

Man with a Plan

Dominique Coulon is a blueprint believer.

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Based in Strasbourg in eastern France, Dominique Coulon designs buildings whose spatial complexity is based on a considered philosophical approach. His signature style consists of massive yet dynamically interlocking elements, grounded in his research into light, materials and colour and based as he says on 'a graphically balanced plan'. *Mark* caught up with him in his new studio, a freshly completed building in burnt wood that reflects his spatial preoccupations.

Before opting to study architecture, you considered literature and philosophy. What swayed your choice, and how do your designs reflect these other interests?

DOMINIQUE COULON: My philosophy teacher at school – Robert Damien, now a professor at the Sorbonne in Paris – had a big influence on me. I still apply his lessons to my projects, by constantly reconsidering things from different angles. Damien even inspired me to study architecture, which I did although I have a non-scientific diploma – in France, admission to architecture school is generally based on a maths background.

So philosophy has influenced my day-to-day architectural approach. To be honest, I couldn't imagine practising 'rational' architecture, as it's taught in some schools. Fortunately, I work with engineer Philippe

Clément (of Batiserf Ingénierie), which makes it possible to realize more complex spaces. As for my literary leanings, they help to free me from constraints and make me more open towards other disciplines, as evidenced in my work. In addition, my partners and staff members have diversified skills and sensitivities that significantly enrich each project.

Site or programme – what do you base your designs on?

So far, we have only built in France, but we never apply the same method twice. The process is intuitive and depends on the nature of the site. It seems we do two kinds of projects: one on rough or neutral sites, where we create an internalized architecture, and the other where the site is strong. In the first, the architecture forms a protective enclosure, while in the second the building establishes a dialogue with its site. For example, for the kindergarten in Buhl (2015), situated on the edge of town, the site is close to a waste treatment centre, so we chose to create courtyards around a core, open to the sky but insulated from the surroundings, with walls and interior spaces colourfully painted to create a more positive image. In contrast, for our competition entry for the cultural centre in Sarlat we drew on, and integrated

our design with, the existing buildings and landscape.

The programme can also take the lead. In the case of our design for Thionville Library, currently under construction, the programme triggered a project in which every line is curved.

How do you explain that?

The programme was written by a philosopher. The idea was to attract teenagers to the library *building*, as they are generally uninterested in its *contents*. The programme evokes universes that must interact and coincide with each other. The main idea is to help users to make their own tools in order to better appropriate the building. It considers the library as a 'third place' – to use Ray Oldenburg's term – the first being the home and the second the place of study or work. It becomes another place to go even if you have nothing to do there, which is a small revolution in our Western way of thinking, which generally needs to assign a specific function to a space. This is why the project is so organic in its organization. It looks like living cells have combined to create spaces and interactions.

What methods and tools do you use?

In our office we make lots of study models, although I'm quick to turn to 3D tools to >



Dominique Coulon
Photo Jean-Louis Hess

formalize what I have in my head. Personally, I believe in the strength of the plan – which is certainly a legacy of my training with Henri Ciriani at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-Belleville in the late 1980s. I believe in a graphically balanced plan design as a means to generate interesting spaces. It's a form of working blind, since I visualize volumes from the plan, and the 3Ds enable me to check and to complete my vision. Of course, sections are also really important to achieve the spaces we're aiming for. So we have no systematic method, and I'm not stressed if the project changes between the first sketches and completion. On the contrary, I'm happy to see the project evolve. For example, with the Mons-en-Baroeul Performing Arts Centre, we balanced the lobby and changed its materiality on the building site. We made it clear to the client at the beginning that, despite the realistic competition images, their project would likely be changed to achieve a satisfactory result.

Ideally, as architects we don't want to be bound by a method, but prefer to explore diverse ways to approach the subject, with the aim of always reconsidering spaces and uses.

'I couldn't imagine practising rational architecture'

Your buildings combine light, colour and geometric form. Why this mix?

The significance of light is its ability to change, giving several sets of shadows to interior spaces based on the time of day and the seasons. Colour is interesting because it adds an extra layer of complexity. Combined with volume, it helps to deconstruct the space and give different experiences depending on your point of view. Our goal is for each visitor to experience various spaces as they move

through the building. The light amplifies these effects. It's a highly intuitive approach. At the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Strasbourg, where I've taught since 2007, I often say to my students that they don't necessarily have to justify everything in a project, but should preserve a certain degree of freedom of interpretation.

