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ON SITE

JEAN PROUVÉ

FINDING MYSELF IN NEW HAVEN last spring, I dropped by the strangely brooding Art and Architecture Building to see how it was holding up. Paul Rudolph's concrete castle still looks fabulously imposing from the street; the interior, once I found the steep and narrow stairs to the entrance, was the dark, cold cave I remembered from a visit to Yale twenty years ago. But here I discovered something quite delightful: a brightly lit shelter made of pale taupe and green enameled sheet metal perforated with blue glass portholes. The shape, color, and substance of the structure gave it the look of an oversize mechanical toy. As it turned out, the little building was purely utilitarian, a prefabricated house conceived and built by the French *constructeur* Jean Prouvé for use in colonial French West Africa.

Prouvé is best known for his astringently functional, mostly metal furniture, but he was so enamored of pressed steel and aluminum that he wanted to use them for all aspects of modern living. Driven by a love of machine-made efficiency, he envisioned portability as the fullest expression of modernity and eventually invented flat-pack homes that could be erected with ease. His first essay in this form was a little steel-and-glass cabin, light and airy, codesigned with Eugène Beaudoin and Marcel Lods and intended for use by workers enjoying a newly introduced government mandate: the paid vacation. During the war years, he refined this building system to create barracks, classrooms, dining halls, and dormitories for the French army. After the war he repurposed these military structures to develop housing units, eventually receiving a

commission to modify the system for use in the colonial tropics. One prototype was installed in Niamey, Niger, in 1949, and the other in Brazzaville, Congo, in 1951. It was a section of the latter, reconstructed in part from the original pieces, that appeared at Yale in the 2005 traveling exhibition “Jean Prouvé: A Tropical House,” curated by Robert Rubin.

My first encounter with this structure involved an element of play. I had the pleasure of tracking down sections of the original prototype too corroded to be restored but nevertheless displayed in the dark nooks and crannies of Rudolph’s tower—and felt a certain frisson on fingering the bullet holes in one panel. (Oh, what dark secrets are being withheld here?) The strangeness of the experience was underscored by an absurd video also on view, in which a group of French intellectuals, wineglasses in hand, wander the reconstructed house in the manner of characters in Marguerite Duras’s *India Song*—except obviously within an easy drive of Paris, not in some distant colony.

A second viewing, when the house moved to the UCLA Hammer courtyard this autumn, provided a chance for further consideration. Here, approximately half the building, a twenty-foot-square cube floating on a veranda, was nestled in a bamboo glade: It was a pavilion rather than a house, the perfect foil for a midcentury modern cocktail party, an exotic variant on the designs for indoor/outdoor living that are such an iconic part of Los Angeles culture. But as a *home*, this model stood coldly apart. The chill came from the realization that, in line with the dogged, industrial optimism of the postwar years, this was a room that could be easily hosed down.

Prouvé was a rationalist and an idealist, determined to use his engineering skills to solve problems impeding the smooth management of the French colonies. His first task was to design housing for administrative functionaries that could withstand a climate of high temperatures and humidity and a four-month season of torrential rain. The houses would need to be inexpensive and easily delivered. Prouvé’s design was technically brilliant. Using the same light materials as Ford and Boeing—extruded aluminum and sheet steel—he designed the central structure of the tropical house as a pair of two-legged metal portals that would provide stability in strong horizontal winds. The whole house floats over a raised base built in situ, providing a layer of insulation below and thus preventing dampness. Outer louvers direct breezes, and along with the shiny beige exterior and the blue-tinted portholes, also deflect sunlight.

It sounds convincing, another case of modern design savvy defeating the elements. But the house in Brazzaville remained a lonely prototype and was

soon forgotten. What went wrong? Well, it turned out that, despite its clever engineering, the house was not cheap to build. How efficiently did the brightly colored, well-insulated and ventilated metal box keep its inhabitants from baking? What does it sound like inside a metal hut when it rains? Who finds multiple portholes a plus and not prisonlike? Indeed, there is photographic evidence that the tenants cut rectangular windows into the panels.

Neither this show nor a small companion exhibit at the UCLA Architecture School answers the question of whether Prouvé's designs were as oblivious to the full range of human needs as those of his sometime-collaborator Le Corbusier. Nor does either exhibit consider in any depth the question of what the structure represents now. To be fair, Rubin declares his only interest to be an examination of a building system at its moment of promise, before experience and failure shade the picture. Yet it is also worthwhile to place the house in a broader context: After gaining its independence in 1960, Congo by 1963 became a Marxist republic supported by the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the USSR, Congo drifted into a democracy that was shattered in 1997 by civil war and the return of Marxist leadership. At that time, several parties in France located Prouvé's battered and bullet-riddled building, bought it, and arranged for it to be dismantled, packed, and shipped back to France, a final, enfeebled symbol of the end of the colonial moment. There, it was substantially reconstructed and renovated so that today's version, now on world tour, is largely cleansed of its past. Somewhat akin to the "current reissues" available at such stores as Design Within Reach, this is vintage modernism presented in a new, replicant version, untarnished and sturdy, ready to support the fantasy of a better modern life.

Thomas Lawson is dean of the School of Arts at CalArts, Valencia, CA.

Prêt à Prouvé

THOMAS LAWSON ON THE TROPICAL HOUSE

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THOMAS LAWSON IS DEAN OF THE SCHOOL OF ARTS AT CALARTS, VALENCIA, CA.



Jean Prouvé, Tropical House, 1951/2005. Installation view, UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2005. Photo: Elton Schoenholz.

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