ARCHITECTURE AND PEDAGOGY IN FRANCE: 1970, AN ABORTED REVOLUTION

Arquitectura y pedagogía en Francia: 1970, una revolución abortada

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Abstract. According to historian Antoine Prost, education in France is marked by two periods of profound reform. The first (1880-1902) occurred during the Third Republic and the second (1960-1985) was set in motion under de Gaulle. From an architectural point of view, the former gave rise to the Jules Ferry school, while the latter sought to introduce the English open-space school model into France. Taking the example of the École Saint-Merri, built in Paris between 1971 and 1973, this article examines the impact of this second reform from an architectural point of view.

Keywords: school buildings; open-plan schools; Plowden Report; Centre Beaubourg Paris; Saint-Merri School Paris; David and Mary Medd; Edith Schreiber-Aujame; Édouard-Marc Roux.

Resumen. Según el historiador Antoine Prost, la educación en Francia se caracteriza por dos períodos de profunda reforma: el primero (1880-1902) se produjo durante la Tercera República y el segundo (1960-1985) se puso en marcha bajo el mandato de De Gaulle. Desde el punto de vista arquitectónico, el primero dio lugar a la escuela de Jules Ferry, y el segundo trató de introducir en Francia el modelo inglés de escuela de espacios abiertos u opciones múltiples. Tomando como ejemplo la École Saint-Merri, construida en París entre 1971 y 1973, este artículo examina el impacto de esta segunda reforma desde el punto de vista arquitectónico.

Palabras clave: edificios escolares; escuela al aire libre; Plowden Report; Centro Beaubourg París; Escuela Saint-Merri París; David y Mary Medd; Edith Schreiber-Aujame; Édouard-Marc Roux.

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There are schools of thought and schools of brick and mortar. A school is a practice, it is also a place: the two dimensions are so closely intertwined that they are designated by the same word. Nevertheless, the relationship between the educators who teach in the school and the architects who design it is tenuous and distant in France, made difficult by the fact that they are not given the opportunity to meet each other. The teaching team is generally not appointed until the architects have completed their work; one group succeeds the other. Under these conditions, the articulation between the educational project and the architectural project cannot be defined by direct contact between them and adapted on a case-by-case basis. It is set for all school projects in the same way by the French state, in order to guarantee the same quality and comfort in all the establishments it funds. It is therefore the state that translates the adopted teaching method into quantified spatial provisions, by defining and publishing regulations to be followed by local authorities when developing school programmes. The first set of regulations concerning the “construction and fitting out of school houses” was enacted in 1880 when the Ministry of Education, under Jules Ferry, gave a decisive push to school construction. During the first half of the twentieth century, these regulations were revised several times without their founding principles being called into question. Subsequently, the baby boom and the democratization of education revolutionized the architecture of schools. In the decades following the Second World War, these factors created a strong need for new schools, with the industrialization of construction processes enabling cost savings. Later again, in the 1970s, they triggered a rethinking of teaching methods and school space. In this article devoted to the links between architecture and education in France, we will begin by revisiting the founding principles forged during the Third Republic and then we will examine, through an exemplary case, the still little-known revolution of the 1970s.

THE SCHOOL OF THE REPUBLIC

School architecture in France was defined under the twin influence of two opposing methods of instruction promoted throughout the nineteenth century: the monitorial method and the simultaneous method. The monitorial method was conceived in Great Britain during the industrial revolution to respond to the demographic explosion of urban
centres. Its aim was to provide instruction to as many poor children as possible at the lowest possible cost, which it sought to do by having older children serve as monitors to teach the younger ones. This enabled a single teacher to supervise groups of 150, 300 or even 1,000 pupils. By its conception, the method required specific material conditions to regulate the physical distribution of the children and their exercises in the silence needed for their concentration. Edme François Jomard, one of the adepts of this method in France, explained it in these terms: “Once the school has been set up and supplied with all the necessary furniture, it will only be a matter of introducing the pupils and the master, and then setting in motion all the workings of this mechanism, by means of the new practices”. Spatial planning was therefore central to the thinking of the proponents of the monitorial method, as is evident in the book published in 1811 by one of its advocates, Joseph Lancaster, *Hints and for Building, Fitting Up and Arranging School Rooms*. In France, the first articles appeared a few years later, sometimes accompanied by figurative representations, a new feature at the time. In 1815, the *Journal d’éducation*, the mouthpiece of the Société pour l’amélioration de l’instruction élémentaire (Society for the Improvement of Elementary Instruction), which had been created to popularize the monitorial method, published a plate drawn by Jomard himself: “Plan and details of an elementary school for 350 pupils” (Image 1).

