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## Walls Have Ears but They Also Speak –A comparative study of two playgrounds

Anna Hirson-Sagalyn  
Bard College, as7972@bard.edu

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2015

## Walls Have Ears but They Also Speak –A comparative study of two playgrounds

Anna Hirson-Sagalyn  
*Bard College*

Walls Have Ears but They Also Speak

–A comparative study of two playgrounds

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Arts  
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by  
Anna Hirson-Sagalyn

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## Introduction

My senior project is a comparative study of two particularly distinct school playgrounds situated in the same region just outside of Paris. The first one is part of a traditional public French school, the Groupe Scolaire Guy Môquet, which I will call the Guy Môquet school for the purpose of this paper. The second playground is part of a public yet alternative pedagogical school called the Ecole Decroly. In my essay, I analyze the ways in which both spaces embody concrete traces of the ideology and world-views of the social and cultural contexts in which they were built, and the specific institutions and other power structures that were involved in their construction.

Through a critical assessment of the playgrounds, I also give an evaluation of both educational systems with regards to their function and place in contemporary French society. The Decroly school encourages the creation of a local community, while the Guy Môquet school is designed to contribute to a policy of national cohesion. Through my analysis, I show that the vastly different environments of both schools, like the education that the children receive within them, are fundamental in shaping the identity of their users and the relationship they form with each other and the world that surrounds them. Moreover, I demonstrate that while the world-views reflected in these two environments is particularly divergent, it is important to understand both of them in order to assess the impact and consequences of such key spaces in the self-development of children as individuals and as actors in society.

My analysis is largely based on research conducted in the winter of 2015/16, during which I spent time working in the Decroly school's extensive archives and in the special collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF), but also and primarily



observing the environments of both playgrounds. The field research I then conducted provided me with a basis upon which to assess observations about the playgrounds' built environments, the actions and events that take place within them, the experience of finding oneself there, the relationship between the playgrounds and the surrounding areas, as well as the way that both spaces were or were not affected by exterior events which occurred at the same time as my visit. My analysis thus focuses on the playgrounds' built environments, their usage, and what types of identity and modes of being the spaces allow for.

The first three chapters of the project concentrate on the public French school system and Guy Môquet in particular. In the subsequent three chapters I concentrate on the Decroly school, all the while referencing back to the first part of my analysis, in order to draw parallels and comparisons between the two playgrounds.

In the first chapter of this project, I give the reader a strong basis in terms of which to understand the French public school system of today. I delve into the origins of the traditional French school system, as it is what largely defines its educational institutions up to this day. French schools were designed after the French Revolution, at which point they were meant to reunify the nation so that it might prosper socially, politically and economically. Not only would they educate those who represented the future of the country, but they would also create a sense of common culture and heritage after a period of deep political division. I then demonstrate the means by which the Republican ideals fundamental to the national school system are inscribed within the facades of schools such as Guy Môquet. Entering the school itself, I then show that the

playground's physical characteristics reflect ideals of equality and secularism, cornerstones of the school's policy to unite the nation's citizens through its institutions.

In the second chapter, I look further into the means by which the playground is built so as to reflect the framing of the school as the terrain of national unification and cohesion. I argue that the presence of common rules, the way in which pupils are constantly visible in the space, and a multilayered system of surveillance all contribute towards the implementation of a precise definition of liberty and rules which both protect its users and engages them in what Hannah Arendt names the "social sphere"<sup>1</sup>, a space of the state. I analyze the particular modes of being that such a space allows. I delve into the limits of the type of identity its users, who have no choice but to partake in a space of public representation, are encouraged to take on. I argue that by focusing on the development of the nation's citizens, schools also prevent their users from embodying, exploring and constructing the multiple facets of their identity, particularly those that are more deeply subjective.

In the third chapter, I further analyze the ways in which playfulness is excluded from the built environment of a school such as Guy Môquet, both in its aesthetic and in the possible usages of its playground space. The way that the playground's users are prevented from manipulating and connecting with the physical elements of the space reflects the pedagogy applied in French schools and the teaching methods employed, as education in France focuses on a set curriculum, leaving little space for play. This is particularly indicative of the rigidity of an educational system that has undergone a remarkably limited amount of change over the centuries. Moreover, in analyzing the

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1st ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 52.

segregation between the built environment of the school and its neighboring areas, I demonstrate the rigidity of the school and the way that it rejects both playfulness and a world familiar to the child and to which he or she can connect to.

In the fourth chapter I turn to the Decroly school and its playground. Just as in the first chapter, I give the reader a context for the particular school, exploring the origins of the educational system. I show that just like the French school system, the Decroly pedagogy was devised in reaction to the challenges of the society in which the institution originated, late 19<sup>th</sup> century Belgium. Because the school system was largely the design of one man, the psychologist, pedagogue and doctor Jean-Ovide Decroly, I go into a brief autobiographical history of the school all the while introducing the reader to the fundamental precepts that informed both the pedagogy and the choice of the facilities and setting of the particular Decroly school in which the playground I analyze is to be found.

In the fifth chapter I go further in my analysis of the space of the Decroly playground by looking more precisely at the elements that constitute it and the various ways in which it is used. I show that the playground is made of a set of varied spaces which are themselves fragmented into smaller areas. I then demonstrate that the space allows for a variety of behaviors, some solitary and intimate, other more communal and public. This allows the school's users to explore and develop a multilayered self, as well as a multitude of fluid social relations. Along with the various forms of play that the space allows for, behaviors in the playground transcend divides found in the "social sphere." I show that the attention given to the individual in the school, and the way that he or she can contribute to the definition of the social space of the playground is also present in the way that rules and cohesion are exercised in the space. The responsibilities

which the school's pupils are encouraged to take on also gives them the right to actively engage in the school's construction. I thus conclude this chapter by analyzing the ways in which the playground answers Henri Lefebvre's idea of allowing its users agency and new forms of belonging.

The playgrounds of French government schools are constructed in a way that prevents their users from connecting and manipulating the world around them, both intra and extra-mural. The playground's design makes for a reality that is impenetrable and rigid. In contrast, at Decroly efforts are made to nourish children's relationship to the world about them. In the last chapter I go deeper into the analysis of ways that the playground space is used for educational purposes and social events, allowing for children to deepen their understanding and engagement with the world that surrounds them. I also show that this connection is further fostered through the physical exploration of the world beyond the classroom, which then forms the basis for educational projects. This can be read through various elements in the school's playground. Ultimately, I demonstrate that by breaking the divide between the reality of the classroom and the world outside of it, the education and the social space that is created within the school strengthens its relevancy within the lives of the institution's various actors.

## Chapter 1

### The Role of French Schools in Building a Strong and Unified Nation -Concrete traces of national dreams in school facades and playgrounds

In this first chapter we will see that the built environment of the Guy Môquet School is closely tied to its place within the national school system and its values. In order to understand the French public school of today, its precepts, goals and the fundamental place it occupies within the nation at large, one needs to look at the central ideas that fueled its creation. More than simply forming the basis for French education, these ideas still largely define the educational system up to this day. Key to this system is the Republican program that emerged from the 1789 French revolution. The desire for national unity and the push for equality, secularism, and particular ideas of individual freedom and liberty, were all central to the new nation. French schools were used as a key tool in the shaping of the new state, and up to this day are supposed to participate in the project of national identity.

After having examined the context for the building of schools, we will then see in which ways fundamental ideas of the republic are present in the built environment of the nation's institutions. I will start with an analysis of the Guy Môquet façade, and explore the multiple means by which, sometimes blatantly, at others more discretely, it is inscribed with signs of the national program. Finally, entering the playground in question, I will give the reader an overview of the space that it constitutes, and show that here too, very particular signs of the Republic's precepts are reflected in the design of the space.

The disposition of the playground and its appearance mirror the ideals of unity, in so far as the space at least visually brings all of its users together. The objects and

surfaces of the playground all partake in an aesthetic of the abstract, a marker of the school's association with secularism. The minimal, geometric designs (which also imply the rejection of other types of representation) show how the school projects an image of neutrality, as a way to speak to people of all origins and faiths through a language with a popular tone, thus echoing the fundamental precepts of equality and secularism, both essential in the formulation of the French school.

### **The French public school system**

The French public schools of today were the product of reforms devised after the Revolution of 1789.<sup>2</sup> Before then, the church had been the main actor in assuring the role of education, but only for a minority that could afford it. Priests performed much of the instruction in public schools, and religious symbols were prominently displayed in classrooms. Thus, education was biased due to its religious affiliation. At the end of the Revolution, a great battle took place over the education controlled by the Catholic Church, which was reluctant to yield to the secular Republic. It took until the early 1880s, after decades of rancor, for French elementary education to become largely secular and, at the same time, obligatory.<sup>3</sup>

In the process of unifying the schools of the Republic, the church was seen as an obstacle, a political opponent with priorities and values that were not republican. After all, at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the church still officially condemned the French Revolution. It rejected the concept of equality, cornerstone of the French Republic.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Keith Sharpe, "Educational Homogeneity in French Primary Education: A Double Case Study," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 13, no. 3 (1992): 342, accessed November 10, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1392902>.

<sup>3</sup> William B. Lee and John Sivell, *French Elementary Education and the Ecole Moderne*, 1st ed. (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 2000), 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

Today, although Catholic schools have been allowed to subsist in the form of private institutions, most schools are funded by the state. Schools are supposed to provide for all, regardless of the children's identity and background.

The desire for a unified nation was particularly strong following the chaos of the Revolution and the period of terror that followed it. Unification was a way into the future of a strong France, after the social turmoil and economic changes that were taking place. Union would also fulfill France's need to become economically competitive, and strong enough to resist and contend with the economic and military forces of its neighbors.<sup>5</sup>

The creation of a common school was perceived as a great tool for the unification of the nation. The establishment of a cohesive school system would help transcend the country's linguistic, religious, and local particularities.<sup>6</sup> Regional loyalties and languages, which still subsisted when schools were first established, were seen as a barrier to that goal.<sup>7</sup> In education, the desire to counter what the French call *communitarisme*, or the fractioning of different social groups more interested in their own welfare than that of the nation, translated into the two foundational values of secularism and egalitarianism,<sup>8</sup> meaning that the state should be neutral in matters of religion, ethnicity and gender, the values of the Republic replacing those of the church.<sup>9</sup>

A contemporary example of this aim of equality of opportunity amongst all is the creation of the ZEP, or "zone d'éducation prioritaire", established in 1982 with the aim of "giving more to those who have less."<sup>10</sup> The granting of this "positive discrimination" as

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<sup>5</sup> Sharpe, "Educational Homogeneity in French," 342.

<sup>6</sup> Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt, *Anthropologies of Education: A Global Guide to Ethnographic Studies of Learning and Schooling* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 132.

<sup>7</sup> Lee and Sivell, *French Elementary Education and the Ecole*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson-Levitt, *Anthropologies of Education: A Global*, 132.

<sup>9</sup> Lee and Sivell, *French Elementary Education and the Ecole*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

it is termed is based on the area's high-grade failure and dropout rates, a high percentage of foreign immigrant families and large unemployment rates.<sup>11</sup> Once a school is nominated as a ZEP, it becomes eligible for additional resources.<sup>12</sup>

The notion of equality was also a matter of redefining the values of the nation according to new ideals. The foundations of the French school as we know it today were largely defined through French Republican ideology and informed by the ideas of the Enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> Schools were seen as the cornerstone in the creation of a just society that would cater to all. For the leaders of the Republic, people were to be educated because ignorance leads to despotism.<sup>14</sup> The idea of universal instruction gained generalized support throughout a France that was largely unschooled and rural. In this context, the national school system was perceived as the path to a better life.

Children in France have historically been considered as both a private and a public resource. They represent a certain common good and wealth of the nation, which, in return, has ~~certain~~ obligations toward them.<sup>15</sup> Schools teach a common history and children are taught the proper use of a common national language. They are introduced to the giants of French literature and culture. But the care in educating the youth is also a matter of logistics. Nursery schools, for example, were originally intended primarily to keep children off the streets<sup>16</sup> by placing them in a safer environment. Another even

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<sup>11</sup> Lee and Sivell, *French Elementary Education and the Ecole*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson-Levitt, *Anthropologies of Education: A Global*, 132.

<sup>14</sup> Lee and Sivell, *French Elementary Education and the Ecole*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Jeanne Fagnani, "Continuities and changes-tensions and ambiguities\_ childcare and preschool policies in France," 2011, in *Children, Families, and States: Time Policies of Childcare, Preschool, and Primary Education in Europe*, by Karen Hagemann (New York [u.a.]: Berghahn Books, 2011), 179.

<sup>16</sup> H. D. Lewis, *The French Education System* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 6.



stronger example of this particular role of schools is that they are understood as an investment in the country's economy.

Schools are seen as an economic necessity, in order to supply a workforce and increase the country's demographic resources. The history of public childcare in France is indissolubly linked to the notion that the state has an obligation to protect maternity, childhood, and the capacity of women to take part in the national economy. This conception is deeply embedded in republican ideals and prevailing ideas about citizenship. The conception developed towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the general consensus was that the state, above all for demographic reasons—there was a concern about fertility—needed to pay greater attention to motherhood and childrearing.<sup>17</sup>

As Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt, Régine Sirota, and Martine Martine Mazurier argue in their article "Elementary Education in France" it can be said that today, "although not as democratic as billed, French elementary and pre elementary education definitely reaches the masses and within just a few generations has powerfully shaped the sense of French identity."<sup>18</sup> The fact that French schools are able to function so consistently, forming what has been termed the "école unique," is largely due to the system's administrative centralization. Most of the management of schools is directed from Paris. The Ministry of Education supervises curricula and pays teachers' salaries in all public schools and even in the majority of private schools.<sup>19</sup> Within the French Government, the Ministry of Education is one of the most strongly centralized, with

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<sup>17</sup> Fagnani, "Continuities and changes-tensions and ambiguities\_," in *Children, Families, and States*, 179.

<sup>18</sup> Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt, Regine Sirota, and Martine Martine Mazurier, "Elementary Education in France," *The Elementary School Journal* 92 (September 1991): 79.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson-Levitt, *Anthropologies of Education: A Global*, 80.

extensive formal control over curriculum, personnel and funding allocations.<sup>20</sup>

Centralization helps pull the whole system together and is especially necessary today, for the coherence of an education system with so many new partners, including parents, the business community, regional and local government.<sup>21</sup>

Regulation in schools is so systematic that according to a popular saying the French minister of education might look at his watch and know at any given moment precisely what every single pupil in France is studying.<sup>22</sup> This is of course a bit of an exaggeration, but the functioning of schools and their curriculum are both strictly regulated, so that they constitute a homogenous network throughout the country. However, a few aspects of schools are managed independently at a local level. This has especially been the case since the 1980s, when a major shift occurred. The *departements* and regions (of which there are 30) were then, for the first time, given full responsibility for the design, construction and maintenance of school facilities, school food services, and the transportation of pupils to and from school.<sup>23</sup>

Most French schools were built before these reforms, when the design and construction of school facilities was controlled and administered by an overpowering and centralized bureaucracy. Thus, most French school buildings still resemble each other (see fig. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). They are constructed of the same material, brick or granite, and their layout is more often than not in the shape of a U or square, centered on the playground and enclosing it (see fig.7, a Google map aerial view of the Ecole Elementaire de Pontoise which I show in fig. 3). The interior is traversed by long

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<sup>20</sup> John S. Ambler, "French Education and the Limits of State Autonomy," *The Western Political Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (September 1988): 469, accessed November 10, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/448598>.

<sup>21</sup> Lee and Sivell, *French Elementary Education and the Ecole*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

corridors, which border the classrooms. The school facades typically have an opulent air, endowed with massive wooden double doors, large windows and high ceilings. Even more impressive is the inclusion of key - sometimes monumental and ornate - symbolic elements placed across the facades, which often refer to the schools' affiliation with the Republic.

The Groupe Scolaire Guy Môquet was built in the early 2000s, following the reforms of the 1980s. Its architects were not working for the Ministry of Education but for the administrative region of the Val-de-Marne, to which it belongs. Conceived in large part independently of the state and set in one of the most liberal regions of France, the building has very atypical architecture. However, its façade and especially the playground bear a striking resemblance to those of most French public schools. Its facade displays a number of features that identify it as an institution of learning. I will not write at length about the architecture of schools and its implications, as that is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, introducing this subject will help situate the reader and give a visual context for the analysis of the playground. It will also help demonstrate that my study of the playground and its relation to the school system could be applicable to the school as the whole.

Patriotic symbols very often adorn the Republic's school facades. In addition, conversely, the function of the institution as a school is often expressed over and above each school's specific identity. Most French public schools feature the popular motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" inscribed above their main door (see fig. 1, 3, 5). This national emblem, which was devised during the French Revolution of 1789 and heralded as the basis for national unity, is a strong mark of the Republican spirit. The French

national flag is often hung above the entrance (see fig. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). It was drawn by Jacques-Louis David, who stood up in protest against the Royal Academy (of which he had been a loyal member) under the Revolution. The blue and red represent the colors of Paris, while the color white was chosen as an allusion to French royalty.

Quite often, in Paris, an emblem either engraved in low relief, or built into the brickwork, is to be found above school entrances (figs 3, 5). It represents a boat afloat, symbolizing the Nautes of Paris, a Gallic navigation brotherhood famous for traveling along the Seine and the other rivers of what was known at the time as Gaulle. The boat is flanked by a laurel branch on one side, and by an oak branch on the other. Both signify the heroic achievements of the city throughout its history.<sup>24</sup> Above it is a castle, and behind it are lily flowers, which have several symbolic meanings, but are mostly associated with the French crown.<sup>25</sup> As a whole, the image constitutes the coat of arms of the city of Paris (fig. 8). The schools' connection to the city of Paris is thus presented as second only to the nation, and before other associations that are more local or particular.

When looking more closely at the names of schools, it becomes apparent that much more care and attention is given to the visibility and aesthetic of the general words indicating the establishment's function (that is, nursery, primary, middle or high school), than to the specific name of each school. The schools' general designation is usually painted or engraved in large letters on the facade. These are, for example in Paris, "Ville de Paris Ecole Maternelle" for the school on the rue des Archives (fig.2), "Ville de Paris Ecole Primaire de Garçons" for the Ecole primaire Joseph de Maistre (fig.1). These titles

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Louis, "Histoire du Blason de Paris," Armoirie de Paris. fr, last modified November 25, 2011, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.armoiresdeparis.fr/Pages/PHistoire.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Britannica.com. Last modified November 20, 2014. Accessed April 1, 2015. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/210078/fleur-de-lis>.

are always meticulously inscribed by hand using a large and noble font. They are often painted in gold, or even chiseled into the stone of the façade itself. On the other hand, the specific designation of each school is simply printed on a small and industrially produced panel that is placed to the side of the school door. These panels were only recently (in the early 2000s) added onto schools, and their design was conceived within the parameter of a general template. It is usually inscribed in white font on a dark gray background (sometimes the reverse), and bears the logo of the city to which it belongs.

By drawing so much attention to the general title that unifies all similar schools in France, the French ministry of education emphasizes the place of each school within the national “Ecole Unique” system. Conversely, it also implies that the individual identity of schools and their locality is not of primary importance, and that it only comes second to their place in the national system. The self-effacement of schools in favor of this national identity is also present in the name of schools themselves: When it is not a simple reference to their geographic location, such as the Ecole Maternelle Archives, in fig. 2, it is chosen from amongst the nation’s historic figures.

### **The Guy Môquet School**

In contrast to more typical French schools, the Guy Môquet building is more discrete in the indication of its positioning within the national system. The architecture of the school is very atypical. It seems to have been inspired by the Guggenheim in NYC, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, to which it bears a striking resemblance (figs. 9 and 10). Contrary to most schools, its own name was combined with its specific denomination (“Groupe Scolaire Guy Môquet”) and appears in relief in large, dark brown font against the white wall that constitutes its façade (fig.10). The only apparent symbol

placed on the façade and referencing the French Republic is a large print of an extract of the original *1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (Declaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen; see Fig.11), which is hung on the façade, and states general and fundamental civil rights.

