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New education within an architectural icon? A case study of a Milanese open-air school (1922-1977)

Geert Thyssen*

1. *Introduction: buildings and education*

Besides materialising through the life of the body, the chief way in which power and bond relations are made concrete is through bodies [...] in the space of buildings¹.

Se attraverso l'educazione si forma e si plasma l'anima di un popolo, [...] immensa è l'importanza dell'edificio che accoglie la gioventù di un popolo e la guida dai primi passi dell'infanzia alle grandi vie della vita².

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¹ T.A. Markus, *Buildings & power. Freedom & control in the origin of modern building types*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 25.

² L. Secchi, *Edifici scolastici Italiani primari e secondari. Norme tecnico-igieniche per lo studio*

In the following paper the relationship between architecture and education is examined within the specific context of an Italian open-air school, one of four cases that are the subject of a broader doctoral study³. The article builds on a paper that was presented at a symposium on iconic buildings organised by Catherine Burke at the conference of the European Educational Research Association (EERA) in Geneva in 2006. In the tradition of Network 17 (Histories of Education) of the EERA that paper was linked with the research regarding material culture⁴ and its possible meaning for the pedagogical historiography. The question at the forefront of this article is to what extent was there discussion of so-called innovative and child-directed architecture and if this gave rise to the same in childrearing and education. The goal is to provide the initial impetus to a «cartography» of an institute in the architectural and pedagogical sphere: an exploration of the discursive space in which it takes shape and in turn gives shape to architectural and pedagogical insights⁵. Those ideas are associated with what Peim would describe as a «pedagogy of a built environment»: a recurring theme in the project of «progressive» pedagogy in order to better attune the school to the needs of the developing child⁶.

Concerning the nature of those «built environments», or simply «the architectural», one can discern a similar continuum in the work of various theorists with reference to «the visual»⁷. Sometimes it is suggested that it can (and should) be «read» (and reread) as a «text» or «discourse»⁸. Other times one implies that it conducts «relations of power and bonds» as a pure, non-verbal medium and can only be (and effectively should be) experienced⁹. Not infrequently, however, the architectural, as a conductor of «hierarchies, values, principles of order and classification, mental representations and, as such, more or less evident real or symbolic meanings» gets ascribed the statute of an hybrid

dei progetti, Milano, Real casa Ulrico Hoepli, 1927, p. 1.

³ The four cases are open-air schools from France, Belgium, Germany and Italy; countries that respectively in 1922, 1931, 1936 and 1949 organised an international congress on open-air schools (or education) and thereby contributed to the promotion of a so-called «open-air school movement».

⁴ See for instance: M. Lawn, I. Grosvenor (eds.), *Materialities of schooling. Design, technology, objects, routines*, Oxford, Symposium books, 2005.

⁵ Cartography is a concept that, according to Marc Depaepe, goes back to Richard Rorty. See: M. Depaepe, *Geen ambacht zonder werktuigen. Reflecties over de conceptuele omgang met het pedagogisch verleden*, in M. Depaepe, F. Simon and A. Van Gorp (eds.), *Paradoxen van pedagogisering. Handboek pedagogische historiografie*, Leuven/Voorburg, Acco, 2005, p. 28.

⁶ N. Peim, *Afterword. Towards a social ecology of the modern school: reflections on histories of the governmental environment of schooling*, «Paedagogica Historica», 41/4-5, 2005, p. 634.

⁷ G. Thyssen, *Visualizing discipline of the body in a German open-air school (1923-1939): retrospection and introspection*, «History of Education», 36/2, 2007, pp. 249-251.

⁸ M. Lawn and I. Grosvenor, *Introduction. The materiality of schooling*, in Id. (ed.), *Materialities of schooling. Design, technology, objects, routines*, cit., p. 9.

⁹ Markus, *Buildings & power. Freedom & control in the origin of modern building types*, cit., pp. XX, 5.

form¹⁰. Be this as it may, it appears that there is agreement within the new cultural, pedagogical historiography from a general interest in «knowledge and reason» and «relations of knowledge and the social»¹¹ that the architectural, as well as the visual, is not only physical or material, but «social»¹².

Analogous with the visual, and regardless of which view one has about the semiotic nature of architecture and architectural «codes»¹³, one understands the architectural as something that in and of itself does not «have» any meaning. As an «unfolding serial event, [...] as a narrative»¹⁴ architecture each time anew «acquires» meaning. The meaning that it conducts as a site of «social construction» essentially comes from two sides. On the one hand – and this has been pointed out a long time ago – architecture assigns people a place in the space and «channels them, their circulation as well as the encoding of their mutual relationships»¹⁵. In this way it functions as a «political technology» that, through control and power steers individuals and makes their bodies «docile»¹⁶. On the other hand architecture also mediates the «consumption» of this kind of social «production». Both sides of the coin deserve the attention of the historical-pedagogical researcher, some scholars have stressed¹⁷. In what follows, that advice is taken to heart; to start with by the creation of the holiday camp of the later open-air school.

¹⁰ A. Viñao, *The school head's office as territory and place: location and physical layout in the first Spanish graded schools*, in Lawn, Grosvenor (eds.), *Materialities of schooling. Design, technology, objects, routines*, cit., p. 49. Viñao defines school architecture as «material discourse» and «a nonverbal language». *Ibid.*, 68.

¹¹ T.S. Popkewitz, B.M. Franklin and M.A. Pereyra, *History, the problem of knowledge, and the new cultural history of schooling*, in Id. (ed.), *Cultural history and education. Critical essays on knowledge and schooling*, New York/London, Routledge Falmer, 2001, p. 4.

¹² Compare: Markus, *Buildings & power. Freedom & control in the origin of modern building types*, cit., p. I; I. Grosvenor «*The art of seeing*»: *promoting design in education in 1930's England*, «*Paedagogica Historica*», 41/4-5, 2005, p. 532.

¹³ Gottdiener and Lagopoulos distinguish in this regard idealistic models rooted in structuralism, structuralistic linguistics and pure semiotics, and neo-Marxist models rooted in socio-semiotics. See: M. Gottdiener, A.Ph. Lagopoulos, *Introduction*, in Id., (ed.), *The city and the sign. An introduction to urban semiotics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 3-51.

¹⁴ Markus, *Buildings & power. Freedom & control in the origin of modern building types*, cit., p. 5.

¹⁵ M. Foucault, *Space, knowledge and power*, in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault reader*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1984, p. 253.

¹⁶ S.M. Low, *Spatializing culture: the social production and social construction of public space in Costa Rica*, «*American Ethnologist*», 23, 1996, p. 862.

¹⁷ Grosvenor, «*The art of seeing*»: *promoting design in education in 1930's England*, cit., p. 532.

2. *A landscape of health*

Trotter, as the Milanese institute which is researched here was called, grew out of – as had happened before in Italy, Belgium and The Netherlands¹⁸ – a «holiday camp» that was only active in the summer into a genuine «open-air school» that was open the whole year and continued to set up «colonies» on its domain, in this case during the vacation periods and other free days¹⁹. The domain on which this occurred had been a horse racetrack, situated on the periphery of Milan, in the town of Turro which since 1917 had become a part of the city²⁰. Since 1918 the most «indigent» children from the city of Milan were able to experience the benefits of «natural» cures that included, among others, «hygienic» gymnastics, «air baths», sun baths, «ablutions» (the rinsing off of the body with water), «serene» playing and singing, and a neither too «excessive» nor too «stimulating» diet²¹. In 1919 the city council of Milan succeeded in acquiring a large domain of approximately 125,000 square meters²².

