Architecture

Nine prefab-ulous houses by Jean Prouvé come to market

The portable, once worthless designs by the French modernist are now cult collectibles; a clutch can now be seen at Patrick Seguin's French estate

Jean Prouvé's 'Better Days' house, 1956 © Galerie Patrick Seguin

Edwin Heathcote

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"Jean Prouvé said 'the house of my dreams is made in a factory,'" says Patrick Seguin. "Just look at this." He runs his fingers down the smooth seam of a folded column in the centre of a demountable house designed by the French architect-engineer. "He had a technique where he welded the section on the inside so from the outside it appears solid. But listen . . ." He taps against the metal shaft with his knuckles. It chimes like a hollow bell.

It’s difficult to communicate quite how in love with the designs of Jean Prouvé Seguin is. He lives them, breathes them. He is showing me around his estate in the Var in the south of France, where he has reconstructed nine Prouvé houses. At this month’s Tefaf art fair at New York’s Park Avenue Armory, his eponymous gallery will be hosting an exhibition exploring the history of the houses, models and Prouvé’s furniture.

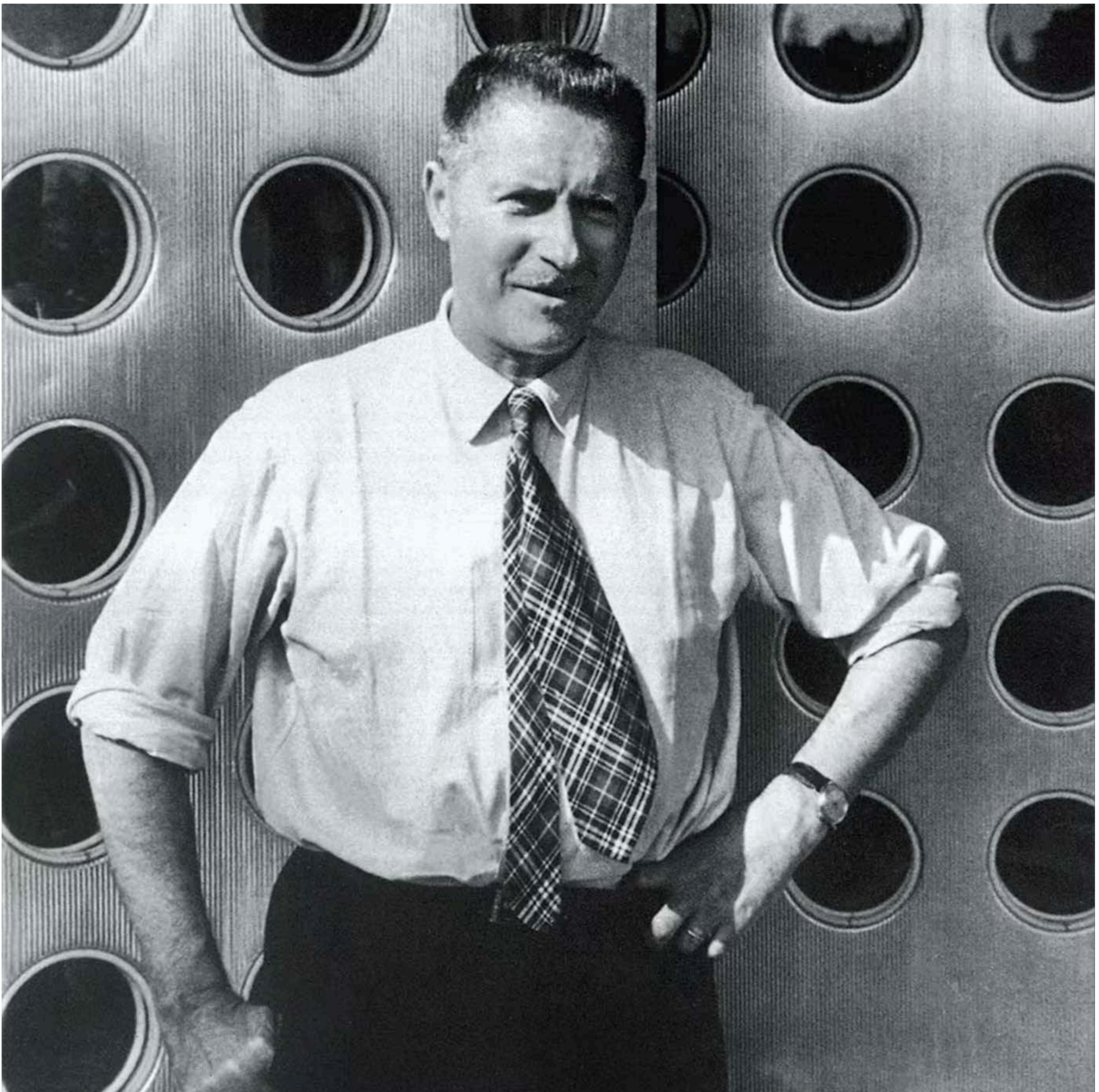
Seguin has spent at least four decades building Prouvé into a kind of cult through research, publishing, collecting, cataloguing — and selling. It’s a posthumous partnership in which Seguin has managed to both save dozens of Prouvé’s best works and make a market from almost nothing. His books on Prouvé top two dozen.

