

Empty Palaces in Atacpan

*Guillermo is building his dream home,
but will he end up living in it?*

BY DANIELA GERSON

PHOTO: DANIELA GERSON





Guillermo's house glows bright white on a riverside dirt road in Atacpan, a sleepy agricultural village in the Mexican state of Puebla. For one person it is spacious, and it seems even more so because of the lack of furniture inside. Guillermo's bedroom serves as a storeroom for dried corn and seeds. A staircase leads to the roof and a view of his father's one-room home next door.

Guillermo has never seen his house. Instead, the 24-year-old cement pourer shares a two-bedroom apartment with six young men and one woman in Sunset Park. Ranging in age from 15 to 29, they all hail from Guillermo's home state of Puebla. In Brooklyn, they share one bathroom. Back in Atacpan, most have already completed their own houses.

A spirited young man with spiky black hair, Guillermo sees his crowded Brooklyn apartment as only a temporary living arrangement. The house he is building in Atacpan, on the other hand, is an investment in his future. "Someday I am going to live in Mexico," Guillermo said over the din of his roommates one evening. "I will go back to look for a woman, and I will need a place to take her."

Houses built with money sent back by immigrants in New York—dry-clean pressers in Brooklyn and day laborers in the Bronx—have created a stark dichotomy in Atacpan, a picturesque village of roughly 3,000 souls, its hillsides dotted with apple, pear, and avocado trees. New houses with glass win-

dows—a luxury there—have shot up, standing like cement palaces among primitive, wooden structures. Most of the new houses have phones; some even have satellite dishes perched on their roofs.

Though Guillermo's home is uninhabited, it is not unused. On a warm spring day, his older sister Esther, a towel wrapped around her, emerged from the front door and walked up the grass to her own bare cement house. Although built with dollars from America, her home, like most houses in Atacpan, lacks running water, so she uses her brother's shower.

Throughout the village—from the lines for calls from America at the local store to church services—there is an eerie absence of working-age men. In this village, as in so many others across the Mexican countryside, young men leave home, heading north to "the other side" in what has become a virtual rite of passage. They flee a life of rural poverty, lured by the promise of American dollars.

While many of the men send money back to their families and build houses to which they promise to return, their absence is acutely felt. It is as if an entire generation of Atacpan's men has been transplanted to New York.

"It's all women and children here," one of Guillermo's sisters-in-law observed, as she stirred herbs in a wood-burning stove. Working in a basic outdoor kitchen, she was preparing a traditional bath for the youngest of her four daughters while making tortillas by hand on the stovetop. Seven years ago, she stayed behind to care for the children when her husband,



Rafael, first sneaked across the border. Since then, her husband, now a construction worker in Brooklyn, has returned four times, usually for just long enough to get reacquainted with his daughters before he returns to New York to support them.

When Guillermo dropped out of school at the age of 17, his older brother Rafael gave him an ultimatum: If he was not going to study, he would go to the United States to work and help the family.

With one sister already in Brooklyn, Rafael paid a *coyote*, or smuggler, to sneak Guillermo and another sister across the border near Tijuana. Two hours by night on a rickety boat—with six other young men and another woman from Atacpan—brought them into California. From there, the *coyote* arranged a red-eye flight from Los Angeles to Newark.

After landing at Newark, Guillermo and his sister hopped in a taxi, instructing the driver to take them to their siblings' apartment at Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street. The taxi pulled up in front of a skyscraper. "We said, 'They can't live here,'" he recalled. "It was a huge building." The driver had dropped them off on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. After struggling to use a pay phone, Guillermo managed to call his sister, who dispatched another car to fetch them and take them to her place in Brooklyn.

Three days later, Guillermo was back in Manhattan, working as a delivery boy in a Chinese restaurant on the Upper East Side. Guillermo found the dangerous journey across the

border exciting, but navigating the urban jungle of Manhattan proved more daunting. "I was very scared," he said. "My first day I didn't know anything of the streets of Manhattan, I didn't know the numbers or anything."

