

Angle de vue : Jean Prouvé's demountable houses

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Angle de vue Jean Prouvé's demountable houses *Adrien Comte & Adrien Meuwly*

Rémy Zaugg

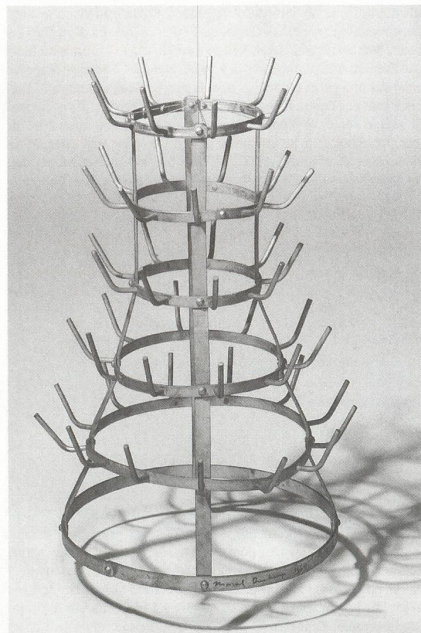


« La perception esthétique, qui allait de soi devant une peinture de Rubens doit, face à la sculpture de Judd, s'interroger, prendre conscience de ce qu'elle est, se redéfinir pour s'affirmer et pour être, c'est-à-dire pour avoir lieu. »

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fig. a Rémy Zaugg, *La ruse de l'innocence*, Dijon 1997, p. 80

Rémy Zaugg



« Le "Porte-bouteilles" de Duchamp ne possède pas la même ambivalence: il est figé une fois pour toutes dans sa fonction seconde et arbitraire de proposition artistique. »

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fig. b Rémy Zaugg, *La ruse de l'innocence*, Dijon 1997, p. 268

Every era has certain codes for reading and understanding art. The perception of a piece of art evolves in time and depends on the context in which the reader is situated. Although the artwork appears frozen in time when confined to a museum, it is actually subject to continual evolution of its interpretations.¹ In *«Wahrheit und Methode»*, the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer argued that a dialogue always exists between a piece of art and those who perceive it.² Reinterpreting a work of art is always possible, since its meaning is transmitted by a contemporaneous experience: we are able to revisit and project on to the original piece with our current codes of understanding.

However, the understanding of an *œuvre* cannot be complete without knowledge of its perception at the time it was created. The work has to be imagined in its original context to be fully understood. Pierre Bourdieu explains thereupon that «the history of the instruments of perception of a work of art is the essential complement of the history of the instrument of production of the work, inasmuch as the work of art is in a way created twice over, by the artist and by the spectator, or, rather by the society to which the spectator belongs.»³

Pierre Bourdieu distinguishes either *«classical periods»*, in which the produced works of art are in line with the system of codes embedded in society, or *«periods of rupture»* in which art pieces are out of phase with these codes. The inertia of the instruments of perception means that, in periods of rupture, the art work produced according to new codes will be interpreted through a lens of former codes of perception; the same against which it has been composed.

Du logement d'urgence...

The atypical approach of Jean Prouvé and his rupture with the traditionally strict separation between conception and production of the twentieth century is confirmed by his self-claimed title of *«constructor»*: a status coming from the industry. At that time, this concept was unknown to the world of architecture, its historians and critics. Since the 1930's he developed innovative techniques, applicable equally to furniture and buildings alike, not making his decisions as an architect, but as a specialist in material properties and their adaptation to manufacturing methods. He created many prototypes for new construction methodologies.⁴ His predilection for prefabrication, involving standardisation and assembly line production, reveal his fascination for the car industry, as well as the American influence of Taylor and Ford.⁵

It is only in 1958, in an article by Françoise Choay published in the art magazine *«l'Œil»*, that Jean Prouvé is described for the first time as an author.⁶ «Prouvé overturned the idea of industrialisation being simply definitional of ugliness. On the contrary, he demonstrated that this economic and technical process implies in essence a new aesthetic.»⁷

The understanding of Jean Prouvé's work calls for a perceptual projection into its historical post-war context⁸, in which the urgent reconstruction of cities and villages was needed to accommodate war victims – 462 000 houses had been completely destroyed. Traditional construction would have taken too long, and would have needed specialized workers who were unavailable (the ones left after the war were mainly employed in the reconstruction of large concrete works). In this context, with the shortage of labour force and material, including a dearth of available steel and wood, the development of a new system sparing both materials and labor was required.

