MODERNITY AND SCHOOL ARCHITECTURE OF THE THIRTIES IN FRANCE. A COMPLEX PARENTHESIS OF PROGRESS AND HOPE TODAY VANISHED

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Introduction

From the analysis of the project of preservation and rehabilitation of the “groupe scolaire”1 Karl Marx (1932) in Villejuif designed by André Lurçat, it was possible to bring into light the existence of a corpus of homogenous constructions, which unfortunately didn’t receive a fair recognition until today. It consists in a group of elementary schools – nursery and primary – designed and built during the 1929-1939 decade. Most of them keep their original purpose today. A majority of these schools is located in close Paris’ suburb. This study then looks at them particularly. Regrettably, their vicissitudes altered their image and actual perception. Their meaning escapes us, their importance, what they can communicate to us as testimonies of a period of strong ideological conflicts, where the claimed modernity of these buildings seemed to announce the freeing of the man from class struggle.

The aims of this study are to question about the value of this heritage, to try to bring out its meaning and to envision which would be the mechanisms that should allow modifying its actual blurred and wrong perception. It will articulate itself around a process of knowledge and recognition of the historical and artistic values of this patrimony, particularly interrogating the sense of “modernity” given at that time and its possible actualization.

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1 A “groupe scolaire” is a primary school, which includes both a nursery school and two elementary schools, one for girls, one for boys.

2 1929 is a key year, in worldwide history with the breakout of the crisis. It is also in French history. Municipal elections (municipalities are in charge of the public elementary school). Foundation of the magazine L’école libératrice. Last improvements for the design of the new schools of Maisons-Alfort, Condorcet and Jules Ferry, by Hummel and Dubreuil. Foundation of the UAM, “Union des Artistes Modernes” (Union of Modern Artists), which celebrates the restauration of the dialog between industrials and creators and modify the notion of ornament, wishing to marry beauty and utility.
This work adopts a holistic approach, being only able to envision the singular inside the totality. In fact, putting into perspective this group of buildings, through the prisms always more specific of history, history of architecture, history of school architecture, history of institutions, history of urban and sociological development and evolution of Paris’ suburb, allowed to give back its entire signification and also to enlighten the reasons of its still relative ignorance.

The experience of the preservation and renovation of the “groupe scolaire” Karl Marx

The “groupe scolaire” Karl Marx is a symbol. Beyond its symbolic nature, its case is emblematic. “Ecole la plus moderne de France”, “Ecole la plus belle de France”… During its opening ceremony, magnificent celebrations were organized. Popular theatre. Fireworks. Catering. Ball. A very “agitprop” moment to sum up. Heads of French Communist Party proposed speeches. As Bruno Zevi wrote about it, this school was offering “a vision of architecture as a prophecy”:

The generous illusion was reaching its final goal, during the eve of the collapse of the left-wing politics provoked by the Hitlerism in Germany and the protectionist evolution of the culture³.

For several years, this school was able to keep the souvenir of its symbolic purpose and even the municipality wished to preserve its meaning. Therefore, it was asked to André Lurçat to design the new extensions, assuring this way a very strong coherence of the building. It did not suffer and still does not suffer from a lack of critics’ recognition. In fact, it is present in most of the manuals of architectural history from the 20th century.

The urbanization and the natural and human processes of degradation that endured the building chased away the innovative character of its architecture and its equipment. For instance, the solarium was not accessible anymore to the children for safety reasons and this lack of interest accelerated its deterioration. The progressive alteration of the social and urban context did not help also.

The project of preservation and valorization, beyond the important local and social benefits that should bring, allowed to rekindle the image of this architecture but also to make some interesting discoveries. For instance, it was possible to bring back into light five frescoes painted by Jean Lurçat, brother of the architect, and thought definitely vanished. A particular care was given to the windows strongly damaged, restoring the original architectural message.

From this very succinct study of this symbol, many questions could then emerge. Do other buildings of the same type built during the same period exist? Where are they located? What were the conditions that made their edification possible? Of which movement are they the testimonies today? Which hopes were, at that time, brought into their realizations? Are they still identifiable? Is the modernity, designed during the 1930s, still today perceptible? What is the meaning of modernity? What were the vicissitudes of these buildings? Which would be the means and the methods to bring into play in order to allow the valorization of this heritage like for the “groupe scolaire” Karl Marx?

**Cataloguing of the schools**

The main goal of this cataloguing was to identify the school buildings then realized (1929-1939). It was decided to limit this study to the municipalities, except Paris, of the previous territorial subdivision known as “département de la Seine”. In fact, from preliminary studies it appeared that, after First World War, this part of French territory was one of the few enduring a strong demographic increase, needing therefore new infrastructures and among them schools. This territory is also known as “the small crown”\(^4\).

The mainly used source was the database of the French Ministry of Culture, so called “base Mérimée”\(^5\), which gives access to the entire inventory of the artistic and architectural French heritage. Yet it could only offer a preliminary survey. In fact, it soon appeared that not all the schools were included inside the database. This is due to the way the inventory is done. Other sources were bibliographical, including magazines of architecture, national newspapers, artistic magazines, and encyclopedias about local heritage. The consultation of the archives has not ended yet. Above the municipal ones, it is possible to consult the national ones, which contain all the grant application files. They include plans, corrections and estimations of coast. Another archive is the AAM, “Archives d’architectures modernes” (Archives of modern architectures), which can also give for instance access to initial sketches or non-realized projects.

