

# Prefab perfection: the wartime shelter reborn as a luxury suite

The latest accommodation at Provence's five-star Villa La Coste is a utilitarian cabin in the woods

3 hours ago

Flanking the gates to the Tuileries gardens from Paris's Place de la Concorde this weekend stand two modest chalets, huts really, with shallow pitched roofs and wooden walls. Compared with the square's majestic Louis XV architecture, they're an incongruous sight.

These *maisons démontables* — literally demountable or collapsible houses — were designed by the French architect Jean Prouvé to provide emergency shelter for those displaced or rendered homeless by the second world war and have since become icons of mid-20th-century design. They are here, until November 15, as part of the French art fair FIAC's extramural exhibition programme, because lately they've become eminently collectable, as has Prouvé's furniture. Last year Sotheby's sold a *maison démontable* 6x6 — the numbers denote its dimensions in metres — for more than half a million euros. A rarer 8x8 was on offer at Design Miami in 2013 for \$2.5m.

To best appreciate their groundbreaking architecture, however, and to really scrutinise their skeletons of folded steel and ceilings of bitumen-coated paper, you need to wake up in one. And the easiest way to do that is to check into Suite 30, an original 6x6 and the latest addition to Villa La Coste, the idyllic hotel at Château La Coste, a 200-hectare estate of undulating vineyards, lavender fields, olive groves, almond orchards and woods 15km north of Aix-en-Provence in the south of France.

Since 2002, the estate has belonged to property investor and collector

Patrick McKillen — Paddy to his friends — part owner, among other things, of The Berkeley, Connaught and Claridge's hotels in London. The son of a metalworker who built up an exhaust-repair business in his native Belfast, he learnt to weld aged 10, he told me, a skill he still uses when he can, and has long revered Prouvé for the way he manipulated metal.

Indeed he already owns two Prouvé prefabs (a 6x6 and a 6x9), which face each other across the picturesque vegetable garden behind his home on the estate, a 17th-century *bastide* of honey-coloured stone. He uses them to house his books: one a library devoted to art and architecture, the other to food and wine — because art, architecture and gastronomy are what Château La Coste is all about.



The interior of the Prouvé cabin at Villa La Coste; the houses could be assembled in less than a day © Patrick Seguin Gallery/Richard Haughton

By contrast, Prouvé (1901-84) was the son of an artist, trained as a blacksmith and taught himself the rest. Active in the Resistance when France was under occupation, he began to design houses with frames and floor beams of folded metal and walls and floors of easily slotted-together pine planks that could be erected in less than a day. Materials were scarce, and a 6x6 required just 900kg of steel and 12 cubic metres of wood. The one opened last month as Suite 30 was first used in Lorraine, in north-eastern France, in 1944.

Now, 75 years on, its fundamental structure is intact, even if the catches on the shutters have rusted and the floorboards creak. But as befits a suite in a hotel of this calibre, it's been sensitively embellished and extended by no less an architect than Richard Rogers' practice Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners.

"Richard's a pal of mine," McKillen told me. (RSHP designed the entrance to The Berkeley and are building a gallery at La Coste.) But more importantly, Rogers is an aficionado of Prouvé's work and to some extent owes his career to him — it was Prouvé who headed the jury that gave him his first big break in 1971, when he and Renzo Piano were awarded the contract to build the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.





The kitchen in the Prouvé house; the cabin was designed by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners © Patrick Seguin Gallery/Richard Haughton

RSHP have added not just solar-powered electricity and running water, but two cylindrical pods: one a compact kitchen with twin-burner hob, fridge, microwave, sink, surprisingly generous work surface and a retractable roof; the other a bathroom with a shower, lavatory and basin, though nowhere to stow a washbag and not much light. Otherwise, bar a blissfully comfortable supersize bed, the house is furnished very much in keeping with its age.

Having arrived too late to dine in the restaurant, I ate my room-service supper — a perfect salad of heritage tomatoes from the estate’s organic *potager*, oil from its olive trees and rustic bread from its kitchens — at a lacquered teak Square table, another classic of 1950s utilitarian design. It was the work of Prouvé’s contemporary and sometime collaborator Pierre Jeanneret, who designed them, along with the V-leg Committee chair on which I sat and the easy chairs by the picture window, for the government buildings in Chandigarh, the Indian city created by Jeanneret’s cousin Le Corbusier at the behest of Jawaharlal Nehru.



