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A MEXICAN EXPERIMENT WITH SUN-
SHINE & FRESH AIR.

A Review of the "Escuelas Al Aire Libre".

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A Review Of The "Escuelas Al Aire Libre"

" The climate of Mexico City is usually mild, but exhilarating; ranging during the year from 35 to 75 Fahr., with a mean temperature of 65 ". Which is to say that Mexico City actually has what the native sons of California claim to have - a climate like the little bear's soup, neither too hot nor too cold, but just right! And hereby hangs a very interesting story, the story of one of the most successful of Mexico's educational experiments - the " Escuelas al Aire Libre ".

In the eight primary "Open Air Schools" which are now going concerns in Mexico City we have an excellent illustration of how happily the Mexicans can, on occasion, take an idea originally developed in other countries and adapt it to the needs of their own nation. Indeed, the "Escuelas al Aire Libre" are more than mere adaptations. As they have been planned and organized by the Secretary of Education, Dr. J. M. Puig Casauranc, they are, in truth, something altogether novel and unique.

" If it is good for weak and unhealthy children " said Dr. Puig, " to have schools with the 'windows always open on at least one side' as the 'International Congress of Open Air Schools' has recommended, why wouldn't the same sort of thing also be good for normal, healthy children? And, furthermore, in a country with a climate like that of Mexico why stop with just having the windows open? Why not do away with windows altogether and take out a whole wall?

or even two walls?

Why not, indeed! A good idea, this is - let us see if it cannot be developed a little further. Perhaps the ends of health and hygiene were not the only ones that can be served by schools, sans doors and windows. " In New York ", said Dr. Puig, or perhaps it was the Sub-Secretary, Mr. Saenz, "on one of the busiest corners of Broadway there is a model cigarette factory. At almost any hour of the day or night one can find hundreds of people with their faces plastered against the windows watching the machines turn out an unending stream of cigarettes.... No doubt the company profits greatly. My point is: why should not education be propagandized in the same way? If the people could actually see what was going on in the schools, would they not be more interested in them? Open air schools can do more than let air and sunshine in to the students; they can also let knowledge and inspiration out to the community....."

This undignified mixture of cigarette advertisements and pedagogical theory is not offered as a rigidly accurate report of what went on the minds of the Mexican educators. It may, however, suggest the fundamental ideas behind the program which was finally worked out for the "Escuelas al Aire Libre". To put the matter in more formal style, two things were proposed: (1) to build a type of school which would accommodate a maximum number of students at a minimum cost and at the same time, take full advantage of Mexico's health giving sun and air; (2) to create in these schools real centers of community life; to make them architecturally beautiful and pedagogically efficient and to place them in the poorest, most neglected quarters of the city.

In the two years since the first school was built in 1925, eight open air units have been constructed in the City of Mexico. With each new school, profiting by former experience, new ideas of architecture and arrangement have been introduced. Finally, in the last unit to be built, "El Centro Escolar - Sarmiento" the ideal for this type of educational institution has practically been reached.

The plans for a typical open air school are set forth in the official bulletin of the "Secretaría de Educación " as follows:

"The program calls for the construction of a series of "cobertizos" (pavilions or "sheds") which will serve to protect the students from the rain and the sun. These "sheds" should be completely open on at least one side and arranged around a park or garden in order to insure ample light and air, and to give the students that feeling of freedom and liberty that comes from direct contact with nature".

"Stated in more detailed fashion, each school should consist of: from five to six class-room pavilions with a maximum capacity of 50 students in each; two pavilions for "trabajos manuales" (manual training, weaving, cooking, etc.); separate 'sanitary departments' for boys and girls with a minimum of two toilets and one wash basin for each class; shower rooms and lockers with at least two showers per class; and, finally, an administrative pavilion containing offices for the principal and the secretary, and a bedroom, kitchenette, and small patio for the caretaker. In addition, wherever possible, the equipment of the school should include a swimming pool and an open air theater".

Due to the experimental nature of these schools and the special exigencies of the situation presented in each case, departures have, of course, been made from this ideal plan. For example, the amount of land allowed for a school has varied from 710 to 5,390 square meters. The total cost per school has ranged between 23,000 and 50,000 pesos, with an average cost of about 40,000 pesos (c.\$20,000). With an enrollment of 5,424 students the operating cost is \$ 5.67 pesos (c.\$2.50) per month, per student.

These statistics leave little room for doubting the success with which the first half of the program for the open air schools has been carried out. To build any sort of educational institution that will accommodate from five to six hundred students at a total maximum cost of \$ 25,000 is remarkable enough; but to achieve with this meager outlay something that is at once a thing of beauty and perfectly adapted to the best interests of the students, is little short of marvellous. With respect to the success of the intention to make these institutions instruments for "acción social" I offer the following statement by Dr. Puig.