Although less blatantly apparent than is the case for other French schools of similar status, Guy Môquet's façade bears important symbolic elements. Two main discrete devices have been employed to symbolize the precepts of the Republic. The first is the name of the school itself, Guy Môquet, inscribed on the upper part of the facade, but also repeated on a small grey square by the entrance. Guy Môquet was a national hero who was killed as a member of the resistance movement during the German occupation of France during WWII. The second means of substitution for national symbols and demonstration of values of unity is a subtle but pervasive one: it is the architecture itself. It could be argued that the very presence of a seemingly modernist building concretizes the ideas of CIAM (and specifically Le Corbusier in France). Although Guy Môquet follows some of the traditions of French schools, it is interesting to see how much more discrete its marks of patriotism are than those visible in most French schools. This goes to show that although I am trying to make a general argument about French schools, there are limits to my analysis, and specificities are present in each individual school, administration, and teacher's methods. Further consideration of the architecture is beyond the scope of this paper: Lets go to the playgrounds!

### **The Guy Môquet playground**

Where and how does one find this idea of national consensus, of unity, equality of access, and secularism in the playgrounds of Guy Môquet? The school has two

playgrounds, one for children of the nursery, aged approximately three to five, and another for children of the elementary classes, aged six to ten (see fig. 12). In this analysis I will focus on the playground of the elementary school, or “cour des grands” (older children’s courtyard), as it is colloquially called. Its shape is geometric and regular, and it is more or less constituted of one large rectangular space formed in a W around a large concrete staircase, under which are placed the toilets (see fig.13).

The entire space is covered in black asphalt. Most of the playground is occupied by a soccer and basketball field, which was painted with assertive fine white lines that serve as demarcations. On the side is a covered area, used as a shelter when it rains (fig. 14). The rest of the space is used for other activities, such as running, playing skipping rope or simply chatting. Around the edges of the playground is a clearly defined long strip of grass, punctuated by young trees placed in a straight line, access to which is prohibited (fig.15). On the other side of the staircase from the covered area, is another row of plants, protected by metal bars (fig.16). Alongside these are two large white benches. The playground borders the school building, its classes and administrative offices. It is framed on the other side by a wall made of alternatively receding and advancing wood, supplemented by wire fences.

The schoolyard is made of an open and cohesive space, bringing all of its users into a common space. The playground’s sense of unity is rendered visual through an absence of privileged spots, reflecting the nation’s idea of bringing all of its citizens together in the unifying space of the school. The aesthetic is highly consistent throughout. There are no corners or small sectioned off places within it, so that it does not allow for any form of apparent spatial exclusion. The ground is equally black and smooth. The

asphalt is marked throughout with white lines, some of which run the entire length of the space (fig.13 and 17). One light grey wall outlines the playground, making for an even backdrop. There are no details marked either on the ground or on the wall. The aesthetic strengthens this point: it constitutes a vocabulary that is abstract and open, that does not refer to any religious symbols (thus indicating the school's secularism), or to any element that might be understandable solely by children of a certain social class.

Only few objects punctuate the space. These are all similar in the minimalism of their design and their geometric shape, which echo the utilitarian aspect of the space as a whole. The benches are constituted of a large slab of white stone placed on two vertical metallic plates (fig.16). The basketball loops are made of a metallic square-shaped pole, to which was added a red loop and a white steel backdrop (fig.18). Some loops also serve as soccer goals. For this they were simply supplemented by another square-shaped bar of metal (fig.18). The objects are practical, cheap, easily mounted, fixed, and easily maintained. This particular type of object is found throughout the school, in the classrooms, in the cafeteria, in the offices. It is a design for the masses, one that is economically accessible to the state and which, by inference, also signifies this popular ambition. Needless to say, then, it inscribes itself seamlessly within the framework of the "école pour tous", as it is called, the school that is compulsory and free.

The French motto "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité" was fundamental in shaping the new nation after the turmoil of the French revolution. It was formulated and made visible in the schools of the Republic, a space that bears the essence of the nation's self-defined identity and ideals. Not only do the signs on the façade mark each school with the values of the nation, but they also inscribe each and everyone within the network of national



institutions. Geographically, they build a sort of web, marking the streets, cities, and territories of the nation with a stamp that reaffirms and perpetuates an expression of its own identity. The space of the playground also reaffirms unity within each institution, by way of forming an open and inclusive space in which signs of particularism are erased so as to include and speak to all of its users. In the following chapters, we will see that the idea of defining a common and inclusive space for the upbringing of all of the nation's citizens and future workers has marked the design of the playground in a diverse and multileveled way. We will also see that the school system which was born out of a national dream and hope also has limitations, especially when it comes to catering to each individual's identity and addressing the multiple realities of their lives.

## Chapter 2

### Technologies of Vision in the Social Sphere

French schools were devised to unite the country's citizens, bringing children of different backgrounds together in one single space. This idea of unification finds concrete applications in the way that the Guy Môquet school playground was designed, the way it is used and the response it triggers in its users. Equality is enforced within schools, through a common and well-determined set of laws, which regulate the temporal and spatial use of the playground. Physical restrictions dominate the use of the playground, by way of intricate rules of behavior and a multi-layered system of surveillance. A sense of being watched permeates the space by way of a variety of pervasive and discrete means. Here I will argue that although largely defended by school policy – the reason given being that the rules maintain the playground and its security – in fact, many of the constraints are superfluous. I will argue that the policies are a means for schools to both make manifest and permeate the space with a specific idea of liberty, as framed by the republic.

Rules are also the confirmation that in this one unified space, all are subject to a common law. In this sense, personal freedom is regulated in the name of the masses, while also constituting a reassuring common basis of principles to which all can refer, and which protects individual freedom. We will also see that surveillance and rules in the space also partake in the construction of “publicness” within what Hannah Arendt calls a “social sphere.” We will see that this particular type of civic space is in line with the framing of French schools as a context for fostering French citizens and professionals.

The playground encourages the same public identity (one that denies an exposed self) that the child is encouraged to acquire in the school in general.

At the end of this chapter, I will show that although the space of the playground forges a sense of cohesion and lawfulness in the name of the population that uses it, the individual sense of freedom is restrained. More personal and inventive forms of play are displaced from the playground. Intimate and vulnerable facets of children's identity that transcend the communal aspect of the space, the framing of the school's individuals as part of the community, are similarly excluded from the place of the school.

### **Visibility, watchfulness and regulation in the Guy Môquet playground**

People are rendered particularly visible in the playground through the uniformity of the surfaces, a lack of color, and the geometric shape of the space. This is especially the case since so many French children are dressed in colorful clothes: only in private schools do they sometimes wear uniforms. Added to this, as I said in the previous chapter, is the fact that the geometric form of the plan and the straight lines and angles that constitute the area leave no space for nooks and crannies. Noticeability is accentuated by the colorless scheme of the space and the clarity of its lines, as well as the surveillance system that I previously described. The playground does not have any small niches where one can escape notice. The trunks of the trees are too slim for anyone, even small children, to hide behind, and the base of the benches are too thick for children to slip beneath. Even the soccer goals, which usually feature a net, are devoid of this element which children might use to cover themselves.

The most explicit form of surveillance is that which is practiced by the teachers themselves. They form a group at the center of the playground to watch over the children.

From this vantage point, very few corners remain unseen. A more discrete form of surveillance is found in the general placement of the playground: adjacent to the school building, where a myriad of sizable windows have a direct view of the space (see fig.19).

The existence of an outside viewer is made both explicitly evident and implicitly present through devices that manifest his or her omnipresence: the general area of the playground is viewable from the vantage point of the classrooms, while at the same time reflections of skylights on the windows obscure the gazer. The staircase in the middle of the playground, to which children do not have access, further favors the scrutiny of a would-be observer in the building, optimizing his or her angle of vision, as it is easier to see what is set a little bit back from a building than what is directly next to it (see fig. 20 illustrating this point). This large staircase is reminiscent of the seats of an amphitheater, from the vantage point of which one powerful individual (a teacher), somewhere in the building, might be watching the whole audience (pupils; see fig.21). An additional layer of scrutiny occurs throughout the site, as the playground is also surrounded by buildings, only set back from the space by small courtyards, having a prime view over the playing area (see fig.21 and fig.22).

The first floor windows of the school building, which could be an exception to this pervasive and discrete form of surveillance, as they are too low to reflect the sky, and could be approached by the playground's users, were covered from the inside by paper cutouts, creating a system of Mashrabiya (see fig.23). This system of partition, found in the Maghreb, which often involves latticework, permits the interior viewer to look out at the exterior without being seen, thanks to his/her proximity to the holes. Here, the cutout

paper obscures the classroom, while allowing its users a privileged view of the space of the playground (see fig.24).

The covered area under the portico has both ubiquitous and straightforward modes of surveillance. The most cloistered of all the spaces, it is also the most explicitly scrutinized. Windows of various sizes and placed at different heights border the space (see fig.25). This emphasizes the vantage points corresponding to the various ages in the school: not only are children watched by their teachers, but they are observed by their peers, from nursery school to 6<sup>th</sup> grade children. The administration, which is considered the most powerful form of authority in French schools, was placed in offices overlooking the area (see fig.26). Its threatening presence is heightened by the less than discrete manner in which it is separated from the playground: a mere panel of glass.

The deployment of so many symbols of control and surveillance in this particular area can also be read as a mark of generalized suspicion of the hidden, as these are seen as prime spaces for the carrying out of proscribed acts. The toilets, placed adjacent to the covered area, underneath the staircase, are a privileged area to hide and conduct acts of mischief. As such, they are viewed as threatening to order. This spatial threat has fascinated a number of French filmmakers who have repeatedly documented the unlawful acts that occur in such a space. For instance, in *The Chorus*, a drama directed in 2004 by Christophe Barratier and documenting the life of a boarding school in the aftermath of WWII, children hide to look at notes they have stolen from the new instructor, Monsieur Clement Mathieu. Having found the children in the toilets, Mathieu starts scolding them,

when he is himself taken by surprise by Chabert, the sports instructor, who subtly accuses him of pedophilia.<sup>26</sup>

The characterization of the correct usage of the playground, including what games one can play in it, enforces a sense of rule over the space, through the dominion of users' bodies. Particular areas are nominated for specific use: The basketball and soccer fields are only used to play sports, and when it is rainy, children are to confine themselves to the covered area. Games too are standardized. Some of them are encouraged and others strictly prohibited. Ruling in the playground is particularly authoritative, considering the extent to which rules define what is allowed and proscribed in the space. While skipping ropes are provided for the children, they may only be used to jump with. One popular game, which consists in enclosing other children within a circle of rope— a game that children constantly attempted to play while I was there - as well as any other activity involving this object, are forbidden. The reason I was given was security. However, I think there are additional factors that come into play here.

In the French playgrounds, there are many unnecessary or forceful constraints: At Guy Môquet, while children can climb the first two stairs of the stairway, it is prohibited to climb the next flight. The lawn is also off-limits. While the grass and dirt are extremely attractive to the children, as attested by two teachers I talked to,<sup>27</sup> it is strictly forbidden to walk onto it, a rule that is reinforced by a signpost placed on the adjacent wall (fig.27). The prohibition of going onto the grass is recurrent in French parks. Its explanation is to be found on panels on which it is indicated that the “pelouse” is “au repos” (the grass is resting). The reason supplied by the school is similar. Although the playground is used

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<sup>26</sup> Barratier, Christophe, dir. *Les Choristes*. Screenplay by Philippe Lopes-Curval. Pathé (UK/France) Miramax Films (USA), 2004. Lopes-Curval. Pathé (UK/France) Miramax Films (USA), 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Conversation with two teachers on 1/13/15.

only for a few minutes in the morning and in the afternoon, and that only five days a week, the teachers are scared that the children will damage the lawn. I would argue that along with the precise time regulations and the grouping of children at the end of playground time, these prohibitions are the exertion of both a spatial and bodily form of power. Rules are the physical embodiment and exercise of national law. They are also the reaffirmation that all children have the same rights no matter who they are.

The way that play is meshed with order is particularly striking in the area under the portico, where the means by which freedom is spatially framed in the space as a whole are especially visible. The portico's elements are juxtaposed to constitute a coherent whole of interlaced signs. The space houses two hopscotch courses that were traced on the ground with the same type of bold white lines as those demarcating the sports field (see fig.25 and fig. 26). Many windows overlook the space. The first set, which I talked about earlier, is placed along the interior corridor of the building and is varied in size, shape, and height (fig.25). The large windows of the administrative office also border the portico (fig.28). The third and final element is a large white clock attached to this wall (fig.25).

According to where one is placed vis-à-vis the hopscotch course, different squares of the game are activated in a mirroring of the different windows, creating a parallel between both elements: placed above the hopscotch, its shapes appear as squares, but standing to its side they are elongated into rectangular forms. If one stands facing the wall, the long window placed at the bottom echoes the general shape of the hopscotch course. The variety of shapes, and the receding into the wall of the larger window also

suggests the certain rhythm and movement analogous to the hopping that takes place across the hopscotch.

The hopscotch course is also made analogous to the clock that was hung nearby, once again calling users' attention to both an element of play and one of control and regulation. Moreover, the game's eight squares, numbered with a clear industrial typeface (close to the "Stencil" font), echo the numbers of the clock that is hung by the windows. The ticking of the clock is thus suggested in the jumping of children on the hopscotch course. Thus shapes, numbers, and rhythms echo to form by association a wider game in which playfulness, rules, and structure intertwine seamlessly.

The presence of a clock as part of the very selective group of objects placed in the space is not fortuitous. The use of the playgrounds is strictly regularized. The "cour des petits" is used precisely from 10:45 to 11:15am in the morning, and from 3 to 3:30pm in the afternoon (3:50pm in the Springtime). The "cour des grands" is used from 10:15 to 10:45am in the morning, and from 2:45 to 3:05pm in the afternoon. When it is time for the break, as indicated by the clocks in each classroom and the clock placed in the covered area of the playground, teachers order their class to go outside. Pupils get their coat from their personal hangers, neatly arranged in a row in the corridors, and then all walk together calmly to the playground. When playtime ends, a melodic bell rings. Children of different classes join together at specific spots on the site, which they have been assigned to at the beginning of the year. There, they shape neat rows, under the supervision of a teacher. Once the rows have been formed, and the children counted, each group returns to its classroom. Thus, an overarching sense of order –both spatial and temporal– pervades and frames the use of the playground.



Watchfulness in the playground mirrors both a particular definition of freedom as framed in French society, and ideas of the right to equal treatment in schools. Being guarded in the context of a playground also means being protected: The watching eye is also enforcer of the common law. Its role is as much that of stopping prohibited acts, as it is the assurance of a certain security. It also partakes in the implementation of a certain reassuring order and defines a common way of being in a space defined implicitly as a type of social sphere. It follows the national idea that strong regulations provide a basis upon which one can be free.

### **The playground as social sphere and its limitations**

The way in which rules and surveillance are enforced in the Guy Môquet school playground make it particularly analogous to the “social sphere” that Hannah Arendt describes in her book *The Human Condition*. In the chapter entitled “The Public and the Private Realm” Arendt presents the idea that a new type of space, neither private (as in the household) nor public (the political realm), but rather the conflation of both, has emerged out of the “modern age.” According to her, the period succeeding the French Revolution saw the emergence of a new political form named the “nation-state.”<sup>28</sup> The “social realm,”<sup>29</sup> as she calls it, blurs the dividing line between the private and public, since “the body of peoples and political communities”<sup>30</sup> is forged in “the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping.”<sup>31</sup> Arendt refers here to the previous existence of a form of private order located in the house, where stark inequalities were the symptom of its

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<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1st ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 28.

<sup>29</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 28.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

patriarchal hierarchy. Opposed to the household was the life of the polis (the public realm of the city) where everyone was equal. Arendt says that: “To be free meant [then] both not to be subject to the necessity of life” (to not have to rely on the vital constituents located in the household) “or to the command of another *and* not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled”<sup>32</sup> (as implied by the hierarchy in the house).

Freedom is understood differently in terms of the modern-day conception of space: to be free is precisely to be overseen, to be ruled and at the same time, by participating in the public sphere, to rule oneself, thus supporting and perpetuating social order. According to Arendt, “freedom of society” (also known as the common good of all citizens), “requires and justifies the restraint of political authority. Freedom is located in the realm of the social.”<sup>33</sup> This leads to the common use of forceful constraints and violence, which are first and foremost the responsibility of the government.<sup>34</sup> A new political form of overseeing formerly maintained by individuals in a household, has been displaced to now be located in the nation as a whole, and overseen by the government itself.<sup>35</sup>

The French playground exemplifies the form of social space as defined by Arendt, in so far as the private and public spheres are conflated, through the establishment of rules pre-defined by the state. As we have seen throughout this chapter, regulations are made palpable by all means available, and maintained by the entirety of the school’s actors, whether they be children, teachers or administrators.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 29.

The maintenance of order in schools is of great significance for the coherence of each institution in general and the unity of a national school system in particular, part and parcel of the building of the nation-state. Regulation builds a sense of common understanding of law within each school, but it also maintains a sense of sameness and continuation throughout the institutions of the nation. By maintaining exactly the same rules in each school, the nation builds a common understanding of freedom, appropriate behavior, proper usage of space, and how to behave within a social setting, to name but a few. The widespread instatement of rules provides a framework for the nation's citizens to think about complex ideas of personal freedom and common rights. It thus shapes a national mentality. The framing of behavior through the widespread use of rules permeates the worldview of the nation through the entirety of the nation's social spheres, all the way to the built environment of its schools.

In "The Public and the Private Realm", Hannah Arendt describes the notion of publicness that occurs in the social space, which is also present in the Guy Môquet playground. In this social sphere, the children's identity is first and foremost one of public representation, which, conversely, leaves out and even takes over their more delicate and particular original selves. The public identity allotted to children in the playground makes a lot of sense considering how they are framed in French schools as a whole: as citizens and future workers.

Schools in France are largely understood to have the primary goal of transmitting knowledge, but also (and through this knowledge) fostering French citizens, that is, developing the children's identification with France. Schools are also intended to give them a sense of responsibility and obligation towards the Republic, and of how to best

contribute to it. Although one course taught in secondary school is called *instruction civique*, most of this is done implicitly, through the instruction of democratic values<sup>36</sup> and the transmission of what is called *culture générale*. *Culture G.*, as the French colloquially call it, is a body of knowledge that is predominantly literary and based on the cultural heritage of France and Western civilization. The culture taught tends to be stable: It has been subject to only minimal revision over large lapses of time.<sup>37</sup> Since French schooling seeks to foster contributors to France's economy, and is perceived as being the first step towards children's careers,<sup>38</sup> the second form of identity that is attributed to the child and developed in schools is that of the future worker.

As Hans N. Weiler nicely puts it in his article "The Politics of Reform and Nonreform in French Education", the educational system tries to inspire in children the "basic values of excellence, hard work, and professional or pre-professional competence."<sup>39</sup> French schools are responsible for preparing children for their future professional lives and role as citizens. The accent is put on skills in the French language (that is, grammar and spelling), mathematics and, increasingly, scientific and technology-related abilities (see stats). The focus on these particular areas is in large part derived from a tradition of market-driven education. This form of market-driven education was reinforced and promoted by Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the minister of Education appointed in 1986, who responded to French concerns about making the most of the country's 'human resources,' in particular suggesting that students should master modern

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<sup>36</sup> Lee and Sivell, *French Elementary Education and the Ecole*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth McNess, "Nous écouter, nous soutenir, nous apprendre : a comparative study of pupils' perceptions of the pedagogic process," *Comparative Education* 42, no. 4 (November 2006): 522, accessed January 11, 2014, <http://www.jstore.org/stable/29727803>.

