

“Jean Prouvé - The Poetics of the Technical Object.” The Design Museum, London, UK, December 7, 2007—April 13, 2008. Previously exhibited at Hotel de Ville de Boulogne-Billancourt, Paris (25.09.2007 - 18.11.2007); NAI Netherlands Architecture Institute, Maastricht (12.05.2007 – 02.09); Palazzo Té, Mantua (18.02.2007 - 22.04.2007); Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein (23.09.2006 - 28.01.2007); Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt (12.05.2006 - 23.07.2006); Toyota Museum of Industry and Technology, Nagoya (04.11.2005 - 22.01.2006); Rensei Junior High School, Tokyo (06.09.2005 - 23.10.2005); Sendai Mediatheque, Sendai (06.08.2005 - 24.08.2005); Kamakura Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura (30.04.2004 - 16.01.2005).

Alexander von Vegesack, *Jean Prouvé: The Poetics of the Technical Object*. Weil am Rhein, Germany: Vitra Design Museum, 2004.

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Jean Prouvé - The Poetics of the Technical Object comprised a varied display of prototypes, realized products from beds to bicycles, drawings, photographs, models, components, films, and computer databases that elegantly documented Prouvé’s career, conveying both its variety and remarkably consistent development. From February 5, 2008, the exhibition was accompanied by the construction and rebuilding of one of Prouvé’s pre-fabricated metal houses, La Maison Tropicale (1951) at Tate Modern. A time-lapse film of the construction is available at <http://www.lamaisontropicale.com/www/>. In addition to experiencing La Maison Tropicale first hand, visitors to the Design Museum exhibition were encouraged to enter a range of spaces, whether physically, by stepping into a full-scale room set or walking under a

structural roof element, or imaginatively, by examining furniture displayed in front of large-scale photographs of Prouvé's own home, or by viewing a filmed interview with Prouvé.

The exhibition used thematic clusters (as does the catalog text) within a chronological display, showing Prouvé's enduring exploration of the possibilities of metal, initially for furniture and subsequently for building. Following a blacksmithing apprenticeship (1916-1919) and military service, Prouvé (1901-1984) set up a factory in Nancy, France in 1927 to produce metal components and commissions in wrought iron, including an entrance grille for Robert Mallet-Stevens' Villa Reifenberg in Paris. Prouvé's contact with avant-garde architecture led to technical and materials-based experimentation, which governed the form and aesthetics of his subsequent work. Prouvé shared the modern movement belief that good design could improve social conditions, and not only for his factory employees; he preferred larger public commissions and published a catalogue of furniture for offices, schools, and hospitals in 1936. At the outbreak of World War II, Prouvé produced prefabricated army barracks and was active in the French Résistance throughout the war. After the war (during which materials shortages had dictated a switch in production to wood), Prouvé moved to a larger factory at Maxéville and pursued his aim of mechanizing the building industry through the use of prefabricated metal modular systems. This resulted in Les Maisons Tropicales and designs for Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseille. The far wall of the exhibition space displayed large metal building panels, which formed a large-scale graphic backdrop at the midpoint of the show's round of miniature architectural models and detailed information boards (fig. 1). Following the takeover of Maxéville by Aluminium Français in 1953, Prouvé built a house with salvaged components and founded Construction Jean Prouvé to work on more complex architectural projects, such as a pavilion for the centenary of aluminum in Paris and, with Charlotte Perriand, furniture for student rooms (1950-1952), of which full-sized examples were displayed in the exhibition. Construction Jean Prouvé was in turn taken

over by CIMT, a manufacturer of railway track components, and specialized in curtain wall facades. In 1966, Prouvé became an architectural cladding consultant, notably for Paris's Tour Nobel building.



Figure 1. “Jean Prouvé: Poetics of the Technical Object,” at the Design Museum, 2008.
© Photographer Luke Hayes.

A large Prouvé archive survives and is made available to exhibition visitors in a user-friendly computer installation showing the flowcharts and photographs that Prouvé made to plan and document production at Maxéville, as well as sketches related to the weekly industrial design lectures he gave in 1957 at the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers, Paris. Films of Prouvé's lectures were shown at the exhibition. The richness of these resources invites future edited scholarly editions of Prouvé's sketches and writings, as well as prompting further reflection on Prouvé's legacy. Although this exhibition did not neglect Prouvé's important

collaborations, it focused on his individual achievements at the expense of contextualising them by comparison with his contemporaries and exploring his later impact. Nevertheless, this accessible and informative exhibition has made Prouvé's work available to a public beyond the designers and collectors who already know his value.