

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

The Elegant and Affordable Prefab Architecture of Jean Prouvé

An exhibition at the LUMA Foundation in Arles features 12 of the socially-minded architects buildings made from easily assembled prefabricated parts.



Joseph Nechvatal | February 5, 2018



Night view of Jean Prouvé, "Ecole de Villejuif" ("Villejuif School," 1949) (all photos by Victor Picon courtesy LUMA Arles)

ARLES, France — [Jean Prouvé](#), the socially motivated 20th century French designer, is best known for his elegant [furniture](#) and innovative architectural

designs. Partly in response to the migrant crisis in Europe, the [LUMA Foundation](#) and Paris-based [Galerie Patrick Seguin](#) have put on a [major survey exhibition](#) devoted to Prouvé's functional yet stylish nomadic structures. Featuring 12 prefabricated buildings created between 1939 and 1969 (the largest number of Prouvé's demountable constructions ever assembled in a single

location), I found the show erudite, compelling, and conceptually relevant to today's cultural necessities.



Jean Prouvé, "La Maison Demontable BCC"
("BCC Demountable House," 1941)

"Europe has been facing a major migration crisis since 2010, bringing the concept of emergency housing to the heart of current architectural thinking," Maja Hoffmann, the founding president of the [LUMA Foundation](#), writes

in the forward to the catalogue. "This type of construction brings concrete and immediate answers to a question which is as simple to describe as it is difficult to resolve: how to improve living conditions in so-called 'temporary' or 'transit' zones? There have been examples in the past, but collective memory seems to be struck with amnesia."

The point of Prouvé now is to prove the positive paradigm. His appealing (some might even say glamorous) prefabricated, portable homes, designed halfway between craft and industry, were initially produced in the late 1930s as temporary accommodations for [military](#) needs and for those of civilian refugees. This innovative housing solution uses mass-produced, demountable, and transportable elements that, at the same time, aesthetically communicates a charming calm and sunny sophistication.

Steeped in the [École de Nancy's Art Nouveau](#) tradition, Prouvé's social consciousness in design is tied to his conception and production of craft. He trained as an



Installation view of *Jean Prouvé: Architect for Better Days* at LUMA Arles

artisan metalworker, privileging the integrity of material processes, as well as the ethical applications of industrial technologies.

These commitments carried him across the five decades of a career that was often marked by collaborations — with, among others, Robert Mallet-Stevens, Le Corbusier, and Charlotte Perriand.

In the 1930s, Prouvé began creating prototypes for his portable building systems and secured patents for them. True to his artisan roots, one perceives in these innovative, movable plans material integrity balanced with economical ingenuity. These nimble structures use inexpensive, easily assembled but durable construction materials that can be just as swiftly dismantled, transported and modified. As seen in the copious plans on view here, they are conceived with rigorous engineering clarity and efficiency. Indeed, Le Corbusier designated Prouvé a *constructeur* — at once an architect and an engineer. Acutely aware of the shifting social and political landscape of his time, Prouvé adapted his construction system to the exigencies of his historical moment.



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At the end of the Second World War, Prouvé designed pavilions intended to provisionally house war victims in the Lorraine and Franche-Comté

regions of France. Doing so, he perfected his patented axial gantry system that offered a quick, economical, and

adaptable solution. The units were habitable the same day they were assembled. In 1947, he was honored by the Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism for his contributions to reconstruction efforts. Morally and intellectually admirable, the structures (as sculpture) are also a pleasure to visually contemplate. Take, for example, the cute-as-heck “La Maison Démontable BCC” (“BCC Demountable House,” 1941), one of a series of projects developed by Prouvé and [Pierre Jeanneret](#) in 1939 anchored on the axial portal frame construction principle devised by Prouvé a year earlier. The house is modest, even in its colorings. On the front façade, worn dark auburn slates are punctuated by toned-down green exterior support pillars and, in a deeper creamy green, the window bracings. It is an open yet cozy space comprised of a metal-frame structure with wooden panels mounted atop a folded-steel compass, which lends support to the roof.



Jean Prouvé, “École de Bouqueval” (“Bouqueval School,” 1949)

Aesthetically, I also greatly enjoyed stepping into the minimalist, silver-colored harmony of Prouvé’s porthole-peppered structure “École de

Bouqueval” (“Bouqueval School,” 1949) and the starker, yet flashier, red-hot shelter “École de Villejuif” (“Villejuif School,” 1949), as they both exemplify Prouvé’s stylish, industrially produced architecture as applied to social necessities that challenge bourgeois notions of architecture as investment properties. There is something irreducible about their modest beauty. Intellectually, they are part of a long and ongoing effort to engage with past discontinuities — to recognize them and to work to remedy them by mixing elegance with social justice.

The structures in *Architect for Better Days* embrace

techniques that utilize economical but enduring materials in conjunction with chic, constructivist, savvy and dashing design. As such, the show offers an encouraging blueprint for responding to the current crisis of migrants in need of help today. It exemplifies the perspicacity of humanist, anti-luxury values at the core of much vanguard art and architecture, both in Prouvé's time and now.



Jean Prouvé, interior of "Ecole de Villejuif"
("Villejuif School," 1949)

Jean Prouvé:
Architect for Better
Days *continues at*
LUMA Arles (45
Chemin des
Minimes, Arles,
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Installation view of *Jean Prouvé: Architect for Better Days* at LUMA Arles



Jean Prouvé, "Maxèville" (1948)