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The plan of the room is precisely drawn, indicating the position and design of the furniture, from the benches and desks to the reading circles around which the children gathered to decipher the printed pictures hanging on the walls. The indication regarding the number of pupils may seem surprising. It can be explained by the approach used to define class size: “The space occupied by each child, including the space between benches and desks, is about two and a half square feet. Thus, by multiplying the proposed number of pupils by two and a half, we will know the surface area occupied by the benches and desks”. To ensure good ventilation and light quality in the room, he recommended “windows on opposite sides [...] wide, not very high and, insofar as possible, equidistant”. The dimensions of the room were thus fixed by the furniture, which itself was the result of the teaching method. To ensure an efficient distribution of heat, he stipulated the use of under-floor steam.

3 Jomard, Abrégé de la méthode des écoles élémentaires, 107.
heating, and he concluded with a very complete description of the furniture, which he considered to be the most expensive part of setting up a school. The society’s rich reflection on the characteristics of the *school-house* was, however, at odds with the poor state of its school buildings. While it set up an increasing number of schools in the early nineteenth century, expanding from 65 in 1815 to 1,546 in 1820, all appear to have been placed in existing buildings. It was nevertheless on the basis of their ideas that the first collection of school models was published in France – drafted by the architect Auguste Bouillon – to accompany the promulgation of the Guizot law in 1833. This marked a first step towards the multiplication of new schools, by obliging each municipality “to maintain at least one elementary school” and by providing them with examples to implement.

The principal representatives of the simultaneous method were the Frères de la doctrine chrétienne (Brothers of Christian Doctrine). This religious order, which had been back in France since 1804 and authorized since 1810, was growing steadily. In 1815, it had 58 houses in which 310 brothers taught and in 1825, 210 houses and 750 brothers. However, the congregation had little interest in the spatial organization of its buildings. The only indications it provided on the subject appeared in *Conduite des écoles chrétiennes*, a teaching manual published in the early eighteenth century, discussing the qualities of teachers and children, catechism and methods for teaching well. These methods were based on the idea of dividing schoolchildren into three groups, *beginner*, *mediocre* and *advanced*, emphasizing distribution by level and progression from one level to the next; these groups were not to exceed sixty. Thus, the number of teachers needed in a school was much higher than in the monitorial method, a minimum of three for a maximum of 180 children. The reprint of the *Conduite* in 1819 specified some classroom arrangements,

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7 Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, *Conduite des écoles chrétiennes* (Paris: Procure générale, 1951, edition of the French manuscript 11.759 from the national library by F. Anselme F.S.C.). Several editions were produced during the Restoration, in 1819 and 1823 (slightly modified) and in 1828 (revised and corrected).
calling for large windows to provide “good daylight and good air”, a surface area of at least 20 to 30 square meters for small and medium-sized schools, and describing furniture and its dimensions at length. During the following decades, in a France whose population was overwhelmingly rural – up to 80 percent according to estimates –, the simultaneous method gradually took precedence over the monitorial method, or, more exactly, the two were associated in more or less successful combinations, mixing monitorial furniture with classes whose dimensions were similar to those advocated by the simultaneous method.

It fell to Octave Gréard, director of Primary Education in the Seine department from 1870 onwards, to draw the conclusions of these reflections and their implementation. He took up the idea of three levels, elementary, middle and upper, and proposed a similar dimension for all classrooms. He questioned the usefulness of “those vast structures where the teacher locked himself up as if in a fortress” and “those massive tables where the children were piled up in thick rows” typical of monitorial learning. Arguing that the teacher should go to the pupil and not the other way round, he imposed the use of single-seat or two-seat benches. He reaffirmed the correlation between pedagogy and architecture, stressing that “the interest of material organization increases when it is associated with the transformation of methods”. At the level of the city of Paris, he proposed a pedagogical reform, encouraging its application by the teachers under his authority. Furthermore, he defined the furnishings and appropriate provisions, supervising their implementation by the municipal architectural services from which the future school builders were chosen. These measures resulted in some three hundred new buildings, most of which are still in use and continue to serve as models throughout France. These decisions in fact preceded the establishment, by the Ministry of Education of the time, of the first regulations for the construction and fitting out of school

8 Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, *Conduite des écoles chrétiennes* (Rusand, 1819), 273-276.
10 Gréard, *Éducation et instruction*, 76.
houses, dated 17 July 1880, presented in the form of themes accompanied by illustrations. This document is divided into four chapters: general conditions, classroom, ancillary services and furnishings. The most significant chapter is, clearly, the one devoted to the classroom (Image 2).

Image 2. Diagram published in the regulations governing the construction and furnishing of school houses issued by the Minister of Public Instruction on 7 June 1880.