"In placing our open air schools in the poorest and most populous sections of the city, we tried to locate them where the need was the greatest. We hoped that the note of color and light, and the activity and enthusiasm of the students and teachers would act as a leaven to raise the social ideals of the community. The results have been more than gratifying..."

"Each school with its modern baths and 'servicios higiénicos' has been an ever present example and impetus for the people to get together and demand that the city council

provide drainage facilities, pave the streets, and in general improve the neighborhood... They take unusual pride in their clean, beautiful schools. They no longer feel that they are forgotten; on the contrary, they have been awakened to their duties and rights as citizens. They have taken it upon themselves, for example, to guard and protect their new schools... Although these schools have no doors or windows to lock, not so much as a single electric light globe has ever been missed"

The educational program now in effect in the open air schools is motivated by the same fundamental principles applied in the rural schools: the students shall learn by doing (the principle of "acción"); and they shall learn those things which will most effectively prepare them to take their place in the community as self-reliant citizens (the principle of "socialización").

If you will visit the newest of the "Escuelas al Aire Libre",

"El Centro Escolar-Faustino Domingo Sarmiento"

you will find the physical equipment to be essentially that described above as "typical". If anything, it is a little more than typical, for its location in a small park on the edge of the city is superior to any of the other schools. Also, its splendid open air swimming pool, and the ample space for gardens, sports, and an open air theater give it special distinction. The class-room pavilions- completely open except for the end walls and roof- are disposed about the grounds in a pleasingly irregular fashion. However, interesting as these physical aspects of the school are, even more interesting are the methods of teaching employed.

The ~~simple~~ notion apparently underlying the whole pedagogical procedure is that the school belongs to the students and the community and not to the teachers and the government. Teachers are there to serve the students, not the students to "learn lessons" from the teachers. When the children talk to you in a very dignified manner about the work of "our" school they mean just that. They have helped build it with their own hands and, now that it is done, they take an active part in running it. This little fourteen year old lad who proudly bears the title of "Commissioner of Agriculture" explains quite simply that he has full charge of allotting the garden plots and seeing that they are properly worked. This other thirteen year old boy is the "Commissioner of Banking". His duty is to run the school savings bank and to make loans to this or that individual or co-operative society in need of help. And so it goes. Every activity of the school is managed by the students themselves. There is a "Commissioner of Marketing" who looks after the sale of the products of the gardens and of the "pequeñas industrias" (small industries), a "Commissioner of Public Health", a "Commissioner of Sports" even the discipline of the 600 students is administered by a body of grave, young "Judges".

Every student during the six year course is required to take the traditional reading, writing, and arithmetic. But aside from this and a few subjects such as history and civics, practically everything else in the curriculum is voluntary. The whole matter is put on the basis of interest. No one is forced to take part in activities. The student is made to feel that he is a citizen in a busy community and his participation

in the community life must be purely spontaneous. And the best thing that can be said about the whole scheme is that apparently it works. The students love it. From the smallest four year old tot in the kindergarten to the oldest student in the sixth grade (and some are as old as twenty-one years) they come early, stay late, and work hard.

In view of the fact that this particular school has only been open for two months, it is perhaps a little early to estimate its effect as a social force in the community. According to the Principal, however, the parents are already beginning to take a deep interest in all the activities of the students. Parent's associations are being formed. The people of the neighborhood are very poor, but somehow, each one contributing his mite, they manage to buy this or that bit of equipment- gravel for walks, rakes for the gardens, and whatnot- which the school still needs.

