



Learning in Living Colour

A MILANESE KINDERGARTEN EMBODIES
A CREATIVE PEDAGOGY WITH STEEL,
GLASS – AND LOTS OF VIBRANCY

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“In Italy, there is a great tradition of early education,” says Maria Claudia Clemente, co-founding director (along with Francesco Isidori) of the Rome-based architecture and urban planning practice Labics. “But there isn’t really a tradition of kindergarten design.” Until now.

In addition to being the birthplace of the Montessori Method, the country also lays claim to the lesser-known Reggio Emilia approach (REA), a kid-centric philosophy slowly trickling across the globe. Founded in the 1960s by primary school teacher Loris Malaguzzi among the Lambrusco vines and Parmigiano-Reggiano-producing farmlands of Reggio Emilia, REA champions participatory education, which encourages each child to determine their own distinct learning path. It also posits that children are born with “100 languages” of expression,

among them drawing, painting and writing.

Following the edicts of REA, Labics transformed a vaulted 1950s-era car showroom in Milan’s Sempione neighbourhood into Jacarandà, a light-filled nursery school and kindergarten with industrial edge. Spread across three levels and 2,100 square metres (with 600 square metres of outdoor space), the school feels like a pop-coloured laboratory scaled down to tot size.

“The overall quality of the space is important,” says Clemente, “because it has a pedagogical role.” REA dictates a number of physical attributes to foster learning, including transparency and easy communication between zones, in order for students to carry ideas from one context to the next. At Jacarandà, glazed walls, a common central area called the agora and the physical porosity of the building itself



OPPOSITE: Jacarandà's ground-floor "agora" is furnished with curving wood walls that enclose kids' atelier spaces for self-guided learning.

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: A tree on the subterranean level projects through a ceiling aperture that allows it to grow right up to the rooftop playground. Labics inserted three bridges to create space for mezzanine classrooms. A child works away in one of the ateliers.

promote dialogue between students, teachers, nature and the neighbourhood at large. Situated within a cluster of mid-rise apartments, the school summons adoring *nonnas* onto their balconies to wave at the children playing on the vibrant rooftop recreation area.

The ground-floor agora is the piazza. "It creates a sense of collectivity and community among the children," Clemente explains. In order to maintain the agora's uninterrupted flow, Labics suspended three lightweight steel-plate bridges from the original reinforced concrete arches to house classrooms on the mezzanine, leaving the space below flexible and pillar-free. The firm adhered to a limited material palette of resin, glass and steel; in a gesture of pragmatic whimsy, it outfitted the ceiling with squishy acoustic

cylinders in an array of bright colours, fluorescent tubes interspersed among them, to soften noise. "The original space is very industrial," Clemente notes, "but the atmosphere is very elegant."

In the agora are two "ateliers" – lattice-walled circular volumes filled with crayon-stuffed mugs and drawing paper, leafy houseplants and curiously shaped rocks. They're dedicated, respectively, to nature and art, providing the inspirational seedlings for the children's self-directed projects. Here, a teacher-atelierista introduces the children to new concepts they can carry into the classroom and beyond. "[The children] see an eggplant growing, draw a picture of that eggplant, cook the eggplant, then eat it," says Clemente.

The ground floor also hosts a lunchroom, a kitchen (complete with a porthole inviting children to press

their noses against the glass) and three classrooms for pre-kindergarteners along the south-facing perimeter. Each classroom is divided into learning and napping areas, with sliding doors between volumes and access to a shared garden. All the curvaceous, colourfully upholstered furniture was designed by Labics and Play+ following specifications for soft, tactile objects in abstract shapes.

Below ground, the architects transformed a former mechanic's workshop into an area with three pools, which "aren't only for the children, but for the neighbourhood, too," says Clemente. Both the roof and the pools are connected by a tree that rises from below to burst through to the playtime area. "It's an urban connection – a space that we give back to the collective." **labics.it**