The story goes that thanks to just one man, between 1918 and 1921, 960 poor, weakened creatures had already enjoyed the holiday camp²³, and that the open-air school was started in the first place in spite of «considerable difficulties»,

¹⁸ Compare: P.P. Penzo, *Italian cities and open-air schools (1907-1931)*, in A.-M. Châtelet, D. Lerch, J.-N. Luc (eds.), *Open-air schools. An educational and architectural venture in twentieth-century Europe*, Paris, Éditions Recherches, 2003, p. 146; E. Taverne, D. Broekhuizen, *Clio revisited. Doctors, teachers and open-air schools in the Netherlands (1905-1931)*, *ibid.*, p. 110; M. Depaepe, F. Simon, G. Thyssen, *Vernieuwing in de franjes. Openluchtscholen en de traditie van pedagogisering*, in Depaepe, Simon and Van Gorp (eds.), *Paradoxen van pedagogisering. Handboek pedagogische historiografie*, cit., pp. 425-427; G. Thyssen, *Openluchtscholen... Iets nieuws onder de zon, behalve lucht?*, in *Actes des VII^e congrès de l'association des cercles francophones d'histoire et d'archéologie de Belgique (AFCHAB) et LIV^e congrès de la fédération des cercles et d'archéologie et d'histoire de Belgique. Congrès d'Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve. 26,27 et 28 août 2004*, Brussels, Éditions Safran, pp. 133-134.

¹⁹ For a relatively critical and visually rich account of the Italian holiday camps, in which special attention is paid to their architecture, see: S. de Martino, A. Wall (eds.), *Cities of Childhood. Italian Colonie of the 1930s*, London, The Architectural Association, 1988.

²⁰ Archivio della scuola «Casa del Sole» di Milano, [S. Bortolotto], *Architettura e ambiente al Parco Trotter*, ACER, CDRom, Milan, 1992.

²¹ A. Albertini, *La scuola all'aperto e la colonia di cure naturali al Trotter*, Milan, Ceretti e C., 1921, pp. 6, 9. The school originally adopted a completely vegetarian diet. In 1934 it was said experience had taught that meat twice a week was appropriate. See: Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 3: Casa del sole, *Indice*, 1934, p. 28.

²² Numbers varied between 123.400,00 m², 127.600,00 m² and 128.000,00 m². Compare: L. Cremaschi, *Bimbi al sole. Dieci anni*, «Bimbi al Sole», 2004, p. 3 [Reproduction of a separate issue of May 1955]; Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 2: scuola all'aperto Umberto di Savoia, *Monografia della regia scuola speciale già comunale «Umberto di Savoia» (Scuola all'aperto)*, 1937, p. 4; D. Barra (ed.), 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell'Infanzia a Milano*, Milan, La città del sole-Amici del parco Trotter, 2005, p. 5.

²³ Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 3: Casa del sole, *Indice*, cit., p. 1.

chiefly of a financial nature²⁴. That man was Luigi Veratti²⁵, alderman for hygiene and health at the time and a well-known physician and hygienist who for several years was the chairman of the Royal Society of Hygiene of Milan. It was indeed Veratti who commissioned the technical department of Milan to draw up the project for a large open-air school, after determining the possible benefits of such a project for numbers of children that could not all possibly be sent to the mountains or to the sea at the expense of the city. It is, however, clear that the founding of the school was no less the result of a generally prevailing discourse that helped to construct the target group through the use of categories such as «delicate» or «fragile» children, and which delineated all kinds of strategies aimed at the target group.

More specifically, the creation of the holiday camp and the open-air school can be understood in the framework – especially since the eighteenth century – of the increasing medicalisation²⁶ and hygienisation²⁷ of the society: international or transnational processes in which health problems were not only considered as health and as social problems, but also as «spatial» problems. The latter was perhaps not new, but still the «spatial» aspect gained importance and since the nineteenth century was no longer so much a question of architecture or of architects in the pure sense²⁸, but of politicians and especially physicians. Even educators, in The Netherlands for example, sometimes hardly played a meaningful role²⁹. That remained the case until the beginning of the twentieth century when holiday camps and open-air schools began to differentiate themselves and shot up out the ground, not coincidentally, like toadstools

²⁴ «Milano, Rivista Mensile del Comune», 47, 1931, p. 339.

²⁵ On rare occasions such as a commemoration of his decease, was the first school principal, Carlo Quaroni, mentioned as a co-founder, but usually Luigi Veratti was honoured as the sole founder. He himself «forgot» to mention Carlo Quaroni as a co-founder in the school register. Compare: «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 1/4, 1930, p. 4; «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 2/6, 1931, p. 2; «Zeitschrift des Internationales Komitees für Freiluftschulen», 5, 1935, pp. 7-14.

²⁶ A recent publication that clarifies these concepts is the following: P. Verstraete, *Macht en onmacht in het orthopedagogisch werkveld. Foucault en de zorg voor personen met een mentale handicap in de 19^{de} eeuw*, Leuven/Voorburg, Acco, 2004.

²⁷ Hygienists were not always doctors, but also teachers, engineers and public servants. By no means were they necessarily representative for their respective occupational groups. See: L. Nys, H. de Smaele, J. Tollebeek, K. Wils, *Een medisch object. Veranderingen in menswetenschap, cultuur en politiek*, in Id., (ed.), *De zieke natie. Over de medicalisering van de samenleving. 1860-1914*, Groningen, Historische Uitgeverij, 2002, p. 17; and L. Nys, *Nationale plagen. Hygiënisten over het maatschappelijk lichaam, ibid.*, pp. 221-222.

²⁸ Foucault, *Space, knowledge and power*, cit., pp. 243-244.

²⁹ Compare: D. Broekhuizen, *Openluchtscholen in Nederland. Architectuur, onderwijs en gezondheidszorg. 1905-2005*, Rotterdam, Uitgeverij 010, 2005, pp. 125, 140-142, 150; and C. Griep, J. Spier, *75 jaar licht en lucht. Eerste openluchtschool voor het gezonde kind*, Amsterdam, Stichting voor openluchtscholen voor het gezonde kind, 2005, p. 14.

on the periphery or outside of cities³⁰. In these «new» institutions – the differences with preventoria and other institutions was «as yet» negligible, even the propagandists of the open-air school admitted³¹ – one was obliged to accommodate those «disinherited of fortune» who due to «the danger that they [posed] for the school community had to be culled»³². Moreover not only the open-air aspect but also the open-air school building itself, that just like other institutions were reputed to bring «purity», became a metaphor for morality and decency³³.

3. *Architecture of the self*

The original design of the Milanese open-air school from the hand of engineer Giuseppe Folli included not less than twelve school pavilions for approximately 160 children, a block for medical, administrative and kitchen facilities (for which the plans would later be adjusted), a film theatre, a gigantic open-air swimming pool (60 by 30 meters – bigger than an Olympic swimming pool), and tennis courts, skating rinks and courts for ball sports³⁴. The spatial arrangement of the school was determined chiefly by the elliptical form of the racetrack that had to be preserved because the racetrack association was allowed to continue to use the domain until 1925³⁵. Ostensibly it was then also pragmatically argued that the racetrack was «most suitable» for activities such as footraces, walking, cycling and heliotherapy (series of sun baths gradually

³⁰ As others have pointed out, «the very location» of such institutes was «an educational act», that was mainly inspired by concerns about «decency». Compare: J.-N. Luc, *Open-air schools: unearthing a history*, in: Châtelet, Lerch and Luc (eds.), *Open-air schools. An educational and architectural venture in twentieth-century Europe*, cit., p. 16; and G. Frisoni, E. Gavazza, M. Orsolini and M. Simini, *Origins and history of the colonie*, in S. de Martino, A. Wall, (eds.), *Cities of Childhood. Italian Colonie of the 1930s*, cit., p. 8.

³¹ U. Perucci, *Esercitazioni fisiche e ginnastica [più particolarmente indicate pei fanciulli gracili delle scuole e colonie all'aperto. Relazione del M.° Cav. Ugo Perucci al congresso internazionale degli amici dell'educazione fisica – Venezia, 11-12-13 1931-IX]*, Milan, Patronato Generale – Opere Integrative Assistenziali e Post-scolastiche – Scuola all'aperto “Umberto di Savoia”, 1931, pp. 7-8.

