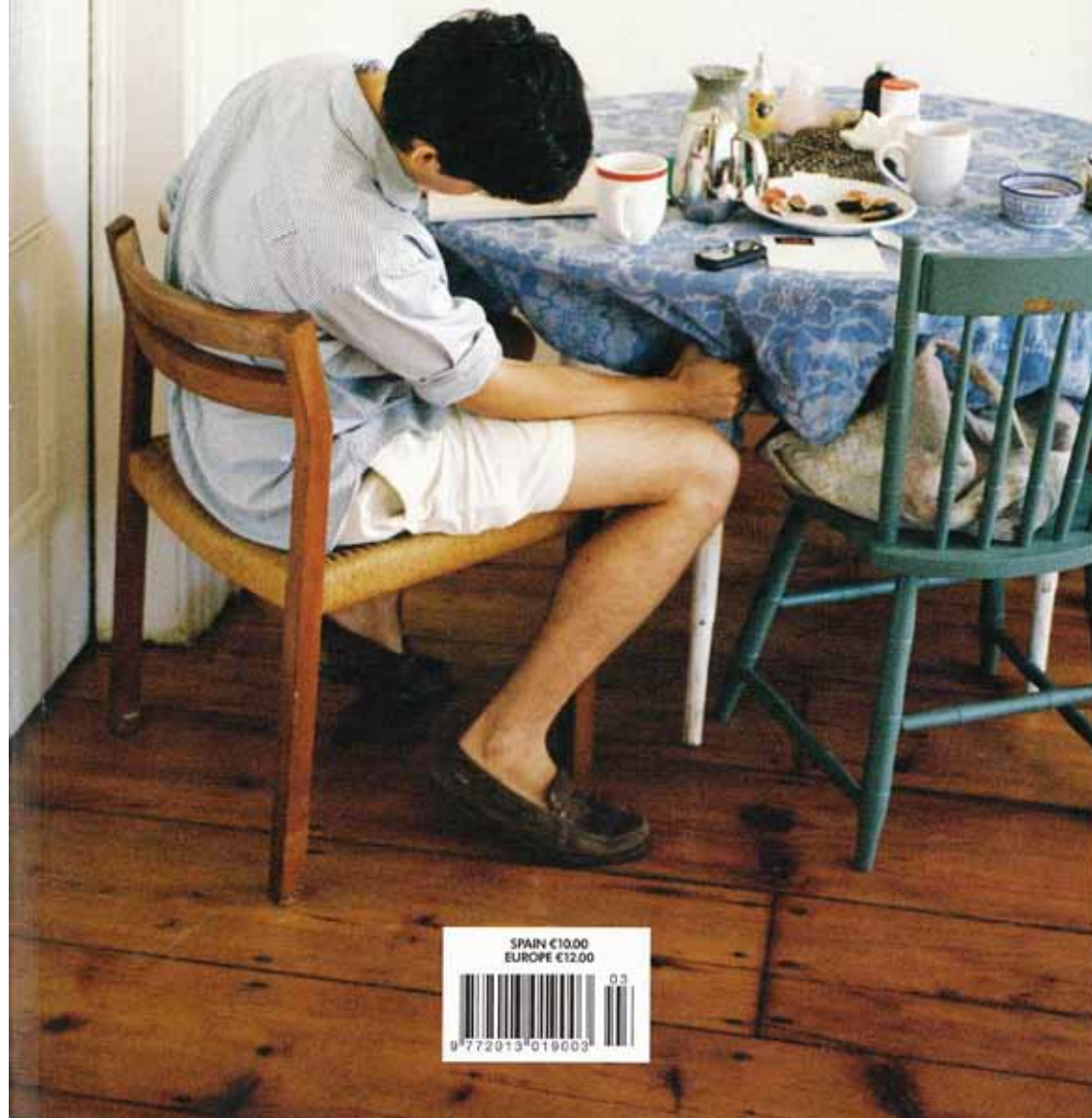


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apartamento

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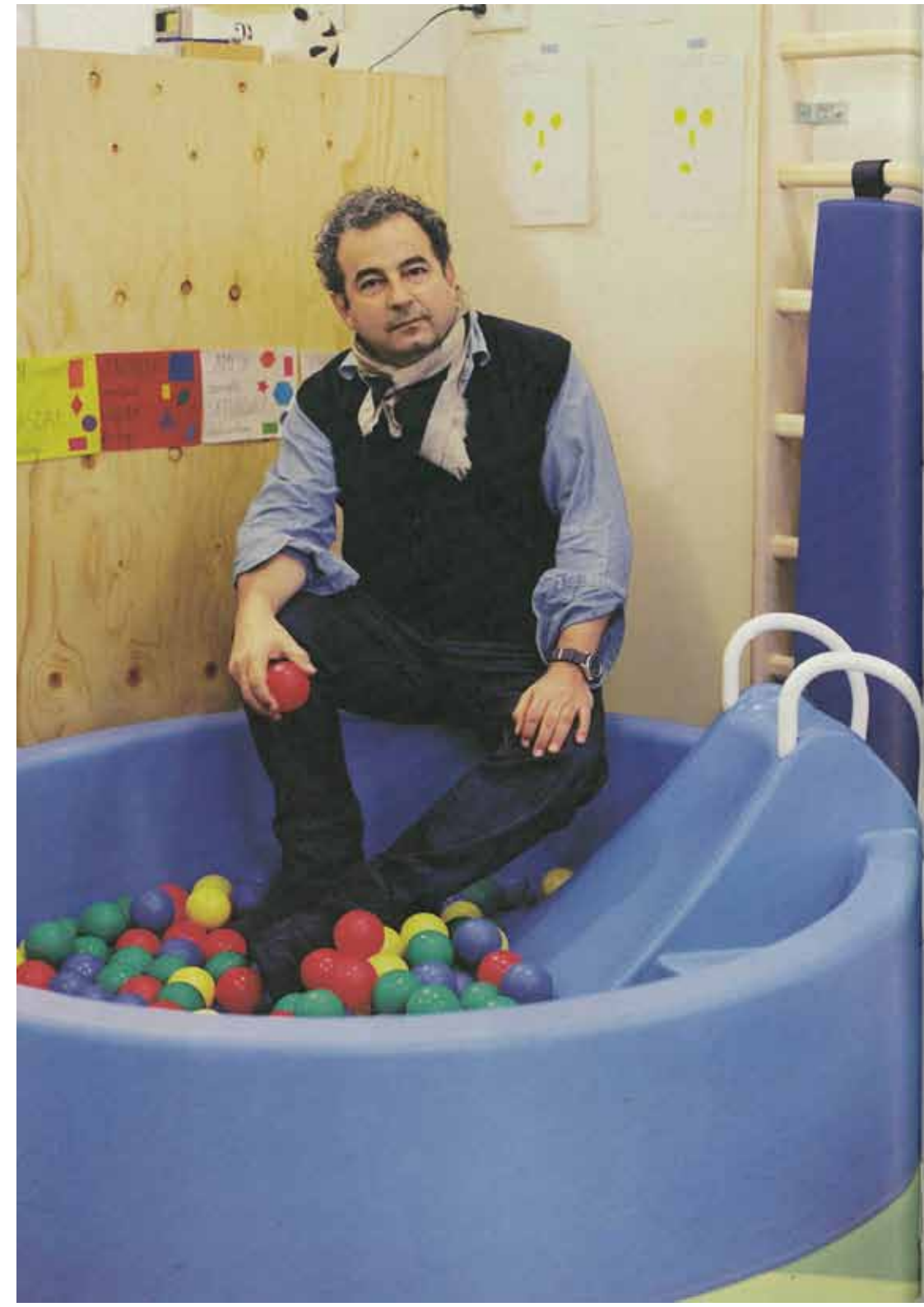
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Ateliers de la Petite Enfance

INTERVIEW BY MARCO VELARDI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AYA YAMAMOTO

