

2016-5

You Can Forget About a Housing Recovery With our Skills Drain

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Recommended Citation

Sirr, L. (2016) You can forget about a housing recovery with our skills drain. *The Sunday Times* 15.05.2016. doi:10.21427/a3p6-vr81

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What's French for Nimby?

In France, they love their patrimoine, or cultural heritage — at least, that's what they claim. Why, then, are developers being allowed to tear the heart out of historic villages, asks Edward Girardet

More than a decade and a half ago, my American wife and I moved to Cessy, then a relatively idyllic French village (population 4,000) in the beautiful Pays de Gex, at the foot of the Jura Mountains, near Switzerland. Dating back to Roman, even Celtic, times, it had a medieval church, three functioning farms and a mixed community of French and other nationals, ranging from Australians to Greenlanders.

Cessy is perhaps better known today for Cern's Large Hadron Collider (LHC), which lies 100 metres underground on its outskirts: we would be the first to vanish in the event of a black hole being created. Like many expatriates who work in Switzerland but live in France — Geneva is a half-hour drive away — we were drawn by lower costs and direct access to the countryside.

During the summer, we swim in Lake Geneva and go hiking or white-water canoeing in the Alps. We're only an hour from Chamonix and two from Verbier. Furthermore, we're just a hop, skip and jump from the Burgundy vineyards, while Provence is barely four hours' drive south. We can do day trips to northern Italy via the Mont Blanc tunnel, or explore the old town of Basel and even the German and Austrian sides of Lake Constance, to the northeast.

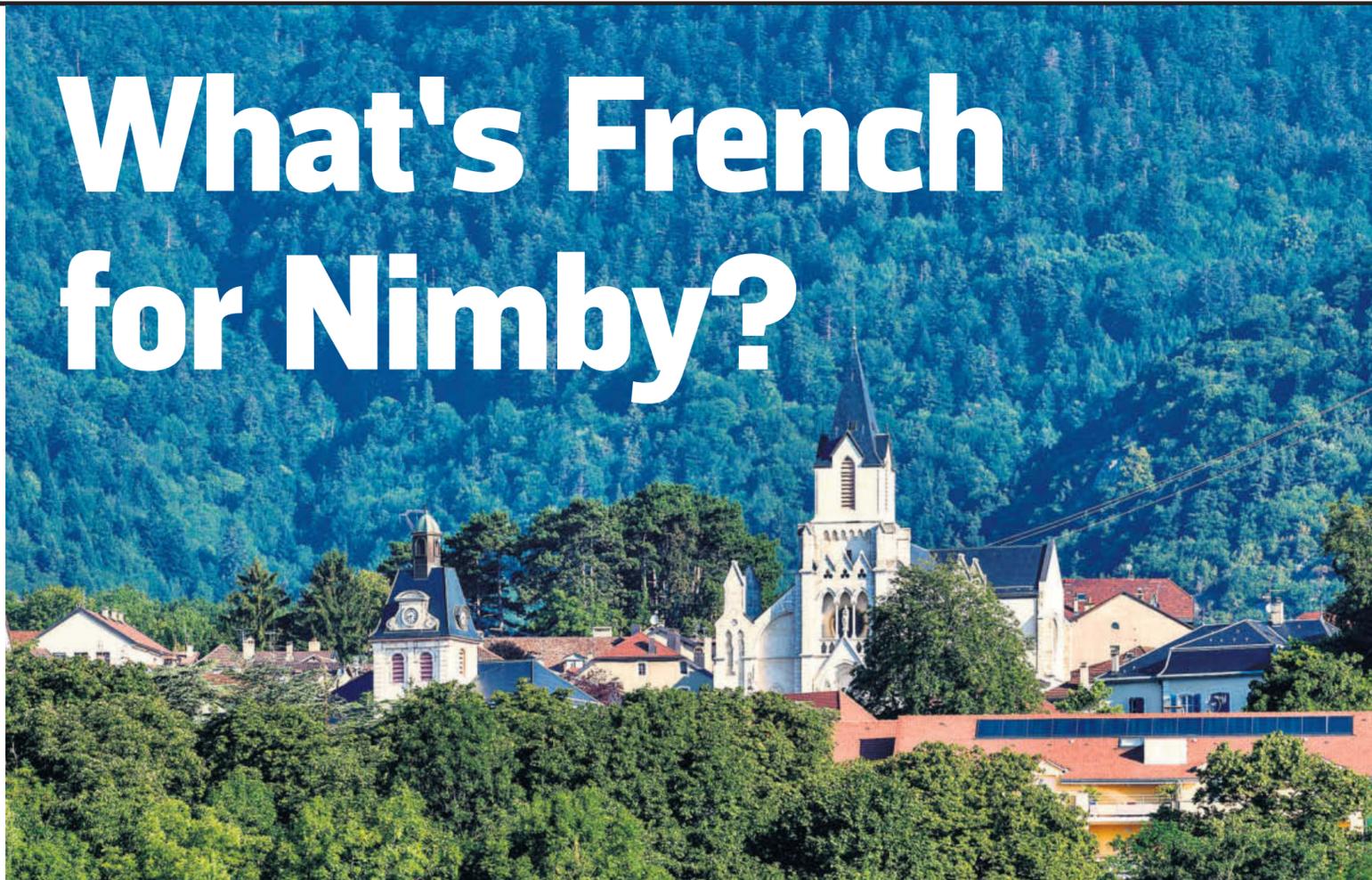
From a quality-of-life point of view, it's hard to beat. But this is now under threat. As in many other parts of France, from the Côte d'Azur to Normandy, property developers, or *promoteurs*, are being allowed to destroy the few old stone houses and barns that remain in their village centres. Rather than incorporating them into the architecture, they replace them with unsightly high-rises that have little to do with local character. And upset residents, regardless of nationality, are discovering there is little they can do to stop them.

