

The exhibition presents the French constructor who championed architecture with prefabricated elements and mass production for social ends

CaixaForum Madrid discovers the industrial architecture of Jean Prouvé

- *The Universe of Jean Prouvé. Architecture / Industry / Furniture* exhibition is a retrospective exploring the work of the French industrialist and furniture designer whose prefabricated elements revolutionised construction techniques in the mid-20th century. Considered one of the innovators of the last century, Prouvé pioneered affordable, quality architecture destined for the greatest number of people possible. His furniture stood out for being durable, simple and lightweight.
- There are some 235 pieces on display, including models, plans, photographs, drawings, furniture and documents, taken from the architecture and design collections of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Most of these items were donated to the Centre by Prouvé's family.
- The exhibition highlights how Jean Prouvé, who started out as an artisan metalworker, went on to become a versatile, multifaceted industrialist. His career would include projects ranging from prefabricated houses, markets and service stations to furniture of every kind, all with a marked social conscience.
- Open from 4 March to 13 June 2021, this display is the second collaboration between the Centre Pompidou in Paris and "la Caixa" Foundation, fruit of the agreement between the two institutions.

The Universe of Jean Prouvé. Architecture / Industry / Furniture. Dates: from 4 March to 13 June 2021. **Organisation and production:** "la Caixa" Foundation, with collaboration from the Centre Pompidou. **Curatorship:** Olivier Cinqualbre, curator of the exhibition and chief curator of the architecture collection, MNAM-CCI/Centre Pompidou, and Marjorie Ocelli, curator and researcher at the MNAM-CCI/Centre Pompidou. **Place:** CaixaForum Madrid (Paseo del Prado, 36).

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Madrid, 4 March 2021. The Director of Exhibitions of the "la Caixa" Foundation, **Isabel Salgado**, the director of CaixaForum Madrid, **Isabel P. Fuentes**, and the curators **Olivier Cinqualbre** and **Marjorie Ocelli**, have today presented in CaixaForum Madrid the exhibition entitled ***The Universe of Jean Prouvé. Architecture / Industry / Furniture***. This retrospective devoted to the French constructor and furniture designer, considered one of the most innovative creators of the 20th century, **spans his entire career** focused on the industrialisation of construction and mass production of furniture.

Through **235 pieces — 146 of them originals** — including models, plans, photographs, drawings, furniture, documents and facsimiles, the exhibition chronologically traces the life and work of Jean Prouvé (Paris, 1901 – Nancy, 1984), from his beginnings as a blacksmith to the end of the 1920s. Prouvé was an extraordinary, multifaceted creator who, though never qualifying as an architect or industrial designer, **worked with some of the greatest architects of modernity — such as Robert Mallet-Stevens and Le Corbusier** — on prefabricated buildings with simple structures, manufactured in series. His conception of architecture, for the benefit of communities and with a marked **social vision**, and his eagerness to innovate and experiment with new techniques **revolutionised the construction of prefabricated buildings**. Outstanding among his most exemplary buildings are the **Maison Métropole, Maison Coque** and **Maison des Jours Meilleurs**. He was also an exceptional designer of furniture, always seeking simplicity, elegance, economy of materials and strength and durability of the object, with functionality as a strict prerequisite.

Prouvé was a versatile creator, able to design anything from a flying-school clubhouse to a nursery-school table, and from a demountable building to a chain of service stations. He **considered himself an "industrialist"** above all else and approached the construction of a house in the same way as he would the design of a small piece of furniture. The display also highlights his talent as an essayist and pedagogue, the product of which has been an influence on numerous architects and industrial designers.

The Jean Prouvé exhibition, conceived especially for CaixaForum, is the **second display organised by "la Caixa" Foundation as a result of the agreement between this institution and the Centre Pompidou in Paris**. The first was *Camera and city. Urban Life in Photography and Film*, inaugurated in 2019.



The **Centre Pompidou preserves a huge collection of works by Jean Prouvé**, thanks to the generosity of his children. The pieces were moved to the Centre in 1992, when the **Musée National d'Art Moderne** inaugurated its collections of architecture and design. Though the chronological criterion of this section of the museum is post-1960, the works of Jean Prouvé give the collections a historical basis. And what is more, they have led to further donations from the families of Prouvé's former collaborators, gallery owners and public institutions that had conserved some of his furniture.

