

Reclaiming Jean Prouvé Piece by Piece



IN PARIS, DESIGN DEALERS HAVE REDISCOVERED THE RADICAL ARCHITECTURE AND FURNITURE OF ONE OF THE LEADING THINKERS OF THE POSTWAR PERIOD

By CLAUDIA BARBIERI

IN 1978 FRANÇOIS LAFFANOUR, a young Sorbonne history graduate turned flea market trader, bought an old chair for a few francs from Emmaus, France's bring-and-buy charity for the homeless. The purchase "happened randomly," Laffanour, now owner of Downtown Gallery, a Paris temple of contemporary design, told MODERN in a recent interview. The chair "was industrial green with a wooden seat and white rubber feet that gave it an indefinable originality, a modernity and a strength that immediately seduced me." This was Laffanour's introduction to the work of Jean Prouvé, the art deco metalworker, industrial engineer, modernist designer, and self-taught architect whose rediscovery, after decades of neglect, has fueled and paralleled Laffanour's own rise as a top dealer in modern and contemporary design.

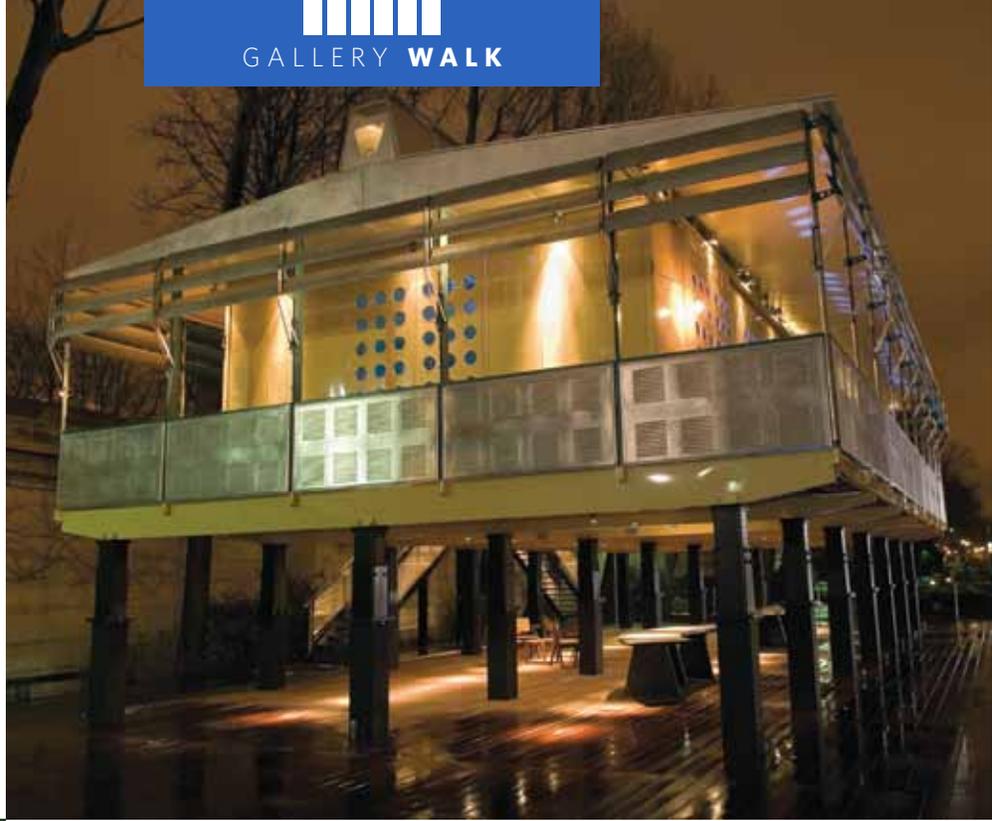
That rediscovery started slowly, but in the past half-dozen years has picked up extraordinary momentum. In 1984 Eric Touchaleaume, another alum of the Paris flea market, could still buy six hundred Prouvé Antony chairs, mass-produced in the early 1950s, as a job lot from a Paris university canteen. Last year a single Trapèze dining table from the same period, and same university campus, sold at the Paris auction house Artcurial for more than €1.2 million, an auction record for Prouvé furniture. In May of this year Artcurial sold a boomerang-shaped Présidence desk for more than €1.1 million, against an estimate of €200,000 to €300,000. "In the past two or three years the market has reached summits one would never have thought possible,"

Prouvé's Maison Métropole, 1949, was composed of a steel frame enveloped in aluminum panels. The house came in two sizes—8 by 8 meters and 8 by 12 meters—and could be adapted to any site.