It specifies that it will be rectangular and that its dimensions will be defined by a minimum area and volume to be allocated to each child. The number of pupils is limited to fifty in one-class schools and forty in other schools, and, in the same way as in the monitorial method, it is

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12 The regulations of 17 June 1880 were published in several works and appeared in annotated editions such as those of Félix Narjoux, *Règlement pour la construction et l’ameublement des maisons d’école, arrêté par le ministre de l'instruction publique le 7 juin 1880; suivi d’un commentaire et de plans explicatifs* (Paris, 1880) and Paul Planat, *Nouveau règlement pour la construction et l’ameublement des écoles primaires avec analyse, article par article, commentaires et développements pratiques* (Paris: Ducher, 1881).
this number that determines the dimensions of the class on the basis of the furnishings. Further details follow on lighting, ventilation, etc., to establish a comprehensive founding document. Indeed, while these regulations were amended several times subsequently, the pedagogical model on which they are based has only rarely been called into question, nor have the material provisions it advocated.

Although there were major educational reform movements during the interwar period, which gave rise to the International League for New Education, these movements remained on the fringes of the institution in France, having an impact beyond school, in the world of leisure activities.\textsuperscript{13} It wasn’t until after the Second World War and the period that some have described as the “thirty glorious years of educational reform”\textsuperscript{14} that they brought about school reforms. With a certain discretion, primary education underwent, as Antoine Prost puts it, a silent revolution in this time. “Since the early nineteenth century”, he writes, “school in France has known only two periods of profound change, each lasting about twenty years: the republican re-foundation, from Ferry to the 1902 reform, and the Gaullist restructuring of the 1960s, which ended in 1985”.\textsuperscript{15} The aim of this second phase of restructuring was to democratize education. This consisted in eliminating the social differentiation that had been at the root of the separation made by the Third Republic between a school intended for the common people and a lycée intended for notables, and transforming them into two successive levels of education, primary and secondary, accessible to all. From that point onwards, school no longer had the mission of equipping children with everything they needed to know in life, since they would continue on to a secondary level. School became freer and more flexible as a result, being able to streamline its curricula and use active methods inspired by debates and experiments that had been going on since the 1930s. The creation of transition classes, designed to support children in the transition from primary to secondary school, led to a


review of teaching methods and rhythms. In 1969, the changes that had been tested in this way were generalized to nursery and elementary schools. Teaching was divided into three groups: fundamental languages, which included French and arithmetic; early learning subjects, encompassing history, geography and natural sciences; and finally, physical and sports education. This breakdown is what came to be referred to as the three teaching times, although the times in question are in fact somewhat unequal in length, since fifteen hours were devoted to the first part and six hours to each of the other two. The application of this principle was to “launch an innovative movement of experimentation” and to “break down the watertight barriers that had been established between the various disciplines”. It is therefore interesting to look more closely at a school designed during these highly particular years of pedagogical renewal, with a view to understanding the architectural evolutions that it gave rise to. What form did these architectural evolutions take? By whom were they formulated and how? The example of the Rue Saint-Merri primary school has been selected here for its reputation and originality. Built in the centre of Paris between 1971 and 1973, its opening was celebrated by a journalist from Le Monde in an eloquently titled article, “Libres enfants de Saint-Merri”, in an allusion to Alexander Sutherland Neill’s book, which had recently been translated into French.

FREE CHILDREN OF SAINT-MERRI

The École Saint-Merri came about due to exceptional circumstances, related to the decision taken by French President Georges Pompidou at the end of 1969, to build “a monumental complex dedicated to contemporary art on the site of the Beaubourg plateau”. A year later, an international architectural competition was launched for this

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18 Presentation of the archives of the construction and development of the Georges Pompidou National Centre of Art and Culture (http://archivesetdocumentation.centrepompidou.fr).
building, which was to house a museum of modern art, a public library and a centre dedicated to industrial design. On 15 July 1971, from among the 681 proposals submitted, the jury chose the one by the architects Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers and Gianfranco Franchini. However, their project was criticized for the rupture it caused in the district by its powerful volumes. This led to the idea of allowing it to breathe on its southern flank, where the fountain by Niki Saint-Phalle and Jean Tinguely stands today, and to create a free space up to the flamboyant Gothic radiating chapel of the Church of Saint-Merri (Image 3). This meant destroying the school for girls and boys in the rue Brisemiche, built in the 1910s, which obstructed the view of the church.19 Following a memorandum from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs judging this school to be “of mediocre architectural value”20, at a time when the destruction of Les Halles was underway, the decision was quickly taken, all the more so as the same memorandum specified that the reconstruction of this school would be an opportunity to launch an educational experiment that the Ministry of Education wished to conduct. This new building, it added, would require “premises of exceptional quality and a specific architectural style”.21 So began the history of the École Saint-Merri.

