THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

International School by Rudy Ricciotti and Jean-Michel Battesti, Manosque, France

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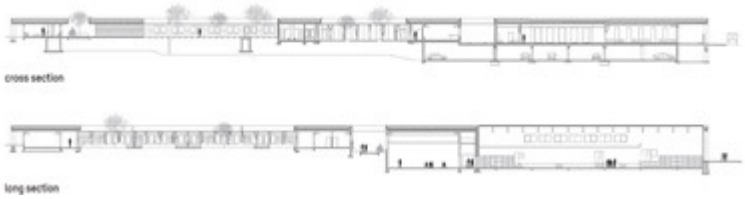
The inner courtyards and colonnades at the international school are lined with more literal tree-like forms that strike softer poses. Photography by Paul Raftery

This 18,000m² international school is a strikingly uncompromising response to site and programme, influenced by various classical archetypes and by its very particular landscape setting. Built at the same time as a neighbouring hospital, these two institutions provide what the school's French architect Rudy Ricciotti describes as the initiators and benchmarks of a new community neighbourhood called Chanteprunier, planned for Manosque, the largest city in the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence department of south-east France.

Anchored by a tree-lined avenue that forms the new neighbourhood spine, this colossal 190 x 140m concrete peristyle certainly achieves its place-making ambition, bringing its own urban scale and order to the site, while achieving a forceful resonance with the landscape beyond. The school was built principally to cater for the children of employees of ITER, the international research and engineering project currently building the world's largest and most advanced experimental nuclear fusion reactor, at nearby Cadarache. Associated with such an ambitious project, the school was to be equally progressive, and had the undeniable benefit of formidable political momentum.



At the time of its inauguration and partial completion in September 2009, Michel Vauzelle - president of the Regional Council of Provence-Alpes-Cotes-d'Azur - was clearly impressed with Ricciotti and his collaborator Jean-Michel Battesti's work. 'What I see here is even better than what I had hoped for,' he said, before reminding the assembled media that 'it was our duty to finance this institution that has no equivalent in the world.' In his view, the school not only puts this place on the world map but also, to the benefit of all who attend, reflects his local Provençal culture. After studying here, he claimed, the school's students 'will keep inscribed in their mind something that reminds them of Provence.'
Educating children ranging in age from three to 18 years, the school's programme is taught in a combination of French and one of six other languages - Chinese, English, German, Italian, Japanese or Spanish - with further languages such as Hindi and Russian also being taught. By contrast, the building is less polyglot, with the architects confining their expression to a creative adaptation of the universal architectural language of column and beam.

In all, 280 precast concrete columns surround the building, rectangular in section but buckled in elevation and jutting out at seemingly random angles. The inner courtyards and colonnades are lined with more literal tree-like forms that strike softer and more graceful poses, giving these intimate spaces a lighter, less assertive manner. Comprising hard, soft and flooded landscapes the courtyards are accessed by two cross-axial routes that cut across the plan and redeploy the angular forms overhead to assert the hierarchy and formality of the more public external facades.

On the principal elevation two entrances bifurcate around the central administrative division that rotates off grid to emphasise its difference as a non-teaching department. The twist serves to accentuate the diagonal trajectory

of the concrete armatures, creating a sufficient articulation in the rhythm of the main easterly elevation to identify this as the principal point of entry. The secondary rear and west elevations are less permeable, featuring more densely packed arrangements of columns.

Ricciotti describes the building as being formed of concrete, wood, glass and scrubland, due to the extensive planting (or hanging garden) that sits within the roof's deep concrete tray. It sits in the landscape like a 'monumental temple of knowledge', with each courtyard discovery becoming a place for the 'expression and revelation of a singular epiphany'.

Wood and glass walls sit beneath the weighty concrete superstructure to create each of the principal departments and shared facilities. These include a kindergarten, primary and secondary teaching spaces, a sports area, a cultural hub, and a school restaurant. Staff are also offered a place of calm respite in their own beautifully tranquil water-filled cloister, which sits on a skewed geometry within the hubbub of the main entrance patio.

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