For the Pays de Gex, one of the fastest-growing regions in France thanks to its proximity to Geneva, this surge of construction is not only leading to increased traffic and pollution, but transforming villages into Ceausescu-style concrete landscapes.

Local infrastructure — public transport, sewerage, even the police — is unable to cope. While some mayors make the effort to protect their *patrimoine*, or cultural heritage, others seek to expand their *communes* as to enhance political profiles and tax bases. They are quite happy to see old structures bulldozed, making way for cookie-cutter designs.

While these may legally meet central government construction norms aimed at urbanising the nation's villages and towns, they fail to take into account local character. Under French law, a building needs to be classified as *patrimoine* by the Ministry of Culture to be fully protected. In the Pays de Gex, only one building is officially designated: the 18th-century Château de Voltaire, in Ferney. Village fountains are also supposed to be protected, but the classification is vague.

The debate today, however, not just in the Pays de Gex, but throughout France, is whether local residents should have a say in what should be preserved. In Cessy, our mayor recently granted permission for a Paris-based company to knock down a clutch of 18th- and 19th-century buildings in the *bourg*, the traditional part of the village, and replace them with bland four-storey blocks of flats. The scheme includes



underground parking for 100 cars in an area known for its flooding. None of the old houses has a cellar, and for good reason — most calls to the fire department are not for putting out flames, but for pumping out basements.

Residents have protested, but to deaf ears. *Promoteurs* have got their way and are harassing homeowners into selling with repeated phone calls or letters. While some French architects pointedly create projects that respect heritage, such as using the original walls, they maintain developers make more money from “knocking and building”. A Canadian friend who lives in the nearby village of Prévessin says they have “rubbleised” one of the top examples of early-19th-century farm architecture in the area, despite pledges by its mayor to preserve the heritage.

One problem is that France's 36,000 mayors are among the most powerful in Europe. As Irish, British, Dutch, German and other EU residents point out, there is no way that town councils in their home countries would grant permission to destroy centuries-old edifices without going through elaborate public consultation processes. “You try doing that in the UK,” says one resident, who is originally from Bristol.

All this raises questions about accountability, and memories of past mayoral misconduct don't help. During the Second World War, mayors and their entourages in the Pays de Gex did highly profitable business under German



The old town of Gex, where none of the old buildings are protected under French heritage laws, has been left open to the cookie-cutter designs of modern apartments, left

occupation. The Gestapo chief Klaus Barbie was head of security just up the road in Gex, while on the outskirts of Cessy stands a former hotel that served as a Wehrmacht brothel. Some local families still refuse to speak to each other because of past collaboration.