19 The school occupied 29 rue Saint-Merri and 1,3 rue Brise-miche, Paris, 4th arrondissement and was built by the architect Albert Allain (Archives de Paris VM74 64-65).
Image 3. Perspective view towards the Church of Saint-Merri, dated 18 October 1971. The drawing presents the hypothesis of freeing the view to the radiating chapel of the Church of Saint-Merri, seen at the back, which was hidden at the time by the rue Brisemiche school (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 541).

The Ministry of Education wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to launch the application of the three teaching times in optimal conditions and recommended the construction of an open-plan school, such as existed in “various foreign countries”. In the English-speaking world, a new type of building had been designed, without the traditional corridors linking a string of rooms, but with vast, adaptable spaces facilitating the development of varied and changing activities. In England, one

of the recommendations of the Plowden Report, which had been commissioned by the Ministry of Education to answer questions similar to those being asked by France on the democratization of education, was to move towards open-plan schools. Submitted in 1967, it stated, in a formula that has remained famous, that “the child is the agent in his own learning”. Furthermore, it proposed to extend to the primary level what was already being done in nursery school, namely giving pupils the opportunity to decide when they would do the work they were asked to do or the activities of their choice. The architecture was supposed to follow from these pedagogical orientations. “It is both an educational and an architectural responsibility to see that the shape of schools is determined by educational trends rather than by architectural fashion”. The series of rooms designed for fixed group timetables was therefore to make way for teaching spaces where pupils would engage in various activities at various times. The report cited the example of a school that had recently been built in London, the Eveline Lowe School (1963-1966) carried out by the Development group of the Ministry of Education on the plans of David and Mary Medd (Image 4). It included a nursery school for sixty children and a primary school for 160 children aged five to eight. Drawing on experiments carried out since the 1940s, which had already eliminated corridors in favour of a variety of activity areas, it was designed as a spatial continuum, with no clear division between collective and non-collective spaces. It contained alcoves of varying dimensions, open to each other, in which children could engage in various exercises from quiet to noisy; some were covered with carpets for reading, others equipped with sinks and work surfaces for practical work. The furniture had also been designed by the architects to serve this purpose.

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24 § 529, Children and their Primary Schools, 1967.

25 § 1097, Children and their Primary Schools, 1967.

Held up as a model by the ministry and published in the architectural press\textsuperscript{27}, it had a significant influence beyond the borders of England.


In France, the Ministry of Education had already tried to introduce these ideas where opportunities had arisen, that is, where it could intervene directly. This was the case in new towns whose creation had been entrusted to public planning institutions managed by senior civil servants. For example, in the Île-de-France region, when the Saint-Merri project was launched, the public management authority of the new town of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines had begun work on the construction of a school of this new type. It had solicited the Association pour

l’Environnement Pédagogique (Association for the Educational Environment, AEP) to programme the spaces, and had simultaneously appointed Yves Merlin as architect and Jean Prouvé as builder. The École du Parc, which opened in 1973, was a vast one-storey pancake with two patios, offering multi-purpose areas under its continuous steel roof. The same approach was followed for the design of the École Saint-Merri. For the programming, the future Centre Beaubourg management authority (Établissement public du Centre Beaubourg) turned to the same team chosen by the new town of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, the AEP. The AEP proposed a three-pronged approach: programme definition and assistance with project management, research into suitable furniture, and preparation of the teaching team for the new organization. The project timeline was then set: February 1972, launch of an architectural competition, October 1972, start of construction for an inauguration planned for the autumn of 1973.

The AEP was influenced by the questioning of teaching methods prevalent at the time, as reflected in well-known publications by Alexander Sutherland Neill, Jean Piaget and Ivan Illich. According to Claude Bensimon, it came into being in 1969 as a result of an encounter between him, Jean Hassendorfer and Edith Aujame. At the time, he was a young architecture student doing research for the dissertation project he wanted to devote to a school applying a modern pedagogy.

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28 “L’École du Parc. Élancourt-Maurepas”, Techniques et architecture “Villes nouvelles” 301 (November-December 1974): 123. I would like to warmly thank Sylvie Zenouda for the information she provided on this establishment.


30 Letter addressed by C. Bensimon to F. Lombard, liaison officer at the Établissement public du Centre Beaubourg, dated 12 January 1972. (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 604).

31 Delegation for the creation of the Centre Beaubourg, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, “Programming” document dated 26 November 1971 (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 544).