A certain defiance of gravity seems to recur in your buildings.

I like to compose with cantilevered volumes as they participate in the dynamic of the spaces we generate. We often implement these with engineer Philippe Clément, whom I mentioned before. At the Bagneux swimming pool, the entrance sequence is covered by a straight corner volume that is very sculptural. In Montpellier, the layering of independent elements resembles a giant game of Mikado.

Perhaps I'm sensitive to the presence buildings have because I grew up in the rural Juras region, where the atmosphere is fairly introverted. I'm attached to the idea that a building should not reveal everything at a single glance; it's important to preserve moments of discovery. So we try to surprise >

The concrete volumes of the conservatory are softened by a Pollock-esque paint treatment in two shades of blue.



In the courtyard, the splatter-painting technique recurs, with the tones reversed.



Wooden beams, panelling and flooring create a warm atmosphere in the auditoriums.

Henri Dutilleux Conservatory of Music, Dance and Dramatic Arts Belfort–France 2015

On the edge of town, demarcating the boundary between built-up and green areas, the conservatory appears as an amalgamation of solid concrete volumes with an unexpected surface. Splatter-painted in two shades of blue in the style of Jackson Pollock, the patterned skin suggests both plant growth and veined marble. It catches the light to lend the concrete monolith an enigmatic, shimmering presence. The building contains two auditoriums, a theatre, a dance studio, a library, classrooms, administrative offices, and a host of studios with extremely varied volumes and areas (the acoustics of each studio are designed to suit one specific instrument). The volumes seem to fit into each other like a puzzle, with empty areas hollowed out of the compact mass creating relationships between different levels.

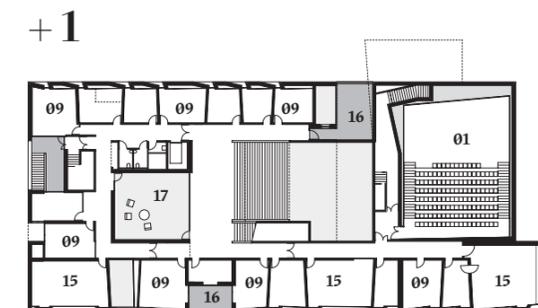
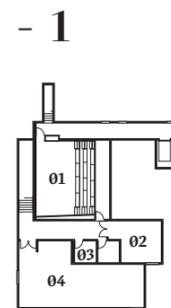
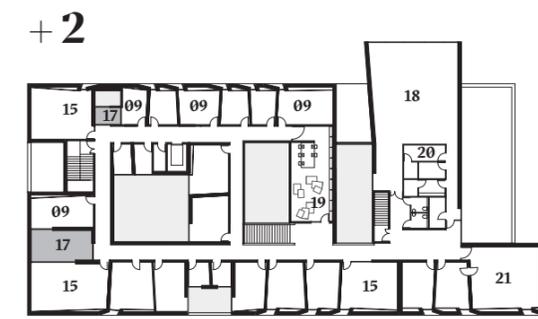
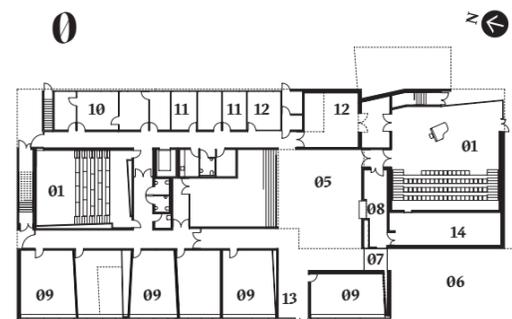
'It may be a little baroque'



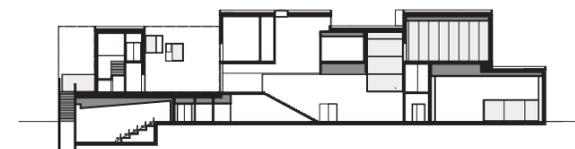
The monumental atrium removes visitors from the surrounding site by placing the openings high up the walls, while a giant light box is suspended from the ceiling to create a soft daylight glow.



The cantilevered dance studio, which faces the countryside and the local Belfort Lion, a monumental sculpture by Frédéric Bartholdi, has the building's most extensive views.