When we first came to Cessy, it was run by the second-longest-serving mayor in France. For 37 years, he treated the village as a personal fiefdom. Conflict of interest was rife, particularly with regard to real estate and construction. Even the *préfet* in Bourg-en-Bresse, the Paris representative for the département of Ain, expressed dismay at how Cessy was being run.

The old mayor was finally ousted and sentenced to six months in prison for illicit dealings, but never served his time. He was replaced by a local pharmacist, Christophe Bouvier, who made clear he would embrace environmental values and heed the voice of the community, including more culturally aware newcomers from other parts of France. There was also a feeling that, given Cessy's growing number of EU residents, who

are allowed to vote locally, there would be greater transparency.

For example, according to David Yeates, editor of *French-property.com*, about 400,000 British and Irish people live in France, with 200,000 houses and flats owned by them as primary or secondary residences. Up to 5,000 have settled with their families in the Pays de Gex, with a similar number in Haute-Savoie, in towns such as Chamonix and Annecy. “Unlike the Swiss side, where residents have to register, EU nationals can come and go, so nobody really knows,” says Sian Sibley, of World Radio Switzerland.

Many work for the United Nations or international NGOs and companies on the Swiss side. Others have set up businesses ranging from winter-sports operations to internet-based firms, or shops such as Jim's British Market, established by Jim Anderson, a former UN employee, in the Pays de Gex town of St Genis.

In Cessy, sadly, “progress” seems to have the upper hand. As one member of the municipality explained: “The village council was elected to make these decisions, so there is no need to consult.” Its urban planners argue that replacing traditional buildings with taller modern structures is more energy-efficient, and hence responds to green trends. “I am not saying these mayors are corrupt, but a lot of people have their suspicions,” one angry French resident says. “The mayors

operate with incredible arrogance. They're like mini Napoleons.”

According to Bouvier, who is also president of the Pays de Gex Community of Communes, which represents 27 towns and villages, France has more than enough heritage. The traditional Gessien buildings are “not interesting”, he says. He also says his hands are tied by complicated French laws, and that the local urban densification plans imposed by Paris, known as *plans local d'urbanisme*, or PLUs, make it impossible to halt such destruction.

Not all of France's municipalities agree. For Marion Lepresle, a councillor in Amiens, the capital of the Somme département, north of Paris, assertions of hands being tied before French law are rubbish. She maintains mayors have the right to demand revisions of the PLU to preserve their villages' historic bourgs.

“It is up to the mayor, as representative of the community, to undertake the necessary steps with the Ministry of Culture to request a protected perimeter as part of the *bourg*,” Lepresle says. Ain's prefecture also perceives this as a feeble excuse. “We're always being depicted as the villains,” said a spokesman in Bourg-en-Bresse.

Bouvier argues that he and other mayors are also under pressure from the Swiss. Given Switzerland's reliance on skilled foreign labour — nearly 28% of the workforce, whether hotel workers or

corporate CEOs — there is a need to house them somewhere. One third of its 300,000 *frontaliers*, or cross-border workers, live on the French side, the others in Germany, Italy and Austria. Housing is tight, but even if Geneva is undertaking large projects, it is reluctant to ruin its pristine countryside.

François Longchamp, president of Geneva's state council, admits that trans-border construction is crucial for the *frontaliers*. “But we're not asking the French to ruin their cultural heritage,” he says.

Despite talk of the Pays de Gex doubling or even tripling its population over the next two decades, it faces a precarious property bubble as developers continue building, encouraged by low interest rates. More than 2,000 housing units remain empty. Many Swiss who were attracted by lower costs are moving back because of France's new inheritance rules. Even French entrepreneurs are transferring their businesses across the border, hampered by burdensome tax and social-security laws.

This has led some to propose that this French territorial pocket should become a “special economic zone” along the lines of Shenzhen, in China. The Swiss already dutifully hand over part of their *frontalier* taxes to the French for improving local infrastructure, but a significant portion is now being grabbed by the cash-strapped government. As with other frontier zones, Paris treats the Pays de Gex like some remote overseas territory. The government recently decreed that *frontaliers* working in neighbouring countries can no longer use their health insurance for more conveniently located cross-border hospitals, obliging them to travel miles in the other direction to have babies or seek emergency treatment.

