

The Rural Settlement in France by Suzanne Hirschi, architect

Rural settlement is a major component of the landscape in the French countryside. Its diversity gives special identity to different regions. French built heritage is greatly influenced by natural conditions such as relief, climate, geology, water or vegetation.

The influence of the natural environment

Natural or baked clay, thatch, stones, or wood are materials taken from the ground, the subsoil or provided by vegetation. The use of these modest and simple local resources and the technology of rural construction have been primarily dictated by economical reasons.

Shapes, forms, orientation, openings, coating and colours naturally show the adaptation of the buildings to the local climate. Sun, rain, snow and wind are also features mastered by the peasant-builders. The rural house protects its inhabitants from the climatic excess but it also uses the climate for their benefit, namely for maintaining hygiene and health. The location of buildings is determined by the presence of water for the use of men, animals and plantations.

The Human factor

Personal factor has a decisive role in the development of the built heritage. Peasant's dwelling is first of all his working tool; therefore rural economy determines the running of a farm. The organisation of a farm reflects the modes of exploitations of the soil by generations of peasants. Consequently, the house changes with the passing years in order to respond to specific requirements of production like ploughing, breeding, truck farming, vineyard etc. The distribution of buildings in space, the use of materials and variation of shapes exhibit the adaptations and changes made according to the needs of the moment. The farmhouse also shows progress of construction techniques passed on from one generation of peasants to the next.

In a larger context, the study of the rural house brings us to examine the organisation of rural areas in respect to agricultural activity. The use of space is shown especially by the concentration or dispersion of buildings, and by the settlement of hamlets or villages along main roads or rivers.

Last but not least, the rural settlement reflects the social order, the organisation of property ownership and the mode of transmission of the possessions. Between the modest house of the simple farm worker and the manor of the lord, owner of his grounds there exists a whole range of houses, which illustrate social hierarchy established according to land ownership.

The inventory of built heritage in the rural setting is not limited solely to family dwellings and utility buildings. It also includes elements related to the needs of the whole community, like wells, fountains, public washing-places, mills, baker's ovens, chapels, shrines etc. These constructions are part of every day living. Additionally, the environment of the farm involves other components of landscape such as ponds, fences, barriers, stone walls, hedges, vegetable gardens, orchards and so on.

Types of Rural Settlement

The classification of the rural settlement takes into consideration natural character of the soil. According to its type, we have houses made of clay, stones or wood. It also takes into account technical, social and economic factors which shaped it; respectfully, we see blockhouses, multiple story houses, houses with yards or detached houses.

Buildings are also classified according to various elements:

- for lodgings, they are walls, roofs constructions and rooftops, openings, floors, vaults, chimneys, staircases, outside coatings, colours, interiors, etc.
- for utility buildings, they are granaries, granges, barns, stables, pigeon houses, sheepfolds not forgetting cellars, press houses, wells, cisterns, ovens, bake houses etc.

Rural France is made up of vast territories identified by different specifics. These entities cover such areas as Alps, Alsace, Basque Country, Béarn, Berry, Burgundy, Brittany, Champagne, Flandre-Artois-Picardy, Franche-Comté, Gastonia, Isle de France and Soissonais, Languedoc-Roussillon and Rouergue, Limousin, Loire Valley, Lorraine, Lyon and Bresse, Region de Toulouse and Ariégeois, Normandy, Périgord, Poitou-Charente, Provence, Quercy and Vendée. Within these territories we can observe not only the recurring characteristics, which make up the identity of a given built heritage, but also singular characteristics related to local, geological, climatic, or agrarian specifics.

Sadly, the rural settlement constitutes an endangered heritage. At times it has been strongly damaged due to complex changes in agriculture and breeding. Traditional building techniques have been abandoned or forgotten, which has caused irreversible disappearance of some peasant buildings. Other dwellings have been denatured by restorations, which failed to respect the specifics of their original identity. Considering this state of the affairs, special measures have been taken to preserve French built heritage. The protection of the rural settlement and its transmission to future generations involves conservation, preservation and rehabilitation, which, while incorporating standards for modern comfort, would commit to its integrity.

With the new agricultural constraints, one of the major tasks nowadays is to find new assignments for the unsuited and forsaken rural buildings. The value of this heritage can be brought up through framework of numerous projects, for example tourist, economic, educational, social or cultural development.

Legal and Financial Measures and Council

Different institutions make use of information, diagnosis and counselling related to land. They are in particular Architects of Buildings of France (ABF), Chief Architects of Historical Buildings, Government Consultant Architects and Landscape Designers and CAUE. CAUE (Councils of Architecture, Town Planning and Environment) provides information or advice by individuals or groups who are particularly interested in vernacular architecture.

In addition, Regional Natural Reserves point out the importance of the study of landscape entities. The charter of any Regional Natural Reserve (PNR) includes development of inventories, the hierarchy of the heritage and the development of charters of heritage in order to determine and put in place a policy of protection of the built heritage.

A network of associated organisations has been brought together to play an important part in the study of built heritage. They include French Association of Museums of Agriculture and Rural Heritage, National Federation of Habitat and Rural Development, National Federation of Rural Lodgings and Peasant Houses of France. Other organisations like the French Foundation or the Heritage Foundation, created in 1996, provide assistance to owners in their efforts to preserve and bring out the built heritage. Councils, inventories or diagnostics have been established as a collaborated effort by the DRAC (Regional Direction of Cultural Affairs) with the assistance of educational network, especially the colleges of architecture.

Various legal bodies have been able to consolidate projects of valorisation of the rural settlement. This concerns, for example, classification or inscription in the inventory of historical buildings, classification or inscription of sites, POS (planning of grounds), ZPPAUP (Zone of the Protection of Architectural, Urban and Landscape Heritage), communal charter or MARNU (Clauses of Application of the National Rules of Town Planning), planning and demolishing permits, littoral law, mountain law, or classification of territory in National Parks. Regional nature reserves have established contractual measurements such as charters or contracts of landscape or soil.

Practice shows however, that legal protection of the rural settlement in France is limited, especially because farms remain primarily places of production subjected to economic constraints.

Consequently, the preservation of rural settlement depends on the estate. The first initiators of revalorisation are simply the inhabitants, owners, farmers, sometimes even associations for the protection of the heritage. However, Government and local authorities can intervene financially to support private initiatives a restoration projects involves the heritage invaluable for the community,

Financial means are worked out by communes (or territorial publicly-owned establishments within the framework of intercommunalities, inter-commune unions, communities of communes, regional nature reserves, public interest groups for local development), local authorities (Regions, Departments, Overseas Territories), and are possibly supported by the Government and Europe.

Finally, the patronage, prizes or labels can contribute to the financing of initiatives carried out by private individuals or associations. Examples are the Heritage Foundation, labels such as Rural Heritage Commune, Rural Lodgings of France and Welcome to the Farm. Unfortunately, few of the contemporary projects realized in the rural setting take into consideration its environmental conditions and constraints (relief, climate, vegetation) or the imprint that has been left behind by agricultural activity. None-the-less, it is the constructions of today that constitute the heritage of tomorrow therefore, we should be especially concerned about their quality and the impact they are going to have in the future. The research and conclusions that have been worked out and put in place for the management of the heritage can contribute to the reflexion on the integration of contemporary buildings in rural landscape and their adaptation to the rural society of today.