Long Section



- 01 Auditorium
- 02 Heating room
- 03 Technical rooms
- 04 Ventilation rooms
- 05 Atrium
- 06 Forecourt
- 07 Entrance
- 08 Reception desk
- 09 Classroom
- 10 Meeting room
- 11 Office
- 12 Drum classroom
- 13 Study room
- 14 Air handling unit
- 15 Group practice room
- 16 Terrace
- 17 Courtyard
- 18 Dance studio
- 19 Library
- 20 Changing rooms
- 21 Drama classroom

the visitor and generate spaces that can be enjoyed from different angles. I often use concrete as a building material – it's very dominant here in France. My favourite is the cast-in-place concrete that gives a fairly monolithic aspect. I prefer monolithic pieces, because I'm not convinced that connected volumes work with my architectural compositions. So my material approach could be compared to that of Swiss architects. And apart from a few exceptions, like the curved glass walls of the Thionville Library, for which we asked for help from a specialist consulting firm, everything is designed here in the office.

With Belfort Conservatory, it seems you're exploring new kinds of expression.

Yes, I like to experiment with new materials. It may be a little baroque because it isn't essential, but my interest is in creating visual and corporal sensations. The circulation is particularly important, as it is made up of dynamic spaces in which I employ a complexity of form, material and light. The working spaces, meanwhile, are more static and treated in a sober manner in order to facilitate their use. At Belfort, the programme imposes numerous rehearsal studios, treated in white but enjoying broad views of the surrounding landscape.

Simone Veil School Complex Colombes–France 2015

A key feature in the new Marine eco-village in Colombes, this complex, uniting a kindergarten and a primary school, is built on four levels. Although dense, it is not monotonous: a number of hollows enliven the façade and the outline of the building. These highly coloured porous areas allow light to flood into the classrooms, which open up in two different directions: vertically, by means of generously sized patios, and horizontally, through outdoor extensions such as playgrounds, terraces and a garden. After dark, the elevated sports hall lights up the square and street like a lantern. Colour, light and form create great spatial diversity within the schools, and the circulation is conceived in terms of sequences that characterize the identity of each place. The architecture of the building becomes an educational tool, stimulating the development of the young pupils.

As for the façades, I wanted them blue. Instead of stained concrete or a too-bright glaze, I sought a softer effect, which we achieved with a Jackson Pollock-like drip painting technique. Two art students, my son Max Coulon and Gabriel Khokha, splattered two shades of blue onto a white background to achieve the final result, which is fascinating – the impression differs enormously depending on how close or far away you are. What is interesting, and also extremely rare for this area, is that the building hasn't acquired any graffiti at all. For the patio, the tones are reversed with a black background. The technique also recurs in the lobby as an artist's canvas.

Is sustainability a feature of your projects?

Yes: our latest buildings, the school complexes in Colombes and Montpellier, are even positive energy – they produce more energy than they consume. The complex in Colombes is in an eco-village where wood was recommended – actually, we're the only ones to have used it, as rough pieces of oak on a grey background. Here, the site did not help the comfort of use. The best orientation is north towards a garden, while in the south the building is closed as it faces a tram maintenance centre. The possibilities were tight. We decided to focus our efforts on the courtyard, using geometry

and bright colours (orange, pink, red and grey) to enliven the lobby and canteen. Colourists helped us to tailor the choice of colour palette to enhance the children's behaviour. I appreciate this kind of collaboration. In a similar vein, I introduced Claude Bonnet, a neuroscientist, to the Strasbourg architecture school. He offers another angle on the perception of space. His scientific arguments are leading to an interesting evolution in the students' designs – and our own.

There are few residential buildings in your oeuvre. Is this by choice?

Not at all. In France, you're invited to take part in competitions that match the programmes you have already done – in our case, sports facilities, theatres, kindergartens, schools, conservatories and so on. So, unfortunately, this doesn't give us much opportunity to access this type of programme. We would like to do more. One of our latest projects is our own office, three interlocking levels with a rooftop terrace looking out on Strasbourg Cathedral – a masterpiece in the history of architecture. —

coulon-architecte.fr



The richly textured façade of the Simone Veil School Complex features rough oak stakes on a grey background, spliced with segments of colour.



Tropically bright shades contrast with neutral, natural tones in both the building and its outdoor extensions.