34 Ivan Illich, Une société sans école (Paris: Seuil, 1971).

Jean Hassenforder, a sociologist, was working at the French National Institute of Pedagogical Research, the driving force behind the renewal of education in France. As for Edith Schreiber-Aujame (1919-1998), she was an architect trained by Marcel Breuer at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, at the time when Gropius was its director. She had moved to France after marrying Robert Aujame, whom she had met in Le Corbusier's studio. All three were committed to “the hope of promoting a physical environment conducive to the New Education” and they were joined by Henri Bonneville, coordinator of the Villeneuve de Grenoble-Echirolles schools, the architect Bernard Kohn and his wife Ruth, an educationalist, as well as the teachers Suzanne Saisse and Nancy Magaud. The aim of the association was to intervene upstream of construction, to define needs with the future users and to transpose them into an architectural programme. For the École Saint-Merri, it initiated the two steps simultaneously: the discussions with the teachers and the design of the programme. There were at least two reasons for this. First, there was little time. Second, the future teachers of the École Saint-Merri, who were none other than those of the rue Brisemiche school whose destruction had been decided, were not familiar with the new pedagogies, therefore it was more a question of introducing them to these teaching methods than involving them in the programming.

The preliminary programme was drawn up within six months. It was validated in June and everything suggests that the architectural project began at the same time as its programming. The appointment of the architects was also quicker than expected. Originally, the Centre Beaubourg management authority wanted to launch a competition; it eventually opted to directly appoint an architect, probably due to lack of time. However, the final decision in fact lay with the Prefect of Paris. In the list of eight names submitted to the Prefecture by the management authority, the Prefect did not select the architect who seemed to be the obvious choice, Bernard Kohn, who was a founding member of the AEP and familiar with open-plan schools, but Édouard-Marc Roux, who was already working for the City of Paris as a consultant architect to the

37 Letter from Robert Bordaz, chairman of the administrative board of the Établissement public du Centre Beaubourg, to the Prefect of Paris, dated 26 January 1972 (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 540).
Education directorate. This therefore allowed the City, which did not have control over this project financed and piloted by the Centre Beaubourg, to at least be in charge of the architect. In the meantime, the third partner in this adventure, the Ministry of Education, had communicated a standard programme indicating the number of classes and buildings desired. It specified that the project would be carried out “according to the open-space formula for the nursery school and according to an optional formula for the elementary school”, leaving a certain amount of ambiguity.

The conditions of the project were difficult. The land, which had been bought by the Centre Beaubourg management authority and was located at the corner of rue du Renard and rue Saint-Merri, had about the same surface area as that of the old school: 2,791 m² compared to 2,700 m². However, it was not just about building a school of a comparable scale: twenty-two elementary school classrooms and seven nursery school classroom instead of twenty-two and nine before. The programme also had to accommodate municipal showers, and in particular, a swimming pool and a gymnasium for 900 pupils, both of which had been requested by the City of Paris. The request had been accepted by the Centre Beaubourg management authority, although this programme increased its budget, because it would bring about the creation of an integrated public amenity. Very fashionable at the time in new towns, the integrated public amenity consisted of a grouping of various health, educational and cultural programmes, etc., which was expected to produce an economy and density of social relations. In Saint-Merri, it would offer local residents the use of facilities also intended for schools, acting as an activity hub and an articulation between the Beaubourg plateau and the Marais.

38 École Saint-Merri dossier (Archives de Paris, 1178W 2567).
40 “Transfert de l’école Saint-Merri” memorandum by the Établissement public du Centre Beaubourg (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 540). According to the project presentation, probably drafted in 1973, the number of classes was later reduced to 17. (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 541).
42 See the leaflet published by the Centre national d’art et de culture Georges Pompidou, École rue St-Merri, un équipement intégré de quartier (no date).
In addition to the difficulties posed by the quantity of activities to be accommodated on the limited surface area, there were further constraints specific to the site. The plot was in fact made up of several parcels, two of which were occupied by buildings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively at 7 and 9 rue Saint-Merri, which had to be preserved. Finally, an access passage to an RATP electrical transformer located at the back of the plot had to be taken into account, and there was the even greater difficulty of dealing with an underground roadway from the Les Halles car park, supposed to emerge at the foot of the building, on rue du Renard (Image 5).

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43 No. 9 is the former Hôtel Potier de Blanc-Mesnil (17th c.) whose façade was listed in the supplementary inventory of historical monuments: see the minutes of the meetings of 25/11/1971 and 2/12/1971 of the Commission du Marais (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 540).
The sum of the functions to be associated and problems to be circumvented explains why the definition of the structure was essential. It had to straddle the exit from the underground and provide vast spaces for the covered swimming pool and gymnasium to form a base on which the school would be placed. Édouard-Marc Roux and his two associates, Alain Gamard and Daniel Lombard, designed large reinforced concrete porticoes that cantilevered over rue du Renard. The teaching spaces rested on this platform, on the corner of the two streets, while the main recreation spaces were staggered in the heart of the block, above the gymnasium and the pool, with respective heights of four and seven and a half metres (Images 6 and 7).

