Coexisting with Nature: The Huts of the Camargue Wetlands

Catherine T. Dunlop

Summary

Rising out of France's largest wetlands ecosystem, the Camargue huts' unique architectural design reflects the practical wisdom of ordinary farmers, ranchers, and fishermen who adapted their dwellings to a harsh windblown environment with limited building materials. Though the Camargue huts have fallen out of use today, their thoughtful design and careful attunement to environmental conditions offer valuable lessons for green architects today.

Through his popular collection of short stories, *Letters from My Windmill* (1869), Alphonse Daudet invited French readers to explore the diverse and visually stunning environments of Southern France, many for the first time. One of Daudet's stories focused on a particularly exotic part of Provençal landscape: a wetlands area at the meeting place of the Rhône River and the Mediterranean Sea, known as the Camargue. A watery and shifting environment that was for centuries prone to cycles of flooding, the Camargue—now classified as a French Nature Reserve—is home to a vibrant ecosystem of short grasses, tall reeds, migrating birds, wild white horses, and stocky bulls. But it was not just the colorful array of flora and fauna that attracted Daudet's attention to the Camargue's distinct landscape. He was equally fascinated by the unusual built environment that he discovered in the southern French wetlands, especially a type of strangely shaped dwelling known as the *cabane de Camargue* or the Camargue hut.

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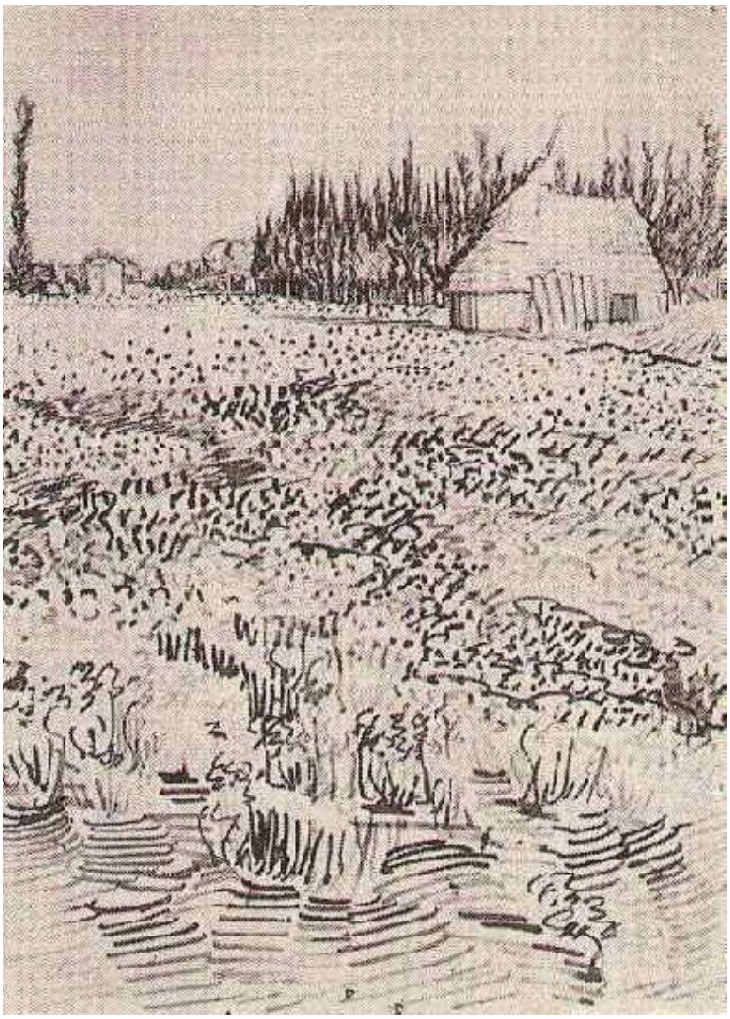

Vincent van Gogh, *Landscape with Hut in the Camargue*, 1888.

Illustration by Vincent van Gogh, 1888.
Accessed via WikiArt on 3 June 2019. Click here to view source.

"A roof of reeds, walls of reeds, dry and yellow, that is the hut," explained the traveling game-hunter who was the protagonist in Daudet's short story, *In the Camargue*. Its architectural form dating back to the Roman settlement of Provence, the Camargue hut—used by fishers, ranchers, hunters, shepherds, and farmers—mirrored the nature around it, both in terms of its building materials and in its structural adaptations to the local climate. To construct the dwellings, inhabitants of the Camargue gathered reeds—which they called *sagno*—and thatched them together into a distinctive house that was long and low-to-the-ground with a rounded apse in the northwesterly direction to divert airflow from the mistral, the region's fierce, fast-moving wind that regularly swept unimpeded across the flat marshes. Indeed, for the game-hunter in Daudet's story, it was only after a violent wind began to blow that the reasons for the hut's unusual design became clear. "At night, when the mistral blows, and the house creaks everywhere and the wind brings the roar of the distant sea, increasing and swelling with sounds, one thinks one is lying in the cabin of a boat." Like a boat jostled by waves, the Camargue hut's lightweight reed design allowed the building to move with the wind as a single beam in the middle of the house kept it "anchored" to the ground.