<sup>39</sup> Hans N. Weiler, "The Politics of Reform and Nonreform in French Education," *Comparative Education Review* 32, no. 3 (August 1988): 260, accessed November 10, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1188122>.

technology in reaction to a competitive global market.<sup>40</sup> Chevenement wrote a book with the telling title *Apprendre pour Entreprendre*, a play on words that would, a little simplistically, translate into “learning for earning”<sup>41</sup> or “learning for enterprising”.

All aspects of the child’s identity which does not directly concern his or her professional career on the one hand or Frenchness on the other is put aside in the context of the school. The institution is only concerned with the non-intimate aspects of children. It thus sets aside what is specific to children’s individual private realities. The most important point here is that we are not talking about a type of extraneous dominance, but that the general atmosphere of the playground enters the blood and bones of the individuals who frequent the school. Thus, the framing of the child’s identity within the social sphere not only has the potent power to restrict his or her way of being in that space, but also to transform it.

Hannah Arendt points out that the sense of public representation in social spheres such as the Guy Môquet school playground redefines the intellectual and emotional positioning of its user. Arendt says: “being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves constitutes reality.”<sup>42</sup> In the Guy Môquet school playground, a space that is inherently sociable, public visibility shapes the actions and demonstration of feelings of pupils in the space. In this sense, users of a public space shape the expression of their feelings so that they may be publically representable. However, emotions are not all equally easy to express. Arendt says: “great bodily pain... at the same time the most private and least communicable of all” feelings is often excluded from the public sphere, since “it is perhaps the only experience that we are unable transform into a shape fit for

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<sup>40</sup> Weiler, "The Politics of Reform," 260.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.

public appearance.”<sup>43</sup> The most intimate emotions are sometimes those that are the least representable because they are hard to explain and particular to us. For this reason they are often excluded from the social sphere.

Intimate emotions open a window into our most original selves that the public sphere does not lend itself to. Arendt delves into the example of physical pain, which “deprives us of our feeling for reality...[like death, it] is so subjective and removed from the world of things and men that it cannot assume an appearance at all.”<sup>44</sup> Feelings such as that of pain which can be difficult to put into words, as well as personal and ambiguous forms of emotion (pertaining to love for example) are excluded from the social realm, which can only absorb publicly discernable representations of self.

Since emotions that are truly publically representable are so exceptional, we are often unable in public spheres to express the multiplicity of facets that constitute us, or explore our deepest selves. Introspection, the examination or observation of one's own mental and emotional processes,<sup>45</sup> is one of the modes of being that is excluded from the social sphere, since it is based on an unsure and indefinite reality and is open to the unknown that is not clearly defined. The expression and affirmation of the most original and particular aspects of people's identity and personality are also excluded from the social sphere, since they are not easily communicable.

In the Guy Môquet playground, most children's games that I witnessed were easily discernable: children were talking, skipping on a rope, playing catch me if you

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 50/51.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>45</sup> Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), accessed April 22, 2015, [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/introspection](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/introspection).

can...Only once did I see a child playing a game that escaped a clear definition. A ten year-old boy who had found a plastic bag was alternatively letting it float in the air and catching it. The child seemed to enjoy the witlessness of the object, the shaping of colorful light through the plastic, the slow and intangible movement of the object. I only saw a child cry once. As he called for the teacher, he was scolded and told to calm down on his own. Children never showed any sign of trying to seclude themselves, only pensiveness, which would quickly dissipate if one glanced at them.

In the social sphere, not only is the self shaped in terms of the projection of what it can communicate to the public, but one's sense of self is radically affected by the act of appearing. In other words, in the social realm, not only do we put on a particular persona in order to appear in front of others, we also unconsciously shape ourselves according to others' feedback in order to constitute our own sense of self and reality.

Arendt describes in detail public validation, or the manner in which the public eye affects the individual's idea of self-worth. She says: "Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest force of intimate life –the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses– lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance."<sup>46</sup> Public appearance is dangerous in so far as it can lead people to think that being visible and approved of by others assures them of their value. In the playground, one is constantly validated or shouted at according to one's behavior.

The public realm of the playground is particularly apparent in the way that children rely on other's judgment to form their own idea of themselves. In the classroom,

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<sup>46</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.

children are constantly rewarded and punished according to their accomplishments or failures. Similarly, in the playground, children constantly perform for the teachers. While surveillance frames their every movement, children respond to teachers' judgment of themselves. They often "show off" for the teachers, and expect approval for their actions. When I was there, children performed games in front of me and would watch my expression for signs of approval and enthusiasm.

The social self in this sense is that which exists amongst and with others, it is the part of us that only exists in answer to the group. The social self takes over the private self, not only because of the need to communicate with others, but as a form of belonging to the group and establishing a reassuring and tangible reality which belongs to the everyday. Arendt explains that for this reason, public lives are often valued at the expense of the intimate sphere: "while the intimacy of a fully developed private life will always greatly intensify and enrich the whole scale of subjectivity, emotions and private feelings, this intensification will always come to pass at the expense of the assurance of the reality of the world and men."<sup>47</sup> In order to underline one's inclusion within society in the name of a form of clear reality, the private self is thus often effaced.

In this chapter we have seen that essential in the making of the space of the playground as a social sphere is the user's observation of rules, within a system that alternates between visibility and subsequent watchfulness. The social sphere distances its actors from the depths that constitute them, only to leave apparent the outer skin of their public self. Leaving aside and protecting their intimacy and disclosing their originality, users become public actors, members of a communally defined space. This form of

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<sup>47</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.



identity is enforced through the web of gazes that define visibility and ruling in the playground, which are signified by key symbolic elements. In the next chapter, we will see that a particular sense of immutability reinforces the definition of the space as social sphere, in so far as it becomes estranged from its users and limits the opportunities for them to connect to it on a personal basis.

## Chapter 3

### The Guy Môquet Playground as Heterotopia<sup>48</sup> –An Impermeable and Separate Realm of Incubation

In the last chapter I showed that rules of usage and behavior, visibility and surveillance prevent children from connecting and playing both with their surroundings and with forms of personal identity. In this chapter, I delve deeper into the ways in which playfulness and physical connectedness to the environment are excluded from the Guy Môquet playground. I show that while the aesthetic of the playground is presented as immovable and unchanging, its design also prevents users both from manipulating and connecting with the space. This reflects the immovability of the French school system, a monolithic institution, which its proponents are struggling to change in response to deep societal shifts. The rigidity of the built environment also reflects the pedagogy of French schools in the sense that content is presented as undeniable fact, leaving little room for discussion and play, excluding the possibility for the child to connect subjectively with what is being learnt.

The impermeability of the school, its environment and the particular reality that it creates, are particularly visible in the contrast between the playground and its surrounding areas. I analyze the playground's detachment from the world that surrounds it, and, conversely, its self-containment: the playground is presented as an abstract space, disconnected both from the spatial context to which it belongs and the real time contemporary to its users.

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<sup>48</sup> Here I reference Foucault's definition of the term Heterotopia, which I would argue resonates with both the Guy Môquet and the Decroly playgrounds. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuite*, March 1967.

The exclusion of the multitude of elements of life outside of school is beneficial to children in so far as this allows them to focus on the Ministry of Education curriculum and creates a seemingly inclusive environment. However, I will show that this reality is restrictive in terms of the possible impact it has on children and the dimensions of ideas and worlds to which it gives them access.

### **The rigid and impermeable realm of the Guy Môquet playground**

The space of the playground is composed of monolithic elements that cannot be moved around, handled or manipulated. The playground's structures are all firmly implanted in the ground. This includes the basketball loop poles, as well as the soccer goals, but also the trees in the middle of the playground, whose base was covered with a stiff rubber material that conceals the dirt surrounding the trunk (fig.29). The surfaces of the playground similarly discourage the users' direct contact. The concrete, asphalt, and stone are all hard, flat, smooth and cold. They are much less easily handled and less tactile than sand or pebbles, for example.

The bareness of the playground reinforces the sense of impermeability and straightforwardness, leaving out any space for ambiguity and discouraging personalized, inventive play. The space is minimal in design, containing only the most rudimentary objects and structures, whose utilitarian character and geometric qualities render the space particularly impersonal. The aesthetic of the playground itself is cold and harsh. The space is mostly colorless, and is dominated by black (the asphalt flooring), white (marks on the ground), and grey (the staircase and the main wall). The only touches of brightness are provided by the mucky green and brown of the lawn, the dark red of the wall under the portico, and the glaring acid yellow of the protective shells surrounding

the basketball loop poles. Moreover, the contrast between the color of surfaces is often stark, the blackness of the asphalt ground opposing the white benches, floor marks and pale grey walls. No art (such as murals), flowers, or additional toys are to be found in the playground. There is nothing unnecessary or not useful. The overall effect is one of a particularly bleak environment.

Even the types of plants (fig.16) and trees (fig.13) selected are simple, and devoid of much personality. The main plot is covered in plain common grass (fig.16). The plants growing behind the metal fence similarly lack character. Resembling bushes, their color is completely uniform and their leaves brittle. As for the trees, both their trunks and branches are consistent in both color and width. They too do not inspire physical manipulation; in any case, contact with them is made difficult and is forbidden. Although they are young, their branches are already high enough to leave no possibility of climbing. They also lack bark, and their wood is so firm that it is impossible to carve anything on them.

The unmovable and rigid nature of the playground is analogous to the way that the French school itself forms a gigantic monolith that the ministry of education has always struggled to transform. As Weiler argues in his essay, "The Politics of Reform and Nonreform in French Education": "over a period of almost 30 years now, an enormous proliferation of reform proposals has more or less peacefully coexisted with an extremely limited degree of actual change in the educational system."<sup>49</sup> The question as to why change does not occur is quite complex. Weiler points out that one of the main issues is that "endowed with a highly centralized bureaucracy supported by a stable parliamentary majority, heir to a long tradition of etatisme", favoring direct state

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<sup>49</sup> Weiler, "The Politics of Reform," 251.

intervention in social and economic matters, the “Minister of Education of the French Fifth Republic would appear to be well placed to shape policy in his domain.” However “the evidence for state autonomy in French education is slim.”<sup>50</sup> When it comes to education, the state cannot control or pass on decisions because so many conflicting actors are involved in shaping it.

The French educational system is also particularly rigid both in the way that it frames information, and in how it considers children’s identity and place in its schools. The system does not take in account differences in children’s personal rhythms and ways of functioning. As we have seen earlier, the teaching methods and syllabuses are systematized so that each school follows the national program and its regulations concerning timetables. A strict system of marking and class levels dictate the rhythm at which elements have to be learned and processed. If children fail to meet the schedule, they have to repeat the grade. This creates an implicit tracking system, which thins down the selection of those who will participate in the greater post-baccalaureate scheme, attain higher paying jobs and climb the social ladder. In this sense, children have to conform to the system to survive in it. They often learn by fear rather than by interest.

The rigidity of the system is also clear in the way that classes are taught. The teaching style is lecture-based. Classes are designed to deliver content that children are not encouraged to question. The instructors teach their course, while pupils take note, later having to learn and often memorize the content. The information is delivered as facts, and children are not encouraged to express themselves, ask questions about the class material or put it in question. The style of teaching is authoritative rather than

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<sup>50</sup> Ambler, John S. “French Education and the Limits of State Autonomy”*The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Sep., 1988): 483. Accessed November 10, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/448598>

collaborative. This aspect of schooling has been coined *encyclopedisme* in France, and has received its share of criticism, notably in the last thirty-five years or so, since the revolution of 1968. One French historian, Claude Durand-Prinborgne, called it a permanent given, “dating back at least to Rousseau in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>51</sup> While a broad consensus exists that one of the objectives of education is the transmission of knowledge and of *culture generale*, there is also considerable agreement about the limits inherent in education as conceived presently, concerning both the amount of subject matter to be studied and the method used to transmit it.

In the playground, the manner in which rules are enforced and pupils watched marks them as the passive recipients of an unyielding judgment, which is delivered by an adult and in which they have no say. Although children are understood to be prime actors with respect to the rules, adults are considered as the primary guarantors of law in the playground. When I was there, I was often addressed by young children who relied on me to pass judgment on their acts. Although they were scolded in return by the adults for not taking care of the matter on their own; children always asked teachers alone for a final judgment. Just as in the classroom, the adult in the playground has the first and final word, because he/she is ultimately thought to be the retainer of truth.

Just like the school system itself, the playground of Guy Môquet is anything but playful. Only its denomination and the symbolic objects of basketball hoop and soccer goal point at the function of the space as potentially being that of play. In this sense, it can be said that little space is created for children to play with their world. In the previous chapter we saw that users are restrained by the heavy weight of common supervision and regulations. Here, we witnessed the way the built environment of the school itself,

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<sup>51</sup> Lee and Sivell, *French Elementary Education and the Ecole*, 25.

echoing the immutability of the school system at large, restricts its users in their capacity to develop a playful understanding of the world. There are no opportunities for children to ground themselves in the space of the playground, connect with it, personalize it, transform it, and in doing so develop their own identity.

The particular impermeability of French schools is also present in the way that the sphere of the school is completely separated from the world outside of its walls. A few changes have slightly altered the role of parents' involvement in schools, but only very recently: As William B Lee and John Sivell point out in their book *French Elementary Education and the Ecole Moderne* (p24): "Rarely were parents and other members of the community involved in the everyday life of the school prior to the 1989 law." This law provided a legal footing for parents to participate in the schooling of their children through nominated representatives in class and school councils. Although the parent's role is solely advisory, any consequential discussion of pedagogy being off limits, a previously inexistent atmosphere of communication and openness has at least been introduced. Ever since this law was implemented it has been mandated (or recommended) that each school have an interdisciplinary project that involves different partners in the community.<sup>52</sup> At the Guy Môquet school, family members are sometimes invited to talk to classes about their experiences and professional lives. For example, the grandmother of a little boy was invited to give a talk about her journey to Greenland.

In France, individual schools are not especially characterized by a particular culture or sense of community.<sup>53</sup> The school constitutes its own world, with little interest in children's experience of life outside of its walls. The topics covered are rarely linked to

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<sup>52</sup> Lee and Sivell, *French Elementary Education and the Ecole*, 24.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson-Levitt, *Anthropologies of Education: A Global*, 138.

the events or the context familiar to the child. Similarly, little effort is made to link the child to his or her built and social environment. The social life of the school is restricted to that which the children develop amongst themselves. The relationship of children to adults such as teachers, other parents, or kitchen workers, for example, is not encouraged. The idea of fostering a community within or through the school hardly exists. Schools are viewed as being places to study, intended for children and schooling only. Traditionally, other members of the local communities are not invited inside its walls.

The way the playground is used mirrors the insularity of the school system. Individuals who are not part of the immediate community of the school are not allowed within the school. Parents leave their child at the front door of the school and wait for them on the adjacent sidewalk (fig.3). Very few events are inclusive of the community that the child knows outside of the school. For example, there are no fairs, parades, parties, concerts or open door events in which they can take part. Moreover, the space was both designed and constructed by people outside of the school's community. The objects were all industrially manufactured by an anonymous factory.

Although it was constructed with materials that are prevalent in the Parisian urban landscape (cement, asphalt and tar) and in a similar color scheme, the Guy Môquet playground is distinctly different from this landscape in at least one striking way: its immaculate surfaces and perfect geometry. Of course, I am not implying that the greater Parisian landscape does not have regular shapes and clean planes. Rather, it is the extent to which the playground's surfaces are clean, smooth, regular and devoid of any discrepancies that is important and point to a very particular kind of separateness of the space from the rest of the city.



A multitude of marks on the ground seem to constitute an undecipherable and distant language. These are the white lines traced on the ground to provide for a soccer and basketball field, the five other straight lines running throughout the entire length of the playground, and a square in front of the covered area which was divided in four (figs.30, 31, 14). While the sports field's marks might be evocative, in general, the traces are abstract and mysterious. Moreover, one might say that the line's primary purpose is largely that of enclosing, delineating, restricting and giving a framework for the proper use of the space. This particular language is mimicked and accentuated by the generalized use of geometrically patterned fences and fence-like designs present throughout the playground (fig. 32, 33, 34) including the opaque grey wooden walls surrounding it (fig.35). One area of the playground neighbors a red brick house (Fig.36). Instead of sharing its wall, additional stronger and sturdier fences were installed in front of it, supplemented by a thinner metal fence. A black plastic tarp was added behind the enclosure as further barrier delineation (fig.37).

### **Buildings outside of Guy Môquet as viewed from the playground**

A piece of the black tarp behind the fence has come down, and reveals a foreign world: the sight of an incomplete wall (fig.38). The house this belongs to is under construction. In some places, the mortar sticks out of the brickwork, while in others it is only partly smoothed-out. At the bottom of this edge is a thicker and even rougher surface, which looks like it could be the part of a pre-existing building that used to neighbor the structure. The other visible façade of the building that also borders the playground, and was also protected by a fence, was almost entirely painted black (fig.18). A triangle of red was left unpainted (formed by the inclined roof). In the painted area, a

small patch was also left bare, almost as like a window into the wall's past, before it was endowed with the skin of paint (fig.18 and 39). There are also strange white, yellow and red marks subsisting on the surface of the wall (fig.40), as if a previous painting had been produced and subsequently erased from it. This blurs our understanding of the building's historical context. One is never sure if this is a new building in under construction or if one that is old and deteriorating. The building's identity is constantly shifting from a state of becoming to that of decaying.

A structure in ruin (fig.35), so decrepit that it is hard to tell what its function was before it was abandoned, stands beyond the playground at the other end of it. One part is a black wall bearing marks of previously mounted white tiles (fig.41). The other is a crumbling and irregular stonewall, made of a mix of large stones and small pebbles, part of which is overgrown by with moss (fig.42). It is also covered in graffiti of various sizes and colors. On a white background, one can distinguish some large bright cadmium green drawings outlined in black. Various other stylized writings words cover the wall, in black, white, ultramarine blue, cyan, and gold paint. A larger drawing at times appearing orange, at others bright yellow faune beige was painted on the window, put forward by bright blue marks. The other window's frame was painted in intermingling pink and pale purple that are equal in value. The window frame is made of smooth wood, while atop is much a rougher and darker slab of wood.

In various buildings surrounding the school, glimpsed from the playground, one comes face to face with the presence of decrepitude and incompleteness, as well as with varied, non-linear and sometimes contradictory and fragmentary marks of time. Graffiti, plants, walls under construction showing sagging mortar and rough brickwork, or

decomposing (a bathroom in ruins) are all signifiers of time and change, human passage and desertion, signs of weather (a worn facade, the decrepit wooden frame of the windows), and of the unwanted or planned (i.e. plants). The surfaces of these buildings form a palimpsest that bears witness to all that constitute life in all its uncontrollability and uncertainty. It is a world full of grey areas, one that is constantly being constructed and subsequently revised. It is also one whose materiality is fully embodied, where things are palpable, have depth and wear out. The mix of textures, shapes, sizes and colors all make for a world of ambiguity. Unlike the playground's planes, which are static and lifeless, the structures surrounding it describe a world marked with traces of time, one that is full of shifts and fluctuations.

This is the opposite of the clearly defined and controlled world of the playground, where everything is more or less equally flat and smoothed-out, where any traces of the organic and of the passage of life are erased. Workers of the municipality regularly clean the floor, walls and facilities, so that no hand, foot or soccer ball imprints are to be found on the planes. The presence of dirt is clearly restricted to the patches of grass, and fallen leaves are immediately swept from the ground. There is also an absolute refusal of the out-of place and of marks of wear and of the uncontrolled in general. In short, the space is kept in what is thought to be a perfect condition: the state of being is immaculate.