In keeping with ministerial directives, the AEP conceived the school as a *pedagogical community*, but due to the cramped dimensions of the site and the high number of pupils expected — an estimated 875 children — it proposed a division into three groups based on needs, learning methods, biological rhythms and degree of socialization.\(^{44}\) The first group combined first and second level nursery school pupils, aged two to four; the second, the oldest nursery school and the youngest elementary school children, aged five to seven; the third, the oldest children, aged eight to ten. The architects quickly realized the need to develop this design in plan, in the form of three teaching platforms, one for each of

these three groups, offering a freedom of movement typical of open-plan schools (Image 8).

Image 8. Section of the École Saint-Merri showing the vertical organization of the school, placed above the swimming pool and the gymnasium (Centre national d’art et de culture Georges-Pompidou, “École rue St-Merri, un équipement intégré de quartier”, [1974?]).

In its programme, the AEP provided a detailed description of the layout of these vast spaces: they combined general purpose teaching areas, locations for quieter or noisier activities, and more intimate areas to be shared by a smaller number of pupils, where each child could find his or her tutor, cloakroom, lockers, etc. To respond to this programme, the architects proposed divisions parallel to the grid of load-bearing columns; these were made of movable partitions that defined the required surfaces (Image 9). This perfunctory response is probably explained by the haste in which they were working to meet the imposed deadlines, with delivery set for September 1973.45 It was also justified by the ambiguity

45 Contract concluded between the Établissement public de Beaubourg, represented by Robert Bordaz, and Édouard Marc Roux and his associates on 20/6/1972. (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 543).
surrounding the choice of the open area for the elementary school: the simple, light panels made it easy to envisage future layout changes.\textsuperscript{46} The result does not have the refinement of English schools, which feature an array of interlocking and open areas that are distinct in terms of their scale, materials and furnishings, such as proposed by the Eveline Lowe School (Image 3).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image9.png}
\caption{Plan of the second floor of the École Saint-Merri, on the +7.50 m level, intended for pupils in the older group (Centre national d’art et de culture Georges-Pompidou, “École rue St-Merri, un équipement intégré de quartier”, [1974?]).}
\end{figure}

Taking their cue from a Corbusian reminiscence perhaps, the architects placed the smaller children on the roof, as in the Marseilles Unité d’habitation, inverting the usual organization of Parisian schools. As was often the case, the ministry imposed on the nursery school what it would not dare do in the elementary school, the open area. The impact on the plan is clearly visible (Image10). It is more complete, the partitions are no longer temporary and the spaces are more fully designed. They are articulated to offer a high degree of permeability between the interior and the exterior, responding to the AEP’s request for activities to take place both inside and outside.\(^\text{47}\) These practices, which emerged at the beginning of the century to strengthen children’s health and combat the development of tuberculosis, were

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recommended by the open-air school movement and subsequently adapted by many educational movements. In France, they had given rise to the famous Suresnes school designed between 1931 and 1934 by Eugène Beaudouin and Marcel Lods, whose classrooms were housed in glass pavilions scattered around a park. They also left their mark on the school architecture of the 1950s. In the École Saint-Merri, this permeability between inside and outside is present, even if it is more fully realized at the upper level than elsewhere and does not have the scope hoped for by the AEP. In the lower levels, the teaching areas are bounded by a large fixed pane of glass on the street side, also the side of pollution, but they are open on the courtyard side, to the south, to access decks and balconies. The recreation areas, which were supposed to be larger than the teaching areas, but in the end are only half the size, are staggered in the heart of the block (Images 11 and 12). They were intended to offer the children contact with nature, with patches of soil as well as small gardens for cultivation and boxes for planting, all of which was only partially implemented. They are connected by wide, gently sloping ramps that have a strong presence and form fluid connections between the teaching platforms, free of difficult steps for the youngest children and offering all users an unprecedented freedom of movement.

48 On the history of this movement and its architectural consequences see Anne-Marie Châtelet, _Le Souffle du plein air. Histoire d’un projet pédagogique et architectural novateur_ (Genève: MétisPresse, 2011).

49 1,300m² of external surfaces compared to 2,483m² devoted to teaching surfaces on the three levels, according to a presentation of the school dating from 1973 (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 541).
Image 11. The ramps, play areas and part of the teaching areas circa 1975 (© Archives de l’école Saint-Merri).

Image 12. A play area today with ramps and teaching areas on either side and the Pompidou Centre in the background (photo Anne-Marie Châtelet, May 2017).
The children thus move from one level to another and have access at any time to the documentation centre, an essential tool for early learning and developing their autonomy: “The teacher”, wrote the AEP, “is no longer the only resource for the children who are learning: books, films, photos, nature and the environment in which they live will all contribute to satisfying their curiosity”.\(^{50}\) The presence of a documentation centre was exceptional for a nursery or elementary school and had not been planned by the Ministry of Education,\(^{51}\) however it was requested from the very start by the AEP. Its existence presupposed the presence of a librarian. The Beaubourg management authority convinced the City of Paris to provide someone full time for this position. As for the location of the library, it was decided to place it on the teaching platform intended for the oldest children, the lowest one, where it was assigned a surface of roughly 225m². Like all the spaces of the school, at the end of the project, it was fitted out with furnishings chosen by Jacques Lichnerowitz, the school’s programmer, after a trip to Edinburgh and Liverpool with François Lombard\(^{52}\) (Image 13). As in all Parisian schools, there is a canteen service, which here is spread over two locations: on the roof for the youngest children and on the lowest level for the others, under the large concrete porticoes where the administration offices have also been placed.