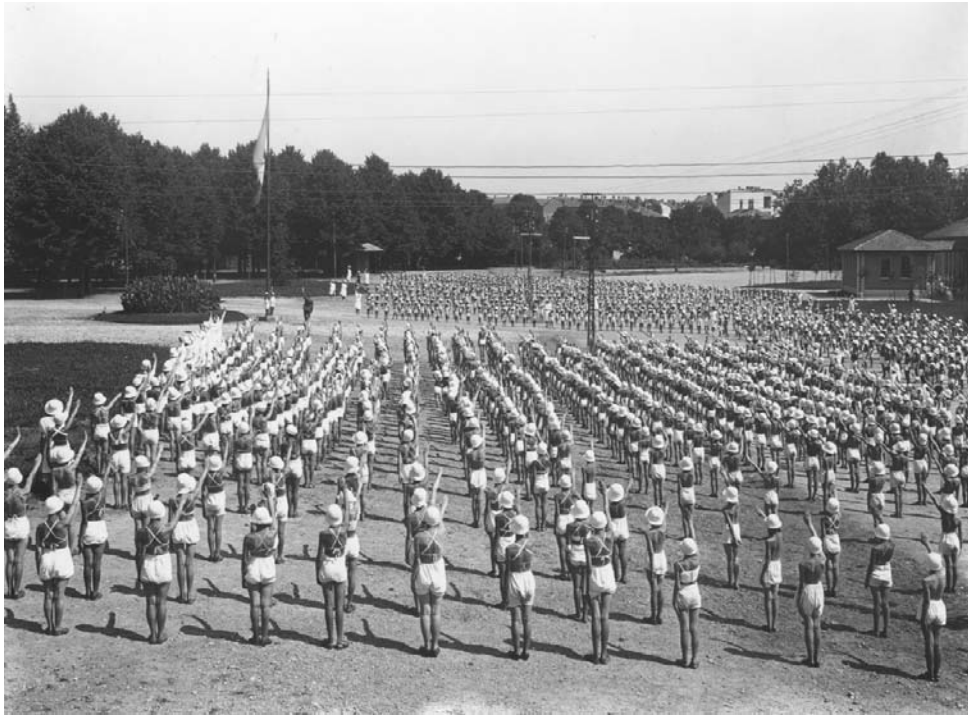
³² Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 2: *Scuola all'aperto Umberto di Savoia*, [L. Veratti], [Ommagio] *L'école de plein air pour les enfants faibles. Rapport présenté au II^e congrès international de technique sanitaire et d'hygiène urbaine, Lyon 6-9 Mars 1932*, [Lyon, Imprimeries Réunies,] 1932, p. 6.

³³ Compare: A. Saint, *Early days of the English open-air school (1907-1930)*, in: Châtelet, Lerch and Luc (eds.), *Open-air schools. An educational and architectural venture in twentieth-century Europe*, cit., p. 73; Markus, *Buildings & power. Freedom & control in the origin of modern building types*, cit., p. 155.

³⁴ Archivio Civico di Milano, Fondo finanze-beni comunali, Fascicolo 208: Finanze, 1919-1926, [G. Folli], *Progetto di una scuola all'aperto nel recinto del Trotter nel riparto di Turro. Relazione tecnica, 30 luglio 1919*, pp. 1-4.

³⁵ Penzo, *Italian cities and open-air schools (1907-1931)*, cit., p. 146.

built up under the supervision of a physician)³⁶. In addition two grandstands with crush barriers were originally kept to split the children up into different groups for hygienic activities and to allow the parents and authorities to view gymnastic demonstrations when the opportunity arose³⁷.



Pic. 1. Gymnastics in the open air (1920s).

From: D. Barra, ed. by, 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell'Infanzia a Milano*, «La città del sole-Amici del parco Trotter», Milan, 2005, p. 19.

In 1922 the first three pavilions, the film theatre and a block for medical and administrative functions were built, so that on the 8th of May of that year a group of 450 children were already admitted to the school³⁸. Sources and works contradict each other with respect to the exact year in which the school was officially dedicated and designated «Umberto di Savoia»³⁹. In any case, by

³⁶ Archivio Storico di Milano, Fondo pubblicazioni, [A. Albertini], *La scuola all'aperto e la colonia di cure naturali al Trotter*, [Milan, Ceretti e C.], 1921, p. 3.

³⁷ Archivio Civico di Milano, Fondo finanze-beni comunali, Fascicolo 208: Finanze, 1919-1926, [G. Folli], *Progetto di una scuola all'aperto nel recinto del Trotter nel riparto di Turro. Relazione tecnica*, 30 luglio 1919, cit., pp. 1-4.

³⁸ Compare: Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 3: Casa del sole, *Indice*, cit., p. 80; «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 1/5-6, 1930, pp. 6-7.

³⁹ Recent adherents of the open-air school claim this happened only in 1925, but elsewhere it is referred to 1924 as the official foundation year. Compare: «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 2/4, 1931, p. 5; and Barra (ed.), 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell'Infanzia a Milano*, cit., p. 5.

1928 the project was revised by the engineers Luigi Secchi and, at least for the *Casa dei Bambini*, by Luigi Beretta⁴⁰.

Although the number of pavilions would be reduced to ten – instead of two of the pavilions, half-open solariums would be built – another ambition was gaining substance: that of a boarding school, integrated in the day school and intended for approximately 160 (morally and physically) exceptionally «vulnerable» children. The boarding school would be the crowning achievement of the «regenerative and preventive action»⁴¹ undertaken by the administration of Milan and especially of the newly-formed patronage. So in May 1928, when the last pavilion and the solariums were established and the swimming pool was in working order, the boarding school *Casa del Sole* opened its doors for a first group of eighty resident pupils. In 1929, several constructions, such as the public grandstands, would be taken down while others, including a small farm with various stalls and even a chapel would complete the complex⁴².

The latter is not without meaning: the addition of a genuine fully-equipped «children's village» with all necessities on hand had to rectify what until then seemed to be a recurring deficiency. Namely, that every Sunday during the mass in the parish of Turro, family members gathered the children close, kissed them and filled their pockets with sweets that, according to the parents, could not always be taken away from them. According to the founders of the open-air school, this led to digestion problems and the risk of infection⁴³. Thus, the school space also had to function as a means of confinement against external influences, like a «container», though not in a neutral or passive sense⁴⁴. Nevertheless, to the regret of some, the boundaries remained permeable; they asserted that a tavern that was practically adjacent to the sick rooms, dressing rooms and dormitories of the boarding school could, among other things, lead to communication and – worse still – smuggling behaviour⁴⁵. This appears to be a confirmation of the fact that the buildings of the open-air school also worked

⁴⁰ See: Secchi, *Edifici scolastici Italiani primari e secondari. Norme tecnico-igieniche per lo studio dei progetti*, cit., p. 132.

⁴¹ «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 2/8, 1931, p. 2.

⁴² Equipping holiday camps (and schools) like these with special farms was not unusual. Thus, it has been contended, «the regime's autarchic policy was restated in the microcosm of Colonia life». See: G. Frisoni, E. Gavazza, M. Orsolini and M. Simini, *Origins and history of the colonie*, cit., p. 8.

⁴³ Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 3: Casa del sole, *Casa del Sole*, June-July 1931. See also: E. Nonnoi, *Convitto di prevenzione anti-tubercolare annesso alla scuola all'aperto «Umberto di Savoia» di Milano*, in *Second congrès international des écoles de plein air. Bruxelles 6-11 avril 1931. Rapports et comptes rendus*, Brussels, Ancienne Librairie Castaigne, 1931, pp. 291-293.

⁴⁴ C. Burke, *Introduction. Containing the school child: architectures and pedagogies*, «Paedagogica Historica», 41/4-5, 2005, pp. 489-490.

⁴⁵ Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 3: Casa del sole, *Casa del Sole*, cit.

as «spaces for resistance and sites of contested desires [...] places where power is wielded»⁴⁶, no matter how much its architecture was intended to promote control.

For example, the boarding school building was designed in a way that was anything but haphazard. Not only did it radically separate the boys from the girls, it also made the supervision of both sexes easier. To this end, the dormitories did not open out onto a hallway, but were connected to each other or were directly connected to a room which was intended for the supervising personnel⁴⁷. In this way, as an instrument of management, the school architecture exerted not only control, but it also formed and modelled the identity of the individual through the body, firstly as «boy» or «girl». This made it, in the words of one scholar, an «architecture of the self»⁴⁸ – or what others would call a «third teacher»⁴⁹ a form of pedagogy itself, as it were. Just as the schedules that prescribed the daily rhythm, the architecture determined the degree of freedom of movement and in this way it «colonised» «the soul»⁵⁰. However, the question remains whether it concerned «innovative» architecture.