Driving force behind the iconic Pompidou building

Jean Prouvé's relationship with the Centre Pompidou was long-standing, as **in 1971 the celebrated creator was president of the jury for the international competition for design of the Centre's building**, the first time such a competition had been held in France. His appointment was controversial, because Prouvé was not a qualified architect. Nonetheless, it was largely due to his **contribution** that the **iconic project presented by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers was chosen**. Prouvé supported these young architects in the construction of a building so striking that it now forms an inherent part of the Centre's identity. Renzo Piano would later take part in creating the scenography of the exhibition entitled *Jean Prouvé constructeur*, which the Pompidou organised in 1990.

All of Jean Prouvé's works in this exhibition come from the MNAM-CCI collection and were donated by his children, Françoise, Claude, Simone, Hélène and Catherine Prouvé, together with a donation from the Clarence Westbury Foundation in Houston.

The workshop as a universe

As a child, Jean Prouvé **trained in the workshop of his father**, Victor Prouvé (1858-1943), who was a painter, sculptor and engraver. Later, in his adolescence, Prouvé served apprenticeships in the workshops of master ironworkers, where he learned the craft of the forge. Significantly, in 1921 his father depicted Prouvé holding a hammer high in a sanguine drawing which is included in the exhibition. **In 1924, Prouvé opened his first workshop** producing "Artistic ironwork and locks" in Nancy. "For several years I worked the



forge myself. I was absolutely not an office man, nor a drawer. I lived in the workshop, and I remember the locksmiths and the blacksmiths used a leather apron to protect themselves from the sparks. I wore that leather apron for many years." **Prouvé is a craftsman who became an industrialist and constructor, highly respected by architects** of both the 20th century and today due to his innovative and functional way of working.

Jean Prouvé's first significant collaboration with an architect was through Robert Mallet-Stevens, with whom he worked on the design of lift cabins, balustrades and staircase banisters. Prouvé decided on a modern aesthetic for these objects, so it is not surprising that he became associated with the Union of Modern Artists (UAM) from its foundation in 1929. There would be no turning back from this **commitment to modernity**, as demonstrated by his participation in the UAM pavilion at the **International Exhibition of Arts and Techniques Applied to Modern Life**, held in Paris in 1937. He designed a spectacular staircase with a central support and, especially for the occasion, created pieces of furniture alongside Jacques André, as well as a bathroom unit for a project in collaboration with **Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand**.

Towards mass production

In 1931, Prouvé steered his company, **Ateliers Jean Prouvé**, towards mass production, and in the mi-1930s his work on buildings went beyond the design and construction of elements, expanding to take in the entire structure. "In 1934-1935 **I imagined another way of doing architecture**; in other words, another way of using materials [...]. I imagined buildings with a structure, in the same way as a human has a skeleton, to which the complement had to be added; and the logical complement for a skeleton — whether it was made of steel, concrete or wood — consisted in wrapping it in a facade, but a light one, given that the structure holds itself up alone."

His first project with structures made entirely of metal and glass was the **Roland Garros Aero-Club** (Buc, 1935-1936). In the **Maison du peuple and covered market** (Clichy, 1936-1938), which is still in operation, he created façades with metal cladding whose panels were made tense by a slight bulging brought about by a spring located in the panel centre. On the first floor of the market, Prouvé designed a multi-purpose hall with moveable elements: the roof opens, the partition walls fold up, the seats can be retracted and the floors can be moved.



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The great contribution of Prouvé as regards furniture was the creation of **durable pieces with economy of materials, often folding and reclinable**. In technical terms, the folded metal sheet provided the object's resistance, and the stress is uniformly dispersed through the chair's legs. One of his most successful models was the 1934 **Standard chair**. He developed and perfected it over time, and in 15 years it underwent various adaptations: he combined wood and metal, it was demountable and finally became an absolute reference under the name of the **Cafeteria chair**. Some of his most famous pieces of furniture can be seen in the exhibition: the **Dactylo chair** number 304 (1950), the **Centrale table** (1951), the **Nursery School chair and two-seater desk** (1951), the **Compass table** (1953) and the **Antony lounge chair** (1955).