With no classrooms, no corridors, but teaching areas, ramps articulated to outside spaces and a documentation centre, this school was configured in a way that made it difficult to practise traditional methods, even though the layout of the older pupils’ level was considered to be temporary. Teachers were therefore expected to change their habits and to work as a team, since they would no longer be monitoring one class over the school year, but would be participating alongside their colleagues to oversee much larger groups. The first one, at the top level, would have 4 teachers for 150 children; the second, at the middle level,

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\(^{50}\) Association pour l’environnement pédagogique, “Groupe scolaire Saint-Merri: projet pédagogique et programme de construction, Paris, Établissement public du Centre Beaubourg”, programme dated April 1972 (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 541).


\(^{52}\) “Rapport de voyage des 6 et 7 décembre 1973”, dated 8 January 1974 (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 541).
12 teachers for 350 children; and the third, at the lower level, 13 teachers for 375 children. The situation this created was by no means straightforward, as it was not of the teachers’ choosing; they were not volunteers, but the staff of a demolished school whose reconstruction was supposed to spearhead a pedagogical transformation being pushed through by the Ministry. The Beaubourg management authority was well aware of the challenge involved and its president, Robert Bordaz, asked the city for additional resources to deal with it.\(^5\) The AEP was responsible for introducing teachers to how their future school, the open school, would function. Beginning on 1 March 1972, it organized several meetings to introduce them to schools of this type in the United States and Canada, and distributed bibliographies to encourage them to learn about the teaching methods they practised.\(^5\) The majority of the books were Anglo-American, but there were some recent French titles, by authors such as Robert Gloton, an education inspector who had launched a new education project in a traditional Parisian school\(^5\) or, Georges Mesmin, a former Ministry of Education official who was highly critical of school architecture.\(^5\)

This disembodied approach was followed, at the request of the participants, by site visits. As there were no open-plan schools operating in France at that time, they took the teachers to private schools in Paris based on Ovide Decroly’s educational methods, and to schools in England: in February 1973, a short trip was organized to Liverpool.\(^5\) Concurrently, during the twenty months preceding the inauguration of the new school, from May 1972 to December 1973, pupils and teachers were preparing on site for the transition. Co-education, which had been partially introduced in the school, was generalized, although it was not


\(^{54}\) According to the papers held at the Archives nationales, there were four meetings between 1 March and 25 April 1972. (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 604).


\(^{57}\) See the report “L’école à aires ouvertes rue Saint-Merri, Paris, 4e arrondissement. Présentation”, no date (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 6541).
made compulsory in France until 1976. Co-education was made compulsory in elementary schools by the decree of 28 December 1976 pertaining to the organization of nursery and elementary school education.58 Classes at the same level were brought closer together to foster closer collaboration between teachers, and some of them went even further. Knocking a wall and introducing better adapted furniture provided the conditions for a kind of open area combining two classes. The parents were also called upon to take part in workshops devoted to early learning subjects. The architects attended the first two meetings but later kept their distance. Édouard-Marc Roux did make a trip with François Lombard, a member of the Beaubourg management authority, but that was not until April 1973, when the construction site of the École Saint-Merri was already underway.59

![Image 13. A teaching area and current furniture (photo Anne-Marie Châtelet, May 2017).]

58 Co-education was made compulsory in elementary schools by the decree of 28 December 1976 pertaining to the organization of nursery and elementary school education.

59 Letter from Édouard-Marc Roux to François Lombard, dated 19 March 1973, mentioning the planned trip on 16 and 17 April to visit Park Country Primary School in Tattenhall (Cheshire), Gorsthills County Junior School in Ellesmere Port as well as the Junior School in Skelmersdale (Archives nationales, France 210100307 dossier 541).
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Nevertheless, the school’s educational project and its architecture did not meet with unanimous approval from either teachers or parents. The teaching staff was divided. As a journalist from *Le Monde* put it: “While some of them have completely reorganized their classes, which no longer exist administratively, most still prefer to keep a traditional structure for the fundamental subjects”.60 Those who had most fully thrown themselves behind the new methods were as happy as they were exhausted: “You have to become a librarian, a therapist, an activity organizer, an audio-visual specialist, a school newspaper manager, a mime, an actor, a musician... We live with a higher degree of tension than the usual civil servant, but we also get more personal satisfaction: we are happy in our work”.61 The parents, for their part, had first and foremost questions about the nature of this teaching in which the class was a barbarism,62 then spoke out against certain dysfunctions related to child safety, such as access to terraces or the absence of a guardrail. Consequently, the inauguration, which took place in April 1974, was prepared with great care, especially given that, as anticipated from the outset of the project, the school population had changed. Some of the children of modest or foreign origin who lived in this old Parisian district had left it following the destruction and rehabilitation caused by its renovation, while others had arrived, in particular the children of Centre Pompidou staff. Their parents included personalities who were well connected on the cultural scene and whose criticisms were quickly amplified.