I have highlighted the limits of the French educational system, and how it has constantly failed to evolve and change over time. Different contributors to the definition of policy in French education have repeatedly been ineffective in formulating significant reforms that would help move schools beyond their limited and old-fashioned precepts, and take into account the radical changes that have occurred over the centuries and that

are rapidly advancing in our contemporary society. French schools were designed with the noble goal of reunifying the nation, so that it might prosper socially, politically and economically after a period of turmoil, and to construct an ideal new Republic. But they were also conceived at a very different time in history, when family structures were in many ways more stable, when public spaces abounded, local culture were often strong, and religions such as Catholicism and various cults brought local communities together. Children's need to construct a sense of belonging and personal identity was then fulfilled in places and spaces outside of the school. In this context, the need to examine alternative models of education, and a different conceptualization of the school's role in children's lives and in communities (local and national), leads us to our next analysis, that of the Ecole Decroly.

## Chapter 4

### The Decroly School in Saint-Mandé

#### –Foundations of an alternative institution in its spatial setting

In this chapter I will explore the origins of the Decroly pedagogy, and then introduce the reader to the Decroly School in Saint-Mandé, where the playground I will be analyzing is located. As was the case for the traditional public French school system, the Decroly school method was devised in reaction to specific challenges in society, namely the crisis of the modern family and its consequences for the child. We will see that the Decroly school system was mainly the product of one individual, Dr. Ovide Decroly, who, having witnessed the dissolution of the family structure in times of rapid industrialization in Belgium in the first half of the nineteenth century, saw school as a way to bridge the gap that existed between what children need, and what the schools of his time provided.

According to Decroly, children were not getting enough affective and emotional support either in their homes, or in any of the multiple state-funded institutions devised to do so. Many of the problems in the family structure had to do with the environment in which people lived: Decroly thought that the modern cities of Europe were unhealthy and that the lifestyles they produced were particularly straining for families. The school was designed to counter this suffocating atmosphere by reproducing an environment modeled on the natural and social environment of the countryside.

While the French school system was developed to tackle national problems concerning the country's economy, societal unity, and political strength, the Decroly system was designed by one individual seeking to challenge specific issues that children

of his time in particular were encountering. Contrary to the French educational system, which situates the identity of children within a national program, the Decroly School places much importance on their individual person. In addition, we will see that the founding of Decroly schools has always been linked to individual initiatives carried out by people for whom education was a personal mission.

Later in the chapter, I will demonstrate that both the facilities and spaces of the Decroly School in Saint-Mandé echo Decroly's will to create a space in answer to children's needs and answer the particular challenges they were facing in the society of his time. Rather than being part of a national network of schools institutionalized to cater to problems of the nation as a whole, the Decroly school is an independent establishment focused on problems of children. We will also see that Decroly institutions have always been initiated by small numbers of individuals in reaction to an existing educational system. We will see that this attention to the particular, to the intimate and to the individual has always been characteristic of the built environment of Decroly schools in general, and of the one in Saint-Mandé in particular. Decroly's ideas about nature and its potential to counter the ills of the city and its effect on the social sphere played a crucial part when it came to choosing the location of his institutions as well as their intramural setting. The geographic placement of the Decroly School at Saint-Mandé, as well as the setting selected for the playground is no exception to this.

### **Decroly: Introduction and chronology of the school and its key actors**

The Decroly pedagogy was conceptualized by Jean Ovide Decroly, a doctor, psychologist and pedagogue born in 1871 in rural Flanders. Decroly started his career at the Policlinique in Brussels, where he was assistant in the department of neurobiology

and then superior in a department that dealt with children who had speaking disabilities. While working at the Policlinique, Decroly understood that the children he was seeing were not abnormal medically speaking, but rather that their symptoms could be attributed to the lack of attention they were receiving from their families and the structures that were supposed to take care of them. Decroly realized that public schools often marginalized and condemned to failure those who did not manage to adapt to the system or had special needs. According to him, schools did little to nurture children, who often ended up rebelling against their structural framework by way of laziness or even crime.<sup>54</sup>

Decroly wanted schools to consider children in their entirety, and take care of all aspects of their development, including those that were and still are generally thought to be the province of the family.<sup>55</sup> This idea is easily graspable when we consider two French terms used to designate education. The first term is *instruction*, which corresponds to what is taught in schools, for example math, literature or history. *Instruction* facilitates children's ability to perform as citizens and contributors to the economy of the country. It is generally considered in France to be the responsibility of teachers. Then, there is *education*, which concerns the upbringing of children and their personal development. One component of *education*, for instance, is teaching children how to best express and deal with their emotions. *Education* in Belgium as well as in France is generally understood to be the domain of the family. Decroly thought that schools should take care of both the instruction and education of children, since the latter was no longer sufficiently taken care of by the family. Thus, the role of educational

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<sup>54</sup> Francine Dubreucq, "Jean-Ovide Decroly (1871-1932)," *PROSPECTS: the quarterly review of comparative education Paris*, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education 23, no. 1/2 (1993): 1, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/ThinkersPdf/decrolye.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

institutions for Decroly is twofold: in his pedagogy, teachers are seen as transmitters of knowledge but are also involved in the mental, physical, psychological, and social well-being of children.

At the time when Decroly was working at the Polyclinique, school in Belgium was not yet compulsory (this only occurred in the 1910's). Many children were cared for in other institutions, such as hospices, asylums, corrective houses, and even prisons.<sup>56</sup> Decroly saw the potential in schools as places for the de-marginalization of children, especially those who experienced personal, familial, or economic hardship. In his mind, schools could fulfill a global role of education, satisfying a multifaceted role in children's lives. Not only would schools educate, but they would also care for the personal, emotional needs of children and the development of their sense of self. Schools could assure children's insertion within society by inspiring interest in studying, so that they could also become successful workers. They could also ensure children's social development so that they would become active members of society and good citizens.

A major shift in Decroly's career came when the Pediatric Society asked him to become doctor in chief of a small clinic dedicated to the study and treatment of children coined as *abnormal*. Decroly was reluctant to conduct the study in the cold and impersonal environment of a scientific laboratory. He accepted but only under one condition, which was that the children be treated in a separate establishment: that of his house. The Pediatric Society accepted, and, in 1901, Decroly opened his house to the children he was to study, who would live alongside his family.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Dubreucq, "Jean-Ovide Decroly (1871-1932)," 1.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 2.



Decroly's refusal to study them in a strictly professional environment shows his humanistic approach. It demonstrates that rather than distancing himself from the children, his goal was to understand them, grasp the root of their problems, and subsequently cater to both their intellectual and emotional needs.

Decroly's investment in education shows that to him changes in the system were of both deep social and personal importance, which resonated with his own beliefs concerning the state of society. The founding of additional institutions, such as a shelter for orphans and a school-farm in Brabant, bear the trace of Decroly's dedication. He also carried out a number of social projects, such as the medical inspection of delinquent children, and participated in a number of conferences in order to discuss his idea of how to meet the challenges the children of his time were facing.

The meshing of a house, a laboratory, and a center for education as a framework for his experiment is also particularly indicative of the Decroly school in a number of ways. This framework implies the transposition of a private world, catering to both emotional and vital needs (the house), a working, public space (the school), and a place that is rigorous but also open to experimentation, a place of analysis and constant revision which is based on the physical world (the laboratory). We will see throughout this thesis that the combination of these programs is analogous with the environment of the Saint-Mandé school itself.

In 1907, individuals who had been following the work of Decroly asked him to educate their own children who had no disabilities.<sup>58</sup> In answer to this request, Decroly opened the Ecole de L'Ermitage, the first of a small group of alternative types of schools to which the Saint-Mandé Decroly School belongs. In Decroly's mind, these schools

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<sup>58</sup> Dubreucq, "Jean-Ovide Decroly (1871-1932)," 2.

would lay the foundation for a larger, more broadly applied methodology for learning. The innovations of his pedagogy were to win over the entirety of the educational system.<sup>59</sup> He wanted to correct the faults of the pedagogy of the state, which, in Belgium as in France, struggled to keep up with new psychological, educational, and cultural shifts in his society, and more particularly the changing environment in which children were growing up.

### **The Ecole Decroly in Saint-Mandé: Origins of the school**

The Ecole Decroly in Saint-Mandé, which will be the focus of my analysis, was opened in 1945, at the request of Henri Wallon and Paul Langevin, two parents who knew the Decroly school in Brussels, and wanted their child to receive a Decroly education. The location, in Saint-Mandé, a suburb just outside of Paris, which, like Guy Môquet, is in the *departement* of the Val de Marne, was carefully chosen. The school's establishment was supported by the Ministry of Culture, then relatively open to new forms of pedagogy. It became state funded in 1948, while also being granted the right to remain pedagogically alternative.<sup>60</sup>

The school was first housed alongside the Vincennes woods, in a large stone house attached to a small garden. It began with twenty-five students and five teachers, and functioned as a cooperative, the management of the school being distributed amongst teachers and parents.<sup>61</sup> Because of the increasing number of children, and for administrative purposes, the school was later transferred to a larger property in an adjacent street.

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<sup>59</sup> Dubreucq, "Jean-Ovide Decroly (1871-1932)," 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ecole publique Decroly. "Une brève histoire de l'école Decroly" [A brief history of the Ecole Decroly]. [ecole.decroly.free.fr](http://ecole.decroly.free.fr). Accessed April 22, 2015. <http://ecole.decroly.free.fr/ecole/historique.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

The new locale, still the school's main building, consisted of a large 19<sup>th</sup> century Haussmann-style stone building, placed within a large garden containing both a carriage house and gatehouse which lodged and still lodges a *concierge*, or guardian. Classrooms took over the main building only bit by bit, with some families actually occupying the building at the same as the school from 1952 all the way to 1958. These families left gradually, but for a number of years both dwelling spaces and classrooms meshed in the main building.

Although the grounds of the school have undergone a number of transformations, the school still resembles what it used to be: an intimate living quarter with a private garden used for leisure and recreation, and a guardian. Both buildings and grounds of the Decroly school in Saint-Mandé mirror Decroly's ideal of meshing instruction and education in the school, fulfilling both the roles that are traditionally left to the school on one hand and the family on the other.

The buildings reflect the independence of the school and the fact that, unlike traditional public French schools that are overseen directly by the government through the state, Decroly involves a smaller group of individuals. The space has slowly evolved in order to accommodate the new institution: Semi-permanent buildings were added on the grounds in the 1970's in order to accommodate a growing number of children. Today, only one of these remains (the bathrooms in the courtyard), the others having being burnt in a criminal fire. Four new buildings were later built, the first being the dining hall, the other three being classrooms and the administrative office. The aesthetic of the school's environment is completely different from that of more traditional state funded French schools, such as those that I described in Chapter 1. The original Haussmann building,

and the other smaller facilities reflect the school's relative independence from the state and its bureaucracy, which would have normally supervised the buildings' design.

**The choice of a semi-rural location and playground:**

**A response to Decroly's ideas about the city**

Decroly's ideas about what environments should surround children as they grow up was particularly influential in the choice of the school's location. Saint-Mandé is sandwiched between the capital and the Vincennes woods, one of two large woods that border Paris (figs. 43 and 44). A small independent commune, its cityscape is very similar to the Parisian environment, both in terms of organization and buildings, but it is known for its local and rural feel, its streets being lined with trees and strips of flowers. It has been officially labeled a "Ville Fleurie", a designation used to indicate the "qualité de l'accueil, le respect de l'environnement et la préservation du lien social"<sup>62</sup>, as the website dedicated to it indicates. The woods that border almost the whole length of the town are particularly diverse. Some areas are completely wooded, others are filled with wild shrubs, and yet others are crossed by geometrical rectilinear alleys, vast expanses of grass surrounded by straight alleys and lined by trees. The lawns, lakes and trees and sandy paths all border both locations that have been occupied by the school.

The decision to place the school here is in line with Decroly's understanding of the ideal environment for children and their education. Decroly thought that the urban environment was the key to understanding the problems of the modern family. To him, the city encouraged particularly unhealthy lifestyles. He believed that a rural setting was a better milieu for children. Decroly associated the countryside with the life of the artisan,

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<sup>62</sup> CNVVF. "Un label au service de votre qualité de vie" [A label to the service of your quality of life]. Accessed April 9, 2015. [http://www.villes-et-villages-fleuris.com/mentions\\_legales-44.html](http://www.villes-et-villages-fleuris.com/mentions_legales-44.html).

a reassuring reality on a human scale, especially as opposed to the dehumanization and alienating world of city life and industrialization. Thus, the setting of schools in a rural environment was especially important since schools were to respond to the challenges of modern society, and especially those encountered in the cities.<sup>63</sup>

Decroly also valued the rural environment over the city because, to him, only there could children truly come into contact with what he called “life.” Among his fifteen points describing the Decroly method, presented at a conference at the Congress for New Education at Calsi, in 1921, the first argument made is that “the school...should be located among natural surroundings...in an environment affording the children daily contact with the phenomena of nature, and with examples of the life led by living creatures in general, by humans in particular.”<sup>64</sup> According to Decroly, the right setting is one where the “phenomena of nature” can be observed, that is, where one can watch the seasons change, as also the cycle of life, living creatures and beings, which are not as visible in the city.

Decroly was influenced by the theory of recapitulation, which was quite popular in the 1830s. The principle of recapitulation was that as beings grow, they go through the same biological stages as their distant ancestors. Thus, Decroly thought that as humans mature, they live through the stages of man’s evolution.<sup>65</sup> In this sense, a rural environment was superior to the urban landscape for bringing up children, since it constituted a similar setting to that which man would have known at his origins. Nature in

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<sup>63</sup> Jean Marie Besse, *Ovide Decroly, Psychologue Et Éducateur* (Toulouse, France: Privat, 1982), 130.

<sup>64</sup> Hamaïde, Amélie. *The Decroly Class: A Contribution to Elementary Education*. Translated by Jean Lee Hunt. 2nd ed. New-York, U.S: E. P Dutton & Company, 1924, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Besse, *Ovide Decroly, Psychologue Et Éducateur*, 30.

Decroly's words is as innocent and pure as children, and man at his origin. That is why he thought it constituted the perfect environment for children.

Not only is the Decroly School located near the Bois de Vincennes, but the playground of the school itself takes the form of a park which is a continuation to the surrounding woods (figs.45). In this way, it is both concretely and theoretically an extension of the natural realm that Decroly wanted his schools to be part of. I have said that the playground is situated in the plot of land that used to be the garden of a private property. But rather than an enclosed garden, in fact the playground is an open territory, more similar to the Vincennes woods than to a French garden.

Rather than being enclosed within the school's facilities, the general space of the playground surrounds the school's buildings. Like Guy Môquet, Decroly has two main playgrounds, but their delineations are less clearly defined. The playground is made of one open space, which is more or less divided into three sections (fig.49). Two areas are occupied by the nursery school playground, and another forms the primary school children's playground. The older children of the middle school can roam throughout the entirety of the space. The whole of the school's community, including the children that frequent it, their families and their teachers also use the space in the morning before classes start, at the end of the day, and during school festivities.

Rather than asphalt, the ground of the playground is made of dirt and is covered with pebbles. Like Guy Môquet, trees were planted on the grounds. However, while at Guy Môquet these are all of the same kind and were all planted at the same time in a carefully arranged motif along a straight axis, at Decroly, the trees and bushes are all of different species, height, width, color, and age (fig.79). Their arrangement in the space is

irregular, and there doesn't seem to have been an overall master plan for the position of their planting. There is not a pervading sense of design or control. The overall area of the school and that of its different constituents are asymmetrical. It winds around buildings that are scattered throughout the site. Curving concrete paths traced to accommodate children with motor disabilities are similarly organic in aspect (fig.45).

The school is visually associated with the Vincennes woods, as the patch of grass in front of the school is largely visible from the playground (fig.46), enclosed in certain parts by a wall, but at others by a slim metal fence (fig.47). The space of the school is further meshed with the woods as children are brought there immediately following their lunch break, by two assigned teachers who accompany the children to an open area in a field in the woods where they can play. The space chosen is a vast field of grass with picnic tables and benches and a patch of sand that serves as a soccer field (fig.48). It is bordered on one side by a long straight sand path, lined with horse-chestnut trees, and on another by acacia bushes. The children's main occupation there consists in collecting leaves, as well as chestnuts, which are dug into with sticks to make little bowls, and acacia thorns and leaves, out of which are fashioned small objects like boats. Children also go to the woods for school projects, such as bird watching and the collecting of tadpoles, which they keep in tanks placed in their classrooms.

In this chapter we have seen that the Decroly philosophy of education came out of a context that was radically different from the time at which the traditional French educational system was devised. Decroly sought to counter new societal challenges, by focusing on bridging the dichotomy that existed (and still does) between the social sphere of the school and the intimate space of the household. We saw that this is reflected in the

built environment of the Decroly School in Saint-Mandé, an open but also intimate space. This also mirrors the fact that only a small number of deeply engaged individuals were actively involved in the school and its pedagogy. This attachment to individuals and the type of environment best suited to their needs is at the core of Decroly education.

Decroly put a lot of thought into the ideal environment of his schools. His ideas were crucial in the choice of Saint-Mandé, and more specifically the building and its garden near the Bois de Vincennes. They all reflect the school's focus on individuals and on re-configuring the place of school vis-à-vis the intimate sphere. They also mirror Decroly's ideas about the ills of the city and the advantages of the countryside. In the next few chapters, we will see the multifaceted ways in which the choice of such a playground serves a crucial role in the school, and how it reflects Decroly's understanding of its purpose.



## Chapter 5

Decroly and the Intimate Sphere

In traditional public French schools, as we have seen with the example of Guy Môquet, a dichotomy is created between the school, a public sphere dedicated to children's role in society, and the intimate sphere of the familial space, to which the role of education is relegated. At Decroly, the two spheres are meshed together. The school takes care of both the instruction and the education of children. In the last chapter, I delved into the general ideas that went into the choice of the facility and geographic location for the Decroly school in Saint-Mandé. We saw that Decroly wanted schools to constitute a world proportionate to the human scale, in which children could feel comfortable. For him, a familial space within a rural setting constituted the “natural environment in its highest form.”<sup>66</sup> Decroly saw the role of schools as primarily being that of fostering children's relationship with themselves and with their environment, including the spaces and people in their lives.<sup>67</sup> As Hamaïde reports, according to Decroly the child: “is made aware that he is a living being, placed in the midst of a social environment—the family, the school, the state.”<sup>68</sup> As children evolve, Decroly thought that just like Man in his own evolution across the ages, they branch out of the intimate circle of the family and into society.

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<sup>66</sup> In Besse and Decroly, *Ovide Decroly, Psychologue Et Éducateur*, 54. Besse quote Decroly who said: “Pour faciliter l'éducation sociale, ce sera en outre une structure familiale qui devra être adoptée, puisque c'est la “le milieu naturel par excellence.”(1908, b, p.123). Translation by the author.

<sup>67</sup> Hamaïde, *The Decroly Class: A Contribution*, 19.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

Here, I will give the reader a broader idea of what constitutes Decroly's playground, and show that the sense of identity it allows its users to develop and the state of mind and behavior it accommodates, all bear the trace of the ways that the school truly constitutes an intimate sphere. This chapter is divided into four parts. In the first of these I will give the reader a more precise idea of the different areas that constitute Decroly's playgrounds. We will see that rather than one unified and all-encompassing space, the school's territory is fractioned into a number of different areas, which are themselves comprised of sub-sections each with its own particularities. In the second part, I will show that these multiple spaces, in conjunction with the particular intimate sphere of the school, allow for a number of behaviors and states of mind, and for both individual activities and social groupings. We will see that while the space of the playground allows individuals to explore and reveal the different sides of their identity, the space also inscribes each person within the school's social circle, in a fluid space that ultimately allows for the community of the school to come together in organic and creative ways.

In the third part, I will delve into the way that a sense of cohesion is maintained in the school. I will demonstrate that rather than being framed as passive recipients of a set of rules, the school's actors are encouraged to become active agents in the school's organization and maintenance, thus attaining a sense of agency and belonging. In the fourth and final part of this chapter, we will see in what ways the space of the school further allows its users to be active agents in their environment, deepening their sense of ownership and power within the school's spaces.