In the six years that have passed since then, Guillermo has mastered the city. He travels to and from the Bronx at all hours of the night to visit his cousins and has commuted to work sites in New Jersey and the farthest reaches of Queens. Yet he has barely learned the basics of English. He has no bank account. He works off the books. And he has no form of identification, aside from his Mexican birth certificate and a document from his elementary school.

On paper, there is next to no proof Guillermo exists in New York. But he has worked almost every bottom-rung job new immigrants take, from cleaning movie theaters at night, to delivering pizzas, to washing cars. All the while, he has been sending money back home to support his relatives.

He also has spent \$12,000 building his house in Atacpan. Much of this money Guillermo earned waxing floors at night in a supermarket, where he would begin work after the last cashier had gone home and the manager had locked the door. The fire exits were often locked, and he had no cell phone, but Guillermo said he did not worry about the dangers of being locked in. "We just came and worked," he said. And there were the perks: He would cook feasts from the supermarket shelves on the stoves in the back, and when he got tired before the doors opened in the morning, Guillermo would pile up paper-towel rolls in the basement and take a nap.

After a year at the supermarket, Guillermo quit, tired of working nights. But he didn't have much trouble finding another job. Today's New York, where long-empty lots suddenly have become construction sites and new restaurants open every day, has an enormous appetite for low-wage labor. Guillermo now works for a construction subcontractor on Atlantic Avenue.

As recently as 15 years ago, relatively few Mexicans lived in New York City. But by 2000 they were the city's fifth-largest immigrant group—and its fastest growing. According to census data, the number of New York City residents born in Mexico ballooned from only 32,000 in 1990 to 122,000 in 2000. But community leaders say the actual population could be twice that size. Of all the city's immigrants, Mexicans are among the youngest and the poorest. They are also the most likely to be undocumented, with about three-quarters here illegally, according to Jeffrey Passel, a senior research associate at the Pew Hispanic Center.

Like Guillermo and his roommates, most of New York's Mexican immigrants hail from Puebla, a landlocked state east of Mexico City that has been exporting its young men to the city for the past two decades. The influx has changed the face of neighborhoods like Spanish Harlem and the South Bronx, Sunset Park and Bushwick, where recent arrivals pack themselves into illegally converted apartments.

The wave of immigrants also has transformed—in a remarkably short period of time—the city's commercial landscape. From restaurant kitchens and grocery stores to construction sites and dry cleaners, undocumented Mexican laborers, often working off the books and for minimum wage or less, are now an integral part of the local economy. For instance, the

Department of City Planning reports that nearly half the dishwashers in the city are Mexican, though even that is thought to be an undercount.

Erasmio Ponce, who came to New York two decades ago as part of the first wave of immigrants from Puebla, has watched the community mushroom. Now the owner of Chinantla Tortillas in Brooklyn, named after his hometown in Puebla, Ponce said almost all the immigrants arrive with plans to work for just a short stint. But overwhelmingly, he said, “They don’t go back.”

“Everyone has dreams of constructing their houses, but they don’t return to live in them,” he said. Of the hundred Mexicans he knows in New York who built houses in their villages, he said, only one or two actually live in them.

There is one time when they are occupied. During January and February, when there are festivals in villages in Puebla, he said, many go back. Other than that, the structures are vacant or family members live in them.

“They make their houses there and they stay empty,” he said. “They return for a few months. If they are illegal, they pay someone at the border to cross back.”

Many of New York’s Mexican immigrants find themselves caught between two worlds. In the United States they are outsiders, restricted to a subculture of Mexican laborers. Yet when they return to their hometowns in Mexico, they often find that their time in New York has changed them.

Guillermo’s childhood friend Fernando was among the six young men who crossed the border with him in 1999. He was drawn to the United States by accounts he had heard of easy money to be made in America. The reality was quite different. “I discovered it wasn’t easy,” he said of life in New York. “You have to work a great deal.”