Against the opposite wall stood one of Prouvé’s Bahut BA12 bent-steel and oak sideboards. And everything was illuminated by one of Serge Mouille’s 1953 Lampadaire Droit floor lamps. All of them originals, it goes without saying.

It was like staying in a design museum. And I feel privileged to have done so. But next morning I was glad to trip down the hill from its elevated sylvan setting (with views towards

Mont Ventoux, the Lubéron massif and, on a clear day, the Alps), to the hotel proper, to WiFi, bedside lights, rugs underfoot and a spacious marble bathroom, and to take up residence in what the general manager, Nicolas Socquet, called my “back-up suite”.



The cabin in the grounds of Villa La Coste, 15km north of Aix-en-Provence in the south of France

“We would never let the Prouvé house without one,” he’d told me on arrival, suggesting that I might prefer to use the 6x6 as a day room and pointing out that the heating and air-conditioning are never going to be calibrated to the level of the rest of the suites, which are among the loveliest and largest (none is less than 90 square metres) that I’ve encountered.

No detail has been overlooked. Take the tiny magnets they’ve sewn into

the edges of the white blackout curtains to obviate light spill. Or the in-room iPhone, loaded with information about the estate and through which you can live chat with the reception staff, operate the TV and order room service without having to speak to anyone.

That said, I preferred to pass the early evening leafing through the art books ranged above the desk, from Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, a memoir of life among the artists of 1920s Paris to a 10-volume survey of Prouvé's oeuvre published by the Paris art dealer Patrick Seguin.



Tom Shannon's 'Drop' sculpture in the grounds of the villa © Tom Shannon

There were numerous art books too: monographs on those from whom McKillen has commissioned site-specific works, the likes of Ai Weiwei, Daniel Buren, Sophie Calle, Tracey Emin, Andy Goldsworthy, Lee Ufan,

Richard Long, Tatsuo Miyajima, Sean Scully, Richard Serra, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Franz West, among many more. By the end of this year there'll be more than 40 installations, including a spectacularly ambitious Skyspace from James Turrell, a piece by Yoko Ono and a collaboration between Frank Gehry and the artist Tony Berlant.

McKillen also collects architecture. Tadao Ando designed the gates, the benches, the art centre, a sobering stygian structure for contemplation of the environment, and has revived the ancient hilltop chapel that stands above a field of Grenache vines.

Elsewhere, Gehry created the music pavilion, for concerts, screenings and the occasional live-streaming of performances from the world-class Festival d'Aix-en-Provence. Jean Nouvel was responsible for the corrugated aluminium winery or *chai*, and the historic winestore has been converted by the exhibition specialist Jean-Michel Wilmotte into a space that is host (until December 18) to a compelling show of paintings by Swiss artist Liliane Tomasko, wildly dreamlike abstractions of photographs she takes of tangled sheets on unmade beds. Meanwhile a second auditorium complex, this time by the late Oscar Niemeyer, is currently under way, as is another major project by Nouvel.



Jean Nouvel's corrugated aluminium winery © Jean Nouvel

But wise to the fact that sculpture parks — even those that attract up to 1,500 visitors a day in August — can never be fully self-supporting, McKillen has been diversifying in order to generate the income to sustain it.

First came the café and bookshop; then, in 2017, the hotel with a spa designed by André Fu and three restaurants, not least one from the garlanded Argentine chef Francis Mallmann, who cooks on an open fire and has converted a former hunting lodge into a place of pilgrimage for carnivores. The vegetables are very good as well, and the made-to-order Madagascan vanilla ice cream ambrosial, though at €42 for 500ml it surely ought to be.

The prices (main courses about €30, desserts from €10) are less startling

at the more traditionally Provençal option, Louison, named after Louise Bourgeois and designed as a glass pavilion surrounded by water to showcase her polished aluminium sculpture, "The Couple".

The art indoors, even in the bedrooms, is remarkable too, adding to the sense that this is less a hotel than the home of a collector. And what a home! To paraphrase Baudelaire, Château La Coste is a haven of order and beauty, of "pleasure and calm and luxury". A couple of days here, and the world seems a better place.

## Details

Claire Wrathall was a guest of [Villa La Coste](#) which offers suites for two from €650 per night. A night in the Prouvé house costs €2,500, including the 'back-up' suite

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