

Hut Thoughts, Dreams and Whimsy



When you let go of what you are,
you may become what you might be.

Only a nut would live in a hut,
Stuck in a rut in a hut by the susurrating sea.
Nothing but a simple shelter,
Like the little grass shack on the shores of Waikiki
---Dr. Ong-Ma

An Artist's "Hut" in Waiakoa,

on the Hawaiian island of Maui



**An Elderly House on Saint Simon Island,
One of Georgia's Golden Isles.**



Grey fog slips softly
through silent pine sentinels.
I inhale the dawn!

--- Dr. Ong-Ma

Living Large In Small Spaces

In past centuries, elderly Japanese men would often retreat to simple huts to live out their remaining days in contemplation and meditation. This idea may seem quaint to the “forever young” baby-boomer generation, a generation that delusively believes that “middle age” begins somewhere around age 65. But it wasn’t so long ago that the average life span was less than fifty years! Even in America , back in 1901, the average age expectancy was only 49 years of age. In past centuries, by the time a person had reached age 60 they were considered to be both elderly and often wise. As one’s life inevitably draws to a close, a person tends to alter their priorities and retreat from worldly things. Every life has its seasons. There is a season to grow up, a season to grow old, and a season to die. Each season requires —indeed, demands—a certain amount of contemplation and preparation before transitioning and ascending to the next level.

Besides the noble art of getting things done, there is the noble art of leaving things undone. The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of non-essentials.

---Lin Yutang

During the latter stages of transition many people find themselves longing for a simpler life. Few, however,

ever act upon their longings. Those few who do oftentimes crave a period of isolation; a semi-colon in their lives; a quiet time to ponder the miraculous course of their lives. This is where the dream of a hut of one's own enters into the framework of our life.

The Solace Of Small Places

Hermits, mystics, monks and sages, as well as many ordinary folk, often prefer to live in places where their “*Wa*,” their peace of mind—their reveries—will seldom be disturbed. A place that offers the kind of peace and quiet and simple natural beauty that nurtures one's spirit. Ideally, a place with a pleasant view, located close to the burble of fresh-flowing water. A wooded place where birds and animals might come to sip the same sweet waters and perhaps linger for a while. A place to meditate. A place of simple abundance. This is one of the many reasons that huts tend to spring up in secluded locations.

Passing Through Life Without Ever Having Lived

In this modern age, elderly Americans are encouraged to do just the opposite of that which is natural. They're encouraged to continue play-acting as if they were forever young. Ads in AARP magazine, as well as Big Pharma ads all depict healthy, smiling septuagenarian and octogenarian couples happily riding their bikes on the beach toward an endless sunset. The so-called golden years are promoted as a time to party on until the day that one unexpectedly drops dead while attempting to sink a putt on the 18th hole. But that's not the way life really is. The idea of remaining “forever young” is little more than an illusory narcotic that the advertising industry uses to peddle their goods to a dumbed-down consumer society.

A Time To Reflect

Perhaps the Japanese ancients had the right idea. It's an old idea, so old that it can even be found written in the Book of Ecclesiastes,¹ which says, in essence, that there is a time and season for everything. There is a time to be born, a time to live, a time to reflect, and a time to die. So why not spend the last few years of one's life living in solitude, free from the maddening crowd, in a small manageable hut of one's own?

Who Knows What Kind Of Hut Lurks In A Human's Heart?

“A dreamer of refuges dreams of a hut, of a nest, or of nooks and corners in which he would like to hide away, (cut off from the rest of the world) like an animal in its hole. In this way, he lives in a region that is beyond human images.” --- Gaston Bachelard

**You can take the man out of the hut, but you can never
take the hut out of the man, because...**

The Hut Dwells Within Us All

Anthropologists tell us that in every society, children build play huts. Every child I've ever known (including myself) seemed to have an innate love and desire for huts and hut building. Remember when you were a kid? Didn't you at one time or another build yourself a hut? It could have been something as simple as a blanket draped over a card table, or it might have been a pillow fort, or a tree house. It seems as if we are born with a little “huttyness”—an appreciation of huts—embedded in our genes. But one need not be a child nor wait until one is old to seek the solace of a hut. Life in a hut—even if it is only a temporary respite from the world—is an excellent way to seek transformation and renewal in the midst of nature.

In every era of human history, a few people—those who march to the beat of a different drum— have voluntarily chosen to live in huts, or very small, simple dwellings.