Pic. 2. Dormitory of the boarding school «Casa del Sole» (1950s).
With the kind permission of «La Città del Sole-Amici del Parco Trotter», Milan.

⁴⁶ Burke, *Introduction. Containing the school child: architectures and pedagogies*, cit., p. 492.

⁴⁷ Secchi, *Edifici scolastici Italiani primari e secondari. Norme tecnico-igieniche per lo studio dei progetti*, cit., s.p. [Tav. 8 and 9].

⁴⁸ Peim, *Afterword. Towards a social ecology of the modern school: reflections on histories of the governemental environment of schooling*, cit., pp. 628, 635-636.

⁴⁹ H. Kemnitz, *Schulbau jenseits der Norm: Hans Scharouns Mädchengymnasium in Lünen*, «Paedagogica Historica», 41/4-5, 2005, p. 605.

⁵⁰ A. Staiger, *School walls as battle grounds; technologies of power, space and identity*, «Paedagogica Historica», 41/4-5, 2005, p. 568.

4. *An iconic building?*

At the Second International Congress for Open-air Schools that took place in Brussels in 1931⁵¹ the Milanese school reportedly received the highest recognition even though, strikingly enough, the same was alleged from Diesterweg, the Kalmthout school colony⁵². The story goes that no one less than Elisabeth, the Queen of Belgium, under whose «high patronage» the Congress stood, was so impressed by the project when she saw the four meter square scale model of the school at the Congress exhibition, that she promised to visit the school immediately as soon as she arrived during her next visit to Italy⁵³.

Without doubt the project, which was started under the auspices of the socialistic city council of Mayor Emilio Caldara, but was to a large extent completed under the fascist regime⁵⁴, was part of a megalomaniacal urban development program. However, the typology, i.e., the concept of several pavilions instead of one single compact block, which according to reports was modern architecture's answer to didactic requirements and which was related to the idea of «little families» within a «large family»⁵⁵, was not as new as some authors assert⁵⁶. That idea had already been applied inside of Italy (at the open-air school in Bologna in 1917, among others)⁵⁷ as well as outside of Italy (for example, at the Uffculme School in Birmingham dated 1911)⁵⁸. The reasons for this were, in this case at any rate, diverse. The children would experience a pavilion less as a «school barracks». They would get less of an impression that they «sat crowded together in barracks» and were strictly disciplined «according to rules that were all the more necessary in large communities».

⁵¹ See: *Second congrès international des écoles de plein air. Bruxelles 6-11 avril 1931. Rapports et comptes rendus*, cit.; and *Exposition internationale des écoles en plein air. Du 7 avril au 30 mai 1931, Bruxelles. Catalogue*, Brussels, Ancienne Librairie Castaigne, 1931.

⁵² «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 2/8, 1931, p. 1; Perucci, *Esercitazioni fisiche e ginnastica [più particolarmente indicate per fanciulli gracili delle scuole e colonie all'aperto. Relazione del M.° Cav. Ugo Perucci al congresso internazionale degli amici dell'educazione fisica – Venezia, 11-12-13 1931-IX]*, cit., p. 6; «Diesterweg's Hulpkas voor Behoeftige Schoolkinderen», 38/5, 1931, pp. 1-2. The Milanese open-air school would have received a «honorary diploma» and the «grand prize»; the Kalmthout school colony the «golden medal».

⁵³ «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 2/6, 1931, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Barra (ed.), 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell'Infanzia a Milano*, cit., p. 5; Penzo, *Italian cities and open-air schools (1907-1931)*, cit., p. 145.

⁵⁵ Archivio della scuola «Casa del Sole» di Milano, *La scuola all'aperto "Casa del sole"*, Milan, 1968, s.p.

⁵⁶ E. Bordogna, *Trotter: scuola all'aperto, Turro: dal dettato pedagogico l'innovazione tipologica*, in G. Fiorese (ed.), *Milano, zona dieci, Loreto, Monza, Padova*, Milan, Informazione Comunicazione Immagine, 1986, p. 96.

⁵⁷ Penzo, *Italian cities and open-air schools (1907-1931)*, cit., p. 145.

⁵⁸ F. Wilmot, P. Saul, *A Breath of Fresh Air: Birmingham's Open-Air Schools 1911-1970*, Chichester, Phillimore, 1998.

They would have more opportunity to assuage their «need for space to observe and experiment in nature» because the classroom lead out by way of terraces onto the school domain, et cetera⁵⁹.

Although Umberto di Savoia's school pavilions could be called ahead of their time according to the hygienic norms regarding lighting, ventilation and capacity, the engineers, by their own account, limited themselves to the model of the Swiss chalet⁶⁰. They justified the soberness of their design by dictating that each pavilion would be surrounded by a certain amount of space and greenery, and that «decorative ostentation» was unnecessary⁶¹. The design was considered «exemplary» for contemporary and prospective school architecture in Milan during the entire interbellum period, for insiders as well as for outsiders⁶². Yet if one compares it with buildings like those of the Uffculme School, they could hardly be called innovative. The same seems to apply to the other buildings of the school. Likewise, they already fit within the trend of eclecticism in the Italian architecture of the day, which tended toward the neo-renaissance style for the headquarters of authoritative agencies and toward a more popular, neo-romantic and folkloristic style for buildings that served the masses⁶³.

If this open-air school, like many other ones⁶⁴, was not an architectural «innovation», does that automatically exclude it from being considered an architectural «icon»? Probably, this depends on how iconicity is defined.

The term icon itself originates from the Greek word *eikon*. Within Plato's philosophy, a distinction was made between *eidos* (the form) and *eidolon* (the visible image), which provided a mere «likeness» of the form: an *eikon*⁶⁵.

Within semiotics, on the other hand, an icon is traditionally regarded as

⁵⁹ Archivio della scuola «Casa del Sole» di Milano, *Il padiglione selezione*, CDRom, Milan, 1992.

⁶⁰ Archivio Civico di Milano, Fondo finanze-beni comunali, Fascicolo 208: Finanze, 1919-1926, [G. Folli], *Progetto di una scuola all'aperto nel recinto del Trotter nel riparto di Turro. Relazione tecnica*, 30 luglio 1919, pp. 1-4; Archivio Storico di Milano, Fondo pubblicazioni, [A. Albertini], *La scuola all'aperto e la colonia di cure naturali al Trotter*, [Milan, Ceretti e C.], 1921, p. 5.

⁶¹ Archivio Storico di Milano, Fondo pubblicazioni, [A. Albertini], *La scuola all'aperto e la colonia di cure naturali al Trotter*, [Milan, Ceretti e C.], 1921, p. 5.

⁶² Compare: «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 6, 1935, p. 1 [Separate issue of January 1935]; and Bordogna, *Trotter: scuola all'aperto, Turro: dal dettato pedagogico l'innovazione tipologica*, cit., p. 99.

⁶³ Bordogna, *Trotter: scuola all'aperto, Turro: dal dettato pedagogico l'innovazione tipologica*, cit., p. 98.

⁶⁴ Depaepe, Simon, Thyssen, *Vernieuwing in de franjes. Openluchtscholen en de traditie van pedagogisering*, cit., p. 434. See also: M. D'hoker, *De lagere-schoolgebouwen in België in de 19de eeuw: een kwantitatieve, kwalitatieve en architectonische benadering*. In F. Simon (ed.), *Liber amicorum Karel De Clerck*, Gent, 2000; L. Verpoest, *Twee eeuwen scholenbouw*, Brussel, 1992; and Th. Müller, R. Schneider (eds.), *Das Klassenzimmer. Schulmöbel im 20. Jahrhundert*, München/New York, 1998.

⁶⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 5.

the opposite of the verbal sign, namely: an image or a picture⁶⁶. Within that discipline, however, it has always been a central anomaly, at least according to some «visual theorists»⁶⁷. They consider definitions of iconicity, in terms of «any sign that may represent its object mainly by its similarity»⁶⁸, to be highly problematic, not only because «similarity is such a capacious relationship that almost anything can be assimilated into it»⁶⁹, but, more importantly, because the whole concept of «sign», drawn from linguistics, is inappropriate to define iconicity in general⁷⁰.

