

Jean Prouvé's Maison Tropicale: The Poetics of the Colonial Object

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In June 2007, Jean Prouvé's prefabricated aluminium bungalow known as the Maison Tropicale was sold at auction in New York for \$4,968,000 (see Figure 1). Prior to the sale, the Maison was displayed on the banks of the Seine in Paris, and following the sale, in front of London's Tate Modern. While the multi-million dollar price tag attracted newspaper headlines, from a design perspective, critics highlighted Prouvé's innovative design that used industrial technologies and prefabrication techniques. Indeed, a factory-produced metallic house such as the Maison Tropicale seemed to embody Le Corbusier's description of the modern house as a "machine for living in."

Designed by Prouvé in 1951, the Maison was transported to a French colonial city in Africa, where it remained for almost 50 years. In 2005, Prouvé scholar Robert Rubin described the Maison's return from Africa: "...the Tropical House of Brazzaville (1951), recently exported from the Congo and restored in France, has recovered its original identity as an industrial object."¹ A major touring exhibition, *Jean Prouvé: the Poetics of the Technical Object*, originating in Germany's Vitra Design Museum in the same year, confirmed this identification of the Maison Tropicale as an icon of industrial modernism.² However, while the Maison Tropicale continues to be lauded as an exemplary *industrial* object, its identity as a *colonial* object remains obscured.

The Maison Tropicale's history is particularly intriguing as it clearly illuminates a largely repressed relationship between European

Figure 1
Jean Prouvé's Maison Tropicale in New York,
2007. Photo by D. J. Huppatz.



- 1 R. Rubin, "Preserving and Presenting Prefab: Jean Prouvé's Tropical House", *Future Anterior* 2:1 (Summer 2005).
- 2 The exhibition has toured major European and Asian cities since 2005 and, at the time of this writing (January 2010), was still touring.

modernism, industrial modernization, and colonialism.³ While cultural studies theorist Christopher Pinney argues that “modernity and globalization are intimately entangled with colonialism,”⁴ design history has thus far failed to engage with this relationship.⁵ As an exemplary modernist artifact designed specifically for a colonial commission, Prouvé’s *Maison Tropicale* provides an excellent starting point from which to untangle this relationship from a design perspective. However, design history currently lacks a suitable framework for interpreting an artifact such as the *Maison Tropicale*, a framework that could incorporate the complexity of its design and manufacture, as well as its shifting meaning on its trajectory from France to colonial Africa. This paper thus examines Prouvé’s *Maison Tropicale* as a colonial object, both in the post-war French colonial context for which it was designed, and in the context of its more recent “rescue” from the Republic of Congo and its subsequent display in New York, London, and Paris.

- 3 This paper is a brief response to Victor Margolin’s call for a more expansive design history—in this case, the need to develop a colonial/global understanding of modernism, both in its historical context and its contemporary one. See V. Margolin, “Design in History”, *Design Issues*, 25:2 (Spring 2009), 94–105.
- 4 C. Pinney, “Colonialism and Culture” in T. Bennett and J. Frow, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Analysis* (London: SAGE, 2008), 382.
- 5 However, architectural history has some engagement with the relationship between modernist architecture and colonialism. Notable recent examples include M. Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), A. King, *Spaces of Global Cultures: Architecture, Urbanism, Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), and P. Scriver, *Colonial Modernities: Building, Dwelling and Architecture in British India and Ceylon* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2007).
- 6 There are a number of publications that cover Prouvé’s work and life. In English, the most accessible are B. Huber and J.-C. Steinegger, eds., *Prouvé, Jean, Prefabrication: Structures and Elements* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1971); A. Von Vegestack, ed., *Jean Prouvé: the Poetics of the Technical Object* (Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum, 2005); and the comprehensive P. Sulzer, *Jean Prouvé: Complete Works* (Basel: Birkhäuser, four volumes, 1999-2005).

Industrializing the Habitat

Born in Nancy in 1901, Jean Prouvé trained as an ironworker—a trade inspired by his father, Victor, a co-founder of the “Nancy School” of Art Nouveau artisans. Prouvé moved to Paris in 1925, where his ornamental metalwork was soon in demand by modernist architects, including Robert Mallet-Stevens, Le Corbusier, and Pierre Jeanneret. He expanded into furniture design and joined the modernist dissidents from the *Société des Artistes Décorateurs*, who formed their own association, the *Union des Artistes Modernes* (UAM), in 1930. Participants in the UAM included leading modernist architects such as Corbusier, Jeanneret, and Mallet-Stevens, as well as furniture designers such as Prouvé, Charlotte Perriand, and René Herbst. Prouvé’s designs for furniture and architectural details featured regularly in UAM exhibitions, and during the 1930s he collaborated on furniture designs with Perriand and Jeanneret—working collaborations that would endure until after the war. Prouvé also applied his ideas to architecture: his contribution to the *Maison du Peuple* in Clincy (1935–39, with architects Eugène Beaudouin and Marcel Lods), celebrated today as an early example of a steel and glass curtain wall construction, included innovative prefabricated elements, such as sanitary units, staircases, and wall panels.⁶