Beyond the fact that it took in children from the Centre, contravening the rule in Paris requiring parents to send their children to the school that corresponds to their home address, the École Saint-Merri appeared in many ways to be a daughter of the Centre Pompidou. Built because of it and financed by the public management authority overseeing its creation, the school was swept up in the same ambition to create an exceptional contemporary amenity in the heart of Paris. Like the

Centre, it was inspired by ideas from across the Channel: while Beaubourg’s architecture is steeped in the imaginary of Archigram and Cédric Price’s Fun Palace, Saint-Merri resonates with the open-space experiments of English schools. Like the Centre, it was forged by senior ministerial officials. For the Ministry of Education, it was an opportunity to test a reform that was still ongoing. For the Ministry of Culture, it was necessary for Beaubourg’s urban design and fitted in with its aesthetic intentions. It was, however, only an appendix to the Centre and was to remain subordinate to it. The façade facing the medley of coloured pipes designed by the architects of the Centre therefore had to remain discreet, the latter requesting that it be “as negative as possible, that is to say, flat”. 63 (Image 14).


The exceptional conditions surrounding the genesis of the École Saint-Merri were supposed to make it a precursor of the changes to come and its creation had been envisaged in the wake of the implementation of the three teaching times. The building was already delivered when the new guidelines for the construction of primary schools were issued in 1973, which responded to this educational reform by encouraging the advent of a new architecture. It was probably still too early for these guidelines to cite the École Saint-Merri, but the model school they described was strikingly similar. Architects were called upon to use a wide grid load-bearing structure to introduce flexibility into the teaching spaces. They would do away with circulation in favour of work spaces articulated to outdoor spaces where outdoor activities could be developed. They would design classroom cells while creating an atmosphere specific to each activity, and they would pay particular attention to the documentation centre. This was the first time since the founding regulations of 1880 that the classroom was no longer mentioned and that the idea of a relationship between the morphology of schools and pedagogical developments was explicitly introduced.

However, the expected revolution did not take place. Although democratization did indeed occur, it cannot be said, as Antoine Prost points out, “that teaching adapted its methods and contents accordingly, that is to say its pedagogy”. This reticence is reflected in terms of architecture. Only one open-plan school was built in Paris and a few others elsewhere in France, less than half a dozen in total. Over the years, school architecture has continued to reproduce the main features defined in the late nineteenth century. The classroom has once again become this essential cell of the school body, even if the architects have somewhat rejuvenated its features. The École Saint-Merri still exists and today it is arousing renewed interest, as illustrated by its current renovation, along with that of the swimming pool and gymnasium. Thus, despite the reservations


expressed about the project and although the school has gone through difficult periods, with disagreement between teachers and some spaces being divided by means of furniture, its unique spatial organization has not been questioned. On the contrary, it has attracted people who seek forms of teaching that differ from those used in the majority of Parisian schools. Today, its teachers are adepts of active pedagogy and its pupils come from all over the city to find an alternative to traditional schooling. The school is highly appreciated and bears witness to the influence that architecture can in turn have on pedagogy.

Note on the author

Anne-Marie Châtelet (Sallanches, France, 1954) received a Bachelor of Architecture from the École Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Versailles (1981), a doctorate in art history from the University of Strasbourg (1991) and her habilitation in the field of contemporary history from the University of Paris I (2007). She is currently Professor of Architectural History and Culture at the École Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Strasbourg and a researcher at the ARCHE Research Unit (UR 3400) of the University of Strasbourg. She has published numerous articles and several books on the history of school architecture, including her doctoral thesis, La naissance de l’architecture scolaire. Les écoles élémentaires parisiennes de 1870 à 1914 [The Birth of School Architecture. Elementary schools in Paris from 1870 to 1914] (1999), her habilitation thesis, Le Souffle du plein air. Histoire d’un projet pédagogique et architectural novateur [A Breath of Fresh Air. History of an Innovative Educational and Architectural Project] (2011) and, more recently, Architectures scolaires 1900-1939 [School Architecture 1900-1939] (2017).

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