The Antony chair, designed by Prouvé in 1954, was mass-produced but today fetches high prices at auction.

CENTER AND BOTTOM: GALERIE PATRICK SEGUIN



says Emmanuel Berard, head of Artcurial's design department. "The collectors are more and more international. For decades they used to be mainly Western, but we're seeing more and more from Asia—mostly Japanese and Korean."

Even more dramatic than the rediscovery of Prouvé's furniture has been the recognition of his seminal influence on modern architecture. Between 1949 and 1951 he designed a prefabricated steel house, intended for industrial production and export in disassembled kit form to house officials in France's West African colonies. Stylistically uncompromising and finished with an attention to detail that raised production costs, "La Maison Tropicale" found few buyers and only three prototypes were built. But in 1999 Touchaleaume tracked those down in Congo and Niger and repatriated them,

restored and bullet-pocked, to France. After a restoration reportedly costing \$2 million one sold at Christie's New York in 2007 for \$5 million.

Specifically adapted for the tropics, with a veranda, an adjustable aluminum sunscreen, blue glass porthole windows to protect against UV rays, and a double roof structure to produce natural ventilation, the house was based on a standardized, modular "dismountable" unit conceived by Prouvé in the 1930s to provide affordable accommodation for industrial workers. In the following decade the design was expanded, simplified, and tweaked to make emergency shelters for the bombed-out civilian victims of World War II. Central to each modular unit was an internal, two-legged, load-bearing steel gantry topped by a transverse beam to which were bolted the prefabricated wall and roof panels. Described as an axial portal frame, the design was patented by Prouvé in 1938—legal proof of its originality.

In the years between the two world wars Prouvé and his circle—most notably Le Corbusier but also Corbu's cousin Pierre Jeanneret and their pupil/collaborator Charlotte Perriand—were on the cutting edge of international modern architecture. But, by an irony of history, the rise of Nazism in Germany, which led to the closure of the Bauhaus in 1933, spread German modernism into the global mainstream as the likes of Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe sought refuge in America. France's wartime and postwar experiences meantime fostered a certain insularity—the famous "French exception"—which left the Paris modernists (with the notable exception of the irrepressible theorist and propagandist Le Corbusier) marginalized inside something of a cultural bubble.

This year Le Corbusier has been in the spotlight, the subject of several new biographical studies and a major exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris to mark the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 1965.

La Maison Tropicale, 1951, was designed for deployment in the French West African colonies, although only three were produced. This example was plucked from Brazzaville, the Congo Republic, restored, and sold by Christie's New York in 2007.

Prouvé's Light conference chair, c. 1953.





Prouvé, who died in 1984, aged nearly eighty-three, has yet to receive that sort of treatment; but over the past three decades he and Perriand in particular have increasingly come back into vogue.

Among a network of dealers, curators, historians, and collectors who have worked hardest to revive their international reputation, pride of place probably goes to the French modern design specialist Patrick Seguin. Seguin told MODERN in an e-mail that he and his wife (and business partner), Laurence, “first discovered Jean Prouvé’s work in the late ‘80s. We were immediately enthusiastic despite the fact that not many people were familiar with his work at that time.” The couple opened Galerie Patrick Seguin in 1989, in a three hundred-square-meter loft near the Bastille, designed by the leading French architect Jean Nouvel. “Since then we have done everything to promote French 20th-century design—Jean Prouvé but also Charlotte Perriand, Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Jean Royère,” Seguin writes.

Prouvé came to furniture design as an extension of his training in art deco craft metalwork, and to architecture as an extension of furniture design—all marked by a clean-lined, well-engineered, structural functionality. “I didn’t invent an architectural system, I made it,” he once said. “I didn’t invent forms, I made an architectural system that had forms.”

And again: “It’s not the form that makes something beautiful, it’s the structure.”

Seguin’s insight was that the narrative could be reversed. He sells Prouvé’s elegantly uncluttered structures to wealthy collectors as installation art. He bought his first Prouvé house in 1991 and sold it to the Vitra Design Museum in Germany. Buyers since then have included the American artist Richard Prince, the Italian fashion designer Miuccia Prada, the Tunisian-born Paris couturier Azzedine Alaïa, and the Northern Irish real estate investor Patrick McKillen, who has reassembled two Prouvé houses on his Château La Coste wine estate near Aix-en-Provence, France.