One of Prouvé’s demountable houses, 1944 © Galerie Patrick Seguin

Prouvé (1901-84) is now one of the most collectible modern designers. His tables can sell for almost $2mn, a single chair for up to half a million. Yet in the 1980s, Seguin tells me, his work had no almost value. “We bought 454 chairs and 87 tables from the government,” he says. “Couldn’t sell them. There was just no market.”

The situation was arguably even worse for the architecture. Prouvé, with his flat-top buzz cut and moustache, dedicated himself to making cheap homes, industrially produced for emergency situations — for refugees and soldiers, the displaced and the dispossessed, and those sent to work in French colonial outposts. His deep social concern steered him away from the architect's diet of one-off boutique houses towards basic shelter.

But what shelters they are. Each is as exquisite as his perennially cool tables and chairs. He more than once said, "There is no difference between the construction of an item of furniture and that of a house." And for him, there really wasn't. You can identify the same components in his tables as in his canopies or columns, the same thinking in the arm of a chair as in the folded metal of a roof.



Prouvé at his home in Nancy, c1955

Patrick Seguin has assembled nine original Prouvé houses at his Var estate; they are all for sale © Galerie Patrick Seguin

Prouvé was keen on suggesting he was only an artisan who got lucky — but there was always more to the story than that. His father Victor Prouvé was an artist and a pivotal figure in the Nancy School, the epicentre of French art nouveau. Jean was born right in the middle of that explosive moment in French style, the odd, eccentric link between rococo and modernism. He was steeped in art — yet he turned his back on it and focused his immense energy on industry.

> **Le Corbusier once described a Prouvé building as ‘the most perfect object for living in, the most sparkling thing ever constructed’. And Corb rarely said anything nice about another architect**

One of the modernists’ collective dreams was the transfer of the production of architecture from the muddy, inefficient mess of the construction site to the clean mechanisation of the factory floor. Prefabrication remained mostly an architectural dream but Prouvé’s experiments were its zenith. He began in the mid-1930s with a range of structures designed for use as classrooms, hospital buildings and offices.

Seguin invites me to witness the assembly of one of these buildings. In less than two days a small, experienced team of builders has erected it, watertight and finished. It’s an early example, an 8 metre x 8 metre structure from 1939 designed to accommodate workers for a hastily built weapons factory in Issoire, in Auvergne. It was designed with the architect Pierre Jeanneret, cousin of Le Corbusier; a simple, beautiful thing that perfectly illustrates why Prouvé became so revered. Le Corbusier himself once described a Prouvé building as “the most perfect object for living in, the most sparkling thing ever constructed”. And Corb rarely said anything nice about another architect.