However interesting that may be, within histories of education, the notion of iconicity is more commonly related to people than to buildings. In that case, icons are sometimes defined as «stylised figures that represent historical (or at least historically imaginable) examples of behaviour worthy of imitation, in a purified form [...] in an idealised image or discourse»⁷¹. Similar notions of iconicity include examples that are not necessarily worthy of imitation or idealisation⁷², but are nevertheless part of our collective memory. Such notions are in keeping with a more intuitive concept of iconicity that can be applied to buildings as well, namely that of the icon as a symbol, a crystallisation or translation of whatever something or someone stands for at a certain moment. Thereby an icon's referentiality need not merely be representational; it could also include a projection of future possibilities⁷³, and have less to do with factuality than with memorisability and recognisability⁷⁴. Moreover, it could be argued that icons are not universal and eternal, but essentially constructed and reconstructed by convention⁷⁵. Finally, the survival of an icon depends partly on the force of the image that it projects, and the amount of times it is reproduced.

That being said, if one were to term one open-air school «iconic» because it helped crystallize pedagogical and hygienic insights that were disseminated through congresses, exhibitions and the press, it would probably not be the institute studied here. One would rather take the school of Johannes (or Jan) Duiker (and Bernard Bijvoet) in Amsterdam dated 1930⁷⁶ with its «slender concrete and glass construction», its «revolutionary» heating system and

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁶⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell thereby refers to a definition of C.S. Peirce.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁷¹ W. Frijhoff, *Iconen, idolen en idealen van onderwijs en opvoeding op de golfslag van de beendvorming*, in D.J. de Ruyter, G.D. Bertram-Troost, S.M.A. Sieckelink (eds.), *Idealen, idolen en iconen van de pedagogiek*, Amsterdam, SWP, 2005, p. 20.

⁷² W. Frijhoff, *Heilige idolen, iconen*, Nijmegen, Sun, 1998, p. 52.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Broekhuizen, *Openluchtscholen in Nederland. Architectuur, onderwijs en gezondheidszorg. 1905-2005*, cit., pp. 20-56.

vertical organisation that «fired one’s imagination»⁷⁷. Its iconicity is partly due to the fact that the building was always photographed from the same angle, which did not guarantee that it was immediately «successful “in the sense of an imitable model”»⁷⁸. One could also choose a school like that of Eugène Baudoin and Marcel Lods in Suresnes (dated 1935), which likewise symbolized the «hygienic» or «modern» architectural style and which, along with the Dutch school, was exhibited as a beacon of modernity in Alfred Roth’s *The New School* (1950)⁷⁹.

Contrary to the Amsterdam school, the Milanese school was not a building in the true sense of the word, but, in the words of its adherents, a «children’s village»⁸⁰, which did not lend itself to being captured in one image; however, this did not make it less deserving of praise for the way in which it fulfilled juvenile needs. Whether the latter was actually the case, is difficult to say. As some scholars have rightly stressed, the children themselves were not involved in reform-pedagogical building projects like these. The «spiritual» and «psychological» elements that shaped such designs postulated the juvenile character as an assumed given, while producing a certain version of childhood and development that then became personified by the child precisely in the temporal-spatial form and organisation of the building⁸¹.

5. *Avant-garde education?*

Nevertheless, there is much to say about the «appropriation» of pedagogical systems within the more or less child-directed and innovative school architecture of open-air schools. In this way, one can ascertain that Roth wrote that the education in the Duiker school was very individualised and took shape according to the Dalton system, among others⁸². This had everything to do with the fact that the school director at the time, Piet Bakkum, was a prominent adherent of Helen Parkhurst⁸³. After the Second World War, as a school inspector in Amsterdam, he would play an important role in the areas of education and

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, s.p. [Book cover].

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143; and Taverne, Broekhuizen, *Clio revisited. Doctors, teachers and open-air schools in the Netherlands (1905-1931)*, cit., p. 110.

⁷⁹ A. Roth, *The new school*, Zürich, Girsberger, 1950. Roth epitomised the movement of the so-called «Nieuwe Bouwen».

⁸⁰ «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all’Aperto “Umberto di Savoia” (ex-Trotter) Milano», 2/8, 1931, p. 2.

⁸¹ Peim, *Afterword. Towards a social ecology of the modern school: reflections on histories of the governmental environment of schooling*, cit., pp. 634-636.

⁸² Roth, *The new school*, cit., p. 187.

⁸³ See for instance: P. Bakkum, *Daltononderwijs op de lagere school*, Groningen, Wolters, 1953.

school architecture. Under his influence schools were built which included «Dalton-corners». According to some architectural historians, these were not always used for the purposes intended, namely, individual work in an informal atmosphere, but as junk corners for storing the children's materials⁸⁴. Whether that was the case in the Duiker School is still the question; just as it is unclear whether the school can truly be considered «an icon» of «*Befreites Lernen*» as was asserted in a recent publication⁸⁵. Mutatis mutandis this applies to the Milanese open-air school that according to adherents still stood «at the head of the pedagogical avant-garde»⁸⁶.

6. «*Viva il Duce*»: representations of fascistisation

In order to consider more closely the relationship between architectural and pedagogical knowledge within that institute, one could make a distinction between the period before the Second World War and the period thereafter. Yet in doing so one runs the risk of adopting the divide imposed by the self-rhetoric of the school. As was previously stated, the school, although conceived by socialists, entered into service only during fascism. Not only was *Il Duce* himself named honorary chairman of the patronage, as frequently occurred⁸⁷, but he also actually visited the school several times. This happened, among other reasons, because he was a personal friend of its founder, Veratti⁸⁸. Under Mussolini's auspices mass glorifications of fascism took place in which many hundreds of children marched in military formation, participated in swim or gymnastic competitions, depicted Roman scenes and sang songs that were especially loved by the fascists. By doing so, it was declared, «they rear themselves – spiritually and physically – for the life that [will] come and greet them, prepared fascistically for the tiring test of employment and labour in the

⁸⁴ These are the findings of H. de Man from interviews he conducted with former teachers concerning education and school construction in the Netherlands after the Second World War.

⁸⁵ Taverne, Broekhuizen, *Clio revisited. Doctors, teachers and open-air schools in the Netherlands (1905-1931)*, cit., p. 116.

⁸⁶ Barra (ed.), 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell'Infanzia a Milano*, cit., p. 16.

⁸⁷ Montessori, for instance, also succeeded in connecting Mussolini's name to her *Opera Montessori* and making certain that it, at least temporarily, enjoyed the protection the fascist regime. See: H. Leenders, *Montessori en fascistisch Italië. Een receptiegeschiedenis*, Baarn, Intro, 1999, p. 53.

⁸⁸ Compare: «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 1/9-12, 1930, p. 4; Leenders, *Montessori en fascistisch Italië. Een receptiegeschiedenis*, cit., p. 62. According to Leenders, Veratti was even on first-name terms with *Il Duce* in his correspondance with him, which was highly unusual.

offices and in the fields». «In this way» the school «shared the fascist concern for hygienic education and the re-education of the smallest beings»⁸⁹.



Pic. 3. Benito Mussolini, Luigi Veratti and other personalities at a school visit (1920s). From: D. Barra, ed. by, 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell'Infanzia a Milano*, «La città del sole-Amici del parco Trotter», Milan, 2005, p. 12.

Not everyone from the city administration was equally enthusiastic about such mass glorifications, and not only because of the fact that their preparation was at the expense of the «natural cures» and the instruction; still, they continued to take place throughout the nineteen thirties⁹⁰. However, fascism permeated into school life deeper than just at these occasional and official occasions⁹¹. Fascism permeated the everyday practices to such an extent that some authors speak of a «fascistisation» of the pedagogical principles of the school⁹²; a reinterpretation

⁸⁹ Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 2: *Scuola all'aperto Umberto di Savoia*, «Il Popolo d'Italia», 16/221, 1929, s.p.