We all share memories of our childhood, though some of them prove to be more cherished than others. And throughout adolescence and into adulthood, we have certainly heard a few stories about our own childhood from the people who have been close to us. In a similar way, we will tell stories to our own children when they grow up. Happy moments, sad moments; we will usually remember the places where things happened, too, oftentimes being at home or school. Schools, often being remembered as both the most hated and loved places of our childhood, have always been a captivating memory. When we heard Jean Touitou, founder and owner of the hip French clothing label A.P.C., opened his own kindergarten in the 6th arrondissement in Paris (aptly named A.P.E., short for Ateliers de la Petite Enfance) we thought it was time we went knocking at its door to find out more. What we discovered were really interesting and imaginative use of materials, a great sense of space and, above all, a clear vision of how to invest into a child's future –which we wish more entrepreneurs out there had.





Jean, you stated in a previous interview that you were dissatisfied with the educational offer in Paris for your younger daughter, and this triggered the idea to open your own school. You had something in mind that is less available among parents today, something totally unique. Can you tell us a bit about your background with this? Is this the first time you have actually gotten so deeply involved with your child's education or do you have previous experiences? My background is being a stranger in France, coming from Tunisia at the age of 9. I had a classical education and then studied history for 4 years and during this time I was member of an underground revolutionary party. That's pretty much it. While regarding my child's education, it is actually the first time I've been really involved with it, and it's something I have wanted to do for a long time.

From the initial thought all the way through to realization of Ateliers de la Petite Enfance, how did you feel about making such a strong statement?

After 20 years spent in the fashion industry I wanted to touch at last [on] something related to civilization.

How did the final concept for A.P.E. come about? Was it easy or did you encounter any complications?

First of all, it was a thought process that involved four of us: me and my wife Judith as

entrepreneurs, Geraldine Lefebvre as the pedagogical input, Laurent Deroo as an architect involved with education. We took care of all the complications before they happened, so it was not an issue.

When did the school actually open for business?

The school opened its doors a bit more than a year ago, in January 2008.

How many children did you begin with?

I think that right at the beginning we had around 20 children.

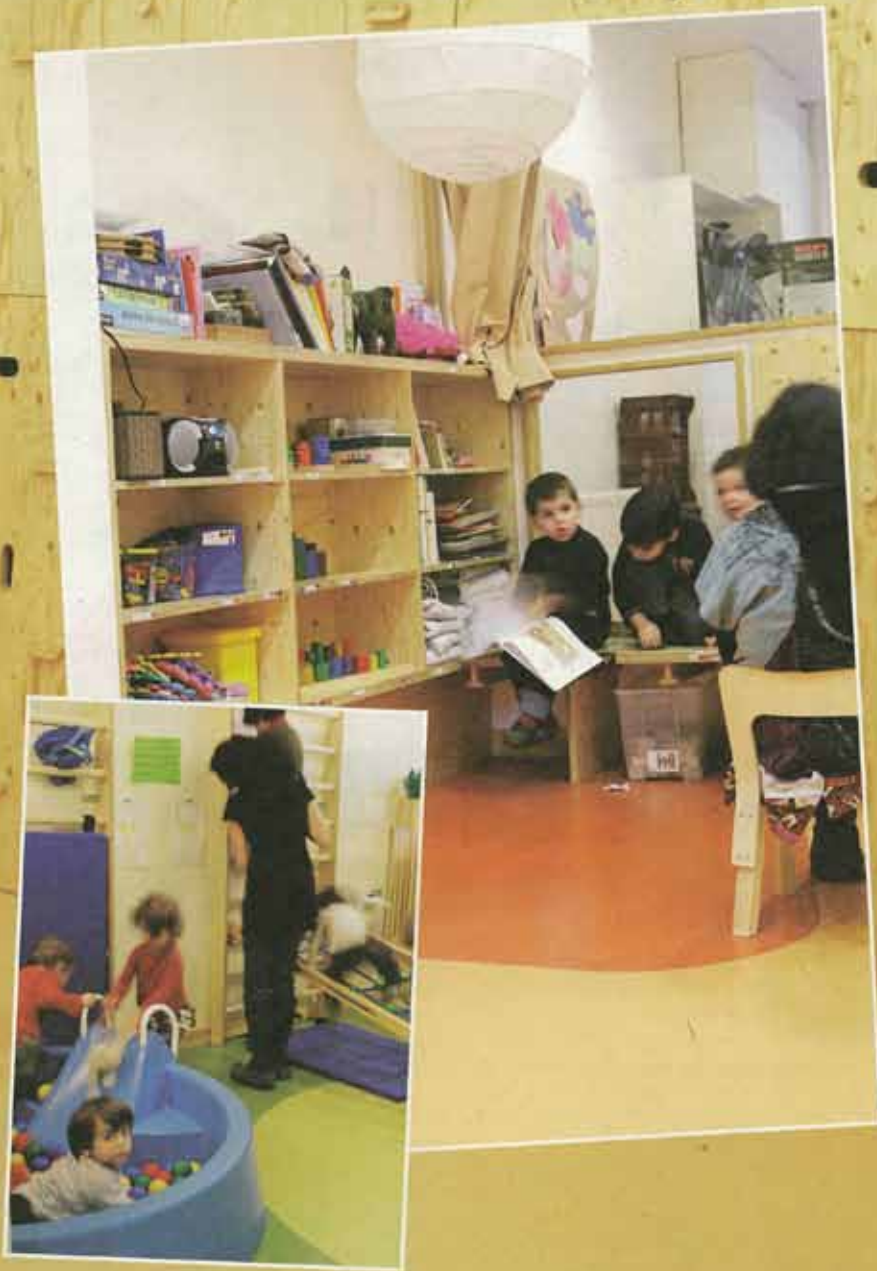
What is the age of the children you accept?