During the Second World War, Prouvé designed prefabricated demountable barracks for the French military, and, immediately after the war, designed his *Maisons à Portiques*, prefabricated emergency housing for the Ministry of Reconstruction and Urban Planning. These projects incorporated modular systems and used simple steel frames and wooden paneling to create lightweight, low-cost, and easy-to-assemble structures. Then, in 1947, Prouvé opened his own studio-factory, *Ateliers Prouvé*, at Maxéville on the outskirts of Nancy, and soon employed 200 workers to produce aluminium façade panels for buildings and bent sheet metal for roofing, as well

as functional modern furniture. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ateliers Prouvé was also engaged in developing prefabricated housing.⁷ The best-known examples were the Meudon Houses, commissioned by the French Ministry of Reconstruction and Urban Planning for a suburb of Paris, Meudon. These “Maisons Standard Metropole” had a modular design and were constructed from a steel frame and aluminium panels produced in the Maxéville factory. While Prouvé’s dream was to produce prefabricated, mass-produced housing, the Meudon Houses were produced on a smaller scale than expected, with only 25 constructed.

Like other modernist designers of his generation, Prouvé believed that architecture needed to get “up-to-date” in its use of new materials, factory production, and prefabrication techniques. “Note that the most highly industrialized objects—on wheels, in flight, or fixed on the ground,” Prouvé argued in a 1960 lecture, “are most subject to renewal and constantly improve in quality, even in terms of price. Building is the only industry that does not advance.”⁸ Designers such as Prouvé and his UAM colleagues maintained faith in scientific progress, new technologies and industrial processes: mass production, standardization, and prefabrication had the potential to modernize the world and raise living standards for all. While Le Corbusier’s famous dictum reimagined the house as a “machine for living,” Prouvé regularly argued for “industrializing the habitat.”⁹ For Prouvé, the habitat could be industrialized through prefabricated structures constructed from standardized, factory-fabricated components that could be assembled in any geographical location.

However, Prouvé’s acute sense of craftsmanship and meticulous attention to detail make it difficult to dismiss him as simply an advocate of the dehumanizing anonymity implied by industrialized, factory-produced housing. He was not formally trained as an engineer or an architect but instead worked from a craft tradition based on intuition, meticulous attention to detail, and intimate knowledge of materials. Thus, Prouvé found himself in a somewhat paradoxical position in his Maxéville studio-factory—trying to blend a craftsman’s creative approach with an engineer’s rational, scientific approach. Le Corbusier described him as a “constructor,” an architect-engineer, and his design philosophy can be placed in a tradition inherited from nineteenth century designer-engineers such as Joseph Paxton and Gustav Eiffel.¹⁰ Importantly, Prouvé’s political and economic ideals for Ateliers Prouvé were far from those of a conventional factory, as all workers engaged in both design and production processes, as well as shared in the profits.¹¹

Ateliers Prouvé opened at an opportune time for modernist design in France. In the immediate post-war period, the French state was rejuvenated by a technical elite dedicated to industrialization, efficiency, and a productive economy.¹² Prouvé’s prefabricated design ideal corresponded with this state-sponsored modernization

7 Tristan Guilloux’s archival research traces the lineage of Prouvé’s prefabricated designs in meticulous detail. See T. Guilloux, “The Maison ‘Tropique’: A Modernist Icon or the Ultimate Colonial Bungalow?,” *Fabrications* 18:2 (2008), 7–25.

8 J. Prouvé, “Industrializing the Habitat,” reproduced in B. Huber and J.-C. Steinegger, eds., *Prouvé, Jean, Prefabrication: Structures and Elements*, 8.

9 Prouvé in B. Huber and J.-C. Steinegger, eds., *Prouvé, Jean, Prefabrication: Structures and Elements*, 17; see also Le Corbusier’s call for industrialized housing in Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1986), 229.

10 Le Corbusier, *Modular 2, 1955 (Let the User Speak Next)*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), 111.

11 Prouvé’s Maxéville factory, founded on his own socialist principles, followed the Arts and Crafts ideal of maintaining a close connection between the designer/craftsman and production processes. See P. Sulzer, *Jean Prouvé: Complete Works, Volume 3, 1944–54* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2005), 19–23.