⁹⁰ Compare: Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 3: *Casa del sole, Scuola Umberto di Savoia*, June-July 1931; Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 2: *Scuola all'aperto Umberto di Savoia*, «Pensiero Medico», 18/16, 1929, p. 647; Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 3: *Casa del sole, Indice*, cit., p. 33; «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 5, 1934, p. 2 [Separate issue of June 1934].

⁹¹ «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 1/9-12, 1930, p. 15.

⁹² The term (in Italian «fascistizzazione») is taken from, among others, Barra and Leenders. See Barra (ed.), 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell'Infanzia a Milano*, cit., p. 16; and Leenders, *Montessori en fascistisch Italië. Een receptiegeschiedenis*, cit., p. 86.

to the ideology of the regime of «innovative» concepts in their pure form such as «active instruction» and «educational positivism»⁹³. With this they seem to suggest that these principles, due to their dissonance with the idealistic and fascistic spirit of the ideology, were fundamentally altered or “forgotten” (read: ignored)⁹⁴. Nevertheless, it is shown by many studies in the Italian context, such as that of Leenders (about Maria Montessori) and that of Ostenc (about fascism in general)⁹⁵ as well as those in the German context (for example, with regard to the Jenaplan of Peter Petersen)⁹⁶ that contradictions do not have to be sought between the so-called reform-pedagogy and pedagogy of the new order, not only due to the fact that the fascistisation of the Italian school did not seem completely successful.

Umberto di Savoia specifically adopted the official school program for all sections of the school, namely the nursery school, the elementary school and the vocational school (comparable to the fourth level in Belgium), as was delineated in 1923 by Giovanni Gentile and Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, among others⁹⁷. If we are to believe the sources, this afforded the instructor not only generous opportunity to experiment with educational methods, but also the freedom to expand or restrict the program according to the individual needs of the children⁹⁸. Given that the school’s target group was reputed to be of «low human quality», the programs were indeed «adapted», namely «restricted» and «simplified». As one of the many directors of the school himself admitted, the school «had not devised any new methods»⁹⁹. One «let nature simply speak for itself» and made agriculture the core of education as Minister of Education Giuseppe Bottai had stipulated in his *Carta della Scuola*¹⁰⁰ according to the wishes

⁹³ Compare: Barra (ed.), 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell’Infanzia a Milano*, cit., pp. 4, 16; and Penzo, *Italian cities and open-air schools (1907-1931)*, cit., p. 142.

⁹⁴ The latter is contended also with regard to holiday camps, by G. Frisoni, E. Gavazza, M. Orsolini and M. Simini, *Origins and history of the colonie*, cit., p. 8.

⁹⁵ M. Ostenc, *L’éducation en Italie pendant le fascisme*, Paris, Sorbonne, 1980, p. 8.

⁹⁶ See, among other works: J. Oelkers, *Reformpädagogik. Eine kritische Dogmengeschichte*, Weinheim/München, Juventa, 1989; I. Hansen-Schaberg, B. Schonig, *Reformpädagogische Schulkonzepte*, band 3: *Jenaplan-Pädagogik*, Baltmannsweiler, Schneider Verlag Hohengehren, 2002.

⁹⁷ For more information, see: Leenders, *Montessori en fascistisch Italië. Een receptiegeschiedenis*, cit., pp. 49, 85, 89, 122.

⁹⁸ A. Fiori, *Programmi*, in *Second congrès international des écoles de plein air. Bruxelles 6-11 avril 1931. Rapports et comptes rendus*, cit., p. 185.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 184; Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 2: Scuola all’aperto Umberto di Savoia, *Monografia della regia scuola speciale già comunale «Umberto di Savoia» (Scuola all’aperto)*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁰ See, among other works: Ministero dell’Educazione Nazionale, *L’educazione all’aperto. Relazioni del comitato Italiano. Convegno italo-germanico settembre 1941-XIX per la preparazione del IV congresso internazionale dell’educazione all’aperto*, Roma, Ministero dell’Educazione Nazionale, 1941, pp. 7-14; Ministero dell’Educazione Nazionale, *Scuole Rurali*, Roma, Ministero dell’Educazione Nazionale, 1940.

of Mussolini, and in so doing installed a myth of rurality¹⁰¹. Except for that, the lessons were simply fractionalised somewhat more according to the typical rhythm of open-air schools with which they, by their own account, handled the same subjects in just three hours instead of in five as in the regular schools, so that enough time would remain for «natural and hygienic cures»¹⁰².

The fact that these cures required the children to be under the charge of the school for the entire day was considered to be ideal from the pedagogical viewpoint. In this way, the children remained under supervision while at the same time being able to enjoy the «continuous encouragement to be active»¹⁰³. Incidentally, the same objective was aimed at by the para-scholastic projects of the «little excursionists», a variation of the boy scouts, and, by their own account, forerunner of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* and the «feminine centurie Balilla Rosa Maltoni Mussolini», the self-professed predecessor of the *Piccole Italiane*. Both institutions were integrated into the curriculum of the school. They had to arouse the germ of the «strong, valiant soldier, perfect worker and honest citizen» in the boys and in the girls that of the «robust Italian housewives and mothers of tomorrow»¹⁰⁴.

Education in the fascist period seems to have gone, contrary to all of the rhetoric, according to what some would call a «grammar of schooling»: the formal rules to which (the keeping of) [nearly every] class and school complied¹⁰⁵ and which also seems to be represented through the many photographs of the school. In other words, the school's material environment did not lead necessarily to a new «school culture», to a new use of «space, time and communication»¹⁰⁶, on the contrary. The use of the school space that was established to allow the children, during good weather at any rate, to enjoy as wide a view as possible and maximum «openness in the presence of nature» (plants, animals, insects, *et cetera*), seems to have already hindered the normal course of events because noise and other stimuli impaired the child's attention for the teacher. It was claimed that this was only a small problem, given that the children as well as the adults adapted themselves quickly to these inconveniences. Moreover, the

¹⁰¹ Barra (ed.), 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell'Infanzia a Milano*, cit., p. 16.

¹⁰² Perucci, *Esercitazioni fisiche e ginnastica [più particolarmente indicate pei fanciulli gracili delle scuole e colonie all'aperto. Relazione del M.° Cav. Ugo Perucci al congresso internazionale degli amici dell'educazione fisica – Venezia, 11-12-13 1931-IX]*, cit., p. 14.

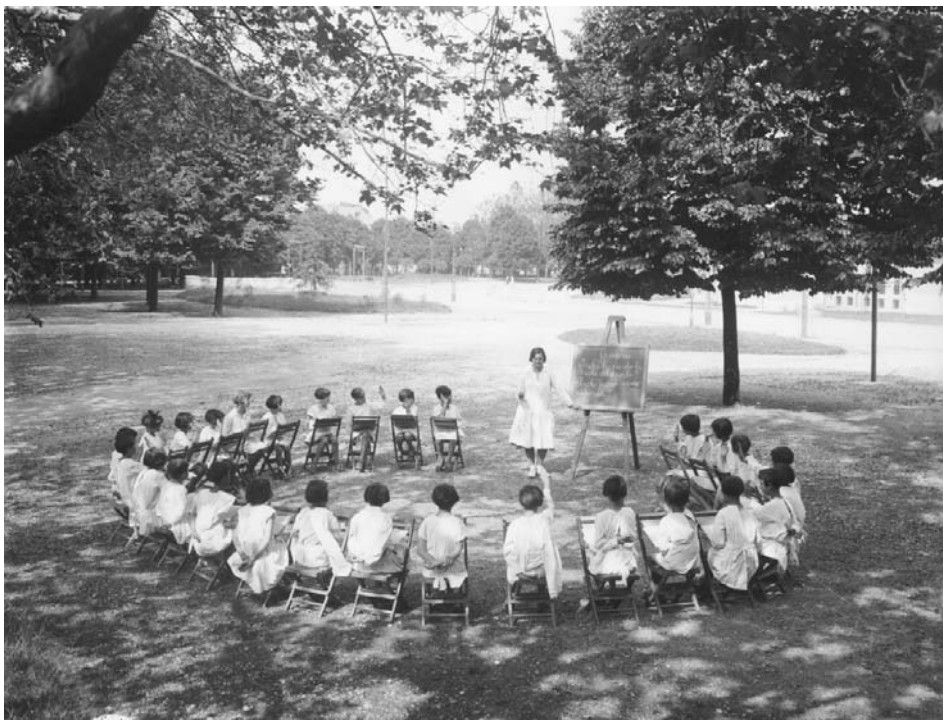
¹⁰³ Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 3: Casa del sole, *Indice*, cit., p. 52.

