

040 | DESIGN

SHED LIGHT

Jean Prouvé's Ferembal house, designed as an office for a can factory, consists of huge internal portal frames, and prefab wood, steel and glass panels that slide around the perimeter as walls

FRENCH CONNECTION

Rescued from a dumpster in 1978, Jean Prouvé's 1948 office building has now been lovingly hand-restored with a little help from Jean Nouvel

PHOTOGRAPHY: JONATHAN DE VILLIERS WRITER: AMY SERAFIN

Wallpaper*



The Parisian design dealer Patrick Seguin remembers how, in the early 1990s, he rescued discarded pieces of a rare Jean Prouvé office building from a dumpster. The building was, ironically, the HQ of the French Building Federation, constructed in 1949, which was being torn down because its office workers complained it lacked proper insulation. ‘We tried to stop them, to tell them they were making a mistake,’ recalls Seguin. A few years later, he sold one of the façade panels to MoMA and another to the Vitra Design Museum, as Prouvé’s value shot from worthless to museum-grade practically overnight.

Now Seguin is unveiling another Prouvé masterpiece, the Ferembal house, which was also saved from the landfill. A charismatic Frenchman, Seguin owns a gallery near the Bastille, and can claim much of the credit for putting the heat in the Prouvé market. It’s hard to imagine now, but French midcentury modernism was a very niche fetish when he first opened his gallery, with former partner Philippe Jousse, in 1989. ‘We had about five clients; you could certainly count them on the fingers of both hands,’ he says. They struggled, but at least they could acquire French post-war pieces for a

pittance. By the late 1990s, financiers and designers were lining up to buy Prouvé’s furniture and his few remaining service stations and dismantlable homes.

Prouvé built Ferembal in 1948 in his home town of Nancy, a city rich in design history. But his straightforward style was a departure from the *École de Nancy* and art nouveau; he worked from the pragmatic perspective of an engineer and metalworker, and for the common man. In the 1940s, Prouvé developed a system of mass-produced houses for people displaced by the war, using internal portal frames and prefab components such as sheet metal pressed in his workshop. Each of these *Maisons des Sinistrés* took three men only one day to construct, using little more than a ladder and a screwdriver.

He employed a similar system for the Ferembal house, which he designed as offices for a friend’s can-making factory. The factory was demolished in 1978 and the Prouvé prefab nearly met the same fate. Fortunately, a local resident who recognised its importance salvaged the structure, dismantled it and put it into storage. Seguin knew of Ferembal from photos and archives, and in 1991 he went to check it out. There wasn’t much to see,

PROUVÉ POSITIVE
The Ferembal house features a hit list of Prouvé’s favourite details, from a bow window for a small winter garden in the director’s office (above), to aluminium slat shutters and a steel awning over the entrance (see previous page)

just a pile of metal, glass and wood shoved into the back of a hangar, but he bought it for 10,000 francs, about €1,500. ‘It was a lot of money for me at the time,’ he says, though today he estimates its value at €8m. (Perhaps not such a stretch when you consider that the hotelier André Balazs recently bought one of Prouvé’s three *Maisons Tropicales* for nearly \$5m.)

Because his gallery was still trying to make ends meet, Seguin stored the building until 2001, when he had the means to start restoring it. ‘I unwrapped the bandages from the mummy without really knowing what was there,’ he recalls. Architecture students from the University of Nancy inventoried the pieces and saw that, fortunately, very little was missing.

Thanks to the fact that Ferembal can be disassembled and rebuilt, Seguin plans to exhibit it around the world. And yet, when he started the renovation, Seguin found himself in an absurd situation. The structure, about 180 sq m in size and weighing several tonnes, originally sat atop a one-storey garage (since destroyed), and needed some sort of a foundation to replace it. But while it takes only 14 days to put the house together, it takes twice as long for a stonemason to construct a >>