12 P. Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 2.

program—it was systematic, efficient, and used new technologies and industrial processes—and this correspondence was confirmed by Prouvé's post-war government commissions. In a French context, the universal, standardized nature of Prouvé's modernist design meant homogenization and an erasure of geographical, cultural, and economic difference to raise living standards for all. However, in a colonial context, the modernist emphasis on new technologies and industrial processes could serve another purpose; rather than standardizing and thus improving social conditions, it could maintain cultural difference and reinforce colonial power relations. While Ateliers Prouvé exemplified modernism's social and political morality at the level of both design and production processes, when applied to the French colonial project, such modernist ideology would prove problematic.

Colonial Modernism: La Maison Tropicale

In 1947, Prouvé was approached by French colonial authorities to design affordable, prefabricated housing for colonial officials in West Africa. The French colonies represented a large potential market for Prouvé's prefabricated architecture: with modernist architecture and design gaining institutional support in France, a growing colonial bureaucracy might also embrace modernism. Paul Herbé, architect and urban planner for France's Niger territory, for example, was interested in prefabrication because of the difficulty of importing building materials into the colony, and he commissioned Prouvé to design and build a colonial version of the Maison Standard Metropole. In 1949, Ateliers Prouvé finished the first prototype for a prefabricated colonial house, the Maison Tropicale. Prouvé's design was a model of industrial efficiency: Its components, constructed in the Maxéville factory, were designed to fit within an aircraft and be assembled quickly on site without specialist building skills. The first Maison Tropicale was prominently exhibited on the banks of the Seine before being disassembled and flown to Niamey, in Niger, where it housed a secondary school headmaster.

In 1951, Prouvé's workshop produced two more, slightly modified Maison Tropicale prototypes, which were shipped to Brazzaville, a colonial city in French Equatorial Africa (now the Republic of Congo). The Brazzaville prototypes included a small structure, 10 by 14 meters (33 by 46 feet), and a larger one, 10 by 18 meters (33 by 59 feet). The smaller one became an office for the Bureau Régional d'Information de l'Aluminium Français and was partitioned into a Director's office, a secretary's office, and a waiting room. The larger one became a residence for the commercial director of Aluminium Français, Jacques Piaget, and was partitioned into a master bedroom plus two smaller bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Considerable thought went into adopting the French "Metropole" design developed for Meudon into a colonial one.

Figure 2

Maison Tropicale, detail of the manually-adjustable louver system. Photo by D. J. Huppertz



Most significantly, Prouvé aimed to develop a modular system of prefabricated building that could engage with the tropical climate of France's sub-Saharan colonies.¹³

Elevated on steel stilts, the Maison Tropicale looked like a metallic colonial bungalow. Its wide eaves, equipped with manually adjustable aluminium slats for sun-shading, and aluminium-paneled balcony, obscured the central cell (see Figure 2). This interior cell consisted of a steel frame with both fixed and moveable aluminium panels that made up the walls. Rather than using conventional windows, some of these aluminium panels were punctuated with rows of blue glass portholes and small circular ventilators (see Figure 3). An aluminium paneled roof, ridged with a lantern, was designed as a flue that would take hot air out of the interior; meanwhile, the ceiling was separated from the roof, providing further insulation from the tropical heat. The open interior space was broken up only by thin steel pillars, allowing for flexible internal subdivisions, and its color scheme was a decidedly neutral cream and green.

Only three Maison Tropicale prototypes were ever shipped to the French colonies in Africa, and Prouvé's design was never mass-produced because the cost of materials and transportation from France was far above local costs. According to Rubin, a further reason for the Maison Tropicale's failure was that colonial officials in Africa thought it looked too unusual.¹⁴ Although the Maison Tropicale never progressed beyond these three prototypes, Prouvé was involved in other colonial projects during the 1950s that were more successful, such as aluminium components and furniture design (in collaboration with Charlotte Perriand) for an Air France apartment block in Brazzaville, furniture and fittings for the colonial projects of French architects Lagneau, Weill, and Dimitrijevic, and furnishings for the Office of Scientific and Technical Research in Overseas Territories (ORSTOM).¹⁵ In 1958, Perriand and Prouvé also collaborated on another prefabricated housing prototype, the Maison du Sahara (with architects Lagneau, Weill, and Kowalski), designed for employees of

