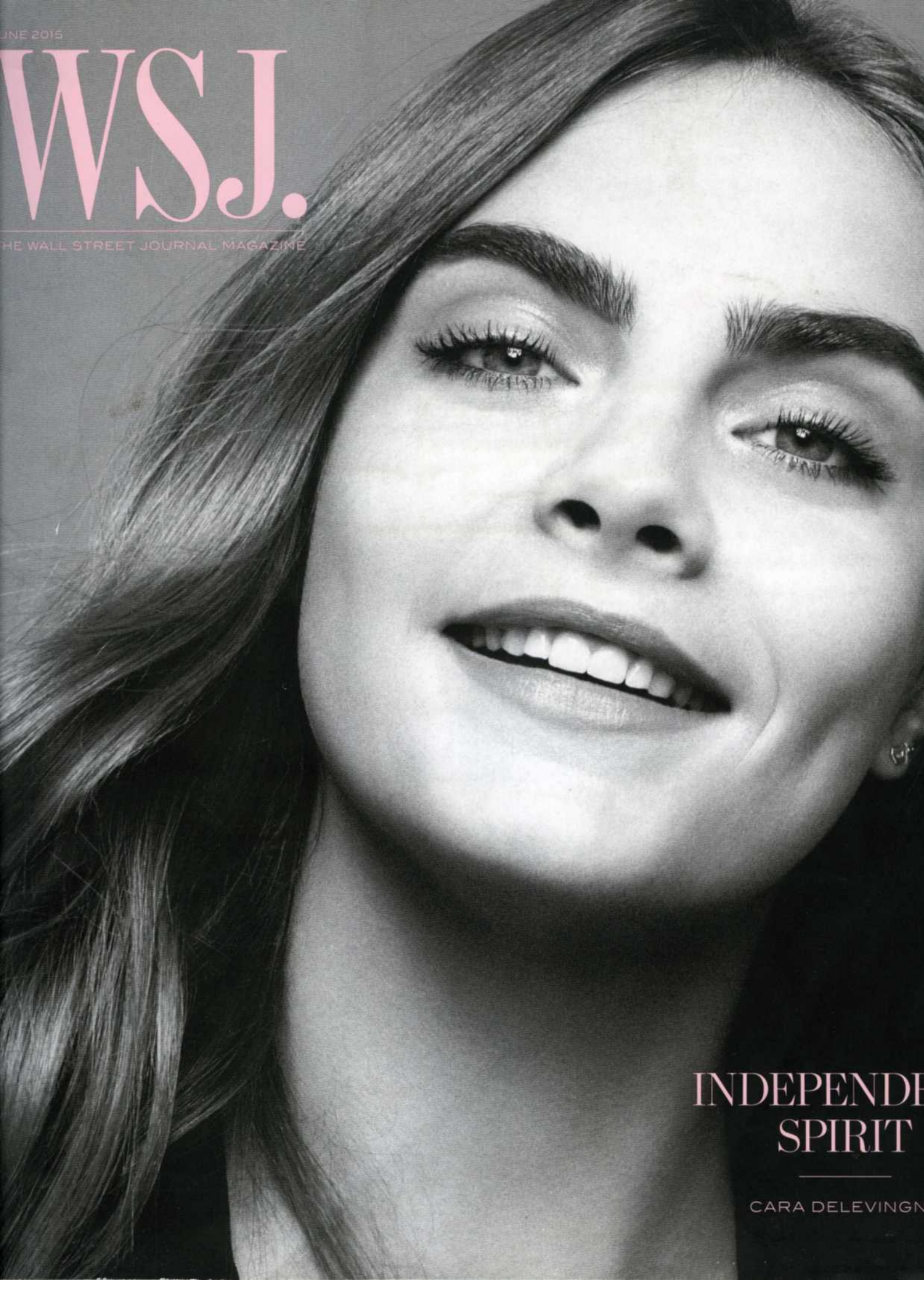


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INDEPENDENT
SPIRIT

CARA DELEVINGNE



LIVING PROUVÉ
Patrick Seguin poses with panels from a Jean Prouvé house and school that he salvaged, restored and exhibited at Gagosian Gallery in New York.

THE HOUSE COLLECTOR

Parisian dealer Patrick Seguin has made it his business to ensure the legacy of French mid-century designer and architect Jean Prouvé, whose prefabricated housing now sells for millions of dollars.

BY SARAH MEDFORD PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEONORA HAMILL

THE HIGHWAYS in and out of Nancy, in northeastern France, have seen some unusual traffic lately. Caravans of flatbed trucks stacked high with plywood crates have been rumbling through town, discreetly labeled and sealed. Antiquities? High-end audio systems? Cases of single-malt scotch?

Houses, actually. Nancy happens to be the hometown and onetime headquarters of Jean Prouvé, the late metalworker and self-taught architect and engineer who pioneered prefabricated construction, beginning in the 1930s. At his Ateliers Jean

Prouvé, he folded, bent and corrugated sheet metal to produce portable structures that were both economical and functional—four men could erect a 388-square-foot home in a day—as well as refectory tables, dormitory shelving, desk chairs and other necessities that were in short supply after World War II ravaged the country. Though the factory was shuttered years ago and his house prototypes were never manufactured on a mass scale, Prouvé's work is celebrated in Nancy and far beyond for its humanism, sober elegance and innovative design. And some of it still lives here—except when it's crated

off to one world capital or another for exhibition sale. A 1956 house is now on view at Milan's E5 2015; a glass-walled gas station from 1969 will pop up at Basel's Design Miami fair later this month.

The mastermind behind all this activity is Patrick Seguin, 61, the French gallerist whose name has become synonymous with Prouvé houses. He is proud owner of some 20 of the buildings, which he stores in two Nancy warehouses, a 90-minute train ride from his self-named gallery in the Bastille quarter of Paris. Blue-chip French modernist design works from the 1920s to the 1960s are Seguin's

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stock in trade: Prouvé, Charlotte Perriand, Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Jean Royère. "At one point I had eight, and now it's as simple as this," he says, holding out his business card printed with the five names. "I have my expertise."

Seguin is in New York for a few weeks, staying at the Upper East Side's Carlyle hotel, and he's stopped at the nearby restaurant Sant Ambroeus for lunch. Down on West 24th Street, two of his steely beauties have been constructed inside the Gagosian Gallery, where additional models and architectural elements help make the case for Prouvé's genius. Of course, no one does it better than Seguin himself: Prouvé's legacy has become his life's work. Through spans, the exhibitions he mounts and his presence at the biannual Design Miami fairs, Seguin has helped make the self-described "factory man" relevant to contemporary audiences well beyond architectural circles. He's sold Prouvé houses to collectors of all stripes, including artists Richard Prince and Mark Grotjahn as well as Miuccia Prada, Azzedine Alaïa, Maja Hoffmann and Patrick McKillen, of London's Maybourne Hotel Group.

Prince says he planned to build his house "next to a pond" on his upstate New York property. "But first I put it up inside one of my buildings. It turned it into 'a room.'" Alaïa sleeps inside a Prouvé gas station in his Paris loft, while McKillen has converted two houses into libraries on the grounds of his Château La Coste vineyard in Provence. Such repurposing delights Seguin, who's progressed from selling Prouvé to proselytizing for his place in today's discourse about architectural context and adaptive reuse.

At his own booth in Basel this month, Seguin

will display a 6-by-6-meter Prouvé house from 1944 that British architect Richard Rogers has updated, adding bath and kitchen "pods" and solar power and water-collection systems to make the house sustainable in any setting. The process has been resonant for Rogers, who at 37 saw his career take off when Prouvé, then chairman of the jury for the future Centre Pompidou museum in Paris, advocated for the design that Rogers and a 33-year-old Renzo Piano had submitted. "There was a small group of people who knew about Prouvé, and thanks to Patrick he's become accessible to anyone who's interested," says Rogers in admiration. "My wife calls him Patrick Prouvé."

After lunch, Seguin, dressed in his customary blue blazer and pressed jeans, checks out gallery shows by a couple of artists he admires—Prince, Kazuo Shiraga—before heading downtown to see more. He is an avid collector of contemporary art. In Paris, he and his wife, Laurence (who is also his business partner), live in a 17th-century apartment in the Marais outfitted with furniture from his inventory alongside works by Alexander Calder, Andy Warhol, Prince, Jean-Michel Basquiat and a select few younger artists, including Grotjahn, Rudolf Stingel and Nate Lowman. The dialogue between the worlds of design and art has become central to his life and business, with Prouvé playing the role of catalyst. "Since the beginning it was a synergy between Prouvé and the art world," Seguin says.

"He loves what he does, and he loves Prouvé," says Grotjahn of Seguin, who's become a friend and an occasional poker mate. "He came over to my place in L.A. and sold me a house on an iPad."

What's the secret to Seguin's success as a dealer? "Simple: passion," says Prince.

SEGUIN SAYS HE encountered "zero art culture" as a child growing up in Montpellier in southern France. But in Paris, where he moved in the '80s for a restaurant job, he met the dealer Phillippe Jousse, who had a stall at the Saint-Ouen flea market. Jousse turned him on to the work of Prouvé and Perriand, and the two soon went into business together, buying up quantities of Prouvé chairs and tables from school lunchrooms and dormitories. "We couldn't sell a Prouvé Standard chair for \$200," says Seguin. (At his gallery, an original example now goes for about \$15,000 and up.) He bought his first Prouvé house in 1990. Finding the next one was a half-step up from salvage work, but he was convinced that a market for

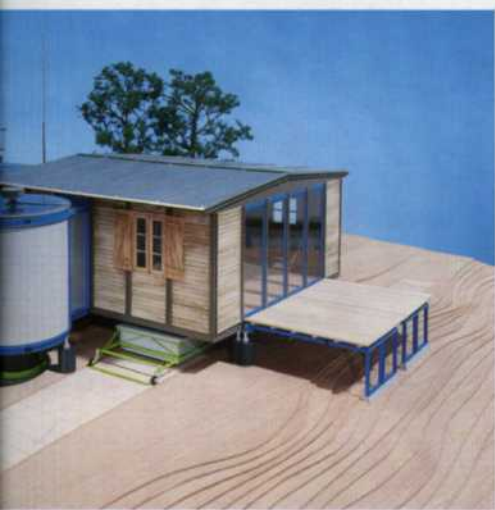


Prouvé's architecture would follow the furniture. His bet paid off: He had to wait only until 1991 before trading his first Prouvé house to Germany's V&A Museum. He went out on his own in 2000.

"Patrick included architectural pieces of Prouvé in his gallery early on," remembers his friend Prince Brant. "His interest has never faltered." Capitalizing on attention from American collectors including Brant, Larry Gagosian and Ronald Lauder, Seguin began positioning Prouvé as an art-world acquisition, with a seminal 2003 show at Manhattan's Sonnabend Gallery that *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith deemed "museum-worthy." Lauder got the message; he bought a key piece for the Museum of Modern Art's collection. Another show followed at Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles a year later, and there have been seven subsequent collaborations between the two dealers, each of whom collects from the other's stable.

Houses aren't the easiest thing for a dealer to inventory or sell. (Though they can be lucrative: André Balazs paid \$4.97 million for Prouvé's *Ma Tropicale* at auction in 2007.) To install and transport them, Seguin keeps a dedicated staff of 12, with a dozen more employees at the gallery. And then there is restoration, which can take years. "See my last purchase?" Seguin asks, as he scrolls through photos on his phone of a forlorn-looking structure in blue aluminum siding, with the words *Le Bon* scrawled on the side. "It was a swinger's club! With the video screens for watching porn, and all the sofas—but I knew what it was." Once Prouvé's prototype studio, the circa-1947 building will spend the next 24 months being restored.

And now that Rogers's work is done on Ma Tropicale, Seguin, as it's been dubbed, the dealer and his partner plan on testing Prouvé's nomadic vision for themselves this summer, dismantling the house after Brant and crating it over to be reassembled on southern France's untamed Camargue coast. "But in August I want to be sleeping in Switzerland, in the mountains," says Seguin. "The house will be our caravan."



HOME IMPROVEMENT From top: A Prouvé house with original furnishings; architect Richard Rogers's planned update of a 1944 Prouvé house, to be exhibited this month.