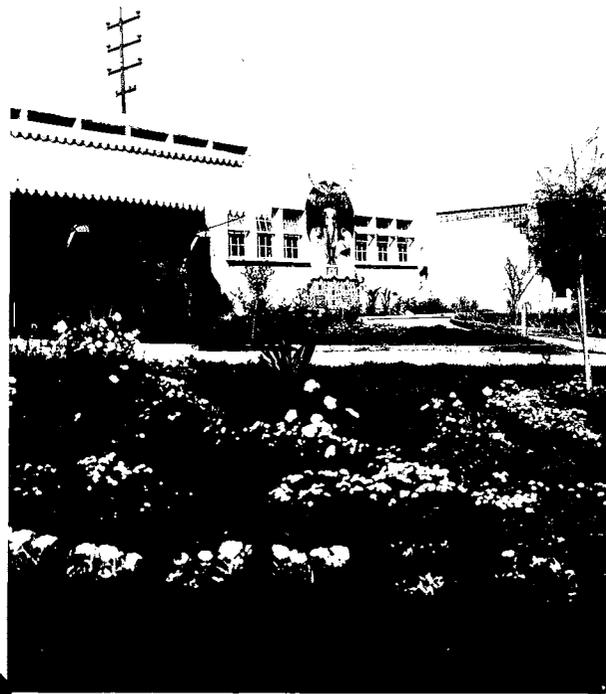
No description of the "Centro Escolar- Sarmiento" would be complete without some mention of the remarkable mural paintings by the young Mexican artist, Maximo Pacheco. A pure blooded Indian, not yet 21 years old, Pacheco is one of the most brilliant of the now famous group of revolutionary artists headed by Diego Rivera. His frescoes, portraying the students engaged in characteristic activities, have been painted on both the inside and outside walls of the pavilions. A curious mixture of realism and symbolism, they are not only splendidly decorative, but a constant stimulation to the imagination of the students.

When the Secretary of Education, Dr. Puig Casauranc, said on the occasion of the inauguration of the

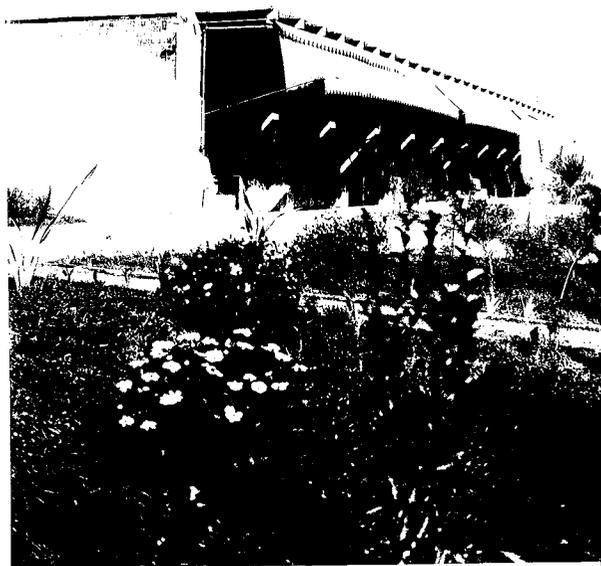
"Centro Escolar Sarmiento"- "we cannot yet expect, given the state of our culture... and our old habits of indifference and even hostility... that the child will go to the school; we must arrange for the school to go the child"- he sounded the key note of the whole modern educational program in Mexico. The distinctive feature of the Open Air Schools is that they have been located in the poorest and hitherto most neglected "barrios" of the City of Mexico. The school has been carried to the child of the city slums. In the same way the federal rural schools are being established in the "forgotten corners" of the "campo" and the school is 'going to the child' of the peon.... If Mohammed will not go to the mountain, then perforce the mountain must be taken to Mohammed.



Entrance to Open Air School
"El Pipila"



Gardens in Open Air School
"El Pipila"



