

Architects and landscape architects in the classroom

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Thanks to partnerships between specialists from the architecture, landscape and education fields, an initiative was launched in 1999 by the Val-de-Marne CAUE to give children a greater understanding of their environment.

For thirty years now, the Councils for Architecture, Urban Planning and the Environment (CAUEs) have been coming to schools to educate young people about architecture, urban planning and the environment, in line with their responsibilities as defined by the 1977 Act.

The educational role of CAUEs

Taking possession of the city of today to better imagine the city of tomorrow – this is the important message to pass on to children, so that much later on they too can be well-informed participants. To understand and respect the ever-changing environment, some key concepts need to be put across.

With this in mind, the CAUE 94 launched an initiative twelve years ago (1999) with the participation regional and departmental services of the ministry of Education (Rectorat de Créteil, Inspection académique du département). “Architects and landscape architects in the classroom” was designed to

educate children from year 1 of primary school to the last year of secondary school. The idea is to put practicing architects and landscape architects in contact with teachers who would like them to come to their classroom, for a one-off visit, a joint work on a project of the class, a neighbourhood visit and so on. It is a chance for the specialists involved to exchange ideas on the different ways of “experiencing the city” and to interact with their future users. Today, around 150 private-practice architects and landscape architects from Val-de-Marne and Paris East end have answered the CAUE’s call. They have volunteered to give their time free of charge in a school (primary or secondary).

The landscape architects can contribute in various ways, depending on the teacher’s needs: some give a presentation on their field of expertise, others give children their first taste of gardening or botany and some assist in a project to create a garden on part of the school grounds. Their main objective however is to teach children to consider, observe and decipher landscapes and to understand the issues at stake. There are also several teaching aids that can be used to facilitate the learning process.

“A garden in my hand”: a fun and creative experience

The CAUE 94 chose to set up an initiative with the help of landscape artist Anne-Sophie Perrot-Nani. The result was fun and educational workshops called “A garden in my hand”. Going for walks, learning how to look, analysing and deciphering what our eyes can see, making things from what we can find, using what we see to imagine and dream – these are the goals of the workshops. All are designed around the same principle and are set in an existing park or garden. The workshops differ depending on the location, as they try to

reveal the individual characteristics of each landscape's site and formation.

The first stage of the session consists of a guided tour of the park or garden. The children are asked to collect various items (fallen branches, pine cones, bark, etc.) while showing respect for the plants and other people of course. Next, back in the classroom or at a materials library set up and provided for the project, the children are free to create miniature worlds, express their own vision of things by building "models" of gardens, parks, nature areas or parts of the town. These can be imaginary or real and are inspired by the walk in the park and the treasures they collected. Once all the designs have been photographed for a future exhibition at the school, the participants leave for home with their "gardens in their hands".

Every year in the Val-de-Marne department, 60-80 classes are able to benefit from the work of the specialists (visit, presentation, workshop, photography work, building models, etc.). Even if the operation is quite limited in scale, it is always a big hit with the children. In addition to learning more about the environment, it gives children their first view of the work environment.

In 2011, a partnership was set up with the regional chamber of architects (Ordre des architectes en Île-de-France) and the regional services of the ministry of Education (Académies de Paris et de Créteil). The Seine-Saint-Denis, Paris and Seine-et-Marne CAUEs have joined that of the Val-de-Marne and are already taking part in the initiative. It is hoped that this region-wide development will allow inspiring the interest and curiosity of many young students.