‘A building should not reveal everything at a single glance’

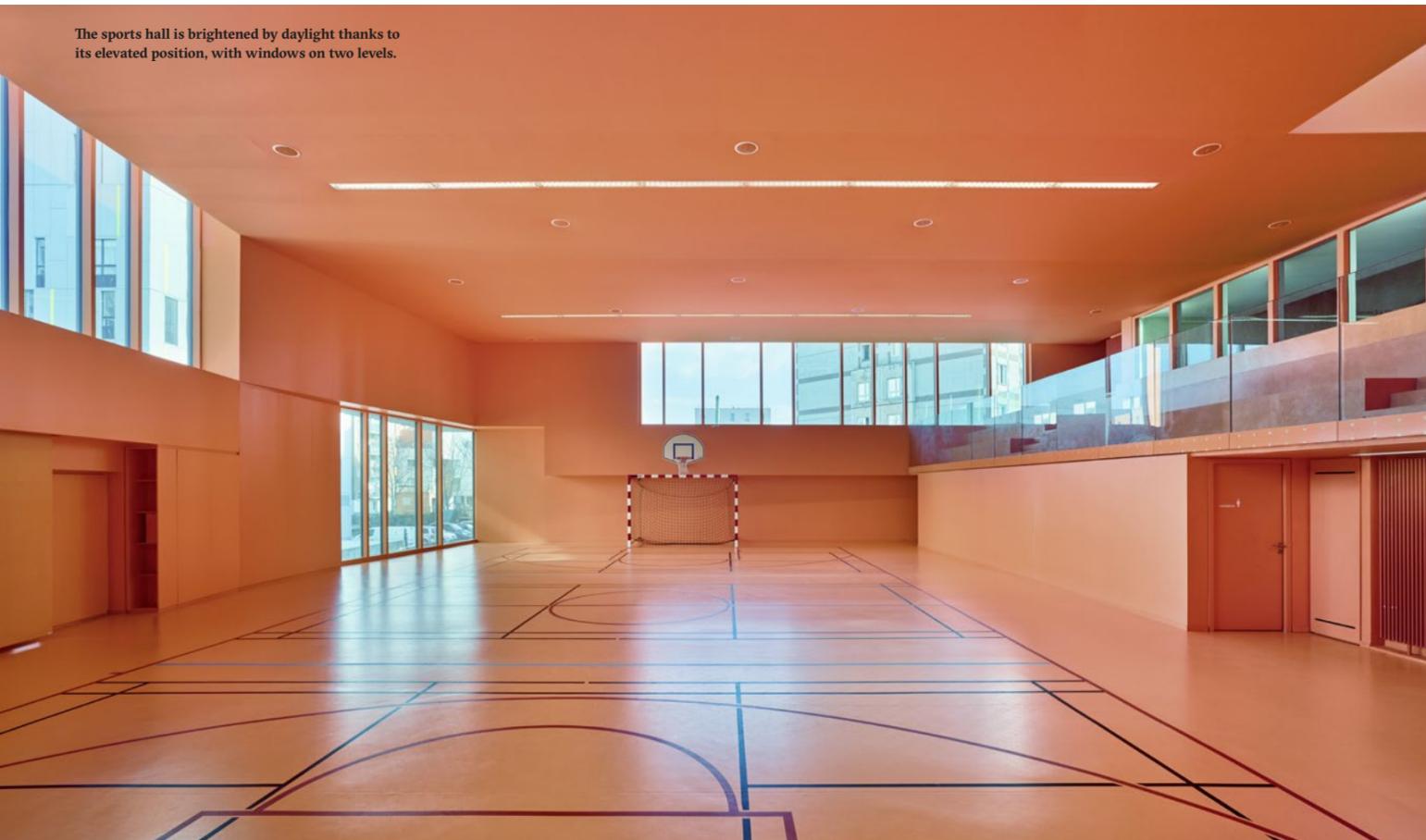




Windows of bright colour are framed by openings in neutrally toned spaces with their natural finishes.

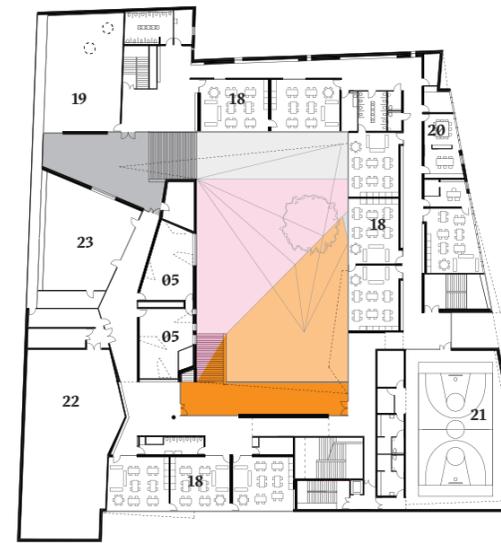


Vibrant shades and quirky angles give extra vitality to a simple corridor space.

