casa bonita: Negotiating home and disaster risk in a context of migration

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Abstract

Disaster research and policy often assumes that the house is just a physical resource and when constructing a house one must choose between the realisation of social, cultural and economic processes or disaster risk reduction. This paper questions this assumption by drawing on intense ethnographic research in Cochabamba city in Bolivia to explore how households negotiate disaster risk reduction as well as the creation of home in a context of migration. In the global south, migration and the receipt of economic remittances is increasingly adopted by households as a means to finance household level disaster risk reduction strategies. More specifically, invest economic remittances are invested in the reconstruction of self-built houses in attempt to reduce disaster risk. Research in Cochabamba shows that economic and social remittances have dramatically shifted the local architecture from 'simple' mud houses to extravagant brick houses that resemble Spanish and North American architecture. Therefore, migration has created a new local architectural norm known as the 'casa bonita'. This paper applies the notion of materiality to understand how people perceive the social functions of the house and why people have chosen the particular design and construction materials of the casa bonita. An anthropocentric conceptualisation of the house helps explain how people interact with the materials and design of the house. Results show that the casa bonita allows people to transform and consolidate social, cultural and economic processes that are not directly related to risk reduction. However, disaster risk reduction is being integrated into the casa bonita. Therefore, this paper shows that migration is facilitating a new architecture that allows people to negotiate and realise the home they aspire to have, as well as the reduction of disaster risk.