Seguin says he currently has twenty Prouvé buildings in stock, warehoused in Nancy, the designer-architect’s hometown in eastern France. Indeed, Seguin’s most recent acquisition came from the site in neighboring Maxéville where, in 1947, Prouvé set up a factory to make industrially standardized furniture and prefabricated units for houses and schools. With production long abandoned, the factory office was being used as a sex club, its signature axial portal frame hidden beneath a plasterboard partition—“but I knew what it was,” Seguin says.

In March this year he joined forces with Larry Gagosian in a joint New York show that used two historically important Prouvé structures as a setting for a dozen crushed car-body sculptures by the American sculptor John Chamberlain—an exercise in contrasting uses of steel. One of the structures, a wood, steel, aluminum, and glass showroom and office block, designed in 1948 for the Ferembal packaging company in Nancy, was intended to be the last prototype before mass production of the axial portal system; the other, a 1956 steel and glass temporary schoolroom for the Paris suburb of Villejuif, used sheet-steel uprights to support a curved, cantilevered, laminated wood roof, with sheet-steel sections serving as stiffeners and ventilation elements in the glazed facade, a combination of engineering solutions since recognized as years ahead of its time.

Earlier this year at New York’s Gagosian Gallery crushed metal sculptures by John Chamberlain were juxtaposed with two prefabricated steel structures by Prouvé: the Ferembal packing company building, 1948, and the Villejuif temporary school building, 1956.

In 2007 architect Jean Nouvel began a three-year project to adapt the Ferembal building into a detached demountable house. It is shown here as temporarily installed in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris.





Luxury fashion label Bally used a Prouvé house as a showroom at Design Show Shanghai 2015.

The dimensions of the 8 by 8 meter demountable house, 1945, were dictated by the size of the metal bending press in Prouvé's workshop.

At Design Miami/Basel in June, Seguin teamed up with British architects Rogers Stirk Harbour and Partners to show a re-edition of the 1944 wood and metal wartime emergency housing version, updated with external kitchen and bathroom pods. With solar power and solar water-heating systems, the updated variant, proposed as a vacation retreat, could be the blueprint for a new generation of emergency and refugee housing in keeping with Prouvé's original vision, Seguin says.

Not content with showing and selling, Seguin has also turned publisher, recently producing a boxed set of five monographs tracing the development of Prouvé's demountable house from an experimental thirty-six-square-meter single room cell with tarpaper roof to a fully fledged three-bedroom house with kitchen, living, and bath rooms; to office blocks and even a circular, glass-walled gas station for the automobile age. Another ten volumes are in the pipeline, Seguin says, with publication in two further boxed sets planned for this year and next.

In the fall he plans to widen his permanent footprint with the opening of a new gallery space in Mayfair, London, to be inaugurated with a show dedicated to Prouvé's demountable architecture. "London is a strategic city for design, with many of our collectors living there," Seguin says.

Seguin is not alone in his proselytizing. "Since the early 1980s François has been interested in Prouvé's furniture in relation to his architecture," Hélin Serre, director of Laffanour's Downtown Gallery, says. "Early on he exhibited such elements as metal doors with circular windows to create ambiance, and Downtown has continued to exhibit and sell Prouvé architecture ever since. The historical houses are of enormous interest to wealthy international collectors."

Downtown Gallery has put together a summer show, running until September 25, in Issoire, the small town in central France where Prouvé, Jeanneret, and Perriand worked together in 1939 and early 1940 designing and erecting prefabricated temporary barracks for construction workers and engineers building a sheet-metal factory, part of the French war effort. The barracks, the first important commission in which Prouvé applied his axial portal system, have been restored by Downtown in partnership with local government officials.

Others, too, have gotten in on the act. The Swiss fashion brand Bally restored a 1944 Prouvé house and assembled it on the grounds of the Delano Hotel in Miami Beach during last year's Design Miami, then incorporated it into its display at the Chinese luxury trade fair Design Show Shanghai—a strange destiny for a building conceived as a refuge from the horrors of war but one that Prouvé, an adaptable pragmatist, might have appreciated. Asked how he came to the concept of a steel-frame house, his answer was disarmingly practical: "I made it using bent steel sheet because I had the steel and the presses to bend it," Seguin quotes Prouvé as saying, in his monograph on the eight-by-eight-meter demountable house. "It's as simple as that."