Henry David Thoreau's Hut/Cabin, Front & Rear Views



An 18th Century Philosopher's Hut

Henry David Thoreau is one famous hut dweller of whom we all know. Of his experience, Thoreau later wrote, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

And so one day, he borrowed an axe from a neighbor and then proceeded to built a small cabin next to Walden Pond. On July 4, 1845, he moved into his new home, where he spent the next two years of his life. His cabin/hut measured only ten by fifteen feet with eight-foot high walls. Thoreau also built a small woodshed behind his cabin. Although his structure appears incredibly tiny compared with today's obscenely bloated houses—not much larger than a 21st century American

garage or garden shed— it served its purpose quite well. Some of Thoreau’s finest writing took root and sprang fourth from the harmonious tranquility and liberty provided by his humble dwelling. In his journals Thoreau said something which, if properly understood, might liberate many modern homeowners from property enslavement: “Our houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them.”

The Life of Richard Proenneke, 20th Century Hut/Cabin Dweller

In the year 1965, Richard Proenneke, age 51, traveled to Alaska. He searched the land until he found the ideal place to build a small cabin. He then gathered a few basic wood-working tools and walked back into the wilderness carrying in his knapsack the means to realize his hut dreams.

Proenneke was a self-sufficient craftsman. He felled trees and made the majority of what he required from the materials available. Most remarkably, he brought along a movie camera and documented the construction of his cabin, as well as preserving on film many other aspects of his solitary life. He didn’t go into the wilderness to escape the rest of the world, but rather, to test himself to see if he could live alone—for an entire year—with only his own thoughts for company. By the time he’d built his small cabin and then spent a year living alone, he’d become one with the land. He had brought into being and made manifest a peaceful and harmonious relationship with *Mutter Erdé*,² amidst nature. He’d discovered within himself the courage not to fear loneliness or bareness, as well as an ability to accept things the way they are. And so

he remained there, living in his tiny hand-hewn cabin, for the next thirty-one years!

During his life in the wilderness he kept journals, took photographs, and continued making movies. Movies that documented the world as seen only through his own lone eyes. His wonderfully entertaining film footage depicts what he saw during his explorations, as well as how he lived his day-to-day life.

When Proenneke reached age 80, he decided to return to civilization to live out his remaining years. His cabin now belongs to the U.S. Forestry Service, but until the day he died, Proenneke remained welcome to return and live there whenever he wished.

In Search of the Essence of “Huttness”

What exactly is a hut, and how big can it be before it becomes a cabin, or a small house? My dictionary tells me that a hut is a small single-story building, often made of wood, that is used as a simple house or shelter. I don't suppose size or height matters much, provided one's hut contains neither more or less space than one needs to live. Simplicity is the key element.

I've had a fascination with small houses and ancient hut designs for many years. But knowing little of 16th-century Japanese architecture, much less hut-building, I found myself pondering what one might require, in the way of design and materials, to build a small, simple, yet utterly satisfying hut. As is often said in the real estate business, location is the primary consideration. Also, the design of the dwelling must certainly be suitable for the environment in which it is intended to exist. It would

hardly make sense to build an adobe hut in the rain forest or an igloo in the desert. Bamboo and paper houses might be adequate for Japan but they would likely prove useless in other environments. Therefore much depends upon the surrounding landscape and whether it is urban or rural, and whether the weather permits one to live mostly outside or inside. Outside space is an important consideration.

How much or how little of a hut would a 21st century man or woman need? Thoreau's cabin, *including his 80-square-foot wood shed*, was only 230 square feet in size, but it's doubtful that anyone accustomed to such modern luxuries as indoor plumbing, bathroom and electric lights could long tolerate such a small and humble place. Not unless they came determined to do as the bears do-do in the woods.

How cheaply could one build a hut, provided they lived in a relatively warm climate, such as North Florida, which happens to be my own neck of the woods? Much would depend upon the availability of materials at hand. Fortunately, American consumer culture is so utterly wasteful that it's highly probable that a resourceful person with a small truck or trailer could soon collect enough free building material to build a secure and sturdy hut. But what would it take to make such a place aesthetically pleasing, both to the eye and, most importantly, to one's spirit?

“Wabi”: a Japanese word meaning poverty that has evolved into a state of serenity and inner peace, in complete harmony with one's surroundings and especially, with nature.

A one-hole Privy on a Wisconsin farm, built in 1876



As an artist and photographer, I've often wondered what it is that other photographers, including myself, find attractive about old barns and weathered, often-abandoned houses as well as other time-worn structures. What is the underlying aesthetic in a rotting building which resonates in the artist's mind?

"Sabi": A Japanese word that roughly means to respond to the beauty that radiates from a simple lifestyle or simple things.

Photo of a 130 year-old Barn Door Hasp and Latch



The Essence of “Huttyness”

A hut must possess a certain ineffable quality I call “Huttyness.” This is the essence of a hut. The embodiment of “huttyness” would include a small, but comfortable shelter that contains all that is necessary to sustain life. But there’s more. There’s something missing! What’s missing is the visceral feeling that one gets from viewing and dwelling in such a place. The Japanese have a word—a concept— for this feeling, and that is *Wabi-sabi*.

