

HEIDI WOOD

SUBURBIAS, Les Réservoirs, Limay
March 9 – April 15 2012

When I was offered an exhibition at Les Réservoirs in the outer Parisian suburb of Limay, I planned to twin it with an equivalent suburb in another country. I hoped to explore the reality behind the wildly different public images of suburbia in France and in English speaking countries.

In France the popular definition of “la banlieue” (suburbia) is reduced to its most volatile neighborhoods. Urban planners define 751 “Sensitive Urban Zones” in France. According to Wikipedia, these are characterized by a population suffering from high unemployment, low qualifications and low earning potential. The percentage of non-French people is twice as high as in the country as a whole. 60% of people live in (often poorly maintained, high density) public housing as against 20% elsewhere in France. Its residents numbered 4.4 million in 2006 (7% of the population). From 77.5 to 85% of the French population is urban, depending on sources. Suburbs that are not “sensitive urban zones” are thought of as cities or towns. Limay is listed as a sensitive urban zone. The French would call it a suburb.

I grew up in Australian suburbia where the term evokes a calm, middle class existence in vast zones of single-family houses dotted with huge shopping centers. The public image of suburbia corresponded exactly to my experience of it. The equivalent of la banlieue would once have been “inner west”, also associated with a concentration of social problems, but most inner city areas have been gentrified these days.

I began my search for a sister suburb for Limay by contacting friends who live in other countries. This is how I defined Limay:

It is outer, outer suburbia (almost Normandy), a worker town built in the sixties with some high rise and a lot of individual houses. There are grazing cows alongside heavy industry. The municipality is run by communists.

Their replies:

Comrade Heidi: The thought of communist mayors in the US made me giggle. I do not think it is possible for there to be any elected official in America who openly professed belief in communist theory or practice... We Americans love our bootstrap free-market capitalism with an ardency that borders on the fetishistic. It might be possible, with a little digging, to find communities where there is a thriving open or openly unofficial barter economy that just skirts the nuanced edges of a collective consciousness. But I would guess that the rhetoric would be libertarian (Live Free or Die being one of our founding mottoes) rather than communist or socialist. Now, maybe you need to think about compare/contrast in your sister suburbs project. I am sure you could find many US cities as robustly capitalist as your EU communists.

(KC Bitterman)

We don't have any communists here in Hong Kong. We have a benevolent dictatorship of real estate moguls organised by huge bureaucracy. (British + Chinese = serious love of bureaucracy). We hardly believe in helping neighbours, let alone community self-management.

(Tanya Hart)

In England the suburbs and communism are like chalk and cheese, you'll never find them together! In England suburbia and conservatism are what go hand in hand. If you want to know what people in English suburbs are thinking then you should read the Daily Mail (www.dailymail.co.uk).

(Craig Dickson)

Faced with the difficulty of finding an exact equivalent, I decided to choose a suburb that, like Limay, corresponded to a national definition of suburbia. I chose the one I know best: Wheelers Hill, 22 km south east of the center of Melbourne, where I lived from the age of 7 to 17. A recent visit showed it had become more prosperous and less peripheral than in the mid 1980's when I left.

Interestingly, the municipal website for Monash that encompasses Wheelers Hill, gives the mobile phone numbers of councilors but not their political affiliation. When I called Monash council, the receptionist was not authorized to tell me which party the mayor belonged to. She put me through to a series of people who couldn't tell me or didn't know. The mayor herself answered my email to say membership of a political party at a municipal level is like membership of any other club – a personal affair. She belongs to the Labour Party. I rang Limay council and asked the same question. The immediate, one-word answer was: communist.

I plan to use the two rooms of the exhibition space at Les Réservoirs like visitors' centers for these two suburbs. I will explore the urban fabric and atmosphere of both in wall paintings, paintings and photographs.

Heidi Wood

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