During the Second World War, **Prouvé associated with Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret** in the construction of **demountable pavilions** for workers of the Société Centrale des Alliages Légers [*Central Company of Light Alloys*], in Issoire, France. A considerable number of pavilions were built — dormitories, canteen, infirmary, saloon and office for the designers — using a system that combined centralised porticoes and modular elements for roofs and façades. Prouvé was **active with the French Resistance** during the war, and **was named mayor of Nancy** in 1944.

Progress, community, avant-garde

Jean Prouvé's ambition was to create products for the greatest number of people possible. He believed in the idea of progress for the benefit of all. So while never losing his avant-garde character, that is what drove him to design and build quality dwellings and furniture conceived as community facilities, in particular during the post-war years when housing was in short supply. "We need prefabricated houses", he said, and from 1946 was able to enjoy an essential instrument to attain that objective: the Maxéville factory. Installed on a large site and adapted to mass production, prefabricated parts were produced in the factory workshop and assembled on-site. This was the method used to build **Maison Tropicale** (1949), **Maison Métropole** (1950) and **Maison Coque** (1951) which, as a novelty, was assembled on the basis of curved roof panels with their corresponding metallic supports. Furthermore, Prouvé always designed the houses with their corresponding furniture.



Jean Prouvé built two unique buildings in the 1950s: his **family house in Nancy** (1954), constructed on rugged, difficult terrain, with prefabricated elements which were light and cheap; and the **Aluminium Pavilion for the Centenary of Aluminium** (1954). Installed on the Quai d'Orsay, the pavilion was **totally demountable and is considered by some to be his masterpiece**.

Another of Prouvé's most significant works is the **Maison des Jours Meilleurs** [*A house for better days*] (1956), which was his response to the call from the clergyman Abbé Pierre in the winter of 1954: **How can we accommodate the homeless, who are dying of cold?** Prouvé had the idea of a house which was equivalent to a standard two-bedroom (50 m²) apartment, industrially mass-produced and assembled on-site. Unfortunately, the house failed to obtain the corresponding technical approval thus preventing its industrial production, and only five were made. During the same period he designed houses for oil industry workers in the desert (**Maison du Sahara**, 1958) and took part in construction of the **Freie Universität in Berlin** (1963-1971). He also won the first round of a competition to build a thousand youth clubs in France, organised by the French Ministry of Youth and Sport. The prototype could be assembled in 45 minutes; two identical curved panels were raised and joined together at the ridge, thus forming a barrel vault 10 metres in diameter. However, the jury finally rejected this solution.

The final project of his career is usually referred to as **Les Blancs-Manteaux**, the name of the street where, in 1968, Prouvé would install his last workshop, very close, precisely, to where the Centre Pompidou would be built. There, he continued designing elements for construction with a small team of engineers. He designed service stations and petrol stations for **Total**, many of them with an original circular shape, which were installed on **motorways throughout France**. He also designed the curtain walls for the façades of the French Communist Party headquarters (Paris, 1969-1971), a project led by the architect **Oscar Niemeyer**. Prouvé's last work was a radar tower in Quessant (1978-1980), a purely technical construction with no architectural pretensions.



Areas of the exhibition

Introduction. The Universe of Jean Prouvé

Due to the uniqueness of their work, some twentieth-century artists are admired by a few connoisseurs and yet are unknown to the general public. Jean Prouvé is one such artist. His inventiveness and know-how have fascinated generations of architects and continue to inspire young creators today. During his lifetime he was awarded several well-deserved prizes, in France and in other countries. Some of his contemporaries witnessed his commitment and fight for the industrialisation of the construction sector. Many French architects requested his participation in their projects and welcomed his technical advice. However, Prouvé had little occasion to create serialised buildings and propose a new way of living, which kept him from popular recognition.