Wabi-Sabi

“The ancient Japanese concept of Wabi-sabi celebrates all things natural, humble, primitive. It’s an apt antidote to today’s sleek technology.” ----“To discover Wabi-Sabi is to spend time finding the singular beauty in something that may present itself as decrepit and ugly.”

--- Robyn Griggs Lawrence

Woven Water Hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*)



We Are Transient Beings In a Transient World

Nature’s cycle of growth, decay and erosion are embodied in the concept of Wabi-sabi. “ Wabi-sabi reminds us that we are all but transient beings on this planet—that our bodies, as well as the material world around us, are in a process of returning to the dust from

which we came.”³ This concept is often associated with the Japanese form of haiku.

Two Haiku:

Leaning together,
two doves on a power line.
A drifting feather.
--- Dr. Ong-Ma

A man and woman,
both old and frail, together.
This is all they have.
--- Dr. Ong-Ma

We Exist Within The Hole Of The Doughnut

One thing that all huts, cabins and houses have in common is that they are constructions that define and (typically) enclose a space. What is most important is not so much the exterior, but the space inside. The **Tao Te Ching** expresses this concept far better than I.

“We join spokes together in a wheel,
But it is the center hole
That makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,
But it is the emptiness inside
That holds whatever we want.

We work with being
But non-being is what we use.

We hammer wood for a house,
But it is the inner space
That makes it livable.”

Life Is An Ever-Changing Experience

In my mind, the hut is an apt metaphor for our own ephemeral, ever-changing bodies. We arrive in the form of a perfect pink *tabula rasa* and everything betwixt our wee beginning and our day of departure consists of entropy and change.



My world breaks apart
like a stone shattering glass.
I see life anew!
--- Dr. Ong-Ma

Change and Decay

Everything that starts out new eventually ends up old and worn-out. Entropy, the second law of thermodynamics, is a universal fact of life: In essence, everything goes downhill; dust to dust, from steel to rust.

The Evolution of Character

One can barely tell one newly-born baby from another, due to their relative uniformity and neotonous features. But as they age their bodies manifest the wear and tear of time, and in doing so, acquire distinguishing qualities somewhat like an artist's brush strokes applied to a blank canvas. The same applies to man-made structures.

Souls Seek Solace in Simplicity

One may live in a grand mansion, but in every heart hides an innate craving for the inchoate simplicity of Wabi-sabi. A hut that's been constructed from items gleaned from nature, combined with "pre-owned" building materials, shuns the banality typical of newly-built homes, and in doing so, resembles the body of a person already weathered by time and experience. It is the accumulation of wrinkles, scars, "laugh lines" and graying hair that gives one's face "character." The same is true of the hut when compared with a shiny new McMansion. One may be grand, but it is utterly bland, while the latter aged structure is infinitely rich with secret stories (and sometimes ghosts) of past dwellers. A new home is typically uninspiring while older buildings—most especially huts—beckon to dreamers, philosophers, and world-weary souls to come closer, to step inside.

**Door of an old barn, built in 1876,
located in Fredonia, Wisconsin**

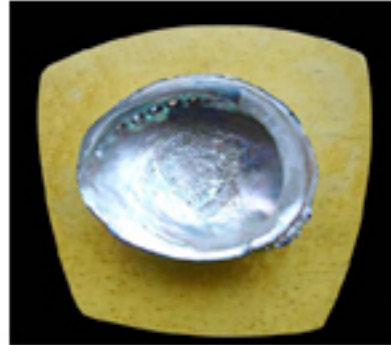


The Cradle of Creativity

As with the body, the hut's exterior doesn't necessarily mirror its interior. The ideal hut is a shelter that was constructed one piece at a time from hand-hewn wood, or recycled materials, with all of their attendant imperfections. Yet each stone, each notch in wood was intentionally made to serve a purpose. Just as the rough exterior of a seashell in no way suggests its smooth, opalescent interior, the hut's exterior may bear the scars

of the seasons and yet its interior may gleam as if illuminated by an accumulation of ethereal dreams. Creativity is often born in such a womb.

SEA SHELLS: *Nacre voit*” (mother of pearl sees.”⁴



“And all the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so he knows instinctively that this space identified with his solitude is creative.... Even when we no longer have a garret, when the attic room is lost and gone (forever), there remains the fact that we once loved such cherished spaces. “we return to them in our night dreams. These retreats have the value of a shell.

