

School, Genolier

IPAS's design is a playful fortress.

SWITZERLAND — TEXT: MANUEL BIELER, PHOTOGRAPHY: THOMAS JANTSCHER

The Genolier school, designed by the Neuchâtel-based firm IPAS, is the most characteristic expression of an outlook that has pervaded school construction in French-speaking Switzerland over the last several years. In numerous instances, whether completed projects or competition entries, the architectural project for the school institution is perceived and expressed as a game. A game of volumes, a game of colours, a game of facade elements. The school is no longer a normative place, full of rigour and truths, but a play space, usually in bright colours and with a playful composition, within which children are supposed to find an echo of their overflowing creativity. The Genolier school, aptly named Tetris, is a very direct example of these preoccupations.

The new building, an extension to the existing school complex, offers a clear programmatic distribution, a sports hall on two levels, topped by two floors of classrooms. The static challenge involved in avoiding structural columns in the middle of the gymnasium has been cleverly addressed by using the hallway walls of the classrooms above. These walls are massive loadbearing slabs of reinforced concrete that operate over the static height of the two classroom levels. They rest in turn on the outer walls, which are thicker at critical spots in order to bear the considerable loads of this superstructure.

Situated on an incline, below the existing school, the new building also resolved traffic problems on the site with a great economy of means. A lower entrance provides access to the sports infrastructure, while the higher entrance is accessible via a wide stairway from the outside courtyard.

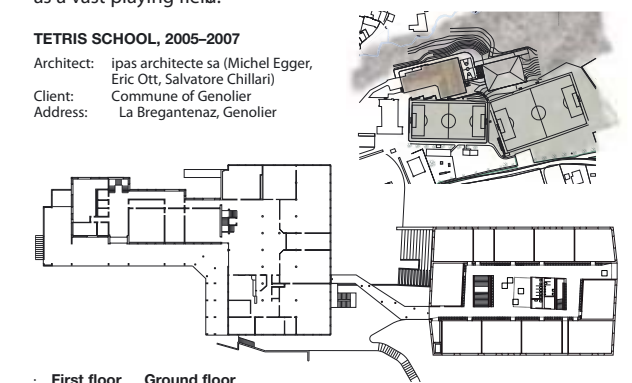
Programmatic and contextual constraints are resolved with simplicity and rigour, allowing the architects to deal more freely with the expression of the building. Located on the edge of a forest, the building engages in a direct dialogue with the surrounding vegetation. The treatment of the facade responds to the apparent anarchy of the surrounding nature with a random composition of open and closed panels. This composition, applied to all the outer walls over the entire height of the building, blurs the perception of the storeys and the functions located inside. The carefully calculated size of the panels makes it possible to deal with the variety of the openings of the school's interior spaces. In addition, the random positioning of these openings confers a unique identity on each space.

The identification of the spaces and functions is accentuated by the use of different coloured floors recalling the passage of the seasons. Autumnal orange on the lower level, wintry white at the entrance, spring green and summer blue on the classroom levels.

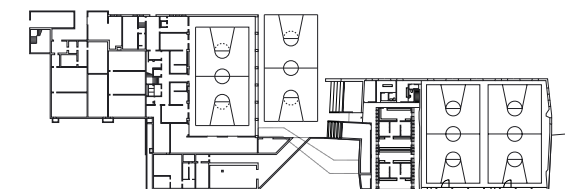
The architecture thus responds naturally to the new Swiss educational programmes which are based on emancipating the pupil within the institution and placing greater value on the creativity and the individuality of each pupil. However, while the architectural approach echoes this desire to make the image of the school institution more festive and more open to the world, it is perhaps also a response to a desire to conceal the growing security apparatus beneath a playful exterior. For in today's Switzerland, the introduction of new, emancipatory educational programmes is paralleled by an increase of in-school surveillance in reaction to the fear engendered by violence in schools. The playful and gently anarchist stand of the IPAS architects in the Genolier school project may perhaps allow children to continue to perceive the school as a vast playing field.

TETRIS SCHOOL, 2005-2007

Architect: ipas architecte sa (Michel Egger, Eric Ott, Salvatore Chillari)
 Client: Commune of Genolier
 Address: La Bregantenz, Genolier



First floor, Ground floor



Central hallway on the first floor, Staircase to classrooms



Entrance to the upper classrooms and connection to the existing building, Gymnasium, ground floor