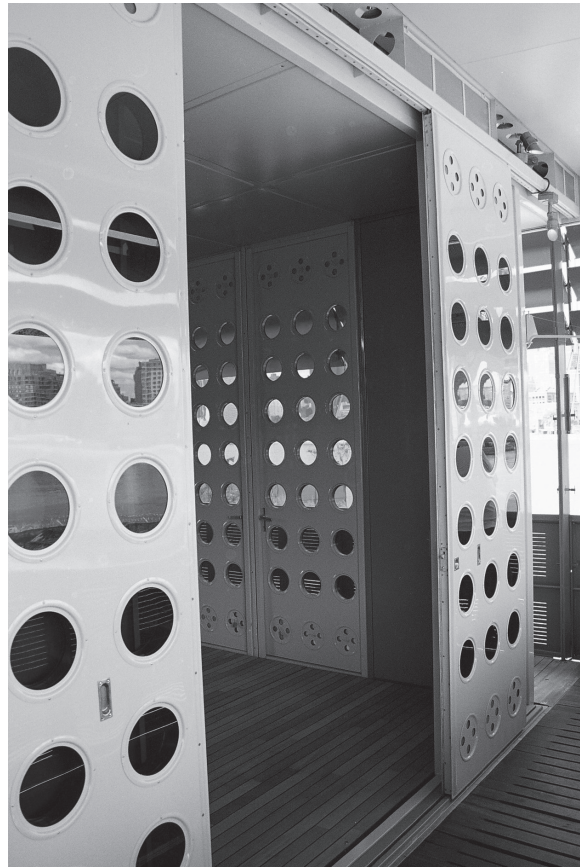
13 Guilloux notes the subtle differences between the Niamey and Brazzaville houses as proof of Prouvé's exhaustive climatic research. See T. Guilloux, "The Maison 'Tropicale': A Modernist Icon or the Ultimate Colonial Bungalow?"

14 R. Rubin, "Maison Tropicale", in B. Bergdoll and P. Christensen, eds., *Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling* (New York: MoMA, 2008), 112.

15 Prouvé's African work is detailed in Joseph Abram, "African Experimentation" in A. Von Vegestack, ed., *Jean Prouvé: the Poetics of the Technical Object* (Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum, 2005), 214–223.

16 See M. Diop, D. Birmingham, I. Hrbek, A. Margarido, and D. Tamsir Niane, "Tropical and Equatorial Africa under French, Portuguese and Spanish Domination, 1935–45", in A. A. Mazrui, ed., *General History of Africa, Volume VIII: Africa Since 1935* (Paris: UNESCO, 1999) 58–75.

Figure 3
Maison Tropicale, detail of the movable walls.
Photo by D. J. Huppertz



French oil companies working in the Sahara desert.¹⁶ Again, despite its innovative design and details (it could be dragged across desert sands on “skis”), the Maison du Sahara was never mass-produced.

In the scholarship on Prouvé to date, there is no evidence of his attitude toward colonialism (he was not known as a theorist), although it is clear that he never visited France’s African colonies. Despite the implicit cost-effectiveness and efficiency of “industrializing the habitat,” prefabricated, factory-produced housing for the French colonies was an unrealistic idea. While Prouvé’s design was meticulous, the Maison Tropicale clearly represented a failure to come to terms with the colonial conditions of the production and consumption of industrial objects. In its universal assumptions, the Maison’s design highlights modernism’s failure to engage with locality and difference; but more than this, its complicity with colonialism requires further interrogation to fully comprehend its significance as a colonial object. For the purpose of brevity, I elaborate on the broader economic, political, and cultural context only of the Congo, for which the Brazzaville prototypes were designed.

Colonialism, Modernization, and Modernism

In the early twentieth century, the Congo was part of the extensive French African colonies, which included West Africa (now Senegal,

Mali, French Guinea, Burkina-Faso, Ivory Coast, Benin, Niger, and Mauritania) and French Equatorial Africa (now Congo, Chad, Central African Republic, and Gabon), and later Cameroon and Togo (inherited from Germany after the First World War). All were characterized by the exploitation of natural resources, and the forced taxation, cultivation, and labor, implemented by a French colonial administration that allowed little to no local consultation.¹⁷ French colonialism in Africa was also characterized by the brutality brought to bear upon its colonized populations. The most notorious example in the Congo was the Congo-Ocean railway project of the late 1920s, in which an estimated 20,000 Congolese (and other African) conscripted laborers lost their lives.¹⁸ In 1944, Congo provided the stage for the French African Conference, overseen by General de Gaulle, as a means to secure and preserve the French colonial system and to protect it from outside (especially American) influences. Marked by the absence of any African representatives, the Brazzaville conference made the official French colonial policy clear: “The purposes of the civilizing work which France has accomplished in her colonies exclude any idea of autonomy, any possibility of evolution outside the French imperial bloc; the eventual establishment—at however remote a date—of ‘self-government’ in the colonies must be ruled out.”¹⁹ French control of its African (and other) colonies was in no doubt in the immediate post-war years.