With so many mayors unwilling to halt the ravaging of their *patrimoine*, a group of schoolchildren in the Pays de Gex are taking action. They have written an open letter to President Hollande, asking why the government is allowing French village heritage to be destroyed.

“If the current generation is incapable of deciding what is best for us, then the future generation should have the right to be heard,” they said.

Hollande has responded to these young future constituents, noting his concern. He has also passed on their letter to the Ministry of Culture. *On vera*. We shall see.

Edward Girardet is a Swiss-American foreign correspondent. His most recent book is *Killing the Cranes: A Reporter's Journey Through Three Decades of War in Afghanistan* (Chelsea Green). He is still renovating a 17th-century house in France

CESSY

You can forget about a housing recovery with our skills drain

Over the past 10 years or so, civil service and local authority staffing levels have been dramatically reduced. Those who retired have not been replaced, and other employees have left for the private sector or have taken early retirement because they were unhappy with pay cuts and changes to their contracts.

The results have been mixed. No doubt money has been saved through reduced state pay and some of the employees who left might have been of limited value in the first place. Workloads have increased for those left behind, but there have also been costs that show not all skills can be put on a balance sheet. The most significant of these has been the loss of institutional memory.

The move towards contract employment and a change in attitudes towards work in the private and public sectors, where variety, not stability, is seen as attractive, particularly by younger workers, has meant that people are quicker to change jobs than ever before. In doing so they're

taking their knowledge with them. More than that, many are not as willing to share all they know in their job because knowledge is key to getting a new position.

In the public sector, where contracts are increasingly common, retirement and non-replacement of staff has had a significant impact on the skill set in the civil service and state agencies. The result is a rise in

the outsourcing of jobs that would normally be done in-house. The consultants employed will produce the final work as required, but the knowledge transfer to the contracting body — the local authority or other agency — is minimal.

Culture also plays a role in the loss of institutional memory. The practice in the civil service and in some local authorities of regularly moving staff from department to

department, and a preference for a competence base over skills, is responsible for a skin-deep level of knowledge. This is of questionable long-term benefit because any acquired knowledge will be transferred along with the employee. In addition, few organisations give kudos to staff who admit to any previous errors of judgment — there's never any reward for failure.

Outside organisations and bodies also become frustrated at constantly having to deal with yet another new person. Just when they feel that the new person is getting to grips with their needs and requirements, which can take a year or two, that person is moved on — and so the process starts again.

Hiring young people on cheap contracts is seen as a convenient solution to staffing needs. These workers are usually enthusiastic, but lack institutional memory. This memory is crucial when it comes to public service experts recognising repeating patterns of disaster. A housing boom is a great example.



It can be politically convenient but risky for past lessons to be forgotten

A recovery in house-building will be impeded in both the public and private sectors by this loss of memory. A shortage of skilled staff at the coalface of construction will lead to higher wages and ultimately higher sales prices, or at least less of a chance of sales prices falling. It may also lead to the employment of

less experienced tradespeople and technicians.

In the public sector, a loss of institutional memory can also be felt from the unskilled to the higher-skilled ends of the spectrum. The workers who have built up years of experience and local knowledge will know that if culvert A is blocked, then fields

B and C will flood. I came across such a scenario last year when a housing development was proposed on land liable to flooding. Nobody but a recently retired workman recalled how a simple drain blockage 2km away had previously led to flooding in that exact same field.

At the more senior end, the loss of decades of technical experience means constantly reinventing the wheel, or more usually outsourcing the problem, which leads to its own problems. Various components of the housing debate are going through this process of re-learning.

Let's not forget, it's also sometimes politically convenient to forget past lessons. It's certainly not reassuring to hear yet again more calls for tax breaks for homeowners and incentives for developers, thus bringing us further back towards 1997 instead of forward towards 2017.

As the quote goes: it's ironic how often we remember the things worth forgetting, and forget those things worth remembering.

LORCAN SIRR
ON THE
HOME FRONT