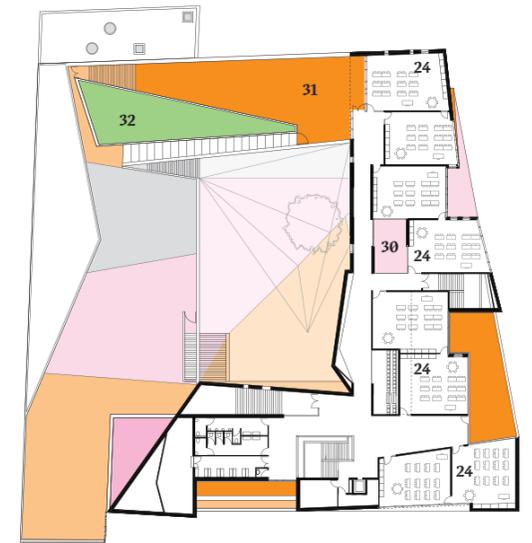


The sports hall is brightened by daylight thanks to its elevated position, with windows on two levels.

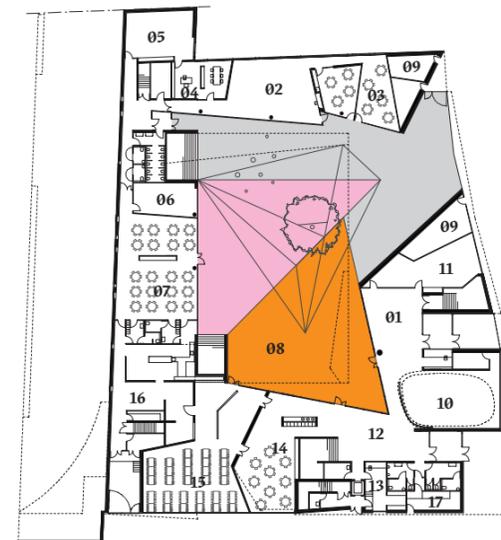
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Section



- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 01 Kindergarten hall | 17 Waste room |
| 02 Leisure centre hall | 18 Kindergarten classroom |
| 03 Workshop | 19 Storage / extra classroom space |
| 04 Office | 20 Meeting room |
| 05 Sleeping room | 21 Sports hall |
| 06 Staff room | 22 Heating / ventilation room |
| 07 Kindergarten canteen | 23 Physical education room |
| 08 Kindergarten courtyard | 24 Primary school classroom |
| 09 Bicycle storage | 25 Support classroom |
| 10 Activity room | 26 Library |
| 11 Kindergarten library | 27 Multipurpose room |
| 12 Primary school hall | 28 Ventilation room |
| 13 Caretaker's lodge | 29 Bleachers |
| 14 Reception / common room | 30 Patio |
| 15 Primary school canteen | 31 Outdoor terrace |
| 16 Kitchen | 32 Educational roof garden |



A seemingly haphazard composition of coloured blocks makes for an imaginative school building in Montpellier.

André Malraux School Complex Montpellier–France 2015

Part of an ambitious general development plan, this school complex unites a kindergarten and a primary school in playful, horizontal forms that contrast with the surrounding housing. Volumes, colours and materials are piled up on each other over three levels in a happy chaos reminiscent of children's stacking toys. The dynamic design avoids repetition and monotony, and the flamboyant exterior forms correspond to the different functional blocks of the nursery and primary schools that encounter each other at the heart of the project. The pivoting of these volumes animates the space and creates a rich, fun-filled experience. It also produces sequences that function as benchmarks for the child – the entrance is easily recognized by the 'gateway' created by the levitating volume of the primary school facilities.



Floating cantilevered forms add lightness and dynamism to the design.

Swathes of immersive colour help define the function of different areas outside as well as inside.