### **The diverse spaces of the playground**

At Decroly, rather than having the school's buildings frame the playground and separate it from the outside world, as is generally the case in French schools, the playground constitutes a territory that surrounds the school's buildings. With a surface area of 5,189 square meters, its general shape is rectangular (see fig. 49). The school is in some places separated from the rest of the neighborhood by a black metal fence topped by the French Fleur de lys (figs.50, 51), and elsewhere by a wall, painted with various murals on the inside (one of the murals: figs,52,53,54).

The playground as a whole consists of three main areas, two of which serve the needs of the nursery school (see fig.49). The first of these is at the entrance of the school. It is made of a wide expanse of white and dark grey flagstones (fig.55) flanked by the large stone Haussmann building that I described in chapter 4 (fig.50). To one's left entering the space are a number of play structures and natural elements (figs.55, 56, 57, 58, 59) To the right when entering the school is the dining hall (fig.60 and to the right of fig.45, and to the left of fig. 46). Beyond these two buildings is the second part of the nursery school playground, mainly differentiated by its surface of dirt covered by pebbles (figs.60, 61, 62).

From the school entrance, the middle school playground lies behind the Haussmanian building, once again covered in dirt and stones (figs.63, 64, 65). Attached to this space are three rows of prefabricated buildings consisting of classrooms, an office and a teacher's room (fig.66). Between each row of buildings are narrow strips of land (see areas encircled in red in fig. 49).

One of these is a passageway (fig.67). Another is occupied by a vegetable/ flower garden, and a henhouse (fig.68). Yet a third territory (figs.69, 71) continues behind the smallest of the temporary buildings, furthest from the Haussmann building. Placed adjacent to the guardian's house and garden (fig.70), its ground is partly covered in dirt and pebbles, but it also has a small paved area (fig.71). Since none of the buildings borders the walls, there are a number of corridor-like passages formed between buildings and the school's edges (figs.72, 73, 74). Middle-school children have access to the entirety of the territory.

Each of the three playgrounds is made of an open area, which is, increasingly from the first to the third space, occupied by trees of various sizes and heights. On the side of each playground are various natural and man-made structures. While these were pushed completely to the side in the nursery school (fig. 55), bordering a wall, in the other two playgrounds the elements were more evenly scattered throughout the spaces.

To further describe each space in particular and the structures within them would only confuse the reader, whereas their configuration is clearly indicated in figures 75 and 76. In the rest of this part I will delve into a broader consideration of the playground space. We will see that rather than being unified and cohesive, as was the case for Guy Môquet's playground, Decroly's playgrounds are made of the different parts of one large territory, and make for a particularly varied and fractioned space.

The geography of each playground is not as clearly or strictly determined as is the case of the Guy Môquet playground. None of the spaces are sectioned off from the others by buildings, walls or fences: buildings frame the areas, but space is left in between them in order for people to be able to circulate. All of the playgrounds are connected to

additional passageways set apart from the main areas (fig. 49, 67, 74). In this way, each area continues towards other spaces of the school.

The various elements placed within each section of the playground create different hubs of activity. Such elements include a ping-pong table (fig.77), bar structures (fig.65), a jungle gym (fig.78), and the combination of tree/rock/bench (figs. 62, 83). The ground covering sometimes reaffirms the autonomy of a particular section. This is especially the case for the green rubber carpeting around the jungle gym (fig.78) and bar structures (fig.65), the pebble-stone flooring in the area behind the small temporary building (fig.71) and the paths laid throughout the playgrounds (figs.61, 79). Some structures frame small isolated areas. This is the case of the small wooden structure in the nursery school, which creates a little nook (figs.57, 58), or, similarly, the space under the jungle gym (fig.80).

Moreover, because Decroly's playground is so diverse in terms of proportions and the concentration of elements that fill it, one's movement within the space is particularly varied. Not only the directionality of one's steps, but also the rhythms at which one can traverse the playground differs throughout.

Visual aspects of the playgrounds also further diversify the spaces. The color scheme of the playgrounds is particularly varied. The ground is at parts brown, beige, white, and grey, and the trees add a large array of greens and browns. The school's murals add a large array of shades, colors and patterns. While some of the paintings are uniform; others are comprised of meticulous drawings, each depicting different subject matter. Because some areas are open, and others more densely populated by trees, some spaces are subject to sun and rain, while others are more shaded and covered. Some

spaces are elongated and narrow (figs.67, 72, 73, 74); others are more centralized and open (fig.52, 55, 64, 69).

### **Social fluidity in the intimate sphere**

#### **-Individuals and their place in the school's social space**

As we have seen, rather than one unified space like the playground at Guy Môquet, Decroly's playground is constituted of a large territory roughly cut into smaller sections. The spaces themselves are fractioned into a diversity of smaller areas, defined by a diversity of elements, colors and materials. In other words, Decroly's playground is a series of areas within a varied set of independent spaces, each with its own subsequent attributes. But what really marks the playground's diversity is how it is used and experienced. I will now delve into the actions that take place in the playground and the forms of identity that its design allows for. Ultimately, I will demonstrate that forms of social division normally present in French schools such as Guy Môquet are inexistent or at least blurred at Decroly. I will show that as opposed to the social sphere, at Decroly intimate and social spaces, as well as private and public forms of behavior are fluidly interchangeable and meshed, as the playground hosts a number of different possible forms of play. In other words, we will see that rather than being completely sectioned off from each other, opposed forms of social spheres are fluidly interlinked, both geographically and behaviorally speaking, as children constantly move from one (mental, physical and social) space to another.

We saw that Guy Môquet's playground forms a single open and all-encompassing space, which consistently includes the user within the framework of a general social circle and the omnipresent public eye. At Decroly, on the other hand, the uneven spaces of the playground and their sub-sections encourage a large variety of social associations,

diverse types of grouping and isolation. Thus, the playground accommodates a variety of activities, characters, moods, and modes of being.

The vast central areas of all three spaces, left open and only occupied by a few trees, is often used to play team sport games, such as soccer, catch me if you can, and bicycle games, in the case of the nursery school. These games are framed spatially by elements such as a wall or a pair of trees used as soccer goals, around one central tree or the various paths. More centralized, focused group activities take place around the ping-pong table, in the sandpit, or around the benches. These areas are framed by structures (the plastic parts that form the sand-pit in fig.59), trees and walls.

Sheltered spaces provide opportunities for smaller group interaction and calmer activities. The area framed by the angle of two buildings and covered by a low leafy tree (fig.81) is sometimes chosen by children for small writing sessions (fig.82), during which they sit on a few of the rubber tires that are dispersed throughout the playground (fig.64). Further north, on the other side of the playground, children play marbles, congregate around the large stone (fig.83), amongst the trees (fig.84) or on the benches, which are often the place chosen for intimate conversations.

The spaces that are even more removed from the general areas or hidden are often quieter, less busy and traversed more slowly. Thus, they are used by children who want to spend time alone or with a small number of friends. Such spaces include the elongated strip of land between the dining hall and the gate, as well as the small spaces within the DIY wooden structure (fig. 57) and under the jungle gym.

In this sense, the playground allows for the expression of a large array of moods, from extroverted, sociable, and energetic, to those associated with intimacy, solitude

and/or calm. In this context, children noticeably allow themselves to fully express their emotions. This was the case of a sad little girl who sheltered herself under a tree in the middle of the playground (fig.83). Similarly abandoning himself to his feelings and letting them show was a little boy who, filled with frustration and anger, had found comfort in the sheltered space formed by the corners of two buildings (fig.85). Leaning against the edge of the wall of the stone edifice, he had found a spot that was enclosed between two staircases and covered by the low leafy branches of a perennial tree. Finding the intimacy to express his pain, he had positioned his body in the shape of the enclosed space within which he found himself, which can be seen as an unconscious response to the space.

Children expressed and let their emotions show not only in such removed areas, but also in comforting zones that are in the center of the space as a whole. The exact feelings that, according to Hannah Arendt, are excluded from the public sphere, are thus present in the space of Decroly, in part thanks to its design. The way that these two children used the spaces shows that the Decroly playground and the type of space that it constitutes allow for the expression of feelings of vulnerability.

One particularly striking aspect of the Decroly playground is the popularity of spaces of transition, that is, spaces that highlight an in-betweenness, the delineation between one space, or realm, and another. Because Decroly's playground is in fact a territory that winds around the school's facilities, the spaces that constitute it are also often spaces of passage between the buildings.

While some of the spaces of passage are quickly traversed, others form spaces for gathering. The small staircase, framed between the stone building and one of the



temporary buildings, and constantly walked through by everyone in the school (fig.81, 85, 86, 87), seems like an uncomfortable space to play or congregate within. However, it is the children's favorite spot. Similarly, children often perch on precarious surfaces such as benches, dustbins the side-edges of walls, play-bars, and trees (see fig.88). This is indicative of the playground users' liminality. By constantly occupying spaces that form the threshold between the ground and the sky, the inside of a playground and the space beyond its demarcation, children are in fact given the possibility in the Decroly playground to physically invest a space that echoes their own in-betweenness, their condition of passage from infancy to adulthood.

The way that children explore an even deeper and unconscious mental space while in the physical space of the playground was evident in at least one additional way. Placing themselves in front of a wall of a particular color, children would alternatively make themselves visible and invisible. The spots they chose sometimes marked their association with certain social groups. This is particularly evident in fig.88. While the older girls dressed in grey and black all squished against the white door and beige wall, the young girls, dressed in bright pink and red, stood in front of a light blue wall that highly contrasted with their coats. Here, the social grouping of the children is expressed in conversation with the environment.

Not only does the space help create a multitude of defined spheres for individuals or social groups, but it also bring out a particular social fluidity. The playground constitutes a space of open exchange between its different actors. At Guy Môquet boys typically occupy the central area to play soccer, while in a side area girls chat or play skipping rope (figs.36, 89). This type of gender differentiation and hegemony is barely

present at Decroly, where gender relations are much more fluid. Girls and boys usually play together, and, in fact, it is rare to see only boys playing on one side and girls on another. Even games that are gender-marked, such as soccer, are played by boys and girls alike, regardless of the children's age. It is not uncommon to witness little boys kissing each other or middle school teenage boys sitting on each other and hugging.

Similarly, while at Guy Môquet children of different ages rarely play with each other, at Decroly it is not uncommon to find a particularly varied group of children engaged in a common game. This is encouraged by play sessions organized in the school. A few hours a week, the former carriage house, which is near the garden and was converted into a theater, is opened to all the children, under the supervision of the older teenagers, who are given the responsibility of organizing activities for the younger ones. While games including children of different ages are then formalized, the meshing of younger and older children continues during regular playtime, as small children and older ones talk and play together.

While adults and children rarely interact with each other within Guy Môquet's playground, at Decroly this relationship is encouraged in a number of ways, through workshops organized on Saturdays and led voluntarily by teachers and parents (figs.90, 91), through the school's festivities, as well as in terms of the relationship of equality that is set up between adults and pupils. Thus, in the Decroly playground, children often play with teachers, initiate games with the school's workers, and collaborate on film, photography, and construction projects with individuals who are much older than themselves.

The way that the playground enables a dialog between its users is apparent in the use of a wall that was assigned for pupils' graffiti (fig.92). The wall is filled with strange animals and figures, the object of children's fantasy and imagination. But it also constitutes a palimpsest of ideas, the site of an ongoing dialogue between pupils, as drawings are constantly continued and transformed into something new. Thus, a monster's open mouth becomes the nose of a female figure; the L of Decroly becomes half of a frame for a portrait. Continuing written discussions also prevail. One started with someone crossing out other people's drawings, discussing her right to do so (fig.93).

Group games that are played within the playground allow for organic and varying set of actors to come into contact with each other. This is the case of the ping-pong table (fig.77), which is the site of a number of games. Sometimes children play the game in the traditional way, in pairs. At other times, they play in teams of two. A third variation is called *la table tournante*, the turning table (fig.94). For this game, children move in circles around the table, each hitting the ball when his or her time comes to face an opponent. When children fail to successfully hit the ball, they are gradually eliminated. The group slowly decreases until only two children remain and confront each other in a final match.

Another popular game, which is inclusive and that any child can join is called *l'epervier*, the sparrow hawk. One child posted at the playground's central tree closes his/her eyes and counts. He/she then seeks to find, from the vantage point of this tree, all of the other players hidden in the surrounding area. The goal of the other children is to arrive at the tree without being noticed, in order to liberate everyone else. When children are caught, they can form a long chain starting at the tree, by holding hands. In this way,

other children can liberate them more easily, since they can do so by touching any of the children holding hands. By playing this game children usually get to know all of the other playground users.

The social fluidity of the space —made possible only thanks to the prevailing sense of intimacy and the openness that comes with it—enables children to play in particularly inventive ways. At Guy Môquet the games that children engage in are all distinctly defined. Their time frame, localization and players are all clearly determined by specific rules. Some play soccer, others skipping rope, basketball, and catch-me –if-you-can. Soccer and basket games usually involve two distinct teams playing against each other within the clearly marked space of the soccer field, with a defined beginning and end and a clear set of rules. This form of order is hardly surprising, not only because we are used to rules in games, but also because, in fact, as Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga argues in his book *Homo Ludens*, or *Man the Player*, it is one of the essential components of play. He says: play is “ an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, with a visible order, according to rules freely accepted.”<sup>69</sup> Play is distinct from “ordinary life both as to locality and duration.”<sup>70</sup> In this way, play is characterized by: “its secludedness, its limitedness. It is ‘played out’ within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning. Play begins, and then at a certain movement it is ‘over’. It plays itself to an end.”<sup>71</sup> Therefore, we may say that structure and order are in fact essential to the formation of play. In play, a certain framework is established, which involves time and space, but also the demarcation of a whole new world, placed outside of the realm of ordinary life.

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<sup>69</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 32.

<sup>70</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study*, 9.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

The third and last characteristic which Huizinga attributes to play highlights its qualities: “the ritual act has all the formal and essential characteristics of play... particularly in so far as it transports the participants to another world.”<sup>72</sup> In this way, play has the capacity, “as a sacred activity”, to “naturally contributes to the well-being of the group, but in quite another way and by other means than by acquisition of the necessities of life.”<sup>73</sup> The mystery involved in play and the ways in which it is delineated are in fact crucial in understanding the difference between play at Guy Môquet and at Decroly. Games such as soccer, ping-pong, and the different variants of “catch me if you can” are in both institutions alike set within clear parameters. However, at Decroly, their structure is often less obviously apparent from the outside. Although they involve the same elements, such as a ball and spatial delineations, their structure is left more open to the particular definition of individual groups of children. Boundaries are still present, but they are more particular and original to the groups playing the game, who in fact set their own-rules.

Not only are the games themselves sometimes less pre-defined, but who plays them, and how where and when they are played is sometimes much less clearly defined. They form an open structure that allows for inventiveness and improvisation, often transcending the clear and sharp pre-conceptualized definitions of social rules that frame public behavior. Thus one afternoon, for example, a little boy was playing with a group of children bouncing a rubber tire against the wall of a stone building, when the object was disputed. At that moment, another group of children with a ball passed in front of the group. Letting go of the tire, all three groups merged to play the ball game. The little boy

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 9.

who had followed everyone in the game, slipped and fell on the floor, where he remained, comfortable on the ground, in a new space of solitude.

The intimate space of the playground enables a range of behaviors that are fluid and escape a clear definition. We saw that the graffiti wall is covered with strange monsters and ambiguous messages, and that the little boy's game shifted from throwing a rubber wheel against a building on his own, to playing with a ball with a new group of children, to lying in the middle of the ground on his own. These fluid boundaries highlight the fact that the playground gives space for children to follow their own logic. At Decroly, many games are quite indecipherable; they follow the personal world and frame of mind of individual children. One game I saw involved a little boy who had picked up a stick, was attempting to throw it through a metal barrier and hit a specific spot.

More than simply an institution of learning, the Decroly school constitutes the intimate sphere of a community. The inclusive atmosphere of the school is fostered by the diversity of its environment which accommodates a large array of modes of being and social associations. It allows for a great variety of behavior, sometimes being sociable and at other times more intimate and vulnerable. Ambiguous forms of behavior that reveal playful and original sides of the personality of its users are also present in the space, as children express a large array of feelings and deep interior states that are usually excluded from the social sphere, and go beyond more usual behavioral conventions. Just as the space allows for solitude and social demarcation, it also encourages a certain social fluidity. Through their games, children play with traditional social boundaries, exploring the way they relate to each other and the world surrounding them. The space of the

playground opens breaches for the individual to play with the idea of social grouping and the formation of a veritable community.

### **Responsibilities within the school**

So far, in my analysis I have demonstrated that the Decroly school's positioning as an intimate sphere is shaped through the space and environment of the institution. In this part of the chapter, we will see that this context opens up new forms of responsibility that are usually minimized in traditional institutions. Rather than passive recipients of the school's rules, as is globally the case in traditional French institutions, at Decroly, children and parents are primary actors in the making and sustenance of the school's interior regulations. The school's actors form a sense of commonality and cohesion in the institution. This is why, as I have implied and will now develop at greater length, at Decroly rules are much more flexible than in traditional French schools, as children in particular are held much more accountable for their own actions. We will see that this is also a means for children to understand for themselves what freedom means, and to test ~~out~~ their own boundaries, a logical extension of Decroly's idea of giving schools the responsibility for *education*.

Hamaïde explains that "if a child's experience at school are to contribute effectively to the development of social attitudes and sentiments, he must be personally enlisted, actively, intellectually, affectively, in the school's success as a community, a community whose organization he can understand and whose best interests he can work to assure. The habits he acquires in the classroom should lend themselves to the building up of this kind of morale."<sup>74</sup> At Decroly, pupils are supposed to be active in and

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<sup>74</sup> Hamaïde, *The Decroly Class: A Contribution*, 95.

responsible for the spaces of the school, including the classroom but, as we will see, also the playground.

The active engagement of children in the tight community of the school manifests itself in the way that they participate in the maintenance of those spaces. At Guy Môquet, the playground and classrooms are maintained by cleaning ladies and handymen who work for the municipality. At Decroly, every evening before leaving their classroom, children put their chair on the desk to alleviate the cleaning lady's work, and it is the children who take care of the playground's upkeep. Pupils and teachers pick up trash from the ground together once a month, and they take tables out to clean them together. One testimony in the *Vivre a Decroly, Decroly Vivra* Book, tells us that: « On a fait des masques en papier marche—ca fait des saletés mais c'est permis parce qu'on aide à tout nettoyer—le soir on met nos chaises sur la table pour aider les femmes de ménage, on trouve ca bien—on a des charges, chacun les siennes: laver l'aquarium, arroser les plantes, porter les papiers, faire les rappels pour les carnets... »<sup>75</sup> Children have communal responsibilities, as well as others that are specifically assigned to them, in order to both sustain the school collaboratively and take part in creating a common space.

In one documentary about the school, dating from 1990, one can see a group of middle-school children vigorously scrubbing their tables, which they have brought out into the playground,<sup>76</sup> a custom that still exists today. The form of engagement of children in the playground and classroom, as in any other part of the school, is also a matter of developing children's sense of belonging. In scrubbing their desks, children's

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<sup>75</sup> Joseph Majault, *Vivre a Decroly: Decroly Vivra - Des Enfants, Des Parents, Des Enseignants Racontent* (Tournai: Casterman, 1979), 132.

<sup>76</sup> Yolande Robveille, dir., *Ecole apprendre*, Ateliers diffusion audiovisuelle (France ), 1990.



physical endeavor reveals but also produces a form of anchoring in the school environment, and through it, community.

Children's engagement in the school environment is supposed to be both active and willful. Hamaïde says that: "discipline for our children is the outcome of their activities, of their work, of their necessities. It is not associated with immobility, passivity, and obedience."<sup>77</sup> As I said earlier, the playground's spatial boundaries are purposefully not strictly enforced. Similarly, the time at which it is used and the rules of behavior within the space are not firmly defined. In this way, as I will demonstrate in the next few paragraphs, order in the school is made to rest upon the engagement of its actors.