For his demountable houses, Prouvé was proposing a hybrid construction; a steel structure that provides precision and strength, with prefabricated wood-clad panels that enclose the space and provide rigidity to the structure. The dimensions of the houses vary, but always follow a module based on the width of the facade panel (6×6, 6×9, 6×12, 8×8 or 8×12m). Each element was produced in the atelier, delivered on site, and put together into a house within one day. Each shipment of materials totaled four tons, of

- 1 «A historically constituted system founded in social reality, this set of instruments of perception which makes up the means of appropriation of artistic goods (and of cultural goods in general) in a given society at a given moment in time, does not depend on individual will and consciousness. Indeed, it imposes itself on individual people, more often than not without them knowing it, defining those distinctions that they can implement and those which elude them.» Pierre Bourdieu, *«L'amour de l'art»*, Paris 1969, p. 75.
- 2 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *«Wahrheit und Methode»*, Tübingen 1960.
- 3 Pierre Bourdieu, *«L'amour de l'art»*, Paris 1969.

- 4 Jean Prouvé, *«Il faut des maisons usinées»*, Conference, Nancy 16th of February 1946.
- 5 Adolph Stiller, *«Des Bâtiments démontables et transportables»*, in: Jean Prouvé, *«La poésie de l'objet technique»*, Vitra Design, 2006.
- 6 G. Morel-Journel, *«Fortune critique de l'oeuvre de Jean Prouvé»*, in: *«Jean Prouvé et Paris»*, p. 240.
- 7 Françoise Choay, *«l'Œil»*, Paris 1958.
- 8 Architecture is, according to Julien Guadet *«l'expression d'un état social, parce qu'au delà des programmes, il y a le programme des programmes; la civilisation de chaque siècle»*.

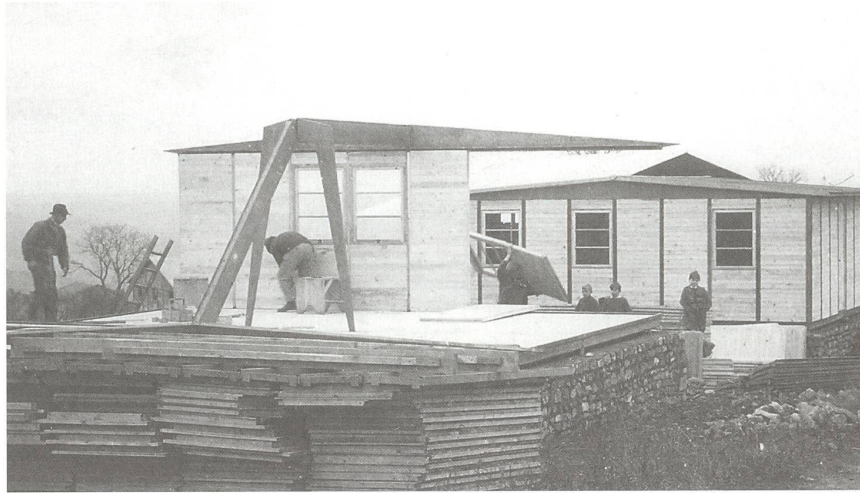


fig. c «8 x 8 m building. It is not known how many 8 x 8 m over 6,4 m² buildings for war victims were built by the J. Prouvé Workshops.», in: Peter Sulzer, *Jean Prouvé, Oeuvre complète, Volume 3: 1944–1954*, Basel, Boston, Berlin 2005, p. 50

which less than half was steel. Each assembly team was composed of four specialists, who would leave the factory early in the morning in a truck full of the elements for an entire house. When they returned, the job was accomplished and the house inhabited.