BCC 8×8 demountable house, 1941 (with Pierre Jeanneret) on display in the Tuileries gardens, Art Basel Paris, 2023 © Galerie Patrick Seguin

Prouvé's furniture: 'There is no difference between the construction of an item of furniture and that of a house,' he once said © Galerie Patrick Seguin

Seguin might have begun by selling Prouvé's furniture but it's clear his real passion resides in these structures. "He wanted to perfect a machine architecture," Seguin says. "He could send a truck and three people and put up a house in a day. After the war they were trying to avoid building camps, to let people stay as close as possible to their homes, in their cities or villages, without displacing them."

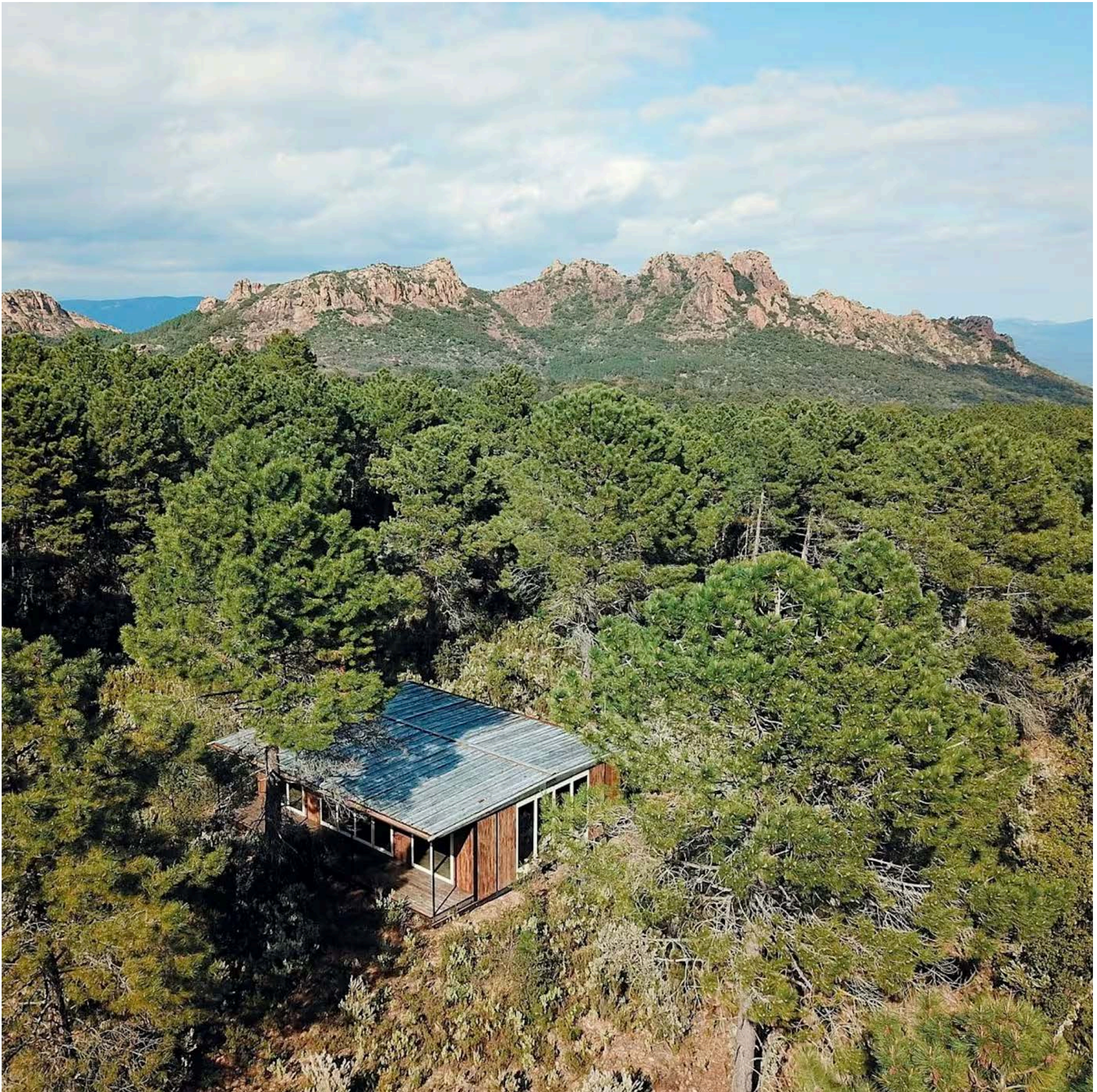
Prouvé continued designing and refining these buildings. Their central structural element, known as a "compass" (it resembles a pair of compasses), is an ingenious innovation that supports the ridge beam and stabilises the construction. It is made from surprisingly thin steel fashioned into an elegant sculptural object, much like the legs for his tables, for which he always used sheet metal rather than the previously fashionable modernist tube.