In the Decroly kindergarten classroom, as in the playground, different spaces are assigned different functions. However, rather than being clearly sectioned off from each other, the space is delimited in terms of *coins* (meaning "corners" or "areas"). Thus, there is a *coin cuisine*, where children bake with the teacher, a *coin bloc*, where children can use large wooden bricks to build small structures. There is a *coin dessin*, where children make art, and a *coin lecture*, where stories are read. Children come and go at will in the space of the classroom. In the book *Vivre a Decroly, Decroly vivra: Des enfants, des parents, des enseignants racontent*, a collectively written work by all members of the school, the authors talk about the role of the *coins*:

«Chaque enfant sait où se trouvent les objets et n'a besoin ni de l'autorisation, ni de l'intervention de l'adulte pour y accéder...l'adulte fait confiance au gamin et ne lui interdit jamais une activité sous prétexte qu'il va se salir. Il se salit, se mouille, c'est vrai, mais pas tant que ça finalement, et surtout il conquiert peu a peu son autonomie et

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<sup>77</sup> Hamaïde, *The Decroly Class: A Contribution*, 97.

cette conquête est facilitée par le rôle des coins où chacun s'ouvre très vite une activité qui lui convient seul ou en groupe. »<sup>78</sup>

Thus, in the different corners, or areas of the classroom, children find their autonomy, as they are given the freedom to explore the different spaces and their respective social circles. They are not restrained by any assigned or delineated space. They are also given the opportunity to play with the water and on the dusty ground, which echoes the fact that similarly chaotic elements, stones and dirt, were chosen as ground cover for the playground. These, as opposed to the asphalt of Guy Môquet, are particularly uncontrollable and can easily soil and get messy.

Further on the author says that: « Le fait que l'adulte laisse faire, laisse couler...l'eau qui coule réellement, accepte ces débordements—en général, il y a une mare par terre et une autre sur la table, dira la maitresse--- permet qu'un jour l'enfant arrive à maîtriser ce débordement et, là aussi, c'est l'étape vers la socialisation.»<sup>79</sup> By leaving the opportunities for children to toy with the elements of the classroom and explore the whole space, they learn bit by bit to control their actions and learn an attitude appropriate to the shared spaces.

The parallel spatial freedom in the space of the playground marks children's physical assertion in it, a certain non-contrived wellbeing that is manifested by their loosely-defined movements within this space. In *Vivre à Decroly, Decroly Vivra*, the authors describe this particular freedom: « on es libre, libre de courir, de sauter, de se déplacer en classe, de sortir, de parler. Liberté du corps : leur corps s'exprime dans ses

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<sup>78</sup> Majault, *Vivre à Decroly: Decroly Vivra*, 37.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 38.

besoins primordiaux, comme ceux de courir...d'aller aux WC sans être culpabilisé. »<sup>80</sup>

The physical well-being and lack of boundaries in the use of the space reveals the trace of their flourishing.

Decroly's playground is organized and used similarly to the classroom, leaving much more leeway for children to do as they please, partly since they take matters in hand themselves. As I have already pointed out, Decroly's playgrounds are not made of completely separate and clearly defined square spaces, demarcated by walls and fences, such as those of Guy Môquet. The spaces are made of one continuous territory that surrounds the buildings of the school (see fig.49). The strips of land that are mainly connected to the primary school playground (the passageway, the garden, and the space behind the smaller of the temporary buildings), underline the fluidity and absence of strict delineations in the school's space. While these plots visually continue the space of the playground, they are in theory more or less prohibited during playground time, since teachers cannot watch over the children who go there. However, children can physically go anywhere they want, since there are no fences, walls or doors to. The different spaces of the playgrounds are open. Rather than clearly delineated by forceful walls and barriers, the spatial limits of the different sections rest upon verbal contract.

The time regulations of the playground are also much less clearly defined than at Guy Môquet. There, access to the playground is constricted within set times which are indicated by the ringing of a loud bell. When both going to and leaving their classroom, children have to form neat rows before being taken to their different classrooms. At Decroly, on the other hand, teachers individually define when their class goes to the playground and when it comes back to the classroom. Thus, the playground is almost

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 125.

constantly in use, as classes come and go. Rather than being framed by the clear sound of an industrial bell that is set to ring automatically, the end of playtime is signified by teachers clapping their hands and calling out. Individual children are called to come, as they slowly stop their game. Children are allowed to linger a little bit more, as they finish their game or pick up clothes they have shed during playtime. The time frame of the playground is further blurred when pupils go to the bathroom: The temporary buildings that house most classrooms do not have a bathroom, and children have to go to one across the playground. In so doing, they often turn around the metal bars or quickly climb on a tire.

While in French schools children follow a series of set policies, at Decroly children have to be actively engaged both in the conception of these rules, and in the way that others respect them. Children could easily trespass beyond the limits of the playground. When this happens, it is often the pupils, not the teachers, who tell each other to come back to the appropriate area. Similarly, it is not uncommon for pupils to clap and call other children to come back to the classroom. In this way, children are pushed to take on responsibilities that are traditionally assigned to adults, a key point involved in the Decroly philosophy of education.<sup>81</sup>

In order for groups of children to stay cohesive, and especially when a problem arises, class meetings are held. The idea that children must take matters in hand themselves is evident in Hamaide's explanation for these occasions. She says: "In order to develop initiative, self-confidence, and group spirit, class discussions are held from time to time. The topics discussed are chosen by the pupils themselves, and approved by

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<sup>81</sup> *Travailler ensemble à l'école Decroly. Film n° 2, Des maîtres expliquent*, directed by Monique Dubost and Gérard Rapegno (1968; Fontenay Saint-Cloud, France: : École normale supérieure Fontenay Saint-Cloud, 1968), videocassette.

the teacher.”<sup>82</sup> Policies are more open and flexible than in typical French schools because they focus on the variety of individuals who participate in the school’s community.

The imprecision of the space’s boundaries and time regulations enables children to self-assess the limits in their actions. Thus, children might climb a small wall or tree and fall, or throw stones. As they hurt themselves, they discover why the rules were devised in the first place. Decroly believed that children should be set free to make as many mistakes as necessary for them to understand what is good for them. In his mind, this was also linked to the *theory of recapitulation*: the idea being that if one lets children discover the consequences of their action they will instinctively learn how to survive in their environment.<sup>83</sup>

Rather than having rules imposed upon them, children’s encounter with limits at Decroly are a matter of self-discovery. Decroly said: « ‘le laisser libre, c’est surtout lui permettre d’être gourmand, grossier, bruyant, bavard, remuant, malpropre, cruel, indiscipliné, désobéissant, révolté, paresseux...le laisser libre, c’est aussi lui permettre...de... bien faire.’ »<sup>84</sup> Self-help and self-government are key notions of the Decroly school as children are given the responsibility to judge for themselves the logic behind their action. In this way, children learn to navigate their own uncertainties, rather than having these be brushed aside by unyielding rules.

At Decroly, children are rarely scolded. Hamaide explains: “When occasions for discipline arise, the school seeks to give the child concerned an understanding of the questions at issue, and for their significance, ...to bring him by this means to the exercise

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<sup>82</sup> Hamaïde, *The Decroly Class: A Contribution*, 17.

<sup>83</sup> Besse, *Ovide Decroly, Psychologue Et Éducateur*, 36.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

of self-control and self-discipline”<sup>85</sup> This idea is brought up in the context of a testimony of a child in the book *Vivre a Decroly, Decroly Vivra*: who says « à Decroly aussi on apprend ce qu’il faut faire, mais en plus on apprend pourquoi il faut le faire. »<sup>86</sup> Teachers are supposed to help children understand the logic behind the rules they are setting, so that rather than following them through constraints, children do so of their own free will.

### **User participation and agency in the construction of the playground**

In the last section, we saw that the community-oriented space of the playground not only engages its actors in important responsibilities but also puts them in an active position to shape and sustain the school’s spaces. Through their actions, not only do members of the community assert new forms of belonging, but they also access a sense of agency in their world, as they are given the opportunity to play in and transform their environment. In this next section, we will see that the school forms an ever-changing world, open to the redefinition of its users, both in terms of the course material and the environment. Pupils are encouraged to be creative in the school as a whole and in the playground in particular. This conception mirrors Decroly’s understanding of how to frame the information taught in school, left open to discussion by children. It also echoes the way that in the school, topics in class are not always defined; in fact many are chosen by the pupils themselves.

When the Decroly school in Saint-Mandé was established on the new grounds that now form the playground of the school, the space surrounding the buildings was a private garden. Through the years, the school has altered the grounds to suit its needs.

Nevertheless, there are still very few of those traditional structures that one would

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<sup>85</sup> Hamaïde, *The Decroly Class: A Contribution*, 16.

<sup>86</sup> Majault, *Vivre a Decroly: Decroly Vivra y*, 52.

typically find in a classical playground, such as jungle gyms or swings. Those that have been installed are very minimal. They are: the set of jungle gym bars (fig.65); three long wooden horizontal beams laid to the side (to the right of fig.64); a pair of metal arches (fig.65); the sand pit (fig.59); the small traditional jungle gym with a slide (fig.78). There are no soccer goals or basketball hoops.

On the third day of my visit, I was taking notes in the playground when three boys from 9<sup>th</sup> grade came to see me, asking what I was doing. After having explained that I was writing a comparative study of Decroly's playground and of that of a more traditional French school, one boy asked me: "Alors, c'est quoi le mieux? C'est l'autre non?" "Ah? Pourquoi?" I asked. "Parce que eux, ils ont des cages de foot et des paniers de basket!" he said. A second boy quickly replied "Oui, mais nous on est créatif! On a une branche et Op! C'est un panier de basket! Avec deux arbres, on a un goal de foot!"<sup>87</sup> Rather than the passive users of a predetermined designed space, children have to use the rudimentary elements they are given in inventive ways. Soccer goal posts are marked combining trees, walls and staircases, clothes placed on the ground, or rubber tires, of which there are plenty throughout the grounds (figs.94 to 97).

The rubber tires are employed in a particularly varied way (figs.98 to 101). Children use them as construction materials, forming mounds or delineating an area. They also throw them, climb on them, roll them, or even encircle themselves and others. At times the tires are used as the basis for games, at others they are employed as a component of the games.

Whereas Guy Môquet's playground's surfaces are hard and impermeable, and its structures strongly planted on the ground, sturdy and immutable, at Decroly the surfaces

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<sup>87</sup> Nils Fortain and Pablo Boardi, conversation, Saint-Mande, France, January 15, 2015.

are soft and flexible, and the playground's elements penetrable. The surfaces are particularly subject to the effects of time, weather and use, in reaction to which they change and evolve. The ground gets muddy and forms puddles when it rains (fig.102), the pebbles shift place, the soft bark of the trees wears down as it is scratched or torn off the trunk, the stone of the buildings changes colors as it is soaked by rain. Because they are changeable and movable, the elements in the playground can be used for a multiplicity of purposes. Children can use the gravel that forms most of the ground cover to make drawings trace the limits of games or form small mounds. Children also collect the stones and shells that are mixed with them in order to make jewelry.

No particular denotation is attached to the element of the playground since there are no structures representing, for example, a boat, a car, or animals. In this way, different connotations can be attached to the elements. The limestone in the playground is one of the key elements which children have appropriated and to which they have attached specific meaning. It is all that remains of the plinths of statues, once to be found in the grounds. With the help of sticks, children make a fine white powder out of them, which they sometimes mix with saliva or water in order to form a liquid to which can be added dirt or leaves (fig.103). This mixture is often attributed the magical powers of a medicine or poison. Children also sometimes make a thicker paste that can then be fashioned into small sculptures, such as loaves of bread that are dried in the sun. Similarly, the soft bark of some of the trees is stripped to form additional "powerful" substances.

This is an example of an element that can be carried and handled by the children who thus take direct ownership of the space by physically shaping and manipulating its



elements. At Decroly, one can see children carrying stones, dirt and limestone powder in little wheelbarrows (fig.104). Sometimes, pupils collect the shells, pebbles, stick and leaves they have found on the grounds, which they bring back home as precious treasures. While at Guy Môquet the trees are both inaccessible and impermeable, and the access to the lawn prohibited, at Decroly, children climb into the low branches of the school's trees, entering directly into the elements of the landscape (first fig.88), and can scrape the trees whose bark is soft, in which they can also carve words.

Children take further ownership of their space by ways of their direct involvement in its maintenance, as we have seen, but also in its construction. The school has a rich portfolio of pupil, parent and teacher- led projects involving the building of structural elements for the playground. The small wooden shack in the nursery school playground built by the toddlers themselves under the supervision of their teachers is one such project, and so is the rickety wooden fence that separates the playground from the guardian's house and small garden (fig.105). The array of building projects also includes a plaster castle, built on top of a medieval well which stands in the middle of the playground (figs.106, 107), a metal welded bridge (fig.108) and the *igloo*, an organically shaped white structure (fig.109). These last projects were all dismantled on the order of the department of Val de Marne, for security reasons. However, the children's involvement in building their playground has since been reasserted by the school, which added a small carpentry shop to one side of the playground.

Whereas the surfaces of the Guy Môquet playground are kept pristinely clean of any sign of wear and tear, those of Decroly, as we have seen, are heavily invested by its users, who, within the context of a class or workshop, paint the interior walls of the

school with murals. The dialog of pupils with the playground's surfaces is extended upon the graffiti wall, which is constantly utilized and transformed (figs.92, 93). A number of other artistic endeavors also take place in the playground, such as photography and video projects. Invested in these projects, pupils often play with their environment, narrating stories and idea through it. This was the case of a group of girls I saw photographing themselves posing in front of the wall of a building that was painted with spheres of color. They positioned themselves so as to appear to be blowing these spheres, as though they were bubbles (fig.110). In this process, children ultimately broaden the space's significances and the array of meanings attributed to it, making for yet another example of the dialogue between the children and the playground.

In this part of the chapter, we have seen that the child is pushed to use the space of the school creatively. The space is left open to the appropriation of its users, who constantly build and redefine it in order to mold it, either physically or metaphorically as they see fit. Children are thus prime agents in their environment, which they have full power to shape and rediscover in order to take on new functions and significance. This form of agency and power in the playground through spatial literacy is not without connection to a particular idea that Henri Lefebvre touches upon in his text "Plan of the Present Work", the first chapter of his book *The Production of Space*.

In the first 60 pages of this book, Lefebvre seeks to demonstrate the ways in which space has now (as of 1974, but I would argue, even more so today) become an abstract concept, one that is understood only by a restricted number of members of the privileged class, which dominates the production and discourse of space. For a number of reasons, some historical, others political, social, and economic, space has become

unreadable for the majority of its users. Whereas in previous epochs, there existed a common spatial language, which could be read by all members of society, now (and especially since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), this space has become abstract and alienating. Space is controlled by the elite in power that infuses space with its ideology using it only to its own advantage, to the detriment of society as a whole.<sup>88</sup>

Lefebvre argues that between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, there existed a “language common to country people and townspeople, to the authorities and to the artists—a code which allowed space not only to be ‘read’ but also to be constructed.”<sup>89</sup> It is the loss of both knowledge and consciousness of space that prevents the non-ruling class from being part of the dominant discourses, since, as Foucault said, “knowledge (savoir) is also the space in which the subject may take up a position and speak of the objects with which he deals in his discourse.”<sup>90</sup> Thus, according to Lefebvre, “knowledge of space must replace [the pervasive] ideology”<sup>91</sup> of the ruling class which uses it in order to maintain its hegemony.<sup>92</sup>

Lefebvre proposes to seek a language to understand the production of space (or how space is created and understood, and the subsequent implications of this). It is only in becoming conscious of the existing mechanisms which have produced our contemporary relationship to space, that we will be able to use its language ourselves, and ultimately be able to subvert it to our own advantage as a society, and regain agency.

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<sup>88</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 7. Lefebvre argues that from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there existed a “language common to country people and townspeople, to the authorities and to the artists— a code which allowed space not only to be read but also to be constructed.”

<sup>89</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 7.

<sup>90</sup> Michel Foucault, *L’archéologie du savoir*, Bibliothèque des sciences humaines (n.p.: Gallimard, 1969), 238. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 3.

<sup>91</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 44.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

One of the strategies of alienation, and of infiltration in the name of the ideology of the dominant class, is the way that it has displaced particularities. In order to exemplify what he means by this, Lefebvre once again references a past time. He says: “medieval society...created its own space” with its “variants and local peculiarities”<sup>93</sup> such as manors, monasteries and cathedrals, the strong anchoring spaces in the network of lanes and main roads. Alienation of labor created a schism in the construction of space, as abstract space took over historical space and erased historical distinctions.<sup>94</sup>

This idea of alienating spaces that are removed from historical, social and cultural contexts is easy to conceptualize if one pictures the architectural tradition of the skyscraper, especially that which was promulgated by Mies Van der Rohe, as well as the architecture produced by those involved in the modernist tradition culminating in CIAM. It is also not without resonance to the abstractions of the post-modernists, such as, to site but a few of the most famous figures, Philip Johnson, and, to take a leap forward through time, Zaha Hadid and Frank Gehry, who have built similar abstract constructions across the world. But this particular type of space also echoes something that was touched upon in this project: the Guy Môquet school building, as well as its playground, which, as we have seen in chapter 3, floats in an abstract space, removed from both the time frame and context to which it belongs, which is exemplified by the excluded spaces of the area surrounding the playground.

As opposed to the Guy Môquet school playground and buildings, those of Decroly are strongly anchored within a multilayered history. There, one can, as we have seen, still read the traces of the place’s origins (the Haussmanian building being kept

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 49.

intact, the grounds having structurally undergone few changes). One can also see traces of the multiple generations of individuals that have used and experienced the space, not only in the eclectic layering of architectural types, but also in the playground's walls and structures. They are also the mark of a variety of meanings that, rather than being abstract and indecipherable, as is the language of the Guy Môquet playground, are full of specific connotations and stories to which its users can connect.

Philip J. Ethington echoes this idea of readable space in his article "Placing the Past: Groundwork for a Spatial Theory of History", in which he states that: "all action and experience *takes place*, in the sense that it requires place as a prerequisite, and *makes place*, in the sense of inscription."<sup>95</sup> There exists an organic relationship between the lived experience of individuals and the spaces they live through, as both are intrinsically marked and shaped by one another. Quoting Edward Casey's *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, Ethington says that "places gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts."<sup>96</sup> However, as I demonstrated in chapter 3, not all spaces bear the traces of their users or their history. At Guy Môquet, the only presence visible on the surface of the playground is that of those who designed and built the space. There are no traces of its subsequent users or living bodies. All marks of human use are repaired, cleaned, removed, while, on the outside of the playground, traces of time and wear, human inscriptions and transcriptions of natural elements are all present. At Decroly, similarly to the areas neighboring Guy Môquet, traces of the use of the space by its actors are everywhere to be found, from the DIY structures, to the murals, built fences, weather measuring tools and signs identifying the trees' names.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 483.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 482.

Not only can Decroly's users participate in the upkeep of its spaces, but they can also engage with it and take part in its "[construction]"<sup>97</sup>, as Lefebvre would put it. In comparison with the immutable space of the Guy Môquet playground, the spaces of the Decroly school are thus left open to their users. This is the case for the graffiti wall, which prompts its drawers to respond to it, or the little girls who took pictures of themselves in front of the colorful discs of a painted mural, reassigning them the meaning of effervescent bubbles. The school's grounds are truly put into play by and with their users, who thus gain and construct ownership of their space.

Ethington argues that spaces bearing the traces of time bring together lived time, which he calls "*human time*", and "*cosmic or natural time*", defined as "what seems to occur throughout the universe, independent from humanity."<sup>98</sup> The traces Ethington refers to have the potential to form collective memory and thus identity. But which memory? At Guy Môquet, this form of memory is erased. At the Decroly school, it belongs to those who were agents in its making, the individuals who have experienced and transformed the space for generations. In this way, the playgrounds of the school bear the traces of the users' agency, revealing that they have been able to transform, identify with and fully belong in the space.