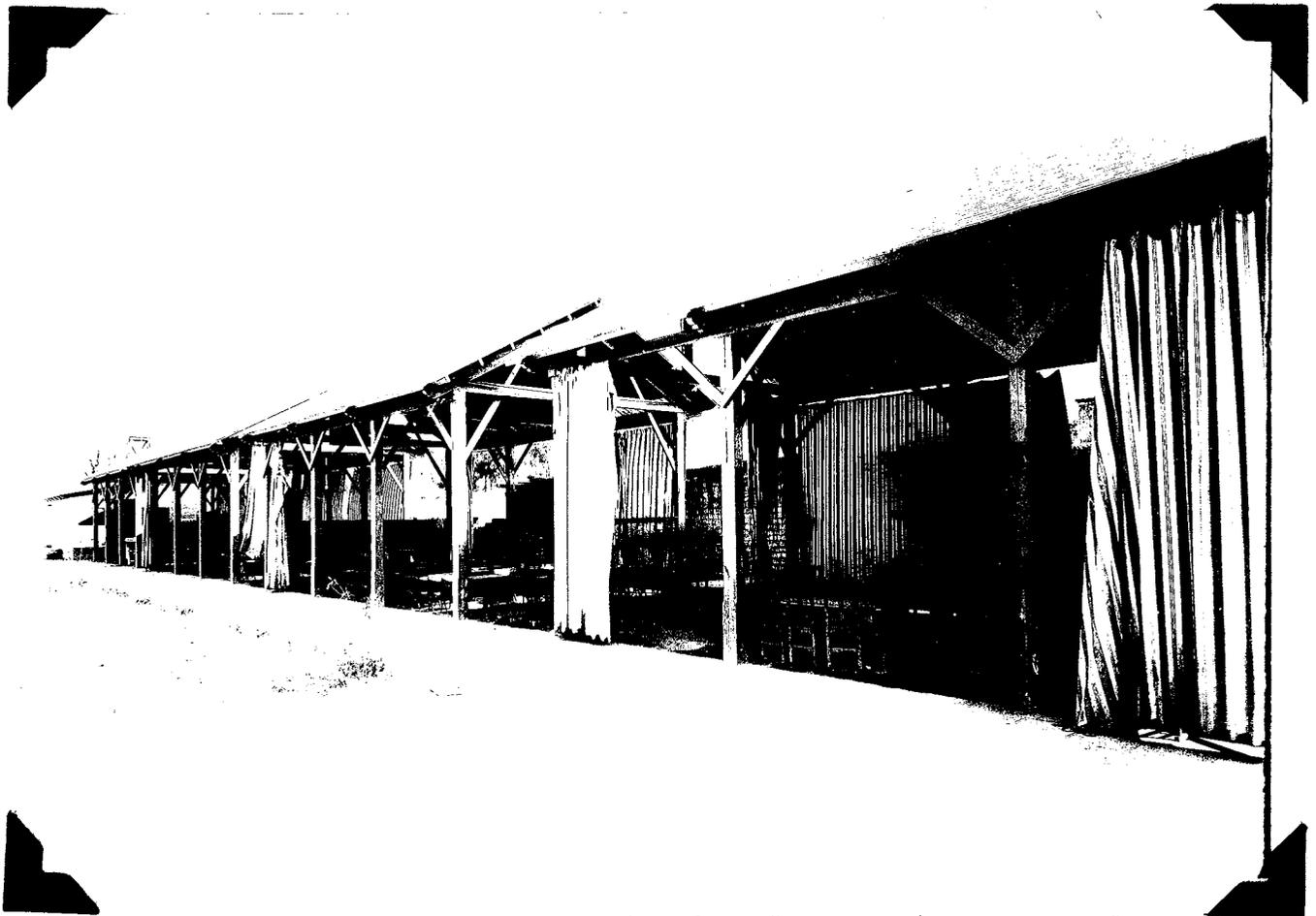
One of the Pavilions - Open Air School
"El Pipila"



Detail of Wall Decorations Open Air School
"El Pipila"



Interior of a Class Room - Open Air School
"El Pipila"



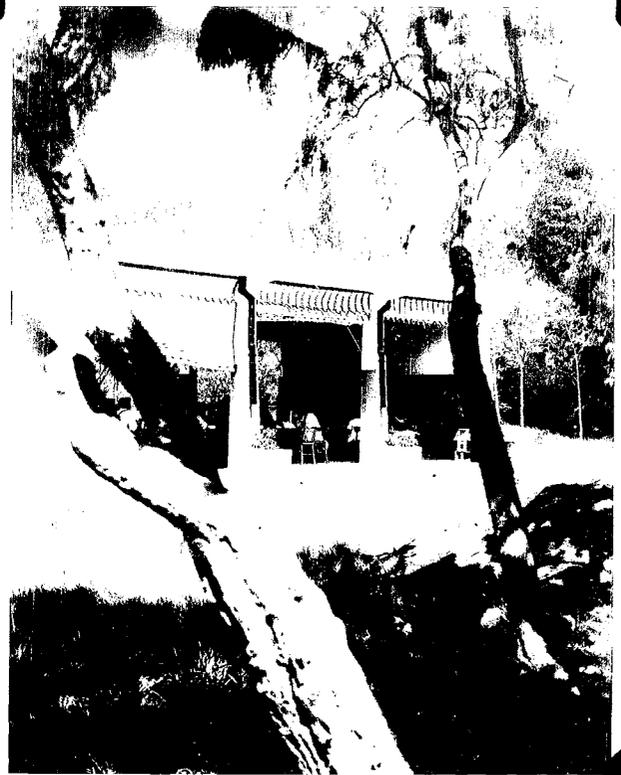
One of the first Open Air Schools to Be Built - "La Escuela - Alvaro Obregon"



Inauguration of Open Air School - Faustino Doming. Sarmiento



Swimming Pool - Open Air School
"Sarmiento".



One of the Pavilions - Open Air School
"Sarmiento"



Mural Decorations - Open Air School
"Sarmiento"

"Commissioners" - Open Air School
"Sarmiento"



Opening Exercises - Open Air School - "Sarmiento".