¹⁰⁴ See: «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 1/5-6, 1930, pp. 6-7; «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 1/7-8, 1930, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁵ Depaepe, *Geen ambacht zonder werktuigen. Reflecties over de conceptuele omgang met het pedagogisch verleden*, cit., p. 52. The concept «grammar of schooling» is taken from Larry Cuban.

¹⁰⁶ A. Viñao, *History of education and cultural history: possibilities, problems, questions*, in T.S. Popkewitz, B.M. Franklin, M.A. Pereyra (eds.), *Cultural history and education. Critical essays on knowledge and schooling*, cit., pp. 125-150.

problem could be easily solved, not only by always choosing the same corner of the school domain for the lessons, but also by installing a «reference point to the classroom», that would be even more efficient if it would have a «closed geometric form» and if didactic materials, like wall charts, would be used¹⁰⁷.



Pic. 4. Essay: «Why do I attend the open-air school? Why do I follow natural cures?» (1920s-1930s).

From: D. Barra, ed. by, 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell'Infanzia a Milano*, «La città del sole-Amici del parco Trotter», Milan, 2005, p. 3.

Yet apart from education a few things can be said about the pedagogical climate of the school in relationship to the built environment. Boarders as well as day students were allowed to enjoy a «well-understood freedom»¹⁰⁸. The children were officially allowed to move «freely» about the school domain¹⁰⁹, even though less official sources suggest that they had to stay on the racetrack

¹⁰⁷ «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 6, 1935, p. 1 [Separate issue of June 1935]; Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 3: Casa del sole, *Indice*, cit., p. 51.

¹⁰⁸ Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 2: Scuola all'aperto Umberto di Savoia, [L. Veratti], [*Ommagio*] *L'école de plein air pour les enfants faibles. Rapport présenté au II^e congrès international de technique sanitaire et d'hygiène urbaine, Lyon 6-9 Mars 1932*, cit., p. 5.

¹⁰⁹ Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 2: Scuola all'aperto Umberto di Savoia, *Monografia della regia scuola speciale già comunale «Umberto di Savoia» (Scuola all'aperto)*, p. 22.

and off of the lawns¹¹⁰; otherwise they would be punished – something from which Attilio Fiori, the third school director during the fascist period, did not shy away¹¹¹. According to him strict discipline was essential, given the size of the school and the large number of pupils. In general, however, the school atmosphere is brought into sharp contrast with the oppressive regime of the regular municipal schools¹¹². It was believed that discipline must come from within, not from external coercion, and that this actually was the case with most children. It was asserted that the occasions where «persuasion» alone did not work were rare, and even then serious punishments were not required¹¹³.

However, in 1939 an investigation was commissioned regarding the disciplinary measures that were used in the boarding school. These included, among other, that bed-wetters had to wrap their dirty linen around their heads in front of the others, or that children who had misbehaved had to stare at a wall for a long time, and in the case of disobedience, a «wonder pill» (purgative) had to be taken. Measures like these, of course, say little about the everyday school climate, let alone about the relationship between architecture and pedagogy. Regarding this relationship it can be noted that the school domain, at least until the Second World War, was literally divided in two: one section for the girls and one for the boys. The girls section included a pavilion with an «apartment» for the study of home economics, the pavilion with the nursery school and the day care centre. After the Second World War this was also the case, but from then on real co-education was gradually implemented. Whether classes separated by gender or not, calling the climate «feminine» would be an understatement. This did not have to do so much with the intention of the school to create a home or family feeling by, for example, having relatively few pupils per class, but more to do with the fact that the majority of the pupils and the majority of teachers were women while the «specialists» for agriculture, drawing and gymnastics education – not to mention singing and rhythmic – were men¹¹⁴. Whether or not the separation of the boys from the girls led to a radically different perception of the school remains far from clear. In general, however, complex relationships between the architectural design, the school

¹¹⁰ Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 2: Scuola all'aperto Umberto di Savoia, s.t., s.p. [Anonymous and undated letter of complaint about the maintenance of the school park].

¹¹¹ «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 2/5, 1931, p. 1.

¹¹² «Bimbi al Sole. Periodico Mensile della Scuola all'Aperto "Umberto di Savoia" (ex-Trotter) Milano», 5, 1934, p. 7 [Separate issue of June 1934].

¹¹³ Archivio Storico di Milano, Archivietto avv. Rivolta 27, Fascicolo 2: Scuola all'aperto Umberto di Savoia, *Monografia della regia scuola speciale già comunale «Umberto di Savoia» (Scuola all'aperto)*, p. 22.

¹¹⁴ Archivio della scuola «Casa del Sole» di Milano, *La scuola all'aperto "Casa del sole"*, cit., s.p.

climate and everyone's individual perception perhaps did not at all provide for an «unequivocal experience of being»¹¹⁵.

7. *Cooperation as a symbol of democracy*

The situation after the Second World War differs somewhat from the pre-war school regime, but yet again not as much as the self-rhetoric would have us believe. After the fall of the dictatorial regime the school took a new name, or better yet – the old name of the boarding school, *Casa del Sole*. Umberto di Savoia, after whom the school had been previously named, and by extension the whole royal family, had, after all, lost popularity and power as a result of their ties with Mussolini. Although superficial changes could be observed at the level of material culture, such as the placement of the school desks in «islands»¹¹⁶ much remained as it had been when the school laboriously started up again in 1947. An example of this is the «gender-tinted» and «class segregated» education, perhaps most notable in the vocational school which even though it was replaced after 1963 with a unified *scuola media* (the first three years of secondary education) meant the end of the study careers of nearly all of the pupils¹¹⁷ and heralded their admission into the «large family of the labourers»¹¹⁸. Specialisation courses were gradually provided in typing and electricity, and later also study grants for the most gifted. Meanwhile, this latter group of students could «culturally enrich» themselves at school with numerous «clubs» which were run by monitors and reportedly were just as much in demand as the courses¹¹⁹. But even the extracurricular activities are evidence of the meager difference with the previous period. Among others, the ritual of the hoisting and bringing down the «tricolour» was kept albeit on historical holidays when songs were sung out of a spirit of patriotism that were beloved during the fascist period¹²⁰.

¹¹⁵ Low, *Spatializing culture: the social production and social construction of public space in Costa Rica*, cit., p. 870.

¹¹⁶ Barra (ed.), 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell'Infanzia a Milano*, cit., p. 51. School desks had to symbolise the health and progressiveness of «new schools» all around the world. See: P.L.M. Martínez, *History of school desk development in terms of hygiene and Pedagogy in Spain (1838-1936)*, in Lawn, Grosvenor (eds.), *Materialities of schooling. Design, technology, objects, routines*, cit., pp. 71-95.

¹¹⁷ Archivio della scuola «Casa del Sole» di Milano, *La scuola all'aperto "Casa del sole"*, cit., s.p.

¹¹⁸ «Parlano i Ragazzi», 3/4, 1959, p. 1.

¹¹⁹ Compare: «Parlano i Ragazzi», 3/6, 1959, p. 1; «Parlano i Ragazzi», 5/5, 1961, p. 1.

¹²⁰ «Parlano i Ragazzi», 5/6, 1961, p. 2. See also: *Inni e canzoni della patria fascista*, s.l., Scuole Italiane all'estero, 1936-1937, p. 8.

Indeed, that ritual could not be (any longer) enjoyed by all of the children¹²¹.

A more fundamental difference with respect to the pre-war situation seems to be the organisation of the classes into cooperatives¹²² and the use of *giornalini di classe* in which the pupils themselves reported their experiences of the educational projects; this as a supplement to and a replacement for textbooks. In retrospect, the school likes to ascribe such matters to the influence of Célestin Freinet¹²³, even though the consulted sources reported his name only in connection with the typesetting machine that the children were allowed to use in order to execute their school projects.