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<sup>97</sup>Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 7.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

## Chapter 6

### Breaching the Divide Between the Classroom and the Outside World

In the *Vivre a Decroly, Decroly Vivra*, one of the contributors states : « Dans la pédagogie d'autrefois, dès que l'enfant entrait en classe, il fallait qu'il oublie tout ce qu'il avait vu dans la cour, dans son jardin, a la maison, il fallait qu'il se mette devant un tableau noir, devant un livre et qu'il ne voie plus que le tableau noir ou le livre et ceci tant qu'il plairait au maitre. »<sup>99</sup> It could be argued that the tradition of French education in fact continues up to this day to mark a divide between the school and the reality that the child experiences outside the school. As I demonstrated in Chapter 3, the aesthetic of the official French school environments marks a divide between the space of the institution and the world that surrounds it. Playgrounds are designed as entities completely separate from the neighboring areas. There are no marks indicating the geographical or cultural context to which they belong. In a similar manner, the subjects taught in traditional French schools often have very little to do with the concrete reality familiar to the child. Traditional French schools are concerned with a planned set of facts that vary very little over time and exclude contemporary events.

At Decroly, on the other hand, both the material taught in the school and its environment are oriented so as to incorporate what goes on outside of school within the institution. Rather than having a fixed curriculum, teachers and children decide together what subjects they want to focus on. These are often based on concrete objects and phenomena that directly surround the children themselves. In addition, the school's social

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<sup>99</sup> Majault, *Vivre a Decroly: Decroly Vivra*,16.

community is organized so as to incorporate children's families, in an attempt to make the realm of the school open to children's lives in general.

In the previous chapters, I already started to touch upon the way that the Saint-Mandé Decroly School's environment is fluidly interlinked with both the territories (Bois de Vincennes) and the social structures (family) that the child is familiar with outside of school. In this chapter I will further analyze the ways in which the playground bears the traces of how the institution seeks to foster children's connection to the world that surrounds them, both through schoolwork and the social life of the school. We will see that the space meshes with the physical and social worlds that are familiar to the child outside of the institution, ultimately making the sphere of school particularly relevant in children's lives.

Decroly said that: "after knowledge of himself", the priority of the Decroly education is to teach the child about "the world about him, the environment in which he as a child finds himself."<sup>100</sup> He "[considers] the environment solely from the child's point of view, and...[discards] so far as possible, whatever does not relate to his life."<sup>101</sup> Decroly thought that children should learn about the world surrounding them through the concrete elements that compose it. According to the authors of *Vivre a Decroly, Decroly Vivra*, Decroly thought that "l'horizon d'un enfant tout jeune est encore fait par les objets concrets qui l'entourent. C'est encore les fleurs qu'il cueille, les branches qu'il casse, le poussin qui sort de l'œuf. Ce sont des êtres, des choses. »<sup>102</sup> This aspect of Decroly pedagogy is another key factor in the choice of a park as setting for the school, since the elements that compose it are particularly diverse and rich as subjects to study. The

<sup>100</sup> Ovide Decroly, Conference at Andelecht in Hamaïde, *The Decroly Class: A Contribution*, 180.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Majault, *Vivre a Decroly: Decroly Vivra*, 18.



playground facilitates the method used to approach the children's studies. Hamaide says: "We generally begin by making it possible for the class to see the objects or phenomena to be considered; next we strive to expand this acquaintance by means of the other senses-touch, taste, smell, and the kinesthetic sense. Then we proceed to experiences offering still more exact information."<sup>103</sup> Following this idea, the playground's elements are often used as a basis for teachers' lessons, so that children may be in direct contact with the object of their study.

Chairs and tables are often brought out into the playground in order to hold classes and take advantage of the good weather in the spring and at the beginning of the fall term. The meshing of the classroom and of the playground is particularly apparent in one of the space's murals (fig.111). The painting is divided into three horizontal strips each bearing a space: on the bottom is the playground, with the Haussmann building in the middle, the guardian's house to the right and to the left a few children playing by a small metal bridge, which used to be in the primary school playground. The central strip of the painting is divided into three classes, with a varying number of teachers and children of different ages. On the top strip, are a few trees framing the dining hall. The compilation of all three spaces with minimum separation between them and in a consistent style bears the unconscious trace of the space's compilation into one unified space of learning.

The playground is used to study a number of observable natural elements. Children build tools, which they can attach to the playground's structures, in order to observe the weather (fig.112). Classes also study the school's birds, and its trees which they tag with little wooden signs identifying them (figs.113 to 115). Hamaide recalls that,

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<sup>103</sup> Hamaïde, *The Decroly Class: A Contribution*, 31.

“once, when shelter was [their] topic of study, the children built a little house in the garden at school. They made the bricks and baked them and made cement as well...the house was entirely of their own construction. It had a wooden roof covered with moss which they had brought for the purpose from the ‘Foret’, the great park of Brussels.”<sup>104</sup>

The concrete space of the playground is thus itself invested as a place of research and study, in order to also apply ideas investigated in the class. Conversely, objects from the playground are brought into the classroom and studied, and grammar and spelling lessons often draw their subjects from the playground (fig. 116). In one class, the small bone of an animal found by a boy of six in the playground became both the subject of a reading lesson and the beginning of the study of prehistoric skeletons, notably those of dinosaurs.

In one of the murals found in the elementary playground, one can see two grass hills occupied by black and white cows, and two yellow houses with red roofs (fig.117). There is also a figure outlined in black on the hill, with wide open mouth and eyes. A sentence just above the figure reads as follows: “Dehors, a l’air libre le monde entier” and, a little bit further: “ici, a l’interieur, un monde tout petit.” The school is referred to as one small fraction of a larger world, but one in its own right. In this sense, the school is conceived as a fragment of existent reality. The quote also alludes to the awareness of a more expansive reality outside the small realm of the school. At Decroly, trees and animals are studied as samples of what one finds outside of the institution.

Classes broaden their horizons by going on small local excursions to the nearby woods and surrounding neighborhoods. The authors of *Vivre a Decroly, Decroly Vivra* say of this: « mais la vie n’est pas qu’a l’école, et il arrive souvent qu’ensemble on ouvre la grille d’entrée et que l’on aille autre part. On va se promener, au bois, au zoo, qui sont

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<sup>104</sup> Hamaïde, *The Decroly Class: A Contribution*, 44.

tous proches. Ou l'on va au marché si, par exemple, on a décidé de faire une soupe ou un gâteau. »<sup>105</sup> The playground is understood as just one portion of the world surrounding the classroom. This idea is attested by the way that it can be visually seen as a continuation of the surrounding area, as I demonstrated in Chapter 5. The study of the world's concrete elements is furthered as classes embark on a week-long trip to a rural area of France at the end of the year, where they meet members of the local population, go on excursions and study local industries and customs.<sup>106</sup>

The way that the space of the playground is used as a medium to explore the tangible world surrounding the classroom is particularly apparent in one of the school's largest murals (figs.52 to 54). The painting, which covers almost an entire wall, represents the bois de Vincennes with its trees, fields of grass and lakes (one of which is a two-minute walk from the school). One part of the mural depicts a sectional view of the woods, revealing the roots of the trees as well as the animals and insects living in the earth. One can see the small tunnels leading to nests occupied by pink baby moles. The cross section of a lake shows the feet of the various birds swimming in the pond. On the light blue sky, one child wrote in fine black lines: "Dans cet espace tout est profond" (in this space everything is deep) "mais non infini" (but not infinite). The depiction brings the surrounding areas into the space of the playground. The mode of depiction expresses a desire to instruct the viewer, while the poetic inscription also bears the literary response to the subject matter.

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<sup>105</sup> Majault, *Vivre a Decroly: Decroly Vivra*,35.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 96: « étude sur la flore et les animaux rencontrés en cours de promenade...visite aux points d'intérêts locaux (fermes et élevages, écluses, fabrique de fromages...) ...enquêtes sur les villages proches, leurs histoire, leur vie quotidienne...contacts personnels fréquents avec les habitants, leur métier, leurs habitudes...»

During the year, classes prepare for their school trips by researching and learning about subjects pertaining to the specific location where they will be going. In the last few years, many classes have gone to the Dordogne region, in the South West of France, where the Lascaux cave is to be found. During the school year, children study the cave's prehistoric paintings in preparation for their excursion. The middle school's playground bears the trace of this study, as children have marked their rendition of the cave paintings on the wall (fig.118): a large square of black paint, marked with fine white lines depicting animals, and stamped with imprints of children's hands. One can say that in a way, the mural is the trace of the mingling between the space of the classroom, the playground and the locations explored during the class school trip.

The way that the school deals with topical events is particularly telling with regards to how the gap is bridged between the realm of the school and the reality outside of it. Shortly after I started my field research for this thesis, two armed men who identified themselves as members of Al-Qaeda's Yemen branch attacked the premises of Charlie Hebdo, a popular weekly satirical newspaper. The assailants killed eleven people including some of the country's most prominent cartoonists and wounded an additional twelve. The attack was followed by a shooting in a suburban street and a hold-up that occurred in the same neighborhood as Decroly, fifteen minutes away on foot. The catastrophe shook the whole country, which united in mass demonstrations and started the worldwide movement involving the photographing of individuals with a "Je suis Charlie" sign, as a symbol of support in the face of the atrocities.

While no sign of the events was to be found within the Guy Môquet School, at Decroly, traces showing the effects of the event could be found everywhere. Groups of

children from the middle school took pictures of themselves with the “Je suis Charlie” signs (fig.119) in front of the graffiti wall, a key symbol of free-speech in the school. Posters of the newspaper’s famous cartoons and of the “Je suis Charlie” sign were visible everywhere, stuck directly on buildings, or inside the buildings’ windows (figs.120 and 121). Similarly glued on the interior of windows’ surfaces and visible from the playground was a series of drawings depicting images of sorrow and grief made by first grade pupils (figs.122 to 124). The depictions featured the motto “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité”, crying figures, large blue tears, rainbows, chained hearts and candles as a sign of mourning. The way that the school’s actors revealed their reactions to the events and expressed them in the playground is particularly telling of how children are encouraged to bring into the school their personal lives and reactions to the world that surrounds them.

As is the case for the majority of traditional public French schools, we saw that the space of Guy Môquet is inaccessible to children’s families, who are not allowed within the school’s facilities. At Decroly, on the other hand, the playground is used as a place for the community of the school as a whole, including all of the children and their families and friends, to come together. In *Vivre a Decroly, Decroly Vivra*, the authors say: « que sa mère rencontre un des enseignants, rien de plus banal. Les parents vont et viennent librement dans l’école. ‘Il est très important’, dit une mère, ‘de pouvoir entrer dans l’école le matin, et d’échanger quelques mots avec l’enseignant, le stagiaire qui se trouve la’. Tout cela fait le lien entre l’école et la maison, qui sont en fait deux mondes absolument complémentaires. »<sup>107</sup> Thus, rather than waiting outside on the sidewalk for their children to come out of class, as is the case at Guy Môquet, parents enter the

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<sup>107</sup> Majault, *Vivre a Decroly: Decroly Vivra*, 45.

schoolyard and congregate when they drop off their children in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon (fig.3). They use this moment to meet and greet other children and their parents, as well as teachers, with whom they usually converse for a while (figs.125 and 126). During this time, it is not uncommon for different parents to play with children who are not their own. In this way, the entire body of individuals who are part of the school's community get to know each other.

The way the space of the playgrounds is used as a focal point for the community to come together is even more evident when one looks at the school's week-end long festivity which occurs twice a year. On this occasion, teachers, former students, parents and family all meet in the playground (figs.127). Children adorn themselves with disguises of their own making that they show off in parades (figs.128 and 129). The playground is often decorated for the occasion (fig.130). Tables of reasonably priced food and beverages are prepared and later manned by the parents (fig.131). In the weeks preceding the event, parents and children are asked to donate items they no longer need, such as books, clothes and toys. On D-day, these are laid out in classrooms and also sold by volunteer parents for a moderate price. The money helps fund the school, which is only partly subsidized by the government.

The involvement of children's families is extended as they are invited to hold workshops on Saturday morning.<sup>108</sup> During this time, they work with children of different ages on various artistic projects, including the photography and video workshops mentioned in Chapter 6, as well as construction workshops, which result in the creation of some of the playground's structures.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 48.

At Decroly, rather than focusing on information devised by the national curriculum, children are encouraged to study specific concrete elements that surround them and which they can physically encounter. They explore the spaces of the school, the neighboring rural and urban areas, and widen their horizon through field trips. The school's social life is expanded through the involvement of children's families in the institution and various community events that take place throughout the year. In this way, the institution validates and takes part in the students' own world. The playground bears the traces of and is sometimes the locale for this geographic condensation, encapsulating the home, the classroom, the woods, the city, and the additional spaces explored during field trips. The focus on real-world elements in the pedagogical program helps build children's relationship and understanding of themselves and the world surrounding them. In this way, the sphere of the school is made as relevant and personally enriching as possible for children as well their families and teachers, as the school becomes a fundamental part of their reality.

## Epilogue

Of all the spaces experienced by children, the playground is amongst those that have the strongest power to shape who they are and how they relate to the world around them. Not only do playgrounds have the potential to develop their users' affective, cognitive and psychomotor development,<sup>109</sup> but they also help them construct a sense of identity. As George Butterwoth says in his article "Origins of Self-Perception in Infancy," referencing William Damon and Daniel Hart, children's "interaction with physical and social objects gives rise to reflective self awareness and the particular autobiographical knowledge of self,"<sup>110</sup> through which they develop a sense of autonomy, individuality, stability, and meaning.<sup>111</sup>

However, in most French public schools, the idea of play and the playground itself are pushed aside, both physically and metaphorically, from what is thought to be the veritable space of learning, the classroom. Moreover, when the Ministry of Education or the Regional Department invests in the construction of its educational institutions, the money and effort go into the school buildings, not into their playgrounds. This is particularly apparent if one thinks back to the stark contrast between the fancy Guggenheim-like architecture of the Groupe Scolaire Guy Môquet, and the barren asphalt-coated space of its playground.

The contrast between the attention given to the design of the playgrounds at Guy Môquet and Decroly brings us to the fact that playgrounds reflect the ideology of the

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<sup>109</sup> Arlene Brett, Robin C. Moore, and Eugene F. Provenzo, *The Complete Playground Book* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>110</sup> George Butterwoth, "Origins of Self-Perception in Infancy," *Psychology Inquiry* 3, no. 2 (1992): 103, accessed January 11, 2014, <http://jstore.org/stabl/1449193>.

<sup>111</sup> Damon and Hart, *Self-Understanding in Childhood and Adolescence*. In Butterwoth, "Origins of Self-Perception in Infancy," 103.



institutions to which they belong. Far from innocent, the design and the possibilities of usage, behaviors and forms of play in the playgrounds that I have analyzed encourage and sometimes even dictate a way of being and relationship to the world that vary greatly from one school to the next. Through the direct observation of two very different environments, this study helps us evaluate the impact of such spaces on the personal identity of playground users, as well as examining the place of the playground in terms of local community and the wider society.

We have seen that the playground of the Guy Môquet School constitutes one of the nation's social spheres. It reflects the goal of creating cohesion within the nation, instructing its pupils so that they may become active, working citizens respectful of certain key values. But we have also seen that the same playground and the school to which it belongs imposes certain restrictions concerning the child's personal development. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that the way children develop more personal facets of their identity is not understood as being the main role of the nation's school. This is still thought to be the province of the family, the local community and the church. Once, such an approach made sense for a number of reasons: the institution of the family was much more stable than it is today, public spaces abounded, local culture was often strong, and religion brought local communities together. Today, however, these features are either increasingly dissolving or altogether lacking in French society. The Decroly model that I have explored proposes to incorporate this more personal domain within the school itself.

Although the traditional public school has admirable, logical origins in the deep national changes brought about by the French Revolution of 1789, it does have limits in

the France of today. What the Decroly school achieves - and the space of the playground attests to this - is in fact to fulfill the role of providing a space for community as well as for a sense of belonging and personal identity. I am not suggesting that this model is perfect, but it does provide for an intimate sphere, filling in gaps that are increasingly apparent in French schools, but also in contemporary French society at large, allowing its users to appropriate a sense of agency, power and personal connection to a space and a community.

I know that there is no perfect educational model, and that schools all over the world have had to seek a balance between the need for rigorous learning on the one hand and the child's need to play on the other. I could mention some of the drawbacks of the Decroly school: the large puddles that form in the space of the playground, the fact that limits are constantly breached, and that the lack of a fixed syllabus sometimes results in parents' meetings that last for hours. I could add that the Guy Môquet school playground provides what the Decroly playground does not: a highly structured and perhaps for some children very reassuring framework for play. I also have to admit that while I attended a traditional public nursery school, I also went to the Decroly school from age six to fourteen. I did not go to a traditional primary or middle school, but I am familiar with, and quite obviously biased towards the Decroly school. My own experience within this institution has informed my understanding of the playground, and my connection to the teachers and students has provided me with important insights which I did not and can not gain access to at Guy Môquet.

Yet I believe that, particularly today, it is urgent to see the benefits that the model of the Decroly school would have in France, firstly in terms of fostering well being in its

users, and secondly in encouraging the creation of a network of social links based on the relationship between children at school. The resulting forms of local community might be incompatible with the century-old conservative institution of the French public school, where community is perceived as a self-interested secluded grouping, usually based on the ideology of a divisive sect or religious movement, and potentially a threat to the unity of the state. However, the Decrolian network has nothing to do with this kind of exclusive self-interest, though it does allow for a strong sense of inter-relationship between children, their teachers and parents, stretching outwards into the world.

I would like to add one last important factor here, which is central to the atmosphere at Decroly: being there is fun. Not always, not every minute of the day. But my experience is that children at Decroly actually want to go to school in the morning, their enjoyment can be felt in the playground but also in the classroom. Educational authorities today do not fully realize the power and importance of play, nor is it at the center of contemporary French culture. To quote Johan Huizinga: “‘Fun’ in its current usage is of rather recent origin. French, oddly enough, has no corresponding term at all.”<sup>112</sup> However, today, not least of all in view of the Charlie Hebdo events, authorities in France are under pressure to accept that it is urgent to make available new spaces for personal development, well-being, and, last but not least, a feeling of agency and personal connection to the spaces of the nation, if the country is to live up to its ideals of “liberté, égalité, fraternité.”

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<sup>112</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study*, 3.



## Figures

Unless otherwise noted, photographs are by the author.



