

DISCOVERY

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I have just returned from Strasbourg. There I was invited by the ENSA, the Strasbourg School of Architecture, to give a lecture on my work on February 19, 2013. The auditorium of the ENSA was packed with people, with many of the attendees sitting on the floor and filling the aisles as well. As they say in Spain, there was no room for a pin. I was very excited from the very beginning with so much interest, and it seems that my words and my reasons, stated in Molière's language, must have reached them well because of the more than generous applause with which they crowned the event.

But the most surprising, the most gratifying thing has been to discover a first-rate architect, Dominique Coulon, who makes a magnificent architecture. Architect and professor of Projects at ENSA, he was the person who invited me and who already invited me in 1992, twenty years ago!

And what was then a young French architect just starting out has become the best architect in Strasbourg and perhaps in France. His works, very personal, full of precision and color, are of a very high spatial quality. In them, in addition to the control of space through a geometry always precise, color appears with all its force qualifying those spaces. He acts with well-controlled space and succeeds with well-dosed color, as did the best Barragán or the freest Le Corbusier. I know from my own experience that the use of color is not easy, and Dominique Coulon masters it masterfully.

The whole of his work already has a consolidated corpus of enormous quality. From the beginning, all of his work points to themes of space contained between tightly folded planes that progressively develop with greater freedom in both form and color treatment. And so, already in the Louis Pasteur College in Strasbourg, one of his first works, many of these recurring themes that will reappear are contained.

The Nursery School in Marmoutier is very beautiful. And also very beautiful and sober is the National Dramatic Center in Montreuil. And if in the perforated box of the Conservatory of Music in Maizieres-les-Metz he dares with perforations in the walls made with extreme freedom, it must be recognized that the interior spaces he achieves are also extremely beautiful. The Mataincourt reception house, because of its uses, is again more restrained, very horizontal, very serene. And in the Anzin Mediatheque, he resists the temptation of color by deploying a more restrained architecture of concrete and white. And in the most recent Josephine Baker School Group in the Courneuve, he makes a project that, as if it were a fruit, is all white and neutral on the outside, in its shell, and all vibrant red inside, like a fruit. A very clear idea and a beautiful development.

But let me talk about his latest project, still under construction, which is a nursery school in the very heart of Strasbourg, which I had the good fortune to be able to visit with him personally. Someone might say how can a work of restructuring and renovation be masterful, which is what he is doing there. Well, this work is.

As if he were an expert surgeon, Coulon has cut and slashed and sewn and removed and added where necessary with absolute precision. He has opened windows that, like great eyes on the city, frame it and, by creating new perspectives, enhance its value. He has lowered the sills of all the classroom windows so that the children can now see what is going on outside. He has perforated the ceilings so that light floods in through the new skylights. And he has also perforated the walls where he has seen fit. He has created clear transparencies in the most public spaces, such as the cafeteria, which now opens generously onto two opposite streets. I insist that, like a wise surgeon, he has perforated and punctured the old body built to achieve a new body that has taken on new life. And all this seasoned conveniently with color, basically the color that Coulon, and I, like the most, red. A vibrant red color that is able to light up the space and that he lights it up even more with his yellows and pinks. The client, the teachers and the children are happy, because part of the work is being done with them in it. It's almost like a goldsmith's work.

On the exterior, the facades have been renovated with great simplicity. More open and glazed, they are tempered with vertical brisesoleils of shiny stainless steel that, while protecting them from the glare of the sun, will produce incredible reflections.

And among all the spaces there are some particularly successful ones. On the first floor, to define the lobby space, Dominique Coulon allows himself to play with great freedom, but very well controlled, with curved walls and ceilings, like the best Le Corbusier. The contrast between the rectangular, Cartesian shape of the classrooms, with the use of curves on this more public first floor, is enormously successful. In addition, here he ascetically dispenses with color and plays only with natural finishes and white, which is how these curved shapes look out onto the street. The result is beautiful.

Inside there is a room for the little ones where, in addition to the walls and ceiling, the floor is also curved and soft. There, the light that streams through the ceiling through skylights full of reflections and through the wall by means of small random openings, is tinged pink with reflections that contrast well with some whitish grays: a beautiful, almost surreal space where it will not be difficult for the children to dream.

This work by Dominique Coulon is a chef d'oeuvre, a true masterpiece. If I were a child, I would like to study at that school.

In short, meeting Dominique Coulon was the discovery of a true master. With a very simple personal approach, and with a very intense work, he has created, with his coherent, mature and beautiful works, an architecture capable of lasting over time and of making the people who live in it happy. Dominique Coulon, master!