Discouraged, he returned to Atacpan a year ago, moving into a home he had built himself with \$13,000 earned in New York as a construction worker. But when he arrived in his hometown, he no longer felt like he fit in. He was restless in *el rancho*, as the men call their village. The only work available to him was picking corn and beans. “For seven dollars a day I worked in the fields,” he said, dismayed at the paltry sum. “I no longer felt accustomed to life in Atacpan. I felt an affection already for life in the U.S. Here I buy what I want. There it’s much more difficult.”

In Mexico, Fernando lived off the money he had earned in America until it ran out. Then he had his brothers in New York arrange passage for him back to America with a *coyote*. This time he had his baby-faced 19-year-old brother in tow, ready to discover for himself if he could make it in America.

Leaving New York meant simply buying a one-way plane ticket home. Returning, thanks to the tightening of border controls, was a \$2,000 journey involving frigid nights hiking through the desert and holding his breath in a stifling car trunk while American authorities examined the vehicle.

Fernando was lucky. He made it across the frontier safely and took a flight back to New York where he landed in Guillermo’s Sunset Park apartment. But back in Brooklyn, he said, “I am not that happy.” He spends his mornings waiting on the corner of Church and McDonald Avenues hoping for work as a day laborer. “Some days I find work, others I don’t,” he said.

Again, he is entertaining notions of heading back to

Atacpan. “I think I will I return to live there,” he said, exhausted and already in bed one evening at 10 o’clock. “In three years, four years.”

On a midsummer day, Guillermo—wearing an oversized tank top with a faded Mexican flag print, his head wrapped in a black Nike bandanna—joined four of his siblings for a backyard barbecue in Sunset Park. As corn tortillas and chicken wings grilled, he twirled his 7-year-old American-born cousin to the sounds of ranchero music. Around him, his siblings bantered in Spanish, throwing in a few words in Nahuatl, an indigenous language spoken in their village.

His sister Esther had returned to Brooklyn days before from Mexico, her skin dark from her recent trek across the desert. She had gone back to Mexico a year earlier, planning to stay there forever. But she grew restless, missing the conveniences of Brooklyn. Her return brought the number of siblings in the United States to seven—five of them in New York—out of a total of nine living brothers and sisters.

Guillermo has not been back to Mexico since he first crossed the border six years ago. In the spring he had said he would go back in June. But then a cousin was brutally murdered by two Puerto Rican youths on Brooklyn’s Fourth Avenue for the \$10 in his pocket. Guillermo used some of the money he had saved for his trip home to send the body back to Mexico. Then he contributed \$500 to his pay his sister’s smuggler fee.

While Guillermo misses his hometown, he enjoys New York. Asked what he does for fun, he replied, “Soccer, beer, and dancing.” They are the same pastimes he enjoyed back home, except in Mexico, he said, “I don’t drink beer because my father won’t let me. Here, nobody says anything to me.”

One downside to life in New York is that meeting women here has proven difficult for Guillermo and his housemates—none of whom had girlfriends last spring. While women from Mexico are increasingly joining their husbands here—and coming on their own—the city’s Mexican population in 2000 was still estimated to be three-fifths male. “We look for women, and we don’t find ones. They don’t like us,” Guillermo said. “Who knows why? It’s easier in Mexico because there are more women.”

Instead, in New York, he will often go to a \$2 dance. At night, several bars in Sunset Park become dance halls where women are partners for hire. At the end of a dance, two bills are passed from each man to his partner. But these women are only a diversion. To find a wife, Guillermo said, he will go back to Mexico.

Still, the longer they stay in the United States, the harder it becomes for Guillermo and his siblings to say with any certainty whether they will go back to their hometown permanently. “Our mentality is to return. It’s always the goal to return and remain there,” said Guillermo’s oldest brother. But, he added, next to nobody does. “Someday we’ll go back, but it may be in a coffin.”

As recently as a few months ago, Guillermo would insist that he eventually would return to his hometown and settle down in the nice house he built for himself there. More recently, a note of doubt has crept in. “I don’t know when I will return, but I am sure I’ll go back because I need to see my father,” he said. “If I’m comfortable living there, I’ll stay. If not, I’ll come back.”

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