Fig. 1 Ecole élémentaire Joseph de Maistre  
29 Rue Joseph de Maistre 75018 Paris, France



Fig. 2 Ecole Maternelle Publique Archives  
40 Rue des Archives 75004 Paris, France



Fig. 3 Ecole élémentaire de Pontoise  
21, rue de Pontoise 75005 Paris, France



Fig. 4 Ecole élémentaire  
62 Rue Lepic 75018 Paris, France



Fig. 5 École primaire Boulangers  
19 Rue des Boulangers, 75005 Paris, France



Fig. 6 École Sainte-Catherine  
13 bis rue des Bernardins, 75005 Paris, France

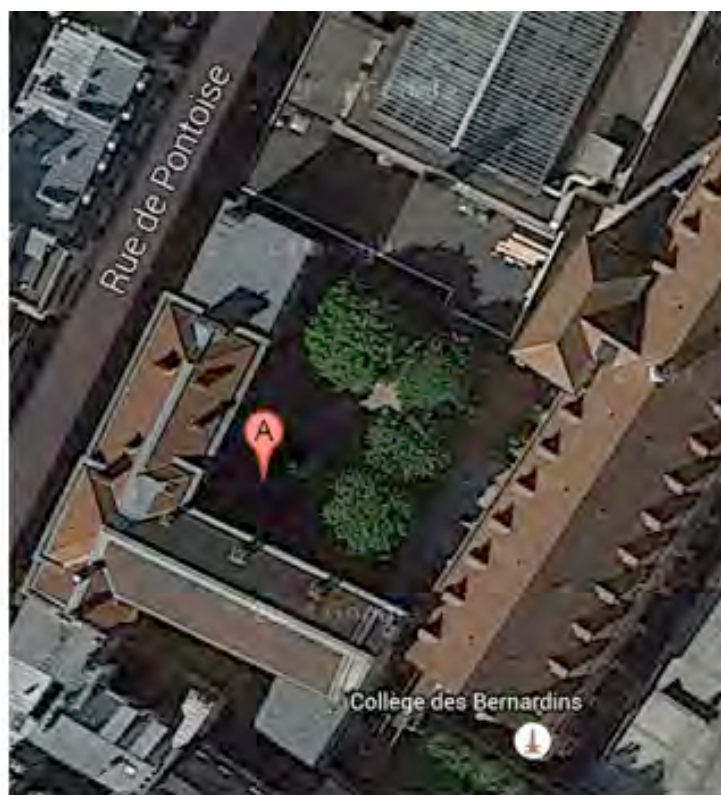


Fig. 7 Aerial view of the Ecole élémentaire de Pontoise  
 21, rue de Pontoise 75005 Paris, France  
 Google. Paris, 5th arrondissement. Image. Google.com/maps/. Accessed April 23,  
 2015. <https://www.google.com/maps/search/ ecole+elementaire+de+pontoise+21,+rue+de+pontoise+paris+5/ data=!4m2!2m1!4b1?hl=en&dg=dbrw&newdg=1>.



Fig. 8 The Coat of Arms of the City of Paris  
 Panza, Sancho, XXI. Grandes Armes de Paris. Photograph. Wikipedia.org. March 15,  
 2014. Accessed April 23, 2015. [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Blason\\_de\\_Paris#/media/File:Grandes\\_Armes\\_de\\_Paris.svg](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Blason_de_Paris#/media/File:Grandes_Armes_de_Paris.svg).



Fig. 9 Facade of the Guggenheim, Franck Lloyd Wright Architects, 1959  
Howe, Jeffery. Solomon Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1959. Photograph. Bc.edu.  
Accessed April 23, 2015. [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/cas/fnart/fa267/  
FLW\\_guggenheim.html](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/fnart/fa267/FLW_guggenheim.html).



Fig. 10. Facade of the Groupe Scolaire Guy Môquet



Fig.11 Extract of the original 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen placed on the facade of the Guy Moquet School

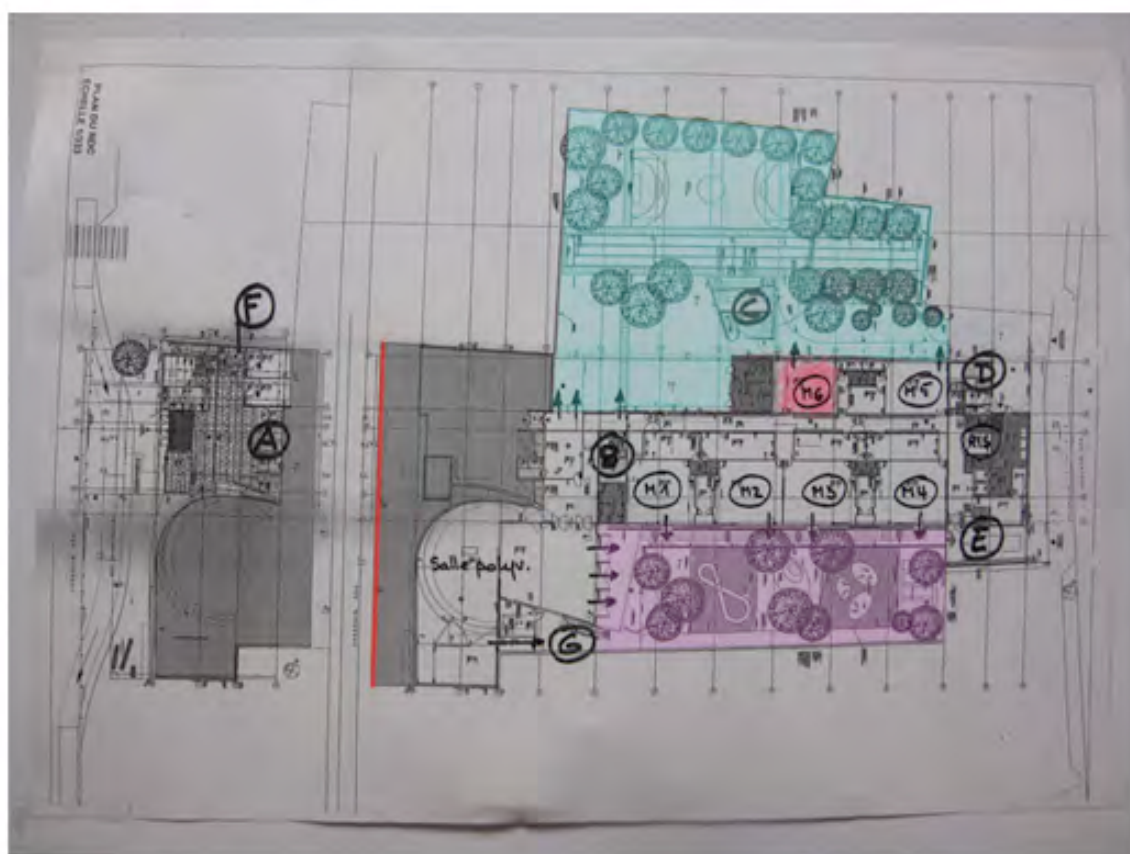


Fig. 12 Map of the Guy Moquet School







Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 21



Fig. 23

Fig. 20



Fig. 22



Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28



Fig. 29



Fig. 30



Fig. 31



Fig.32



Fig.33



Fig. 34



Fig. 35



Fig. 36



Fig. 37



Fig. 38



Fig. 39



Fig. 40



Fig. 41



Fig. 42



Fig. 43 Google, Saint-Mandé, image, Google.com/maps, 2015, accessed April 28, 2015, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Saint-Mandé,+France/data=!4m2!3m1!1s0x47e6728e5018ff17:0x40b82c3688b3800?hl=en&dg=dbrw&newd=1>.



Fig. 44 Google, Location of Decroly, image, google.com/maps, 2015, accessed April 28, 2015, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/ecole+decroly+saint+mande/data=!4m2!3m1!1s0x0:0x96ce55cbea4050?hl=en&dg=oo>.



Fig. 45



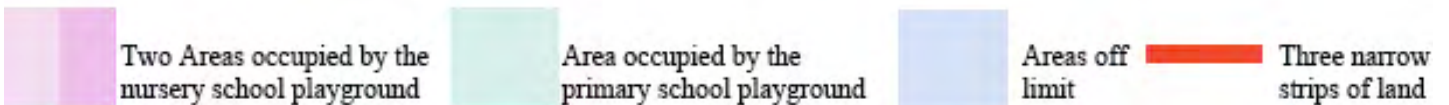
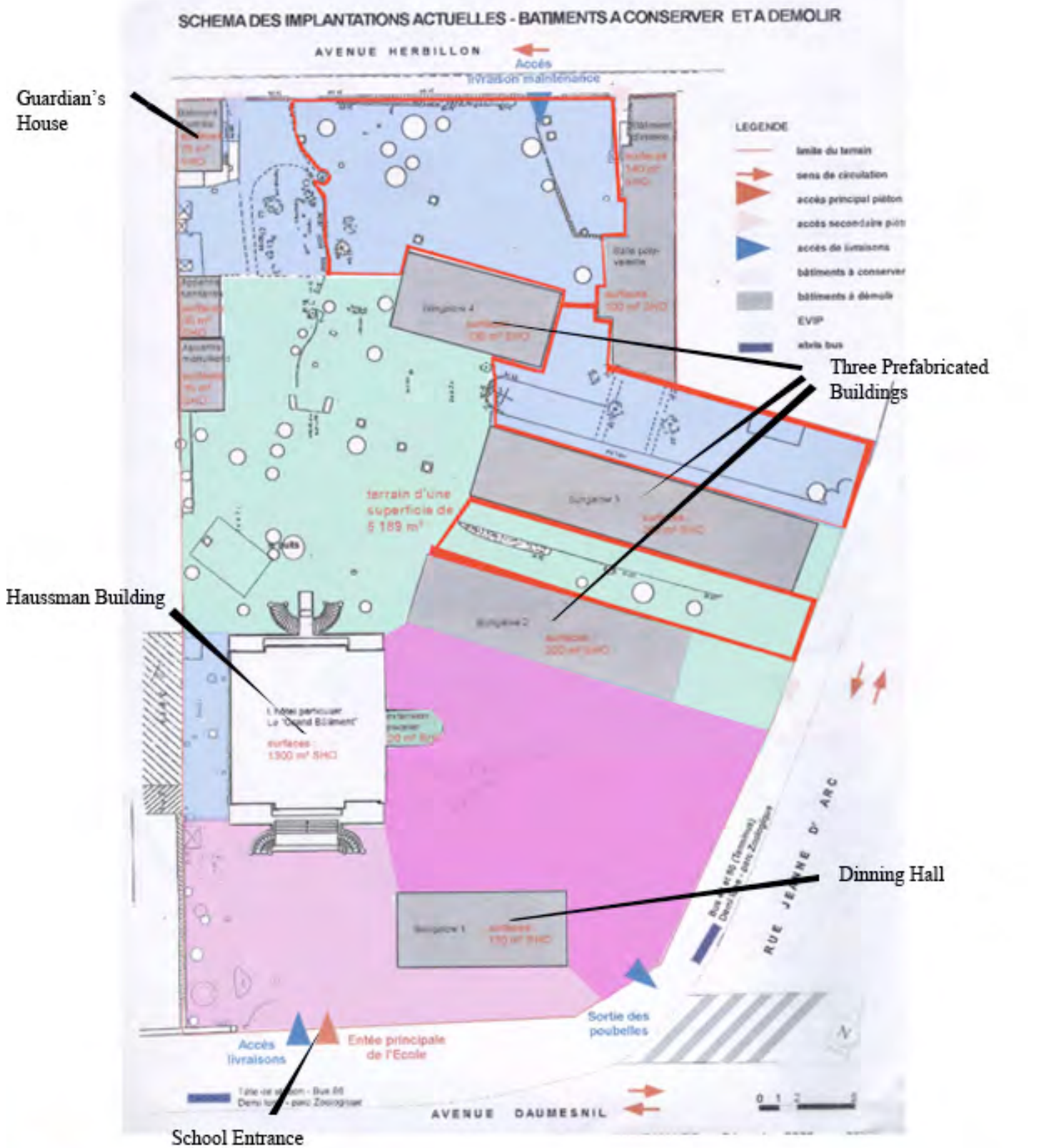
Fig. 46



Fig. 47



Fig. 48



**Fig. 49**



Fig. 50



Fig. 51



Fig. 52



Fig. 53



Fig. 54



Fig. 55





Fig. 56



Fig.57



Fig. 58



Fig. 59



Fig. 60



Fig. 61



Fig. 62



Fig. 63



Fig. 64



Fig. 65



Fig. 66



Fig. 67



Fig. 68



Fig. 69



Fig. 70



Fig. 71



Fig. 72 Passage the side of the garden



Fig. 73 Passage to the side of the Haussman building



Fig. 74 Passage to the side of the dining hall



Fig.75 The spaces and elements of the nursery school playground

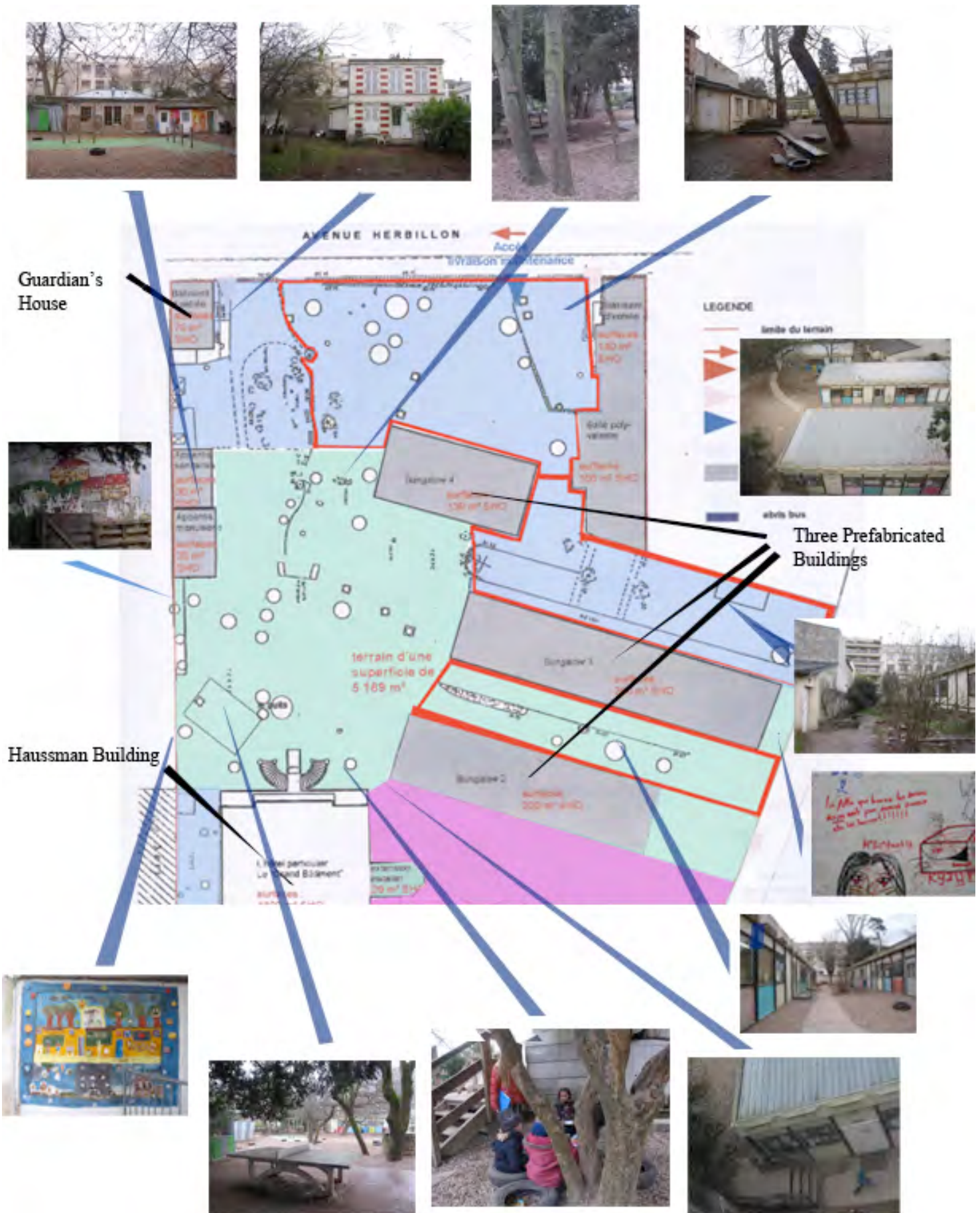


Fig.76 The spaces and elements of the primary school playground



Fig. 77



Fig. 78



Fig. 79



Fig. 80



Fig. 81



Fig. 82



Fig. 83



Fig. 84



Fig. 85



Fig. 86

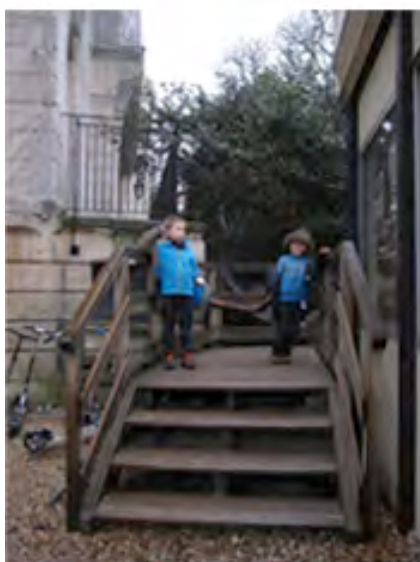


Fig. 87



Fig. 88



Fig. 88



Fig. 89



Fig. 90 Anonymous, Nicole Christophe during a Saturday morning sewing workshop, photograph, 1990s, Decroly archive. Association Decroly, Saint-Mande, France.



Fig. 91 Anonymous. Mecanique avec Mr. Goudail prof de Maths annees 1960. Photograph. 1960s. Decroly archive. Association Decroly, Saint-Mande, France.



Fig. 92



Fig. 93





Fig. 94 Anonymous., photograph, 1990s, Archives Decroly, Associaion Decroly, Saint-Mande, France



Fig. 95



Fig. 96



Fig. 97



Fig. 98 Anonymous, Children Playing with Tires in the Decroly Playground, photograph, 1970s, Archives Decroly, Associaion Decroly, Saint-Mande, France.



Fig. 99 Amandine Christophe, Cour JE, photograph, 1983 or 1984, Archives Decroly, Association Decroly, Saint-Mande, France.



Fig. 100 Anonymous, Tire writing session, photograph, Ecole.decroly.free.fr, accessed April 28, 2015, <http://ecole.decroly.free.fr/pedagogie/pedagogie1.html>.



Fig. 101 Anonymous, Encircling in a tire, photograph, Archives Decroly, Association Decroly, Saint-Mande, France.



Fig. 102



Fig.103



Fig. 104



Fig. 105



Figs. 106 and 107. For both pictures:  
Anonymous, No title, photograph, Archives Decroly,  
Association Decroly, Saint-Mande, France.



Fig. 108 Ibid.



Fig. 109 Anonymous, Igloo construit par gds du college  
(annees 1970), photograph, 1970s, Archives Decroly,  
Association Decroly, Saint-Mande, France.



Fig. 110



Fig. 111



Fig. 112



Fig. 113



Figs.114 and 115



Fig. 116



Fig. 117



Fig. 118



Fig. 119



Fig. 120



Fig. 121



Fig. 122

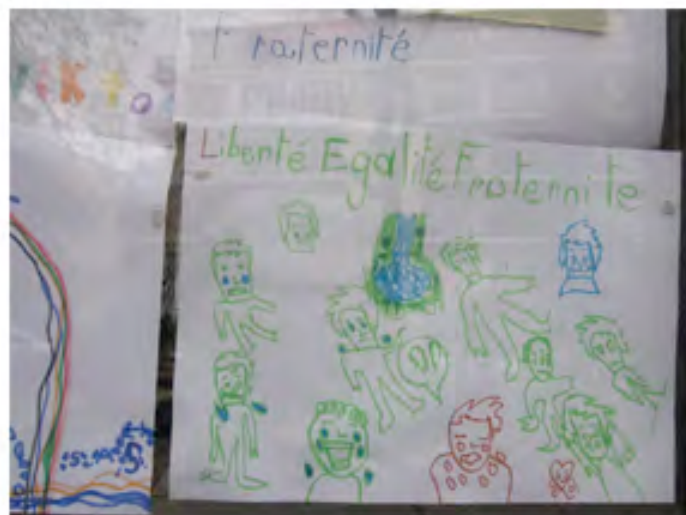


Fig. 123



Fig. 124



Fig. 125



Fig. 126



Fig. 127 Anonymous. Photograph. Archives Decroly. Association Decroly, Saint-Mande, France.



Fig. 128 Anonymous. Photograph. 1999. Archives Decroly. Association Decroly, Saint-Mande, France.



Fig. 129 Anonymous. Photograph. March 1996. Archives Decroly. Association Decroly, Saint-Mande, France.



Fig. 130 Anonymous. Photograph. April 1994. Archives Decroly. Association Decroly, Saint-Mande, France.



Fig. 131 Anonymous. Photograph. Archives Decroly. Association Decroly, Saint-Mande, France.



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