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## CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE WITH CHILDREN

Contemporary architecture may often leave our fellow citizens indifferent. Why? What is the antidote?

The educational workshop of *arc en rêve* -centre d'architecture, creates and delivers a series of programmes and activities for young people, children and teenagers, at primary, secondary and high schools, social centers and specialized institutions. Installations, workshops, educational kits, building sites, hands-on activities, trips, visits... to make young people more aware of architecture, town-planning and design. The challenge of all these activities is to examine architecture, design and the city in their cultural dimensions. The idea is not to get children "playing at being architects", rather it is to offer children access to the different delights and possibilities that architecture, design, and the city may offer them.

To reach true education, it is enough to place the child in a sufficiently rich medium, sufficiently nutritive, so that he or she is spontaneously driven to act, explore, discover, invent, observe, test... driven to activity which enables him or her to reach not just knowledge but an inquiring spirit, without any intervention of the adults. At arc en rêve we are creating situations (with structured and self-perpetuating direction) that will lead young people to experience and experiment with architecture themselves.

**38 Today *arc en rêve* -centre d'architecture has accumulated experience for 25 years. Since it's not possible to share it all, it seems that the best way to present the *arc en rêve* -pedagogical approach on architecture is through some basic key concepts and images.**

**Random mode: Let the children be sensitised to architecture without any preconditioned program... wouldn't that be the best way? The same way as our own personal culture has been built on several threads through meetings or events. This means not doing anything in term of education, but sometimes letting the environment teach us...**

**Open approach: Artistic, cultural, ecological, economic, aesthetic, functional, geographical, historical, literary, poetic, political, psychological, sensitive, sociological, technical, urban... Which is the best way to know and make architecture known? Sometimes we have to admit that writers, authors or film directors (like Jacques Tati in *Mon Oncle* in 1958 or *Playtime* in 1967) can tell us even more about architecture than architects. Giving as many options as we can is the best way to help children to understand architecture as a reflection of society in a specific time.**

**Arouse curiosity: It is not fundamental to explain it all in the beginning, but just to inspire curiosity. Children imagine stories. They talk about architecture starting from the observation of the images provided. They discuss their points of views and give their criticisms of the buildings presented... then we will tell them something about its function, history, site etc. It is important to let the images have an influence and allow children to start the conversation themselves.**

**Contents: Speak about architecture as much as a container (a physical object) as contents. For example, to tackle the questions relating to the importance of structure in architecture by the work of the engineer Cecil Balmond. Does space have to be a container? Should it be dynamic and not static? Drawing the principle of an implementation, the children discover the possibilities of this structure. How can an orthogonal constructive system be turned into a system producing another architecture? How can we talk about engineering? How can we explain that numbers can do things?**

**Continuity: Going through history and heritage, establishing continuity between inheritance and modernity, playing games about the differences**

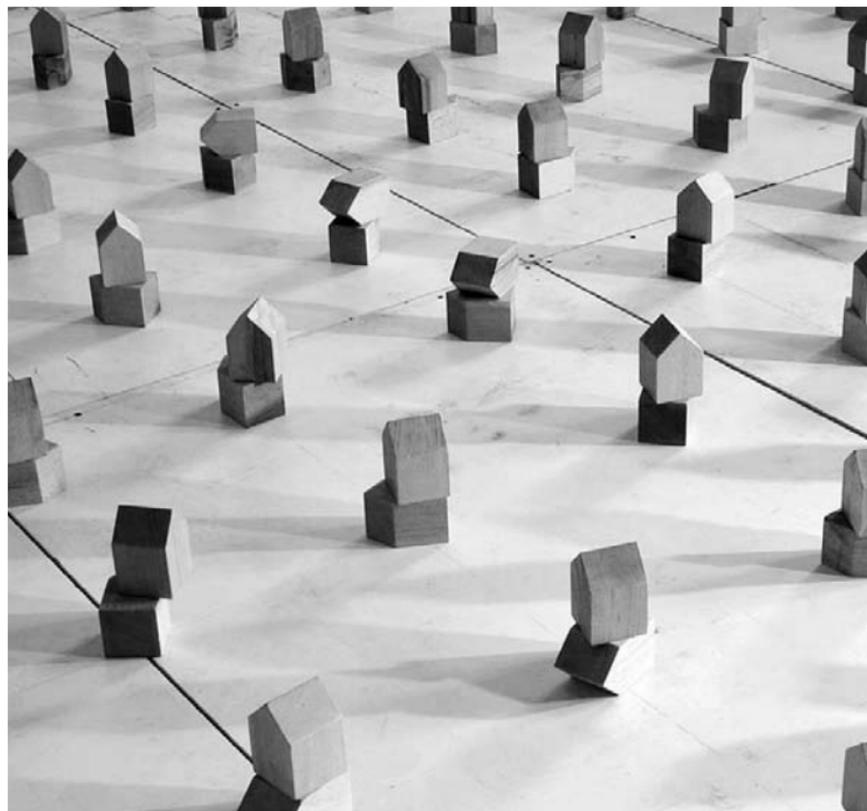
between dwellings from the twenties and contemporary social housing. 39

**It's a way to understand architecture. Bringing life and feelings out from architecture to understand how it agrees with time and people. It's important to integrate buildings with the time and culture where they belong. To point out that any work is hand - made through a specific time for a specific reason we use for example projects of Le Corbusier in Pessac as well as projects of Anne Lacaton and Jean Philippe Vassal in Mulhouse.**