We accept children between 2 and 6 years old.

Do you have restrictions for whom you take on board? What is your capacity right now?

We have no restriction and our capacity right now is 36 children. Basically, the way it is structured is: the youngest go to the school on Rue de Fleurus and the oldest at the school on Rue Cassette because the teaching is not the same for these different groups of age. In some workshops though, like cooking and theater, the children are all mixed. Also on Wednesdays, they do more playful activities all together. The hours are from 8:30 to 18:30 everyday and the school is open during the holidays.





Did you open both locations at the same time?
The second part of the school located on rue de Fleurus opened a bit later because there was a lot of construction to be done.

So, what was your original investment?
The original investment for the school was around 300.000 euro. The loss for the first year has been 100.000 euro. Our goal is to break even within the third year of activity.

And what are the fees you charge?
The fees are:

- 460 euro per month for half time.
- 810 euro for 3/4 time.
- 1100 euro for full time.

From visiting both the two schools' locations, anyone can definitely get the impression that they were designed with a very specific aesthetic in mind, from the selection of materials employed, the use of space and color. Can you please tell us a bit about the vision behind it? What are the most interesting features to find, and why? Who designed A.P.E. spaces?

There is no specific concept of the vision behind the way we designed or furnished our two spaces, we just tried to make them as beautiful and relevant as we could. Our aim was to avoid dull naiveness. Laurent Deroo, our fourth partner and designer of many interiors for A.P.C. shops, followed the design for both spaces.

One of the schools even used to be an A.P.C. store once, why the switch?

True, in fact Rue Cassette was the old A.P.C. music and graphic design studio and the other, Rue de Fleurus was the A.P.C. men's shop. We switched because change is good.

One of the first things I noticed was the mix of custom made interiors mixed with IKEA and Artek children furniture pieces. How important do you think design is in the daily life of a child?

The more children see beautiful things in their early days, the better it is for their development.

With such a creative environment, how do you approach teaching?

The whole idea is to incorporate satisfaction into learning, therefore the kids can enjoy being taught.

Do you have specific set of rules?
Of course, no rules would mean chaos.

I get the impression from our first talk a few months ago that the A.P.E. educational/learning techniques combine various elements of methods such as Steiner-Waldorf education, Montessori or Freinet pedagogy. Was it a specific choice?

We did what we thought is a good mix of those pedagogy, but it would be too restrictive and sectarian to only follow one of them.

