

ARCHITECTURE

NEWS

## Jean Prouvé's House of Better Days on show at Galerie Patrick Seguin in Paris

The Maison Les Jours Meilleurs, or House of Better Days, by Jean Prouvé is explored in a new show at Galerie Patrick Seguin in Paris

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(Image credit: Galerie Patrick Seguin)

BY HARRIET THORPE  
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In Paris in February 1956, a prototype prefabricated house designed by French architect Jean Prouvé opened to the public for three weeks on the banks of the Seine. Amidst a post-war housing crisis, the *Maison Les Jours Meilleurs*, or House of Better Days, was a direct response to an appeal by activist Abbé Pierre for urgent homeless relief in Paris during the brutally cold winter of 1954, which saw widespread suffering and the tragic death of a mother and baby.

Now, 70 years on, an exhibition at Galerie Patrick Seguin in Paris is exploring the house and its social history through deconstructed architectural elements, archive material and the opportunity for the public, once again, to step inside the house – this time in virtual reality (back in 2012, the gallery released an animation of archive imagery and computer graphics that detailed the construction of Maison Les Jours Meilleurs).



(Image credit: Galerie Patrick Seguin)

## The House of Better Days at Galerie Patrick Seguin

Even with VR headsets beckoning, the exhibition's pièce de résistance is the very real, load-bearing core of the *Maison Les Jours Meilleurs*. The finely crafted, sculptural piece of steel was an innovative multi-tasker (greatly admired by Le Corbusier); it supported the building, carried plumbing and ventilation, hid a compact bathroom and revealed a neat kitchen.

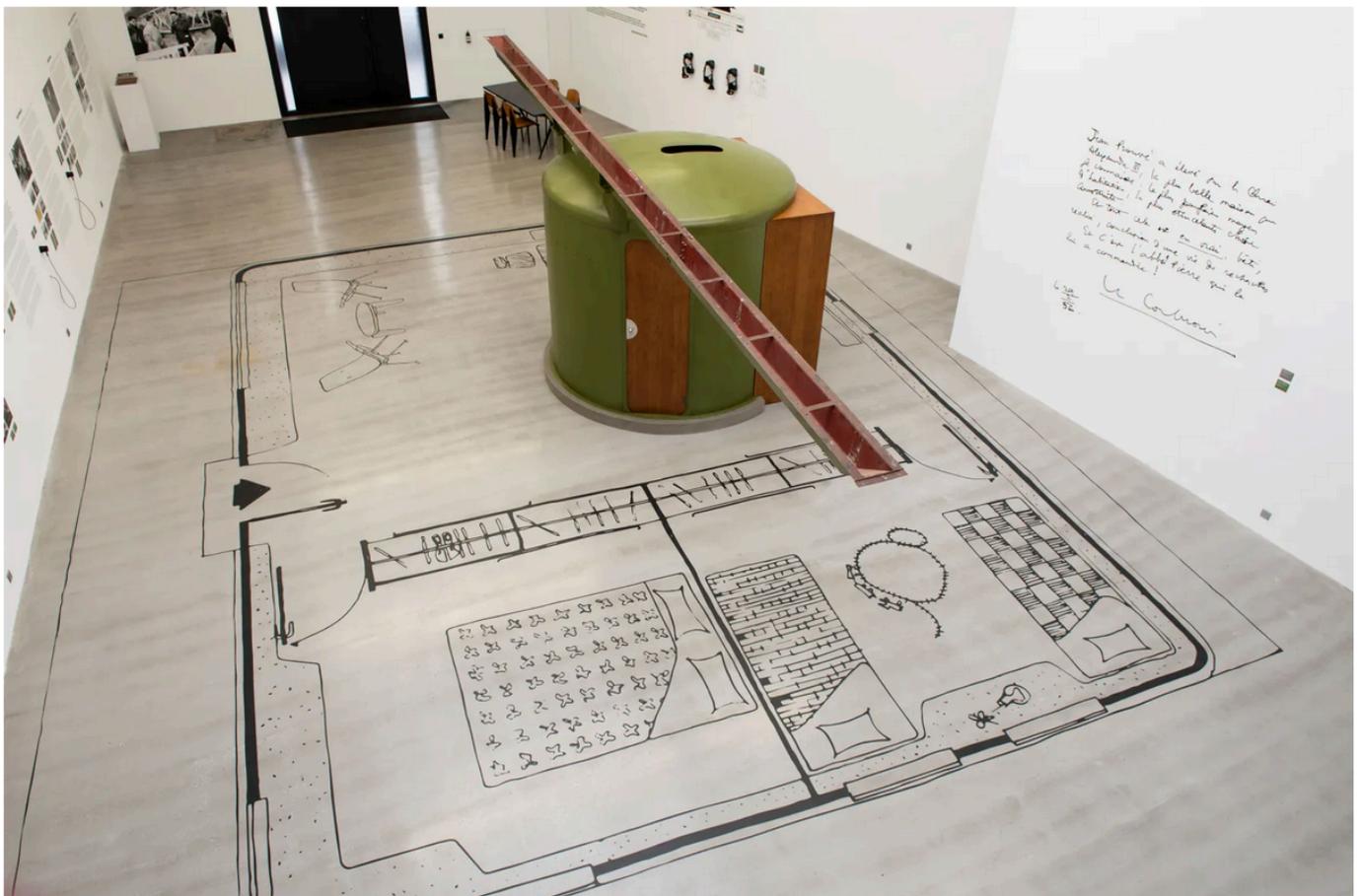
At the heart of Prouvé's concept, it shows that – even though this efficient, low-cost house built of industrial materials including aluminium roof panels and a plywood façade could be constructed within seven hours by two people – precision and craft were not lost.



(Image credit: Galerie Patrick Seguin)

Though the *Maison Les Jours Meilleurs* was modest at 57 sq m for a family of four, the virtual reality experience helps to communicate the quality of its interior; such as the warmth of its beech wood interior panels (also displayed in the gallery as a comparison) and sliding windows framing cinematic views of the Seine in the 1950s.

Back in 1956, an impressive 96 per cent of visitors approved of the interiors (with 59.8 per cent claiming interest in purchase). Today, achieving a sense of texture and depth virtually was the result of a painstaking collaboration between gallerist Patrick Seguin, VR experience architects Double Geste and architectural visualisers Le Visiomatique, who describe it as a process of 'reverse archaeology'.



(Image credit: Galerie Patrick Seguin)

It is through newspaper cuttings, magazine covers and construction photographs that the social history of the house can be better understood, as both a product of its context and the humanist ambitions of its creators, Prouvé and Abbé Pierre.

Prouvé had been working on 'emergency' architecture for many years prior; developing the axial portal frame system patented in 1939, then responding to a government brief for post-war housing in eastern France in 1944. In Paris, Abbé Pierre founded the Emmaüs group, also known as the Compagnons Bâisseurs, or Companion Builders, dedicated to tackling housing and poverty; and tirelessly raised funds through a campaign with washing powder brand Persil to raise more than two million francs to commission Prouvé.



(Image credit: Galerie Patrick Seguin)

While designed with optimism for a better future, only five *Maison Les Jours Meilleurs* were ever built – after failing to meet planning restrictions, a proud Prouvé refused to alter his designs. Yet gallerist Patrick Seguin believes there is much to be learnt from the house and its story, commending architects such as Shigeru Ban who continue to work on humanist approaches to emergency architecture today and in this vein, he's open-minded to see where the virtual *maison* might travel next.



(Image credit: Galerie Patrick Seguin)

*Maison Les Jours Meilleurs, 1956', Galerie Patrick Seguin, 14 March – 20 April  
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