Both the Maison Tropicale commission and Prouvé’s subsequent colonial commissions can be seen as a direct outcome of de Gaulle’s Brazzaville directive, which also included a reference to bringing modernity to the colonies. After the war, the French colonial authorities began consciously modernizing their African colonies, and in Brazzaville, this included constructing a new airport, port facilities, a hospital, and other public buildings, as well as a few small factories.²⁰ As in most other French colonial cities, the colonial authorities in Brazzaville maintained a strict spatial division between European and “native” populations. A 1948 report of the French Overseas Ministry on urbanization in Brazzaville, for example, included details of a mass eviction of up to 20,000 people from an African section of town, who were relocated several kilometers away to make way for the expanding European settlement.²¹ In Brazzaville, the Maison Tropicale prototypes were located in the designated European part of town, as was the Niamey house, located in an area “that was off-limits for the natives during the colonial period.”²² It was within this segregated context that Prouvé’s prototypes were assembled in colonial Africa.

Despite his research into the tropical environment, Prouvé’s understanding of Africa was largely a colonial projection. Innovative technical devices, such as the louver system, the flexible sliding panels, the circular “breathing” holes that direct and regulate airflow, and even the insect screens, confirm that Prouvé conceived

17 See B. Freud, *The Making of Contemporary Africa: The Development of African Society Since 1800* (London: Macmillan, 2nd edition, 1998), 141.

18 1st Principle from République française, Ministère des Colonies, Conférence africaine française, Brazzaville, 30 janvier 1944 – 8 février (Paris 1945), in B. Fetter, ed., *Colonial Rule in Africa: Readings from Primary Sources* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 169.

19 P. M. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 50.

20 P. M. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 55.

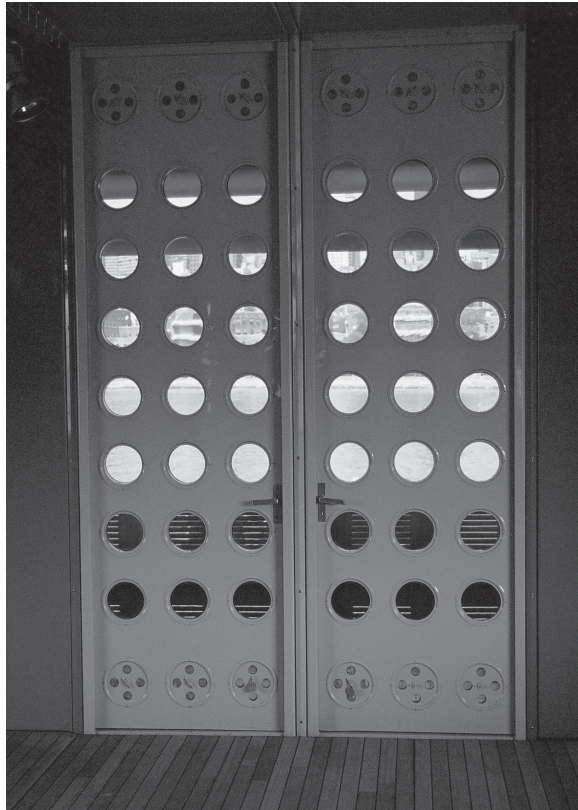
21 M. Diawara, “Architecture as Colonial Discourse”, *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 22/23 (Spring/Summer 2008), 26.

22 M. Diawara, “Architecture as Colonial Discourse”, 24.

Figure 4

Maison Tropicale, view from the interior.

Photo by D. J. Huppertz



the Maison Tropicale as a machine for regulating the tropical environment—an environment assumed to be not only alien but hostile. With its metallic walls closed and its opaque blue portholes both for filtering the dangerous tropical sun and for surveying the outside, the fantasy of colonial mastery pervades Prouvé's design (see Figure 4). With colonial administrators housed in high-tech industrial machines, there could be little chance of assimilation into the local context and no chance of engagement with the colonized "other." Understood in this way, Prouvé's design of the Maison Tropicale served to maintain existing colonial differences and reinforce French technological superiority.