I don't see any sort of uniform at A.P.E. Neither the children nor teachers are wearing any. How do you deal with activities, like painting or playing outdoor?

For the kids, we collaborated with Irene Cohen from Bonton and they did painters outfits, sheets and napkins for us.

Considering your fashion background, are you ever going to implement any sort of teacher's official/working uniform? Why?

We just introduced aprons for teachers. I would say that uniforms for teachers and kids of that age would be too much of a strong statement but I would not mind if children wore uniforms from 6 to 18 years old.

How do you go about finding new teachers? Do you have a training program? Do you require specific skills?

We have a few fundamentals. Our "general" teachers must have an education related to very young children and their specific needs. We require a French diploma called "EJE", *Educatrice De Jeunes Enfants* (teacher for young children). Part of their skills is to have a strong knowledge of young kids psychology. Then we hire teachers with very specific knowledge in precise fields like music, painting and English. There is no training program as such. Training is everyday life at school, with a permanent overview of Geraldine, who defines the day-to-day activities.

Do you involve creative people and friends that have worked with you on projects for A.P.C., such as Jessica Odgen?

Yes, Jessica is hired to do a workshop of paper cutting out inspired by the work of Matisse. We have also involved M/M (Paris) to design the identity and logo of the school.



Have you ever done special workshops or activities for the children with artists or musicians? We have decided not to have special or casual activities, the kids are too young for that. At that age, they need to get used to one teacher before getting into a creative process. So, somebody from the outside, even excellent, would not get them focused enough.

You are also a musician and play in your own band. Do you ever play, or teach music, to the children at A.P.E.?

No, I actually don't play [music] with the kids and my own project is purely just to have fun in the studio; I never intended to do any recording.

Then, considering many parents tend to push their children to learn an instrument as it's generally acknowledged to be good for them; do you think music is an important part of a child's learning process from an early stage?

To be honest, I don't really know, but I think that any sort of teaching of art is good for the learning process at that age. They should definitely be given a creative influence from an early stage.



Talking about parents, one of the major activities of running a kindergarten must be dealing with the parents themselves. How do you cope with it?

What was it like to meet the first group of parents when you were about to launch?

We met the parents separately, one by one, before launching. It was a very deep kind of conversation that Judith had with twenty families. It was quite a challenging thing to do to propose them a new school for their kids. Then we met the parents one month after the school opened, I personally was very scared, but it all went fine since they were mostly fully satisfied.

How is A.P.E. structured with the interaction between parents and teachers and between parents themselves, do you have weekly or monthly meetings, or reports?

One statement of A.P.E. is that is very open to the parents. They don't leave kids at the door

of the school but actually come inside everyday, and they are told everyday by the teachers how the day was for their own kid. So, we don't feel the need to organize reports or meetings.

Being a parent yourself and having your youngest daughter at A.P.E., which is definitely not the usual preschool, and more of an elitist and privileged one, as many would say, how do you consider the change she will experience when moving to a elementary school without such a structure as A.P.E.? How do you prepare children for that? And how do you prepare parents for it as well?

The better you prepare kids to cope with the world when they're young the better they can face it when they grow up. We teach self-confidence and we believe that it is what will be needed for the "after-A.P.E.". In our school kids learn also about rules of life - how to behave with the people around you, how to talk to adults, how to say no, how to share - which I think it is quite the contrary of belonging to an elite.

Have you already thought of possibly further expanding the school to other parts of Paris?

Yes, we did, but real estate is way too expensive.

Would it still make sense to get bigger or you'd rather keep it small?

It could make sense to have quite a few small projects like that, but not to making a big one.

Finally, I would like to ask you to share an activity for our readers to do with kids at home to entertain and educate them. Something which it's normal practice at A.P.E. or something you were taught when you were a child and still cherish. Nothing beats cooking, especially when it's cakes, and when it's a bit noisy and messy in the kitchen. So meringues are good for that. Mixing eggs whites with sugar for long minutes, then displaying it on a plate that goes to the oven. Then discovering the actual meringues, makes them very, very happy. The only problem is that parents ends up eating much more sugar than they need to...

