It was damaged by an earthquake but reborn with a big vision. Iride nursery in Reggio Emilia, Italy merges with its environment and allows children to learn through discovery. Alessandro Zecchin, Gonzagarredi Montessori General Manager, explains how.

WOMB WITH A VIEW

Children learn more effectively if their path towards discovery is led by curiosity and experience. The creation of the Iride nursery school in Guastalla, in the province of Reggio Emilia, was guided by this simple concept.

The building's design and construction emerged from the local municipality's need to replace the building damaged by the 2012 earthquake. Today the kindergarten welcomes 120 children (aged 0-3) and they enjoy a sensory journey surrounded by smells, colours, alternating lights and shadows.

The Iride nursery was designed by Studio MCA, Mario Cucinella Architects, and furnished by GAM, Gonzagarredi Montessori, an Italian company that designs and creates open, interconnected and creative educational environments for schools, libraries and cultural centres worldwide.

It is an example of open and innovative childcare, planned to respond not only to the educational needs of children, but also to those of teachers and educators.

This new project took its inspiration from the so-called Reggio Emilia Approach, the educational method conceived by the Italian pedagogist and teacher Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), which focuses on stimulating the creativity, language and curiosity of nursery children, supporting both their cognitive and emotional development.

THE ARCHITECTURE, ALSO NICKNAMED “THE WHALE”, RECALLS THE BELLY OF PINOCCHIO’S WHALE.

The building was designed to support this educational experience at an early age: the emphasis on discovery means children develop critical and divergent thinking; that fundamental formula that shapes their growth and future learning. The architecture, also nicknamed "The Whale", recalls the belly of Pinocchio's whale and also the womb of a mother, a warm and safe place where human beings take the first steps towards growth.

The presence and variety of trees in the nearby area immediately inspired the idea of a building that interacts with its surrounding environment. For example, the repetition of the numerous vertical wooden elements in the supporting structure recalls the motif of the rows of trees and cultivated fields on the site, giving lightness to the building. It overcomes the problem typical schools have of appearing dense and monolithic.

Inside, the distribution of spaces, the choice of materials and the integration of the internal and external environments have been carefully designed to provide children with the necessary stimuli for their development. Large windows separate the learning areas, giving children the chance to experience many different environments at the same time.

The furnishings designed by Gonzagarredi Montessori provide the children with a comfortable and stimulating environment, where they can move and explore freely.

At the same time, the curving nature of the spaces helps the teaching staff, as this building respects the free potential and development of children.

This communication with the environment is not due only to the geometry of the spaces, but also to the materials used, natural and recycled and the innovative energy efficiency systems that guarantee a sustainable building.

The structure includes photovoltaic panels and has a low environmental impact – it has a Class A energy certificate. In addition to the self-generation of electricity and hot water, the structure provides systems for the recovery and reuse of rainwater, useful to operate the irrigation system for the garden. The large windows allow natural light to enter the internal areas, in many cases limiting the use of electric light.

The underfloor heating comes thanks to a water channelling system. All elements that convey to children the importance of sustainability and respect for nature.

The Iride Guastalla nursery is an excellent example of an innovative kindergarten, where architecture becomes an educational tool. ■

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