--- Gaston Bachelard

The Hermit’s Humble Home

“The hermit is alone before God. His hut, therefore, is the opposite of a monastery. And there radiates around this centralized solitude a universe of meditation and prayer, a universe outside the universe. The hut cannot receive none of the riches “of this world.” It possesses the felicity of intense poverty; indeed, it is one of the glories of poverty; as destitution increases it gives us access to absolute solitude.”

--- Gaston Bachelard

A Hermit In His Home, Standing Alone Before God



A red Cardinal
perches in my Dogwood tree
singing for a mate.
--- Dr. Ong-Ma

Nature Is, Above All, Natural!

A hut is simple yet elegant, functional yet uncluttered. It provides refuge from the world. It is simply a space in which to be. It is a transformative place, a place of quiet contemplation that makes space for spiritual growth and change . It contains no more and no less than the few necessities of life, each with its own designated place. It is the place where dreams are born and brought to fruition.

“...if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.”
--- Gaston Bachelard

Essence of Hut

A hardwood floor and a broom,
a hat and raincoat hanging on a hook beneath the eaves,
a small table and a chair or two,
a single, perfect morning glory in a clay pot,
a small brass bell, a brush or a pencil and paper,
a small iron pot-bellied stove with a tin chimney,
a soft, warm blanket on a narrow hand-made bed.

The prototypical hut has no address, no mailbox, hence no junk mail, no bills, no Jehovah's Witnesses to come knocking at the door, no shrieking neighbors, no boom-boxes. Nothing but the sounds of birdsongs, nocturnal hoot owls and the ever-fluctuating song of wind in the trees. Somewhere off in the distance may be heard the burble of water wending its way through a maze of river rocks.

The ideal hut is simple, yet complete. It is seldom perfect but neither is it shabby. In fact, perfection and uniformity is the antithesis of “huttyness.” A hut's singular beauty emanates from, and is a result of, its lack of symmetry, its geometric imperfections, its often whimsical composition of atypical construction materials.

I trust that by now, the reader may have acquired a better understanding of why some nuts might choose to live in huts. Are you such a nut? Is there a hut in your

heart and a hut in your future? All one need do is to enter into your own hut dream and make it so!

Footnotes and/or Source Material:

The contents of this article consist, to a large degree, of a pastiche of quotes selected from the books and articles listed below, as well as from my own personal journals.

All of the photographs contained in this article are my own, with the exception of the two pictures of Thoreau's cabin, which I "borrowed" from a web site, and the I-Ching hexagram number 49 (Change) which I clipped from *The I Ching Workbook*, by R. L. Wing. I give thanks to the fine writers from whose works I have liberally borrowed.

I encourage all who are interested in the subjects covered in this article to buy and/or read the source materials listed below.

1. Song Lyrics: "Turn! Turn! Turn! (to Everything There Is A Season)," is a song written by Pete Seeger, wherein Seeger set text from the Bible to music, specifically, a reading from the Book of Ecclesiastes, 3:1-8. Although he wrote it in the 1950s, Seeger waited until 1962 to record it, releasing the song on his *The Bitter and The Sweet* album on Columbia Records.
2. Book: *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, by Erich Neumann, 1955. In his patient's dream, Erich Neumann shows the force of the Mother Earth (Mutter Erdé) archetype." pp. 40—41.)
3. Magazine Article: "Wabi-Sabi, The Japanese Art of Imperfect Beauty," By Robyn Griggs Lawrence. Published

in Natural Home Magazine, May/June 2001

www.naturalhomemagazine.com

(Author's Comment: Robyn Griggs Lawrence is a wonderfully clear-minded and poetic writer whose works I highly recommend!)

4. "*Nacre Voit*" is based on the notions that architecture reflects us and that our experience within buildings reflects the architecture."

• **Video: "Alone in the Wilderness,"**

Bob Swerer Productions,
2440 S. College Avenue
Fort Collins, Colorado, 80525
1-800-737-0239

(Author's Comment: If you love nature or if you're interested in building your own hut, by all means, check out this video!)

• **Book: One Man's Wilderness,** from the Proenneke journals and photographs, By Sam Keith. To order a copy, call 1-800-452-3032.

• **Book: Thoreau Journal,** by Henry David Thoreau,
(July 12, 1817 – May 6, 1862.

• **Biographical information about Henry David Thoreau,** regarding his Walden Years, 1845–1847 was obtained from free-source on-line research.

• **Book: The Poetics of Space,** by Gaston Bachelard.

• **Book: Oeuvres Complètes:** Jean Nicholas Arthur Rimbaud,
October 20, 1854 —November 10, 1891. published by Le Grande-Chêne, Lausanne.

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Winter: Writing On East Beach, Saint Simon Island, Georgia



This article is dedicated to Wee-Gee, a wonderfully intelligent and talented German Labrador Retriever who gives me reason to get up each morning. Wee-Gee Bruder Hund!