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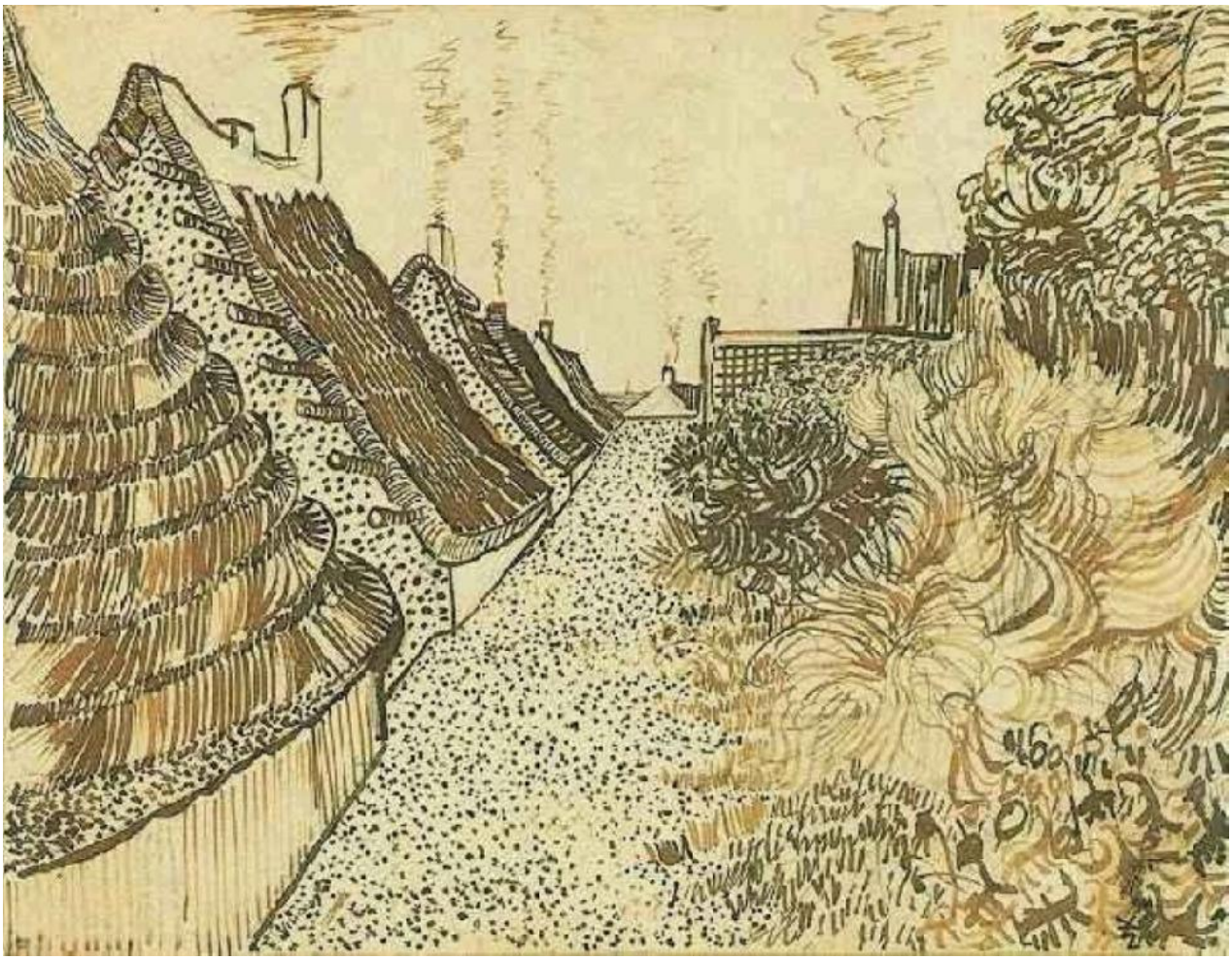
Historians are just beginning to explore what ordinary buildings can teach us about practices of environmental adaptation across the globe. In a country as environmentally diverse as France, vernacular architecture embodies the heterogeneity of French regional cultures and their close associations with their surrounding ecosystems. Humble dwellings like the Camargue huts invite us to tell a different kind of story about human-environment relationships, one less focused on human beings' mastery of nature and more focused on two-way interactions and thoughtful strategies of coexistence. The huts thus embody what anthropologist Tim Ingold calls *co-option*: when building designs are inspired by naturally occurring patterns in the environment. They also offer a high degree of what archeologist Michael Given calls *conviviality*: sustainable and balanced co-living between humans and nonhuman nature.