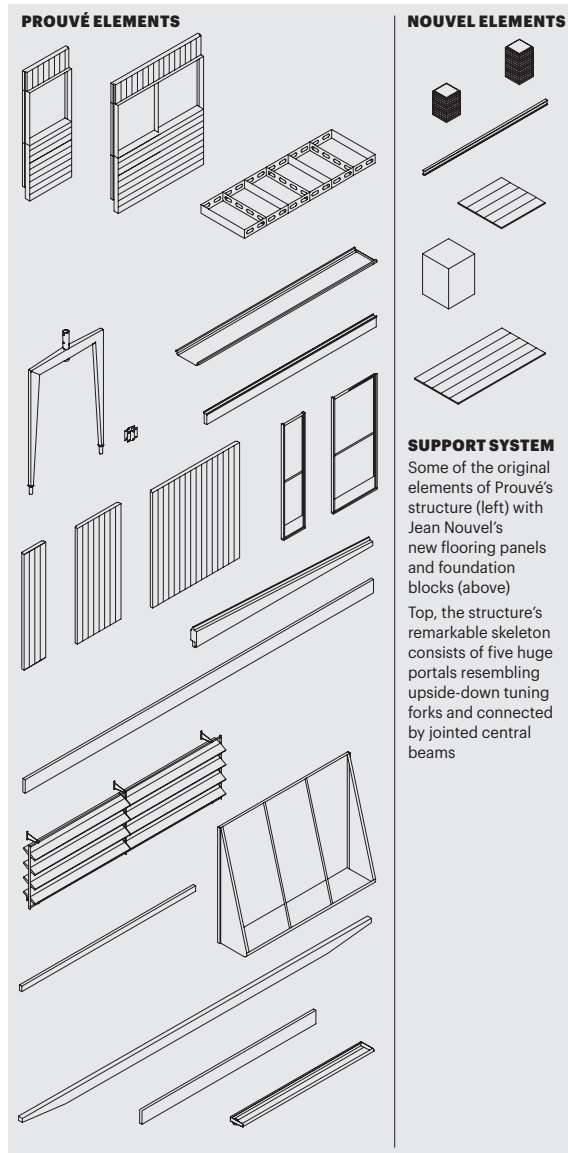


temporary foundation. There needed to be a more efficient solution for the base.

He called up an old friend who also happens to be one of the world's finest architects, Jean Nouvel. The two met a couple of decades ago in the south of France, where they both grew up, and where Seguin, before getting into the gallery business, used to run restaurants and nightclubs, which Nouvel used to frequent. When Seguin renovated his gallery in 2004, Nouvel designed the space. Sitting in his enormous Paris office, the architect explains his admiration for Seguin. 'He is someone who is passionate, exacting and meticulous, with great respect for each work he preserves. One could almost consider him a curator.'

Seguin now asked his friend to design a portable base for Ferembal, and Nouvel accepted without hesitation, though he knew it would be a challenge adding something to Prouvé's precisely built masterpiece. 'This was not just a cosmetic job, it was fundamental,' says Nouvel. 'Transforming an existing structure is as important an architectural act as creating something from nothing. In this case, it was 99 per cent Prouvé, so if we didn't do it well, we would really make a mess.'

Nouvel deliberately chose techniques and materials that both complemented Prouvé's and yet were unmistakably contemporary, so there would be no confusion as to where one architect's contribution stopped and the other's began. Taking advantage of an existing steel grid under the parquet floor, Nouvel came up with an arrangement of 14 blocks, each made from sheets of Ductal high-performance concrete, layered like a millefeuille. The height of each block can be adjusted by adding or removing sheets, making the entire foundation adaptable



to the rises and dips of the ground. Rather than 28 days, it can be assembled in one.

The new foundation, however, created another problem. When Prouvé first built the Ferembal offices, they were 3.2m off the ground and reached by a long lateral stairway. Now that the structure stood only 75cm from the ground, it required a lower set of stairs. Nouvel created three floating Ductal steps, which are uneven, to reflect the original asymmetrical stairway. They look simple, but Nouvel mentions the innumerable hypotheses he explored to create them. Ultimately, the final result appears to be the sole and natural solution. As Nouvel says, 'My job here has been to make myself forgotten.'

That might seem a modest goal for a Pritzker Prize-winner whose roster runs up to 50 projects at a time, from major museums to statement skyscrapers. 'This project was about minutiae and Jean played the game, getting involved in the smallest details,' says Caroline Djuric, the architect who supervised Ferembal for Nouvel. 'I've never seen him spend so much time choosing a screw.' She says it was a puzzle just mapping out the pattern of the parquet flooring, which had to be replaced, because the building is not regularly spaced throughout. Likewise, the joints between the floorboards had to be studied to resist varying temperatures when the house travels.

One day this spring, as local artisans and Prouvé experts were applying the finishing touches to the Ferembal house, Seguin went to Nancy to check on its progress. Where interior walls once stood, it was now an open space, the row of oversized portals creating a breathtaking perspective. Absent were the dropped ceiling, the wiring, the insulation, so that every detail of Prouvé's structure was on display, hovering gracefully on Nouvel's millefeuille blocks. The wood panelling had been replaced and the steel frame had been stripped down to its original colours, lemon yellow and lime green.

The Ferembal house is scheduled to make its debut in Paris this autumn. After that, Seguin will lend it to museums, universities and municipalities from Basel to New York, until he finally sells it to a private collector or an institution. But even after he and Ferembal part ways for good, the dealer's intimate relationship with Prouvé's architecture will continue, especially since his other holdings include a schoolhouse the designer constructed in Bouqueval, north of Paris, in 1949. This structure, too, is being adapted by Nouvel, and Seguin says that one day it will serve as his home. It's the first house he has ever bought as a place to live; where he will park it is anyone's guess. ★
Galerie Patrick Seguin, 5 rue des Taillandiers, Paris 11e, www.patrickseguin.com