As has often been pointed out, Prouvé's originality lay in the fact that he was neither an architect nor a designer — as term which in those day had yet to be invented. In his early years he was an artistic blacksmith and subsequently became a metal constructor, before training in architecture alongside fellow architects specialising in metalwork, although he had no aspirations to obtain a degree. In the aftermath of World War Two he took part in the reconstruction of France and threw himself into manufacturing prefabricated homes and items of furniture for communities, for Prouvé was above all an industrialist. He believed in progress, in the technical contribution of powerful machines and in the team spirit he instilled into his collaborators. He never ceased to promote his factory and dreamt of building homes for the modern age, that of motor cars and aeroplanes.

Prouvé dedicated himself to metal, developing folded metal sheets, optimising the material's resistance and reducing its weight and cost. An inventor of new building systems that he was continuously reworking and improving, Prouvé preferred to prefabricate and assemble his works in his factory rather than working on actual construction sites. Over the course of his career he created a vast number of façade panels, from the simplest to the most sophisticated. He also conceived highly elegant curtain walls for increasingly large façade and perfected joints and stiffeners, key elements in the installation of panels. Prouvé conceived his items of furniture as he conceived his buildings, favouring industrial components in pieces designed for the general public, as proved by his dining-room chair, that became a design icon. The universe of Jean Prouvé — an unusual teacher — also encompasses the passing on of his knowledge. We hope the present exhibition will help further this aim.



Blacksmith

A teenager during World War I, Jean Prouvé was an apprentice to two master blacksmiths, Émile Robert and Adalbert Georges Szabo. Upon completing his military service in 1922, the young blacksmith displayed his work in the section devoted to forging at the exhibitions organised by the Fine Arts School in Nancy. In January 1924 Prouvé opened his own blacksmith's and locksmith's in Nancy, where he made his first small decorative objects (lamp standards, bases for vases, andirons) and went on to create articles like doors, entrance gates, railings, balconies and chandeliers, more or less decorated and all made for local clients. In 1925 Prouvé took part in the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts held in Paris, where he discovered the work of modern architects, specifically the pavilion entitled L'Esprit Nouveau designed by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, and the pavilion devoted to Tourism designed by Robert Mallet-Stevens. A couple of years later, Prouvé would work with the latter on the entrance to the Reifenberg *maison-studio* in Paris. His atelier, where he employed approximately fifteen workers, combined traditional manufacturing and technical innovations. In the early thirties Prouvé began to use stainless steel sheets, although he was yet to make his last masterpiece in steel and wrought iron: the entrance gate to the Musée Permanent des Colonies (Paris, 1931), designed by architects Léon Bazin, Léon Jaussely and Albert Laprade.

Among Modern Artists

After a few early commissions Robert Mallet-Stevens began to collaborate with Jean Prouvé on a regular basis, designing lift compartments, balustrades and handrails for modern staircases. As a result of the designer's relationship with the architect the former became one of the first members of the Union of Modern Artists (UAM, for its initials in French) founded in 1929. Prouvé showed his work at all the salons staged by UAM between 1930 and 1934, and took part in the competitions jointly organised by UAM and the Technical Office for the Use of Steel (OTUA, for its initials in French) and in the exhibitions hosted by both associations. He also built a spectacular staircase for the UAM pavilion designed by Georges-Henri Pingusson on occasion of the 1937 Parisian International Exposition of Arts and Techniques Applied to Modern Life. For the same exhibition he designed other items of furniture in cooperation with Jacques André, and a beach hut in collaboration with Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand. Besides UAM members, Prouvé rubbed shoulders with



architects who could commission works from him, well known professionals and modern artists who preferred to remain on the margins of avant-garde trends and with whom he intensified his collaborations in the fields of furniture design, dividing walls and other architectural projects. Prouvé discovered contemporary furniture when he visited the Werkbund Exhibition at the twentieth annual Salon of the Société des Artistes décorateurs held in Paris in 1930, where the items of furniture created by Walter Gropius and the steel-tube pieces designed by Marcel Breuer took centre stage.