After crosschecking, it was possible to localize and identify 41 “groupes scolaires” and 11 only “écoles élémentaires” or “écoles maternelles”. Some of them may have changed function, but, except the case of three buildings, they are all still used as elementary or secondary schools (Fig. 1).

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\(^4\) “La petite couronne.”

\(^5\) [http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/inventai/patrimoine/](http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/inventai/patrimoine/)
A place of memory

Public school has been and today remains a field of particularly intense political and ideological fights. The victory of the secular, free and mandatory model during the years 1881-1882 transformed the municipal primary school into one of the fundamental symbols of a republican regime, still looking for its stability. Collective memory installed itself into these buildings, which form today a structuring and significant network inside urban French landscape. Unfortunately, the statue of “Place of Memory” seems in general applied only to the schools immediately built after the adoption of the laws setting up the public school and before First World War.

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6 Teachers were called the “Hussards noirs de la République”, black hussars of the Republic.
Memory can invade the buildings we are dealing with now, but only on the condition to reveal itself again. These buildings conserve different levels of memory. One of this is the fight lead by left-wing politicians for the improvement of life conditions of the populations of the suburb.

During the interwar period, these populations continued to increase, when Paris’ one started to decrease during the 1930s. It consisted mainly in a working population living in the middle of quickly built factories during the industrial revolution, and without access at that time to enough services and infrastructures, including the most elementary hygiene. Consequently, left-wing majorities decided to equip their cities with new and modern ones, including sanitary services or social housings. For instance the OPHBM of the district of la Seine, ruled by Henri Sellier, planed the edification of 15 “garden cities”.

For the municipal elections of 1929, the French Communist Party (PCF) decided to change its doctrine and transformed it into “municipal communism”, hoping that through local action and tangible realizations, the party should have been able to gain national elections. It was without counting on the concurrence with the SFIO. Left-wing majorities ruled most of the cities of the suburb after 1929, so to be called “the red belt”. A strong emulation existed between PCF’s and SFIO’s cities, even after June 26 1934 and the creation of a coalition between the two parties. Each party was supported by a newspaper: the SFIO by Le Populaire and the PCF by L’Humanité. These daily newspapers strongly advertised the inaugurations of public schools with photos of the buildings, repeated announcement of the opening ceremonies, transcription of the speeches of the local and national politicians present, interviews of visitors. They participated also to the municipal elections’campaigns, defending the achievements of the municipalities or attacking the ones ruled by rival forces.

A modern architecture for a new school

Air, light, hygiene and comfort. These four characteristics are a leitmotiv that we can find inside above-mentioned newspapers, architectural magazines, and more general literature and art magazines, and among pedagogues, politicians, visitors and users.

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8 This is partly due to the progressive renovation of the “ilots insalubres”, which destruction forced their residents to move into the suburbs.
9 Office Public d’Habitations à Bon Marché (Public office for social housing). The constitution of this local structures was authourized by the Bonnevay law on the December 23rd 1912. Because of First World War, first large realizations appear only during the 1920s-1930s.
10 Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière, French Section of the Workers’ International, name of the socialist party at that time.
11 “La ceinture rouge”.
12 Célestin Freinet, member of the association, and founder of different schools based on its pedagogy was attending the inauguration of the groupe scolaire Karl Marx. He recognized inside this school a comfortable place in which new pedagogical methods could be applied but regretted that they would not be used. See Freinet, Célestin. “La nouvelle école de Villejuif”. L’Educateur Prolétarien. No. 3. December 1933, pp. 157-158.
These schools provided without any doubt a strong rupture with the usual housing of the local populations. It is interesting to notice that the meeting between young architects, sensitive to the modern architecture at that time and, partly, to the ideologies and social hopes, and mayors with a strong personality, allowed to equip the suburb with the most advanced school infrastructures, from both aesthetic and technological points of view13.

Almost all the five points of Modern Architecture are present in these schools, thanks particularly to the generalization of the use of reinforced concrete. Pilotis allow to place covered courtyards directly under the main buildings. Roof gardens will host solariums in order to get access to a more pure air. The horizontal window and the free design of the façade are possible thanks to the structure. The free designing of the ground plan had to face the rigidity of the regulations in terms of school buildings, which are based on the juxtaposition of the classroom unit. Yet we can find some kind of liberty inside the composition, thanks to new specific equipments, like gymnasium, library, pedagogic movie theater, drawing classrooms. The alignment of the façade on the road is more and more light, withdrawals and projections becoming an integrant part of this new school architecture.