At Château La Coste in Provence you can book to stay in a Prouvé building customised by Richard Rogers © Galerie Patrick Seguin

After the war, Prouvé's involvement with the French Resistance was honoured by making him mayor of Nancy, the hometown where he worked for most of his life. He later experimented extensively with lightweight aluminium and prototypes went out to the colonies, to Niamey, Brazzaville and the Middle Congo. He built himself a demountable holiday home in Carnac, in Brittany. But his innovations were not taken up more widely.

Seguin spent time researching Prouvé's archive and inventory and where the structures had ended up. "Some of these houses were on farms," he tells me, "painted, covered in timber and used for tractors or for storing hay." One building had most recently been used as the nautical-themed Le Bounty, a swingers' club.

In 2007, hotelier Andre Balazs bid $4.97mn for one structure, the exquisite aluminium-panelled Maison Tropicale. The market had truly kicked off.



Prouvé's own 1948 design office, Var © Galerie Patrick Seguin

The interior with its hollow steel 'compass', an ingenious innovation that supports the ridge beam and stabilises the construction © Galerie Patrick Seguin

Seguin currently has nine Prouvé buildings on his estate, including the architect's own 1948 design office. Some are virtually as found, others slightly redesigned with bow windows (based on a Prouvé design) or minor modifications. They are all for sale.

Dealers can be cagey about prices but I chance my arm and ask Seguin what one might cost me, expecting to be met with a blank stare. Instead he says, with refreshing openness, "Let's say between $2mn and $12mn." Compared to art, it seems a bit of a bargain. "They're not like paintings," he adds. "You can use them. Several of my clients have them in their gardens as offices or cabins."

Demountable house, 1944 © Galerie Patrick Seguin/Nicolas Bergerot

At Château La Coste in Provence is a Prouvé building customised (with added bathroom) by Richard Rogers, one of his last projects; guests can book to stay in it. Rogers had a bond with Prouvé, who had been instrumental in ensuring that a young Rogers and Renzo Piano won the competition for the Pompidou Centre in 1971. Rogers' early work also owes much to his designs, sheet metal, panels, portholes and prefabrication.

There is, of course, a biting irony that these structures, designed for refugees and emergencies, and to be cheap and portable, have become status symbols. The list of owners of Prouvé structures is remarkable. It includes artists Damien Hirst, Rudolf Stingel and Richard Prince, collectors Yusaku Maezawa, Maja Hoffmann and George Economou as well as Miuccia Prada. But it is the value now ascribed to them that has allowed them to survive.

These are also very fine paradigms for a modern architecture. They sit lightly on the ground, with no concrete base, are easy to assemble and completely reusable — a circular architecture. And therein lies yet another cutting irony: that these temporary buildings have proved so durable while so many other modernist works have disappeared.

Jean Prouvé at Galerie Patrick Seguin, Tefaf New York, May 15-19; tefaf.com

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