The inseparability of modernism and colonialism is clear in the Maison's design as a model of modern colonial order and efficiency, as well as a metonymic representation of the colonizer's worldview: rational, universal, and infinitely reproducible. As both a modernist object and a colonial object, the Maison Tropicale stands at the logical endpoint of the Enlightenment narrative of progress, tangible evidence of reason's triumph over the primitive. In this way, the Maison's rational engineering and industrial production processes, if successful, could have aided the French colonial mission to conquer the primitive heart of darkness in Africa through technological superiority. Furthermore, with the Maison Tropicale's design as both an elaboration of difference and assertion of colonial power,

Manthia Diawara extends its symbolism: “An aluminium house signified French technological superiority not only over Africans but also over other colonial powers in Africa.”²³ In this light, it is worth recalling the Niamey Maison Tropicale displayed on the banks of the Seine in 1949 before departing for Africa; similar to Gustav Eiffel’s tower 100 years earlier, this modern spectacle could confirm French technological superiority to both Parisians and foreigners alike.

In his defense, Prouvé sincerely believed in modernist design as a means to improve social conditions. From his post-war production of temporary emergency housing to his project for the famous Abbé Pierre, French advocate of the poor, Prouvé’s design philosophy was not based on industrialization for its own sake but clearly stemmed from a strong ethical position. Prouvé even described “industrializing the habitat” in specifically ethical terms: “I am obviously not referring to the housing for the privileged few. We are talking about accommodation for what is commonly called the largest number: they, in my opinion, are in fact most inclined to accept instinctively the most highly industrialized—and therefore the most advanced—habitat.”²⁴ However, Prouvé’s modernist imagination clearly did not come to terms with the realities of furnishing the colonial habitat in Africa.

The convergence of colonialism, modernization, and modernism is most clearly visible in Prouvé’s relationship with Aluminum Français, a relationship that also reveals the designer’s limited agency in the Maison’s design, production, and consumption. Aluminum Français was the state-owned company that controlled French aluminum production in the interwar and immediate post-war period. After the war, with the reduction in the military use of aluminium, Aluminum Français aimed to develop new markets for finished aluminium products. In 1949, the company acquired a 17 percent share in Ateliers Prouvé, and Prouvé signed an exclusive deal with Studal, an Aluminum Français subsidiary that then managed the studio-factory’s commercial operations. For Prouvé, the injection of capital was necessary to expand the studio into a productive factory, although the commercial arrangement’s limitation was that it tied Ateliers Prouvé increasingly to working with aluminium. The Meudon Houses, for example, and the Maison Tropicale prototypes displayed the potential use of aluminium both in France and throughout its vast colonial empire.

In addition to producing aluminium, Aluminum Français was involved in the exploration and mining of bauxite, including in various French colonies in Africa. It is worth highlighting again that the Brazzaville Maison Tropicale prototypes served as the local office of Aluminum Français and as a residence for its director. Thus, Prouvé’s Maison is a design object that clearly illuminates the post-war relationship between modernization, modernism, and the colonial project: the French state mining company, Aluminum Français, was extracting raw materials from the African colonies,

23 B. Huber and J-C. Steinegger, eds., *Prouvé, Jean, Prefabrication: Structures and Elements*, 17.

24 United Nations Human Development Indices, 2008 report, “Table 3: Human and Income Poverty”, p. 35. Available online: http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDI_2008_EN_Tables.pdf (accessed 9/17/2010). Niger, where the other Maison was located, has even worse poverty statistics than the Congo.

which were then returned to France, refined into aluminium, designed into prefabricated housing and furniture by designer Jean Prouvé, and finally, in the case of the *Maison Tropicale*, returned to the colonies as finished commodities. Seen in this context, the designer's role is hardly that of autonomous creative agent; instead, the role is rather more limited and intimately enmeshed in the network of relationships that come together with colonial modernization.

The touching and somewhat ironic conclusion to Prouvé's role in the *Maison Tropicale*'s narrative occurred when his beloved Maxéville studio-factory was taken over by *Aluminium Français*. After the initial deal in 1947, *Aluminium Français* increased capital and shareholding until its position was dominant and Prouvé himself was increasingly sidelined from the factory he founded. In 1953, with increasing profits the main objective of *Aluminium Français*, Prouvé unhappily resigned as Managing Director of *Ateliers Prouvé*. Unfortunately, *Ateliers Prouvé* was absorbed by this convergence of colonialism and modernization (which it supported and on which it was dependent) through its production and promotion of all the innovative modernist objects—from furniture to prefabricated bungalows—that could be designed using aluminum. The triangular relationship between colonialism, modernization, and modernist design is clear in this, the first chapter of the *Maison Tropicale*'s narrative. But the story does not end there.