[From Individual Elements to Architectural Ensembles](#)

As he worked on his commissions, Jean Prouvé gradually expanded his range of products, creating further patents and broadening the variety of his designs for the interiors of buildings. Prouvé managed to produce the architecture he admired through his collaboration with architects Eugène Beaudouin and Marcel Lods, for whom he made the exterior carpentry work for the social housing project Cité de la Muette (The Silent City) in Drancy, built between 1931 and 1934. Thanks to them, Prouvé began to design in metal structures. The first of these was the Roland Garros Aeroclub in Buc, built between 1935 and 1936 entirely in metal and glass, the apparent simplicity of which conceals an arrangement and installation painstakingly conceived and executed. The project for the Maison du Peuple and the rooftop of the open-air market built in Clichy between 1936 and 1939 was even more complex. The spatial flexibility provided by the dimensions of the building and its interior fittings were an opportunity for him to display his inventiveness. Designed between 1937 and 1939, the BLPS holiday home (so-called for the initials of architects Beaudouin and Lods, Ateliers Prouvé and construction firm Forges de Strasbourg) was conceived as a prefabricated dwelling to be assembled by the homeowner, a structure reduced to minimise its weight enabling it to be easily transported. In 1939, the year of the outbreak of World War II, Prouvé turned his attention to the design of portable barracks for the French army, which he produced in wood and metal. In 1940 he teamed up with Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret to work on a project to build temporary housing in Issoire.

[A Construction Industrialist](#)

Prouvé's idea was to industrialise construction, a cause he would actively pursue after Liberation. In 1947 he built the Maxéville factory, where he was able to mass



produce and assemble pieces of furniture. Prouvé increased the number of housing projects that fulfilled the needs of urban reconstruction, creating versions for the Parisian metropolis and her colonies, like the Maison Métropole and the Maisons Tropicales, built in 1949 and between then and 1952, respectively. Besides taking part in the exhibitions staged under the auspices of the Ministry of Reconstruction and Town Planning, he promoted his own experimental constructions. His participation in the renovation of Noisy-le-Sec commune from 1947 to 1949 merited first prize in the Concours des Maisons Nouvelles (New Houses Competition), while his development in Meudon accommodated the greatest number of prefabricated houses ever made at Ateliers Jean Prouvé. However, in spite of receiving several recognitions, sales were still rare. Interested in the possibilities of aluminium, in July 1949 Prouvé signed an agreement with the Light Alloys Studio (STUDAL, for its initials in French), a subsidiary of the L'Aluminium Français consortium. Although their production of houses was scarce, the demand for furniture was high enough to warrant mass production. Thanks to furniture, Prouvé made a name for himself as an industrialist in the fields of construction and interior design. His models, conceived for specific uses to serve the needs of his private customers, could be adapted to other uses and over the years would be gradually perfected.

1954, A Year of Transition

In 1952 Prouvé's Maxéville factory began to fail and over the course of 1954 the negotiations concerning the future of the company and his position within the new organisation caused him many worries. Nonetheless, that year he also built his family house, Maison Jean Prouvé in Nancy, and the Aluminium Centenary Pavilion in Paris, both of which he worked on alone, while his work began to receive international acclaim. The Prouvé family house in Nancy was neither a cold display of technical virtuosity nor a perfect object, even less a total work of art, but a house sculpted in Prouvé's own image and likeness. He hoped to make it into a generous home where he could live comfortably, where inventiveness could be concealed behind flat-pack, championed by Prouvé, and where the conceptual unity of architecture and furniture was simply expressed. The Parisian Aluminium Centenary Pavilion was entirely different, a display of extraordinary skill and technique in which he strove to reveal the celebratory nature of architecture and demonstrate the potential of aluminium and of his own talent to express it. The building didn't only meet the programmatic requirements of the commission but became a backdrop of the processes of manufacturing and of



the range of aluminium products — indeed, the structure is in itself an exhibition, at least as regards the art of building.

