

Learning from Cabañal: From Vernacular to Contemporary House Design of Mediterranean Seashore



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the adobe-based fishermen's barracks of El Cabañal, a historic seaside district of Valencia, as a critical source of architectural knowledge for contemporary Mediterranean housing. El Cabañal emerged primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a linear maritime settlement shaped by fishing economies, coastal regulations, and collective life patterns. Its urban fabric developed parallel to the shoreline, characterized by narrow plots, repetitive housing units, and a strong relationship between domestic space and productive coastal activities. Despite later pressures of modernization and real-estate speculation, the district preserves a rich vernacular heritage rooted in material pragmatism and climatic intelligence.

At the core of this heritage are the adobe fishermen's barracks, modest dwellings built through incremental and community-based processes. Their plan typology is typically narrow and elongated, responding to parcel subdivision and orientation constraints. A simple axial organization—often consisting of a sequential arrangement of living, sleeping, and service spaces—allows cross-ventilation from street to courtyard or rear patio. The ground-floor emphasis and limited height reflect both structural logic and the socio-economic conditions of fishing families, privileging compactness, adaptability, and ease of construction.

Materially, these barracks rely on adobe walls combined with timber roof structures and ceramic tile coverings. Adobe, produced locally from earth, water, and organic fibers, provides high thermal mass and hygroscopic performance, stabilizing interior temperatures and humidity levels in a humid coastal climate. Thick load-bearing walls ensure structural stability while minimizing the need for imported materials or complex technologies. The construction system is low-energy, repairable, and deeply embedded in local knowledge networks.

From a contemporary perspective, the sustainable qualities of the Cabañal barracks are particularly instructive. Their reliance on local materials, passive climatic strategies, and adaptable spatial layouts aligns closely with present-day concerns regarding ecological responsibility and economic resilience. These qualities demonstrate that sustainability is not an external technological add-on but an intrinsic outcome of vernacular intelligence shaped by environment, economy, and culture.

The paper, thus, will be focused on learning from vernacular adobe Cabañal houses to creating a new sustainable contemporary housing universe for Mediterranean seaside contexts in general.

KEY WORDS:

Cabañal, Valencia, vernacular architecture, house, Mediterranean seashore, contemporary