Return to the Heart of Darkness

The three *Maison Tropicale* prototypes might well have remained in Africa and served as obscure footnotes in Prouvé studies if not for their recent spectacular resurrection as modernist design icons. The next chapter of the *Maison Tropicale* narrative (i.e., between the prototypes' arrival in colonial Africa in 1949/51 and the "rescue" and their restoration in recent years) is a little sketchy but nevertheless is worth recounting because the shifting uses and meanings of the *Maison* during this period are intriguing. As in the previous section, I follow the biography of the largest Brazzaville *Maison Tropicale* prototype, with the understanding that the biographies of the other two are similar. There are two significant issues at stake here: the status of the modernist design object as it was actually used in Africa and then the shift in status upon its return from Africa. The latter trajectory of the post-colonial *Maison Tropicale*, from Brazzaville to a New York auction house, reveals a great deal about how modernist design is fetishized today, as well as how the ingrained colonial attitudes remain.

Despite the 1944 Brazzaville directive and modernization program of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the French colonial regime formally withdrew from the Congo in 1960, and the colony became the Republic of Congo. The newly independent government aligned itself with the Soviet Union, but like many former African colonies,

the Republic of Congo struggled both economically and politically in the decades following the withdrawal of the colonial power. Since independence, the Congo's economy has relied predominantly on subsistence agriculture and petroleum exports, while politically, the country descended into a cycle of civil wars and political unrest in the early 1990's (although the authoritarian rule of Denis Sassou Nguesso has provided some stability since 1997). The contemporary Congo is characterized by a high infant mortality rate, high rates of HIV/AIDS, and extreme poverty. According to the most recent UN Human Development Indices (2008), over half the country's four million people live on less than \$1.25 per day.²⁵

It is in this context that we must imagine the *Maison Tropicale* in post-colonial Brazzaville, abandoned by *Aluminum Français* and inhabited by locals. The Brazzaville *Maisons* were certainly altered at some point between 1960 and 2000, with local inhabitants adding concrete walls to the steel stilts to create an additional enclosed space underneath. Artist Angela Ferreria and filmmaker and academic Manthia Diawara have recently documented what little is known about the *Maisons* in Africa. Ferreria's installation at the 2007 Venice Biennale was inspired by the displacement of the *Maison Tropicale* prototypes from their African context, and included photographs of the concrete bases in Brazzaville and Niamey upon which the *Maisons* formerly sat. In a complementary project, Diawara's film, "*Maison Tropicale*," brought some of the *Maisons'* African contexts to life and included an interview with Mireille Ngatsé, who lived in the Brazzaville *Maison Tropicale* for several years. As post-colonial objects, the *Maison Tropicale* prototypes were thus integrated into their local African contexts, adapted, modified, and inhabited during the four decades from 1960 to 2000.

By the time his *Maison* prototypes had "gone native," Jean Prouvé's reputation was undergoing a significant revival in museums and auction houses in Paris, London, and New York. Although his death in 1984 sparked brief interest in his designs, it was not until the 1990s, when the market for modernist design really began to surge, that Prouvé's furniture became popular with collectors. Within a decade, chairs and furniture produced by *Ateliers Prouvé* that had furnished French provincial schools and colonial offices for 40 years or more were fetching tens of thousands of dollars per item at auction. Attention to Prouvé's design began to peak after the turn of the millennium; numerous exhibitions in France in 2001 and 2002 accelerated both market and museum interest in his designs. In 2003, in response to the collecting mania, Vitra began reissuing Prouvé furniture classics, including the EM Table, designed as part of the *Maison Tropicale* project.

In 2000, the *Maison Tropicale's* narrative resumes when the three prototypes were "rescued" from Africa by French antiques dealer Eric Touchaleaume. The smaller Brazzaville prototype was sold privately to former Wall Street trader-turned Prouvé collector-

25 Christie's Catalogue, *Jean Prouvé's Prototype Maison Tropicale and Works by Jean Prouvé, Charlotte Perriand, Le Corbusier, and Pierre Jeanneret, from the Collection of Eric Touchaleaume* (New York: Christie's, 2007), 9.

turned Prouvé scholar, Robert Rubin, who exhibited it in 2005 at Yale University and UCLA, then donated it to the Pompidou Center, where it currently resides on permanent display. The larger Brazzaville prototype was restored and then sold at auction to hotelier/developer Andre Balazs in New York in 2007 for almost US \$5 million. Finally, the Niamey prototype is currently being restored by Touchaleaume and is slated to be reassembled in the South of France as a design and architecture study center. In addition to rescuing the Maison Tropicale prototypes from Brazzaville and Niger, Touchaleaume also rescued any transportable artifacts from Brazzaville's former Air France building, including furniture and fixtures designed by Prouvé and Perriand, which have since been sold at auction.