Vincent van Gogh, *Street in Saintes-Maries*, 1888.

Illustration by Vincent van Gogh, 1888.
Accessed via WikiArt on 3 June 2019. Click here to view source.

One artist who seemed to understand the reciprocal relationship between nature and vernacular architecture was the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh. During his stay in Provence from 1888–1889, Van Gogh harvested reed pens directly from the wetlands, using them to create pen-and-ink drawings that beautifully evoked the fusion of natural and human habitats in the Camargue. In a letter to his brother Theo, Van Gogh compared the Camargue

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huts to “those of our Drenthe heaths and peat bogs.” For Van Gogh, the Camargue huts were active and alive, just like the reeds surrounding them and the moving air swirling around their walls. Through his pen-and-ink drawings, Van Gogh pictured the homes rising organically, almost like plants, out of the wild landscape. In his colorful portrait of three huts from Saintes Maries-de-la-Mer, one of the coastal villages in the Camargue, Van Gogh set the homes against a sky of deep and vibrant blue, the kind of atmosphere typically created by the cloud-chasing gusts of the mistral. “Not everyone,” he wrote to Theo, “would have the patience to let themselves be eaten by mosquitos, and to struggle against this infuriating nuisance of the constant mistral.” But the visual possibilities of the Camargue were hard to give up, and Van Gogh admitted that “the appeal of these vast landscapes is for me very intense.”

Vincent van Gogh, *Cabanes blanches aux Saintes-Maries* [Three white cottages in Saintes-Maries], 1888.

Painting by Vincent van Gogh, 1888. Held by Kunsthaus Zürich, Switzerland.
Accessed via Wikimedia on 3 June 2019. Click here to view source.

What lessons do old buildings like the Camargue huts have to teach us in the twenty-first century? In considering this question, we must remember that French and Provençal leaders from the past often drew the wrong lessons from the South’s architectural heritage. Right-wing politicians, particularly during the Vichy Regime, framed the

Camargue's traditional huts as symbols of an exclusionary, ethnically-pure Provençal identity. But France's regional architecture need not be interpreted through the narrow-minded lens of ethnic identity. Today, we can look to France's traditional dwellings, constructed from local materials rather than from concrete, as examples of balanced coexistence between human beings and the living environment. At a moment in history when the challenge of sustainable living looms large, vernacular architecture can offer models of smart, locally-generated dwellings that are attuned to the particular climate, vegetation, and geology of their surroundings. Rather than look to one-size-fits-all solutions for better building design, we can instead find environmental wisdom in an historical archive of strange-looking houses like the Camargue huts.

Further readings:

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- Zaretsky, Robert. *Cock and Bull Stories: Folco de Baroncelli and the Invention of the Camargue*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.

Related links:

- Camargue Museum
  https://www.arlestourisme.com/en/museum-of-the-camargue.html
- Dunlop, Catherine. "Looking at the Wind." *Environmental History* 20 (2015): 505–518.
  https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emv047
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  https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203818000089
- Hochhäusl, S., et al. "Field Notes: Architecture and the Environment." *Architectural Histories* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1–13.
  http://doi.org/10.5334/ah.259
- Parc naturel régional de Camargue
  http://www.parc-camargue.fr
- Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters
  http://www.vangoghletters.org

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Websites linked in image captions:

- https://www.wikiart.org/en/vincent-van-gogh/landscape-with-hut-in-the-camargue-1888/
- https://www.wikiart.org/en/vincent-van-gogh/street-in-saintes-maries-1888
- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Van_Gogh_-_Drei_wei%C3%9Fe_H%C3%BCtten_in_Saintes-Maries.jpeg

About the author:

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Catherine Dunlop is associate professor of modern European history at Montana State University, Bozeman. Her first book, *Cartophilia: Maps and the Search for Identity in the French-German Borderland*, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2015. Her current book project, *Mistral: Environment and Society in Nineteenth-Century France*, explores how people from different backgrounds—including sailors, farmers, doctors, writers, and painters—interacted with southern France's famous wind. Her scholarship has been supported by the Rachel Carson Center, the Camargo Foundation, the Aspen Institute, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Georges Lurcy Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation.