

EXHIBITION

Jean Prouvé – Architect for Better Days

LUMA Arles
Until April
Review by Veronica Simpson

Jean Prouvé is a 20th-century design legend. Trained as an artisan metalworker, he first made furniture for and then collaborated on buildings with some of the leading figures of the mid-20th century, working closely with Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand. A humanist and visionary, he was a prefab pioneer, creating structures that responded to a time of crisis, of populations — whether military or civilian — displaced by war, and he did so with an economy, inventiveness and grace that makes this exhibition of his work at the LUMA Arles mesmerising.

Philanthropist Maja Hoffmann could hardly have provided a better setting for Prouvé's buildings than this former railway depot, 90km from Marseille, now reimagined as a multidisciplinary artist residency and incubator space, as well as exhibition venue. Four of his structures have been recreated around the campus, and eight of them rebuilt under the cathedral-like wrought iron roof of the Grande Halle, an erstwhile manufacturing shed; it is a fitting home for the work of this former metalworking apprentice.

Prouvé was a modernist (he helped to establish the Union of Modern Artists), who refused to make distinctions between design, engineering and architecture, and explored all the available technical resources of his time. Initially focused on making furniture, through his experiments with bent and sheet steel, he developed designs of great lightness and strength, and supplied countless schools, hospitals, universities and government departments with everything from chairs, tables and shelves to facade panels.

His adventures in prefabricated housing were kicked off not by war but in response to the French government's announcement of paid holidays for its workers. Sadly, we don't have the resulting project — BLPS (1937-39), a steel holiday home weighing less than two tonnes, and measuring 3.3 sq m. On the campus, however, we do have one of the 300 lightweight military shelters Prouvé made for the French army (Baraque Militaire, 4x4, 1939), which could be used solo or conjoined to house between four and 12 people. The model here ended up as the gatekeeper's hut at the metalworking Ferembal factory in Nancy; it is accompanied by the bent-steel, drop-arm barrier Ateliers Jean Prouvé designed to go with it.

Sadly, most of Prouvé's work was destroyed during his decades out of favour. Yet what we have here is testament to the diversity and creativity of the man. What survives is largely thanks to Paris gallerist Patrick Seguin, who has dedicated the past 27 years to recovering and restoring what few

furniture pieces and buildings are left (and he and his collectors — among them Brad Pitt and Larry Gagosian — have all benefited from the consequent stratospheric elevation of their prices; recently Prouvé's Trapeze refectory table sold for a record \$1.3m at auction).

Inside the Grand Halle we have one of his earliest domestic houses, the wood and glass Maison Démonatable BCC, of 1941; war required that Prouvé be just as inventive with wood, as metals were scarce. This chalet-lite building offers ample views and ventilation from its multitude of openable windows, framed by cheerful green shutters. Nearby is the bentwood elegance of the Maison Les Jours Meilleurs (a house for better days) (1956). While its richly toned, curved contours evoke the charm and intimacy of a ship's cabin, its concrete base banishes any feelings of transience.

1 Inside Prouvé's Ecole de Bouqueval, recreated inside the Grande Halle

2 Maison Démontable was one of Prouvé's earliest houses from 1941, using wood, as metal was scarce

3 Maison Démontable offers ample views and ventilation from multiple opening windows framed by shutters

4 Clad in aluminium panels, the Ecole de Bouqueval is punctuated with Prouvé's trademark portholes

The classic mid-century green circular central shower pod is a winning element, but even more appealing is the concrete lip extending about a foot up from its floor, offering a low-level seating platform that wraps around the inner perimeter wall. Simon Allford of Allford Hall Monahan Morris — whose own recently completed White Collar Factory building in London reveals his admiration for Prouvé's engineered elegance — explains that this house was designed and then built by the Seine in 48 hours, in response to the news that a homeless woman had frozen to death on the streets of Paris. Compassion and egalitarianism were as important parts of Prouvé's practice as craftsmanship and collaboration.

Gleaming at the centre of the Grande Halle is the Ecole de Bouqueval (1949), clad entirely in aluminium panels, punctuated with Prouvé's trademark

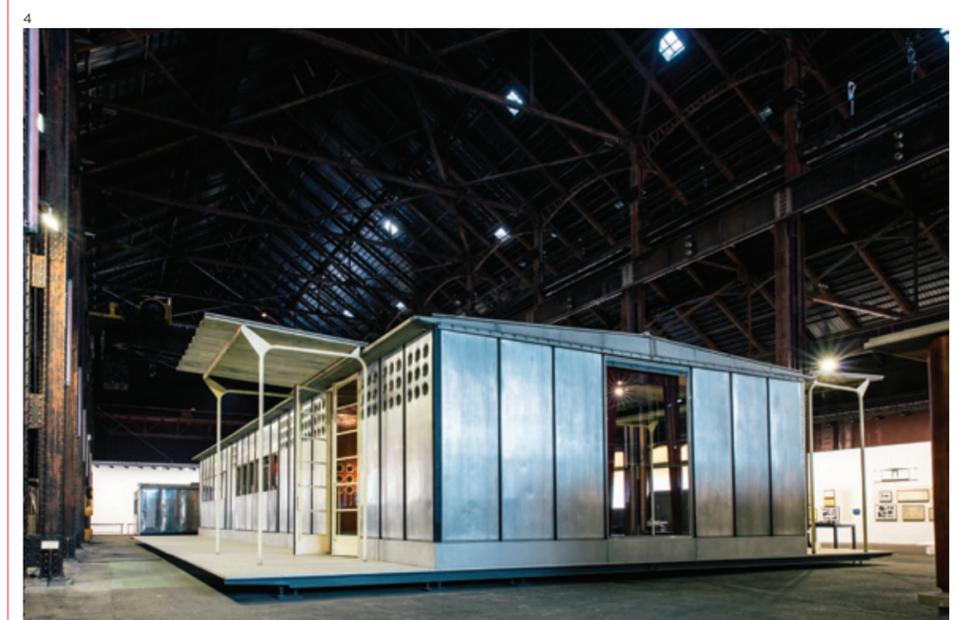
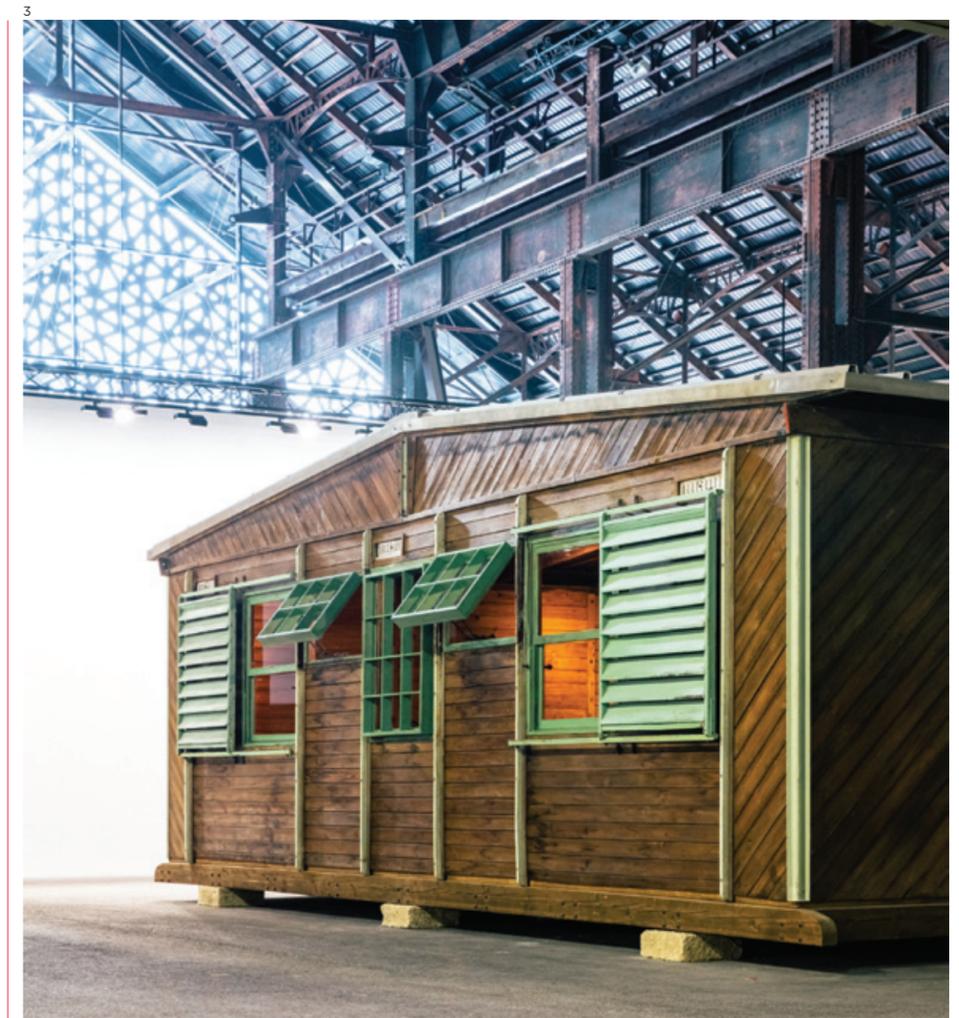
portholes. Both the smaller anteroom and the generous classroom next to it enjoy a fully glazed wall of French windows looking on to a veranda, shaded by a wide canopy. (With temporary classrooms like this, why were British baby boomers forced to spend the Seventies and Eighties in crappy huts?)

Prouvé's genius lies in his ability to express the elements of each structure with the minimum of materials, the greatest economy of line and yet with a sculptor's spatial and material sensibility. A compelling characteristic is the way each dwelling's supporting structural arches are so distinct: a singular inverted U or V-shape, their legs tapering gracefully down to their fixing slot. Whether painted red in this school, or yellow, as in the Maison Ferembal (1948) outside, they transform the open-plan interiors from flatpack construction kits to works of art.

The period of austerity that followed the Second World War was a time of experimentation and expansion for Prouvé. Encouraged by a 1945 government commission to create prefabricated refugee houses, he moved his Ateliers Jean Prouvé operations to Maxéville in 1946, just outside his home town of Nancy. Here, with both a factory and a design studio at his disposal, he could combine research, prototype development and production to transform the building process from craft-based practice to mechanised industry. It was here that he developed the Tropical House, an environmentally intelligent, lightweight aluminium structure, which was exported to Niamey, Niger, as a potential solution to the shortage of appropriate housing and civic buildings in France's African colonies. Two more were commissioned, and sent to the Congolese capital Brazzaville, in 1951. But the design failed to appeal to the expatriate community and no more were made.

He was a man ahead of his time. Though Prouvé was subsequently commissioned to create prototypes of prefabricated public housing, sales never took off. One of his housing prototypes that ended up as his HQ at Maxéville, the Design Office, is here at Arles, restored by another fan, Jean Nouvel. Following a disagreement with his backer, Prouvé abandoned his Maxéville site in 1952 — a move so traumatic he declared: 'I died in 1952'. In fact he lived until 1984 and went on to win sizeable commissions and accolades. But his dream of mass-produced, lightweight housing that leaves little impact on the planet had faded. It is hard to grasp how these structures, which now seem utterly desirable and contemporary, weren't snapped up and reproduced in their thousands, especially when the past decade has seen many calls — and responses — for architects and engineers to design lightweight and humanitarian buildings for the crises that have afflicted the planet. The exhibition text is correct when it speaks of a 'collective amnesia'.

Although he refused the term architect, this exhibition proves that he more than fulfilled that designation. Mark



Wigley, professor of architecture at Columbia University, who spoke at the exhibition's opening, said: 'If we embrace Prouvé as an architect, then we have a new idea of architecture. He was a revolutionary. Not just a revolutionary artist but political... His work is explicitly a socialist project. You see someone who clearly cares a lot. I love this exhibition

because it sees no distinction between caring socially and making the most beautiful work.'

If you can, you should seize this unique opportunity to see so many of these structures in one place. As Wigley says: 'You only understand Prouvé when you see the [structures] all together. That's when you feel the brain of this guy.'