In the official catalogue for the Christie's sale of the Brazzaville Maison Tropicale, Touchaleaume stated that he made "arrangements in 2000 for a trip to Africa in pursuit of the prototype Maisons Tropicales, determined to salvage them from ruin and to bring them back to France."²⁶ Touchaleaume's narrative, picked up by the popular press, had all the makings of a Hollywood blockbuster in the Indiana Jones mode: a forgotten masterpiece by a modernist design visionary, occupied by "squatters" and overgrown by tropical foliage, rescued from war-torn Congo, then lovingly restored and triumphantly displayed in Paris, New York, and London.²⁷ On the rescue itself, the many newspaper and journal articles reiterated the story but skimmed over the details. In *The Guardian*, for example, Amelia Gentleman reported that "there were problems at the border: local authorities refused to let it pass through Customs, arguing that it should remain in Africa."²⁸ In the *New York Times*, William L. Hamilton wrote: "the Maison, occupied by squatters, was sold twice to Mr Touchaleaume, he said, by two parties who each claimed ownership. Mr Touchaleaume added that he also paid the government..."²⁹ The narrative raises some crucial questions: After 50 years in the Congo as a post-colonial object, who was the owner of the Maison Tropicale? Where was this object's "home"? Was Touchaleaume's repatriation of a significant design object simply a continuation of colonialism by other means?

In its most recent revival as a design icon, the Maison Tropicale confirms modernist design as transcendent, neutral, and universal and thus beyond the specifics of culture, politics, or history (see Figure 5). As a museological spectacle, we are encouraged to understand the Maison Tropicale as an exemplary industrial object created by an autonomous design genius. The colonial context of the Maison is suppressed in its contemporary display and consumption, with no evidence of its African inhabitation remaining. The twin forces of European industrial modernization and colonialism, although clearly manifest in the Maison Tropicale, are effectively reduced to the singular understanding of the object as a modern industrial icon, while the complexities of its colonial history are

26 S. Rose, "House Hunting: Steve Rose Meets the Indiana Jones of Furniture Collecting," *The Guardian*, 7 February 2008.

27 A. Gentleman, "Bullet Holes Extra", *The Guardian*, August 31, 2004.

28 W. Hamilton, "From Africa to Queens Waterfront, A Modernist Gem for Sale to the Highest Bidder," *New York Times*, May 16, 2007.

29 Kristen Ross argues that the discourses of modernization and colonialism were kept separate in postwar France. See K. Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA, and London, MIT Press, 1995), 9.

Figure 5

Maison Tropicale in New York. Photo by
D. J. Huppertz



repressed.³⁰ In its shifting identity from a colonial object, a postcolonial object, and finally a design icon, the Maison Tropicale also shifts from a functional, modernist object—a space inhabited by the colonial Aluminum Français corporation and then in the postcolonial era by the Congolese Mireille Ngatsé—to a work of art, a twenty-first century spectacle that has been literally and metaphorically sanitized, its African existence erased. In this way, the contemporary rescue, resuscitation, and reframing of the Maison Tropicale as a modernist icon confirms European cultural superiority, as the mid-twentieth century engine of modernization and as the twenty-first century guardian of cultural heritage.

By focusing on technology, industrial processes, designer price tags, and the accompanying rescue story, the intimate relationship between modernism and colonialism, both in the 1950s and in the twenty-first century, is naturalized and normalized. At least as it is understood in the Europe and North America, design history continues to frame our understanding of modernism within a meta-narrative of developmental modernization that is inherently Eurocentric. However, in a recent survey of the field, Denise Whitehouse identified non-Western scholars who are “advocating a new geography of design that critically rethinks the impact of Western capitalism’s dissemination of the idea and practice of design.”³⁰ She argues that design history needs to shift from a modernist historiography and geography of design that is implicitly diffusionist, in which both modernization and modernism radiate from the Euro-American center to the colonial (then post-colonial) margins.³¹ The recent return of the Maison Tropicale prototypes from the margins to their spectacular display in the centers seems to perpetuate the Eurocentric narrative in which modernization, modernity, and modernism are still understood to be exclusively European. However, by expanding design history’s interpretive framework to consider the complexity of its design, production, and consumption over the past 50 years, we can now understand Prouvé’s Maison Tropicale as an ambivalent mythological object in which the threads of industrial modernization, utopian modernism, and colonialism remain entangled.

30 D. Whitehouse, “The State of Design History as a Discipline”, in H. Clark and D. Brody, eds., *Design Studies: A Reader* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009), 61.

31 On diffusionism, see J. M. Blaut, *The Colonizer’s Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1993).