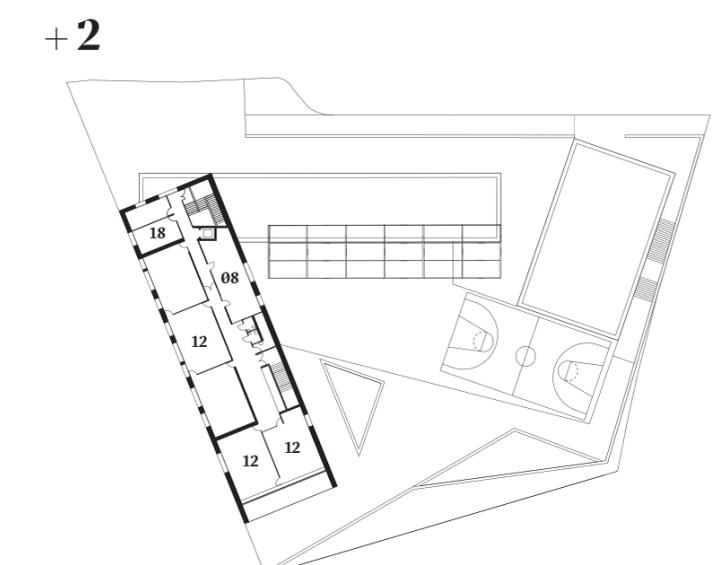
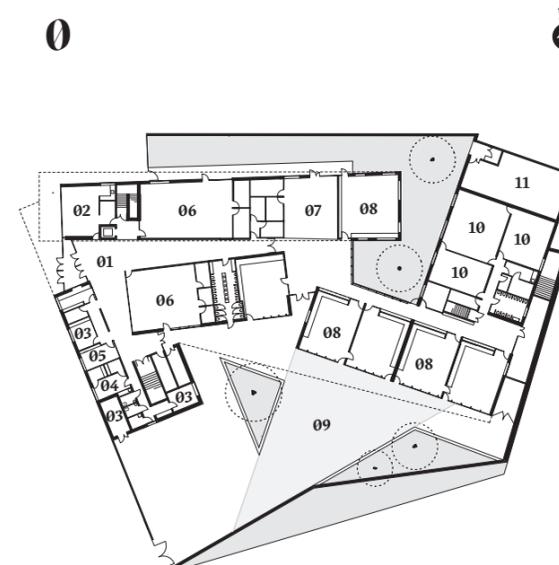
Irregularly placed windows and a skylight fill the upper-floor primary-school facilities with daylight.

Inside the building are 15 different classrooms, including this ground-floor, glass-walled nursery space – etched with a philosophical quote by André Malraux.

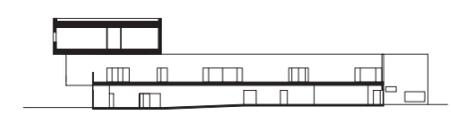


A classroom in shades of blue benefits from a lively view of the greenery outside.

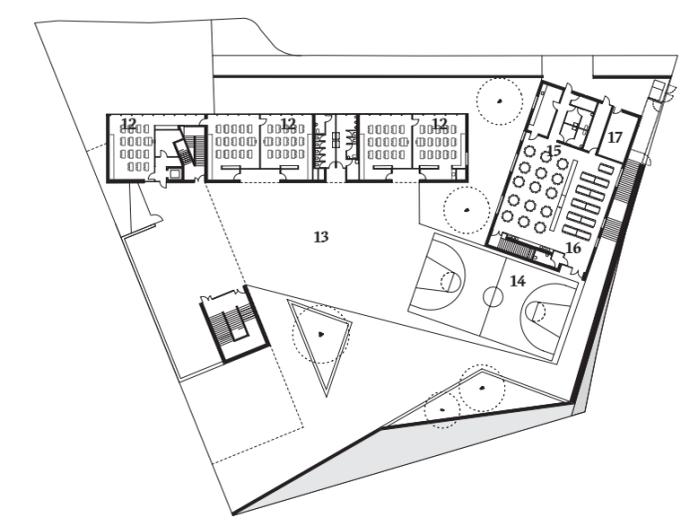
- 01 Entrance hall
- 02 Meeting room
- 03 Office
- 04 Staffroom
- 05 Reception
- 06 Activity room
- 07 Nursery hall
- 08 Classroom
- 09 Kindergarten courtyard
- 10 Sleeping room
- 11 Heating room
- 12 Primary classroom
- 13 Primary upper schoolyard
- 14 Sports court
- 15 Kindergarten dining room
- 16 Primary dining room
- 17 Waste room
- 18 Educational practitioners' room



Section



+1



'I believe in the strength of the plan'