Pic. 5. “Active education” on tables placed in little “islands” (1960s).

From: D. Barra, ed. by, 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell’Infanzia a Milano*, «La città del sole-Amici del parco Trotter», Milan, 2005, p. 51.

¹²¹ «Parlano i Ragazzi», 1/4, 1957, p. 1.

¹²² Apart from cooperatives that traded in flowers and plants, fowl and eggs, rabbits and dairy products, among other things, and – like in the «real world» – worked with statutes, leases, shares, cashbooks and the like, but were nevertheless always described in a somewhat giggly fashion because the children would just never manage them entirely like adults, arose also a guide corps, a slate club, a travel agency, a travelling library, a sports club, a first aid line, a group of philatelists and numismatists, and a health committee. Compare: G. Ieri, *Caseificio e cooperativa «Fiocco di panna»*, «Bimbi al Sole», 2004, pp. 13-14 [Reproduction of a separate issue of May 1955]; V. Laini, *Corpo «guide» della scuola, ibid.*, p. 9; P. Torazzi, *Biblioteca circolante «casa del sole»*, *ibid.*; «Parlano i Ragazzi», 2/1, 1958, p. 1; «Parlano i Ragazzi», 2/2, 1958, p. 4; «Parlano i Ragazzi», 3/1, 1959, p. 3; «Parlano i Ragazzi», 3/2, 1959, p. 3; and «Parlano i Ragazzi», 9/4, 1965, p. 1.

¹²³ Compare: Bordogna, *Trotter: scuola all’aperto, Turro: dal dettato pedagogico l’innovazione tipologica*, cit., p. 101; and Barra (ed.), 1925-2005. *Casa del Sole. La Città dell’Infanzia a Milano*, cit., p. 51.

If we are to believe the founders of the open-air school, the students often took the initiative themselves and arranged much in these matters on their own¹²⁴. However some things were also initiated by the instructor¹²⁵. The administration of the cooperatives was «democratically» chosen by the pupils themselves, and for positions within other contexts it was the instructors or the directors who gave their authorisation which resulted in the «most obedient ones» being given the most chances¹²⁶. In the case of the «school guard» that was founded after the war, the boys were the most obvious candidates¹²⁷, yet only those among them who displayed sufficient «sense of duty, sense of responsibility, and discipline». Not that the «vocation» of school guard, in spite of the accompanying uniform, always commanded respect from the fellow students; not even when one chose to steer a less military and repressive course¹²⁸. The same applied to the «protectors of the green» each of which had jurisdiction in the space surrounding his or her class¹²⁹, and who were, for example, the only ones allowed to collect the footballs from the lawns. Yet there were those who dared to lend their uniforms to classmates and thereby ran the risk of being promptly discharged from their duties¹³⁰; just as it seems to have occasionally occurred that a candidate for one function or another dared to bribe the voters with caramels¹³¹.

There were advertisements in the school newspaper for all of the commendable initiatives, which was, contrary to the pre-war specimen, actually edited by the children themselves, even though adults sometimes helped with the correction of the articles which were sent in. It was also the adults who remained personally responsible for the publication¹³². Similarly, it can be assumed that adults – directly or indirectly – had influence on the editing, certainly during the first years. And so in 1960 it was thought that the representatives of the student council urgently deserved to be reprimanded and it was recommended that the pupils voted a bit more cautiously during the next election¹³³. However the student council itself did not function entirely autonomously. The representatives of each class were assisted by someone from the directorate, the secretary and

¹²⁴ «Bimbi al Sole», 2004, pp. 9-18, 25-28, 34-35 [Reproduction of a separate issue of May 1955].

¹²⁵ For instance the travelling library. See: «Parlano i Ragazzi», 5/3, 1961, p. 2.

¹²⁶ «Parlano i Ragazzi», 4/4, 1960, p. 1.

¹²⁷ Compare: «Parlano i Ragazzi», 2/1, 1958, p. 4; and «Parlano i Ragazzi», 3/6, 1959, p. 3.

¹²⁸ Compare: «Parlano i Ragazzi», 4/1, 1960, p. 1; «Parlano i Ragazzi», 4/3, 1960, p. 4; and «Parlano i Ragazzi», 4/4, 1960, p. 1.

¹²⁹ «Parlano i Ragazzi», 5/2, 1960, p. 2.

¹³⁰ V. Laini, *Il comitato generale della scuola*, «Bimbi al Sole», 2004, p. 8 [Reproduction of a separate issue of May 1955].

¹³¹ «Parlano i Ragazzi», 7/4, 1963, p. 2.

¹³² «Parlano i Ragazzi», 3/3, 1959, p. 3.

¹³³ «Parlano i Ragazzi», 5/2, 1960, p. 2.

the faculty¹³⁴, so while it sometimes seemed as if the children devised rules themselves, in fact adults guided the proposals and gave the final approval¹³⁵.

Be that as it may, it seems that after the war the school made enthusiastic attempts to create a new image for itself in the direction of democracy and tolerance¹³⁶. Most probably within that framework fit the admission of gradually more «socially maladjusted» children as a supplement to and a replacement for children who were «endangered in their health». Before the war, for this latter group of children hereditary and environmental factors – for which «hydro» or artificial «heliotherapeutic» cures and open-air education were said to have a large influence – were statistically documented for the «immediate and future advantage of the race»¹³⁷. This new target group for the open-air school, especially for the boarding school, was in some cases affectively and socially disturbed as a result of its «fragility», as it were. If the first contact with the school resulted in problems that cumulated with «existing familial problems of an economic and psychological nature», these children sometimes exhibited difficult behaviour. A social service, especially for this medical-pedagogical category, complemented the two doctors from the school's medical service which since the war had been expanded to include radiologists and dentists. Children who exhibited serious «character disturbances» and «adjustment difficulties» were sent to the «medical-psycho-pedagogical centre»¹³⁸. This spatial strategy appears to be illustrative of the increasing professionalisation of various occupational groups on the domain on which this institute, like other open-air schools, endeavoured to sustain itself. Finally, after the war in the buildings of the school itself, an attempt was made to recover a more domestic atmosphere by, among other things, compartmentalising the refectories which were present in each pavilion¹³⁹. Whether such adjustments to the architectural function of the buildings also fundamentally changed the actual perception of the children is nevertheless far from certain.

¹³⁴ «Parlano i Ragazzi», 2/2, 1958, p. 1.

¹³⁵ «Parlano i Ragazzi», 1/3, 1957, p. 2.

¹³⁶ See, for instance: «Parlano i Ragazzi», 5/4, 1961, p. 1.

¹³⁷ A. Albertini, E. Nonnoi, A. Lagomarsino, *Relazione del servizio medico e del funzionamento del gabinetto di ricerche scientifiche della scuola all'aperto "Umberto di Savoia"*, Milan, Patronato generale opere integrative assistenziali e post-scolastiche scuola all'aperto "Umberto di Savoia", 1929, pp. 34-46.

¹³⁸ Archivio della scuola «Casa del Sole» di Milano, *La scuola all'aperto "Casa del sole"*, cit., s.p.

¹³⁹ «Parlano i Ragazzi», 3/5, 1959, p. 3.

8. *Conclusion: school architecture as pedagogy*

The central question of this article was whether or not, in the context of a Milanese holiday camp and open-air school, there could be said to be innovative child-directed architecture that in turn gave rise to pedagogical innovation. That does not seem to be the case. The design of the institute conformed to the architectural trends of the time in Italy and the use of the built environment lead to control, discipline and traditional education practices no less than it did in regular schools. As far as there appears to be any pedagogical innovation, especially after the Second World War, it is unrelated to rather than a result of the school architecture. Differences between the pre-war and the post-war situation were often on the surface, also in relation to the use of classrooms. How the students themselves experienced the relationship between the spatial environment and the child-rearing and education practices is difficult to know on the basis of the sources. Nonetheless it can be asserted that this relationship actually makes a difference: it contributed to the formation of the identity of the students who in turn gave form to the function of the buildings and the spaces.

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