A New Beginning

In 1953 Jean Prouvé left Nancy and settled in Paris after being dislodged from the studio and recruited to the department of project management, and where he went on to found Les Constructions Jean Prouvé over the course of 1955 and 1956. The new company hired the services of young architect Michel Bataille, a fervent admirer of Prouvé's, and gathered together several of his former collaborators and employees like Jean Boutemain, Prouvé's son Claude and close friends, including engineer and ally Serge Ketoff. A number of great works soon saw the light: the Maison des Jours Meilleurs (A House for Better Days), the Villejuif Demountable House and the project for a buvette and pump room for the spa complex in Évian-les-Bains. The commission of a temporary school for a new area in Villejuif offered Prouvé the opportunity to design a prefabricated metal structure that was cheap to produce and easily mountable and dismountable. The school was based on a new construction type in which folded steel-sheet props, asymmetrical, acted as pillars and beams to support a cantilevered wooden roof.

On another scale, Prouvé applied the same engineering procedure to the thermal spa complex in Évian invited by architect Maurice Novarina. The result was a highly original building, from the compositional structure of the façades to the slightest technical detail. During the same period, the architects of the National Centre for Industries and Techniques (CNIT, for its initials in French) also requested his collaboration on the façades of the centre's new headquarters.

La Compagnie Industrielle de Matériel de Transport: 1957-1966

In 1957, after having absorbed Les Constructions Jean Prouvé and the small Goumy company, the managers of the Industrial Company of Transport Equipment (CIMT, for its initials in French) set up a construction department in order to diversify their activities. Prouvé was appointed director and kept his position as an independent engineer and advisor, establishing a solid relationship with some of the company's engineers, Jean Swetchine and Léon Pétrouff in particular, with whom he collaborated closely on his last works. Thanks to his position, he continued to receive important commissions, such as the Nobel Tower at La Défense in Paris, on which he worked from 1964 to 1966. In 1962,



CIMT moved to buildings for which Prouvé had designed a grid system of panels and tensioners. The same system would be used in the Musée-Maison de la culture in Le Havre, refurbished between 1953 and 1961; in the National Institute of Applied Sciences of Lyon (INSA, for its initials in French) in Villeurbanne, built between 1960 and 1963; in Grenoble Town Hall, erected between 1964 and 1968; in numerous secondary schools such as the one in Orléans-la-Source, constructed between 1965 and 1968; and in the Jules Verne school at Villagexpo Saint-Michel-sur-Orge in 1966. From 1963 to 1971 Prouvé collaborated with the Candilis- Josic- Woods firm of architects (founded by Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic and Shadrach Woods) and with Manfred Schiedhelm on the Free University of Berlin. Sponsored by CIMT, the exhibition entitled Jean Prouvé opened at Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris early in 1964, displaying works presented by Prouvé himself. Late in 1966, dissatisfied with the management of CIMT, Prouvé left the company upon reaching the age of retirement; his construction department would disappear two years later.

[Les Blancs-Manteaux: 1968-1984](#)

Les Blancs-Manteaux, a street in the fourth arrondissement of Paris where Prouvé set up his studio in 1968, is also the name given to the last stage of his career. Although he was still an engineer and advisor to CIMT and continued to cooperate with other architects, only five or six people remained as permanent members of his team. They worked in a modest office producing mock-ups and designs up until 1983, also in collaboration with steadfast colleagues, fellow engineers Louis Fruitet, Jean Swetchine and Léon Pétroff. Prouvé used Pétroff's design of an extendable roof system in buildings such as the Alpexpo conference centre in Grenoble, built between 1967 and 1970, and the Club Alpin Français mountain refuge at the Vanois pass, made between 1970 and 1971; from 1968 to 1973 the two worked together building the motorway petrol stations owned by French oil company Total. As did professional architects, Prouvé took part in a number of competitions, including the one for the design of a thousand youth clubs organised by the French Ministry of Youth and Sports the year 1966-1967, and the one instituted by the French Ministry of Education the year 1970-1971, a project on which he worked with architect Joseph Belmont. Prouvé designed the curtain-walls of the façades for the headquarters of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party in Paris, built by architect Oscar Niemeyer between 1969 and 1972. Throughout his lifetime, Prouvé always preferred teamwork: 'Buildings can only be made collectively, the names of their makers are of no



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consequence', he declared upon receiving France's Grand Prize for Architecture in 1982, two years before his death.



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