

Private property and the *périurbain*

Propiedad privada y lo periurbano

Fabrizio Gallanti

Director Arc en Rêve Centre d'Architecture. Visiting Professor at the Architectural Association School of Architecture

In “La Horse”, a 1970 film by Pierre Granier-Deferre, Jean Gabin plays the part of Auguste Maroilleur, a rich farmer in Normandy. When a gendarme asks him what he does for a living, Maroilleur proudly retorts: “landowner!”

I discovered this film thanks to my father-in-law, who had been undersecretary in the government of Salvador Allende in Chile. He told me how, when the film was screened in the upper-class districts of Santiago, the mainly well-heeled audience would clap and roar approvingly when they heard Gabin’s proud rejoinder. This reaction also reflected the opposition of the Chilean middle class to the Socialist government of the time, which it saw as a threat to its privileges, in particular the sacred inviolable right to own private property.

If we look at suburban areas in whatever country, be it France, China or Brazil, it’s obvious that the ideology that underlies their forms remains that of private property. The ground is marked out to define perimeters covering a precise number of square metres or feet, of acres or hectares, subject to daily variations in land value. Within these ill-defined boundaries where growing built-up areas are interwoven with fields and woodland used for farming, what is built depends less on actual need or desire than on money.

Figure 3. Télérama, February 2010.
Télérama is a weekly French cultural and television magazine published in Paris, France.
The name is a contraction of its earlier title: Télévision-Radio-Cinéma.



If ten hectares planted with sugar beet are still profitable, they will be cultivated for a few more years. If not, they will be built on and turned into residential areas sold at competitive prices. With the scant power it still possesses, the public sector is merely put in charge of “regional development” and “services”. In other words, it is expected to create connections that facilitate mobility between different areas and facilities —housing estates, hypermarkets, office buildings, leisure centres, petrol stations— and to build a bare minimum of public amenities — a few schools, a swimming pool, a fire station— .

The suburban is different from the periphery: the latter grew in proximity of cities, often located just outside walls and fortifications, thus it carried the memory of the urban, that substituted former agrarian land to give room to new housing and industries. Its growth was faster than the cities it encircles yet slower than the accelerated transformation under our eyes today. The periphery is the past, the suburban is the present. The periphery was an excrescence of the urban, the suburban aspires to be a livable countryside. The periphery is shrinking, the suburban is in expansion. The suburban is hybrid: the traces of agriculture persist and become a palimpsest malleable enough to accommodate a variety of seemingly contrasting uses. (Fig.1)

It is not formless as some commentators might like to describe it, because it incarnates and translates economy in its almost purest form. It is, in fact, a surface of possibilities. It is a patchwork and a screenshot of a videogame, Sim City.

In France, 30% of the population lives outside of compact cities and towns but also does not consider, in census and polls, to be rural. To capture the essence of the territories inhabited by this population, the term “périurbain” has been in use since the ‘80s. It differentiates from the US concept of the suburban, because while it attributes to the car —another example of private property as the concept upon which these places are conceived— a crucial role in their development, it acknowledges the pre-existence of land uses that are sometimes millennia-old. Its usage has expanded in the 2000s and now completely dominates economic, political and social discourses, having substituted the term *périphéries* and *suburbain*, which anyway was never used frequently. The legal framework within which a specific municipality is defined as *périurbaine*, thus attached to a larger city and benefiting from various levels of integration in services, is that at least 40% of the population commutes for work towards denser areas.¹

1 Martin Vanier, “Dans l’épaisseur du périurbain”, *Espaces et sociétés* 148-149 (2012/I): 211–218.



Figure 2. Bruno Fontana, L’expérience du territoire, “Levitt France. Une Utopie pavillonnaire”, *Typologies*, Évry, 2014. © Bruno Fontana/Rencontres Arles. Source: <https://www.amc-archi.com/photos/rencontres-de-la-photographie-2017-arles-entre-dans-l-arene,7144/l-experience-du-territoire-l.2> (Accessed Junio, 2022)

This is a French peculiarity: compared to Italy or Germany, where industrial manufacture is often scattered and associated to smaller villages and has managed to subsist, France has suffered from more violent processes of de-industrialization, where tertiary activities are concentrated in centers and have become the principal employers. Therefore, the nature of the périurbain is mostly residential: it is there where the future *propriétaires* will be able to afford more spacious homes and terrains for their families because real-estate in the centers is less and less affordable. In that sense, the périurbain is profoundly different from the US suburban sprawl, that caused the crisis and collapse of many downtown areas, in France the périurbain is the solution that the market has to offer to the middle-class that has no longer the means to afford to purchase houses or apartments in the centers, that are, in general, thriving. (Fig.2)

The *périurbain* is at the same time ugly and sublime. It is composed of elements that are repetitive and ubiquitous: the single family house, *le pavillon*, deployed in rationalized aggregations *les lotissements*”, offered by specialized companies that have streamlined their offer down to the smaller details; the commercial sectors, *la zone commerciale* composed by an aggregation of prefabricated boxes, easily accessible by highways and ubiquitous roundabouts, dedicated to different merchandise —the hypermarket, the DIY equipment and materials, the sports and leisure accessories, the garden furniture, the consumers’ electronics; and the remnants of rural villages and towns, crystallized in a picturesque and expendable ideas of the past— it is where the farmers’ market and the *brocante* will happen once per week. (Fig.3)



Figure 3. Vertical Pools, 2016

© Eric Tabuchi.

Source: <https://www.erictabuchi.net/filter/Photoworks/Vertical-Pools>
(Accessed Junio, 2022)

It is intertwined with agriculture: for instance, the prized vineyards of Pessac, close to Bordeaux, are surrounded by bland tiny villas and non-descript commercial hangars.

The *périurbain* is also sublime, because it takes advantage of centuries of careful tending of the landscape, therefore, it expresses regional differences in topography and vegetation, and it benefits from salient geographic features: the Alps around Grenoble or the Mediterranean bush around Avignon.

Even if deemed ugly by the urbanite elites that still dominate french culture, the *périurbain* seems to be doing quite fine and has no intention of ever becoming urban.