The relationship between the envelope and the load-bearing structure plays an essential role in the demountable houses, where a house is only stable once the object is completely mounted and every piece is in tension. The roof is an integral part of the structure: a horizontal beam standing on a portique, transmitting the loads to the facade. The central portiques are admittedly structural, but serve above all as a tool for the assembling of the house. It is this constructive logic of the demountable houses (deprived from any stylistic effect) that generates its own aesthetic: the technical device becomes an architectural element.⁹

Jean Prouvé wanted to «show the public that the factory-built house is a comfortable house, and overcome the routine»¹⁰. But in order to give appropriate dimensions to the living area in a very limited space, the adopted plan did not correspond to typical living standards and inhabitants needed to conform to this «typology of emergency housing». Although we sang the praises of these technically advanced, «dry-mounted buildings», the demountable houses, due to their image, were not matching the public's tastes. All of this resulted in the limited success of the demountable houses at the time of their first occupancy.¹¹

... au jardin des Tuileries

Nowadays, the acknowledgement of the pioneering role of Prouvé is only increasing. The demountable houses are finding a completely different public: that of the art galleries. Their light, transportable structure, contradicting the notion of architecture as anchored to the ground—the very one of «immovable property»—allowed gallerists to more easily appropriate them as objects. It was not until the end of the 1980's, when Prouvé's furniture and some facade panels could already be found in galleries and museums, that Patrick Seguin and Philippe Jousse began to collect entire houses that were becoming obsolete. A slow process of valorisation, most notably with the integration of these «rescued»¹² houses to the catalogue published in collaboration with Enrico Navarra, launched collectors' infatuation for these relics. This called into question the promoting as art pieces of barracks originally conceived as an economical solution to the social housing problem.

According to Nathalie Heinich and Roberta Shapiro, the trade actors are playing an essential role in the process of «passage à l'art» through the fact

9 Catherine Coley, *Jean Prouvé*, Paris 1993.
 10 Jean Prouvé, «Il faut des maisons usinées», Conference, Nancy 16th of February 1946.
 11 Adolph Stiller, «Des bâtiments démontables et transportables», in: Jean Prouvé *La poésie de l'objet technique*, Vitra Design, 2006.
 12 Patrick Seguin, interviewed in: «Passion de collectionneurs», in: *Jean Prouvé et Paris*, p. 244.



fig. d «Demountable buildings for war victims. 1944/45. [...] Two 6 x 6 m buildings in a Lorraine village.», in: Peter Sulzer, Jean Prouvé, *Oeuvre complète, Volume 3: 1944–1954*, Basel, Boston, Berlin 2005, p. 47

that they permit the circulation and visibility of the œuvre.¹³ By organizing many exhibitions and publishing catalogues about Prouvé, collectors allowed the work to obtain fame and public recognition, the last stage in the process of «artification». This combination of technical knowledge, traditional craftsmanship, and artistic sensibility, defining Jean Prouvé's practice, makes possible this unusual situation of an entire building being exhibited alongside the great masters in the museums of fine arts and the auctions halls.

This shift of perspective does not come without consequences for the demountable houses: the structure is brought forward, the house being exposed without any inside walls and displayed as an empty and pure box.¹⁴ The single space acquires a renewed scale, corresponding to contemporary expectations. The time-worn elements are restored, and although patina and traces of time are accepted, the original colors are sometimes lost in the process, leaving the original materials visible. The technical character of the construction is also staged, as the process of assembly becomes a performance, realized in the presence of an audience. Richard Rogers was even commissioned to increase the house's comfort, completing the modular system with an adjacent kitchen and bathroom: a perfect holiday house in what was formerly a war victim's shack. Nowadays, the understanding of the œuvre differs from the original one. This renewed reading does not result only from a change in historical context; the language is adapted, so that contemporary «instruments of perception» permit a clearer understanding.

The demountable houses' rarity, stemming from the failure of their project for mass production, has paradoxically become one of the reasons for outbidding them today. This same rarity is certainly apparent in gallery owners' initial will to preserve Prouvé's work, with ample space for financial growth. This process of collecting triggered an influx of interest for Prouvé's previously little-known houses: now the heritage protection authority takes action, trying to protect the architectural objets that stayed out of the art scene. Currently, the heritage's preservation finds itself in a paradoxical situation of competition between public authorities having difficulties to maintain the quality condition of protected objets and the world of art and design leading to relocating and adapting the houses. Thus, irrespective of the motives that pushed gallery owners toward the preservation of this work—passion or business—they uncovered a seemingly essential part of our building heritage. There remains one central question surrounding the origin of Jean Prouvé's creations that we encounter today in galleries and museums: are they still the work of Jean Prouvé?

13 Nathalie Heinich et Roberta Shapiro, «De l'artification, enquêtes sur le passage à l'art», Paris 2012, p. 284.

14 For example Jean Nouvel's project for the adaptation of «Maison Ferembal».

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