Some renewal of the pedagogy can take place, even if it remains limited because of the existence of the regulations in terms of school design but also because of the uniform and equalitarian model of the French public school. The most significant improvements come from the new type of finishing work14: Lurçat’s “meubles-immeubles” which are furniture directly integrated to the architecture; landscaped gardens, especially in the nursery part of the schools, allowing “show and tell” lessons. The diffusion of new technologies permitted to develop a new type of furniture, using light steel tubes or bent metal sheet for the structure and Bakelite for the board. The desks became light and easily movable15. It was then possible to design rapidly a new working space inside the classroom. The new regulations, enacted in 1936, integrated and codified the new fixtures brought by the schools built in the suburb during the first half of the 1930s. In the commission took part André Lurçat, but also Marcel Lods and Eugène Beaudouin16.

Similar lives

These architectures suffered, for different reasons. They did not always keep their original image. One of the reason is the recurrent lack of a famous fatherhood. In fact, few are the famous architects, who participated to this strong effort of construction and innovation. For instance, Florent Nanquette, who designed schools

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14 ibidem, p. 217.
16 They are the designers of the most advanced school in terms of pedagogy and technology, famous under the name of “Ecole de plein air de Suresnes”.

during the entire interwar period, recently saw the destruction of a city stadium which was completing in symbiosis a “groupe scolaire” today hardly recognizable\textsuperscript{17}.

Furthermore, the use during this period of some technics and materials, which were then to the forefront of innovation and technology, involved a quick deterioration of some relatively fragile elements. For instance, in the “Groupe scolaire” Marius Jacotot, achieved in 1938, desgined by Jean and Edouard Niermans in Puteaux, strong deteriorations of the walls of “translucid concrete”\textsuperscript{18} were already noticed in 1941. In 1967, the municipality decided to replace them with curtain walls because it was cheaper than respecting the original project, even if it was Jean Niermans to supervise the works. Another recurrent modification is the substitution of the windows with new ones not coinciding at all with the project and transforming its image and perception. In fact, the often replacement of sash windows with casement windows created a strong contrast with the usual horizontal lines of the façades. The use of terrace-roofs had been also limited by the new 1949 regulations for school constructions because of the numerous defaults encountered within realizations of the thirties\textsuperscript{19}. Even some terraces of these architectures were replaced with traditional roofs using tiles. It is the case of the groupe scolaire Eugène Varlin in Pierrefittes, designed in 1933 by Georges Gauthier and La Guilde, a group of young and modernist architects, engineers and designers (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

Last but not least, another aspect is the urban development of Paris’ suburb. The superposition of different administrations, the too much power in terms of urbanization of the mayors, the too high fragmentation of a territory\textsuperscript{20}, which already became an urban continuum, the lack of integration of this territory with Paris’ one, led today to a hardly readable and understandable landscape. Already in the 1930s, different projects\textsuperscript{21} were proposed for the realization of the “Grand Paris”. Some of the “mayors builders”\textsuperscript{22} involved also themselves. For instance, André Morizet\textsuperscript{23}, SFIO mayor of Boulogne-Billancourt, proposed the fusion of the 80 cities plus Paris into a single entity, through the departmentalization of all public services, in order to solve the strong inequalities, especially in terms of school equipment.

\textsuperscript{17} It is the former “groupe scolaire” Aristide Briand, today “lycée” (high school) Lapie, 1930-1933.
\textsuperscript{18} “Béton translucide”.
\textsuperscript{20} In 1936, there were 2.829.746 inhabitants inside Paris and other 2.041.936 inhabitants inside the rest of the “Département de la Seine” distributed among 80 cities.
\textsuperscript{22} “Maires bâtisseurs”. All a number of the magazine L’Urbanisme was presenting the realizations of Henri Sellier for his city of Suresnes. “Suresnes. Etude sur l’évolution et l’aménagement d’une ville de banlieue”, L’Urbanisme. No. 32, 1935.
\textsuperscript{23} He equipped his city with new infrastructures, such as a new city hall designed by Tony Garnier, two new primary schools, one designed by jacques-Debat Ponsan and the other one by Emile Cauwet.
and social housing. After Second World War, the rapid construction of the “grands ensembles” for the working classes and then the vanishing of industries led to the degradation of the urban context. Most of the analyzed schools do not benefit from any kind of protection and are hardly recognizable inside this constantly changing environment.

Conclusion

Finally, the holistic approach adopted allowed to enlighten a large corpus of architectures relatively homogeneous and significant, through emotions, hopes and inspirations, which both architects, politicians and citizens brought into their conception. However, it remained only a parenthesis. After Second World War, the war damages and the quick increase of French population during the end of the 40’ and the 50’ required the development of heavy and rationalized prefabricated schools. Even the regulations for school buildings published in 1949 took into consideration the emergency of the situation and simplified the requirements in terms of space required for each child, in order to decrease the costs and increase the productivity. Only remained then the traces of a fertile souvenir, which unfortunately vanished by the years. Beyond their historic significance, which we could introduce here, it was also possible to enlighten some strong similarities, from the points of view of their typology, morphology and vicissitudes. By analogy, these architectures are suffering today, partly, from the same pathologies. We can hope then that a future study, taking into consideration the different experiences encountered during several projects of preservation and rehabilitation applied to these buildings and their actual state of conservation, one by one, will be able to propose a guide helping to restore a disappeared meaning.