**An open debate: Becoming aware of the possible opposite characters of the different points of view on the city and architecture. Everyone has his own opinion about architecture, which is as notable as another. Gathering every point of view is a way to open discussion including exchange, listening, understanding... and learning.**

**Cultural approach: To adopt a cultural approach, addressed to each individual, gives the taste of architecture, open to criticism and giving justification for a judgement. Animated by the architects, our workshop uses these three activities:**

- 1. Taste exercise, it always proceeds with a sensitive approach. The child is confronted with the designer's work. This is a meeting with the contemporary creation: the implementation of forms, of materials and techniques, the play of colors, of matter, light, of full space and empty space, measurement and disproportion, shown and hidden? Who creates the space, who evokes the stories, what causes emotion? That's the experience of the pleasure of discovering. A universe filled with images as the many signs which inform us about the world. Pleasure in seeing, in understanding, pleasure in learning.**
- 2. Critical exercise, the expression of various points of view about a designer's work, author's works - architect's projects and furniture designer's projects, photographer's images, writer's texts - are selected, exchanged, to show a work in different ways and to question it from different angles - economy, aesthetic, function... it is reflexion and exchange time.**
- 3. Judgement exercise is the alignment of a certain requirement with the quality of the object, of a house, of a building... it is appropriate here to discuss the quality, to explain or to state the strong points and the weak points, the advantages and the disadvantages. This is**



**an essential moment of teaching dynamics, that's the setting in a situation of responsibility.**

**Changing scale: Do not overlook any scale (from usual object to landscape) to discover architecture. We use for example a set of wooden houses representing a prototype of house to approach the concepts relating to the city, its development, its management and sustainable development questions.**

**To feel: Before doing anything it's necessary to feel architectural space. The only way of apprehending architecture is to have initially a direct bodily contact with space. All that one does through words, by a retranscription, a chart, is not lived architecture. The younger the children are, the more we work with large and heavy, not easily easy to handle.**

**Exemplary architecture: It is easy to explain the interaction between landscape and architecture by showing some of the best examples of architecture. The house in Lège Cap Ferret, by Anne Lacaton and Jean Philippe Vassal, tells us how to build a home without damaging the special qualities of the site. House in a plum grove, by**





**Kazyo Sejima**, leads us to questions concerning space and inside-outside interaction.

**Event:** The awakening of architecture can take the form of specific events (walks, visits, workshops) which can represent as many determining meetings with architecture.

**Expression:** It's important to show architecture as the expression of society in space. Comparing architectural achievements and experiments in differing urban contexts and in diverse modes will show how ideas and techniques can travel around the globe. Buildings designed by architects are shown as both subjects for and objects of discussion, as pretexts for debate or reflection on the problems facing urban society in the early years of the 21st century.

**Extraordinary:** To make known the extraordinary to better know the ordinary. Exhibitions or architectural visits are proposed to allow discovery of buildings and projects which are cultural references for contemporary architecture.

**To arouse interest:** Invent and design actions considering that generally, for the public, architecture is not interesting. Use the pupils ways of life to speak with them, or act by transgressing the rules (in agreement with the teachers) using current modes of expression. For example, on a project that concerned an installation of a high school playground, we tried to understand the use of the space, looking for and marking its advantages and its weak points, to draw some conclusions and finally to create a program for the architects.

**Pleasure:** We think that getting pleasure is one of the conditions to create the desire, the requirement for architectural quality.

**Point of view:** To learn how to see and understand the forms of expression of the architecture of today, to practice being critical. Support expression of different points of view on architecture: in the presence of a space or of a given object, each individual has his or her own sensitivity, feelings and emotions. The children's points of view are very rich for learning about each other's tastes. Between the generally accepted ideas and the pleasure of architecture, their work is an invitation to traverse a thousand and one possible ways to understand the metamorphoses of the city.



**To go out:** It is essential to incite to go out for better knowing one's city, quarter, house. To explain everyday which appears common, and which abounds sometimes in treasures of architecture.

**Subjective:** It's essential to multiply the subjective look on architecture to obtain an objective image from it.

**Designers role:** Communicating the creative role of the architect whose mission is to answer the present needs and to anticipate the future ones. In the project cabin, build your own adventure! *arc en rêve* plays the role of cultural mediator. It provides the interface between the children and the architects. The latter gave a formal framework, resulting from the various desires of cabins expressed by the pupils. Some wanted to look at the sky or to have an exit on the roof. Others wanted to have a transparent hut. To bring these ideas together, the cabin adopted a simple form which is held in the space of a circle made by the children. The children each have their window facing towards the sky. They were measured to be all the same height, once upright on their seat. The cabin which removes the differences in size is also that which posts all the characteristics. Some 350 transparent plastic bags are placed at the disposal of the children who fill them with objects which have meaning for them.

**Artistic view:** It's fundamental to point out some striking works of architecture with an artistic dimension - opening a view to their empowerment with emotions or curiosity, and indicating how they should move people's perceptions and representations. In september 2006 *arc en rêve* will launch a project called *One building / One architect*. This will be an educational tool designed by *arc en rêve* and produced jointly with the *Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine*. The aim of this project is to make children aware of the variety and beauty of contemporary architecture while enabling them to enjoy buildings designed by famous architects even when they are unable to visit them. Based on the experience of its educational programmes, we will provide a medium aimed for those who both wish to learn about architecture as well as to share this knowledge with others. In order to make things known, one needs to make use of elementary means, accessible to a larger public: images and words are what are most necessary. What these images and words must achieve is to express the creative dimension of architecture, to generate the pleasure of discovery and stimulate the desire to know more and even more...

