A brief history of the LEM

In 1968, Jacques Lecoq’s theatre school had been in existence for 12 years. That year, amid the political and social mass demonstrations and student movements, Lecoq was invited by Professor Jacques Bosson (1925–84) to deliver a one-day experiment for architecture students from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ENSBA) [National School of Fine Arts] in Paris.

As a consequence of the student movement, profound changes took place in ENSBA, separating architecture teaching from the other courses, and creating the Unités Pédagogiques d’Architecture (UPA) [Architecture Pedagogical Units]. Starting in 1969, the newly created pedagogical units began to enjoy some independence in the administration of the training that they offered. Bosson was part of the Unité d’Architecture Pédagogique n°6 (UP6), located in the La Villette neighborhood.

In addition to a common framework for all architecture educational units, each teaching unit could propose different course units, which also contributed to the promotion of original teaching approaches. The UP6 was characterized by being very open to multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary teaching methods, giving significant space to new approaches that dialogued with plastic creation, philosophy and the humanities (ENSAPLV, 2014). Later, the UP6 became the École Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Paris La Villette.

Bosson, architect and set designer, was married to Monique Hermant-Bosson, director of the Charles-Dullin School of Theatre. Bosson is considered the initiator, from 1965, of the teaching of scenography within the architecture schools (Risacher, 1984). After the successful activity with 1,200 students conducted by Lecoq in 1968, Bosson invited him to jointly develop a project with the student architects, beginning in 1969 (Belekian, 2011).

Lecoq and Bosson, in collaboration, developed a course unit called ‘Dramatic Analysis of Spaces’ for student architects that attempted to ensure students would physically experience spaces in order to try to define those spaces based on their experiences and not just by mental processes – a broad course unit that would dissolve the boundaries between the languages of theatre and architecture (Ritorno, 1970). The establishment of the relation of the corporeal experience of space with graphic and constructed expressions of space was already present.
A few years later, Lecoq began to develop work in the UP6 independently from Bosson:

It is in this sense that I started a Laboratory of Movement Study at the Fine Arts School, with the study and manufacture of forms (portable architectures) that allow one to grasp the space, so that future architects know better the value of the spaces they build without forgetting that, inside, men live and move.

(Lecoq, 1974: 281)

Krikor Belekian was a student of the UP6 who participated in the experience proposed by Lecoq in 1968 and became his student in 1969 in the first of Lecoq’s architecture classes. In 1972, Belekian [then spelled Belekhian] presented his graduation research with the title Spectacle d’architectures portables [Architecture’s Portable Spectacle], under the direction of Jacques Lecoq. This paper is a reference for creating the design of portable structures, one of the main pedagogical processes of the Laboratory of Movement Study (LEM) and ‘symbol’ of the laboratory in its publicity.

Soon after the completion of the architecture course, Belekian was invited by Lecoq to be his assistant in UP6, where they worked together until Lecoq left the UP6 in 1988 (Belekian, 2011). The UP6 offered a series of annual course units related to the field of Experimental Set Design. These comprised three units of Jacques Bosson’s: Ecology of Spaces, Scenography, and Mobile Architecture; and two of Lecoq’s: Laboratory of Movement Study and Laboratory of Dramatic Architecture. Analysing the course unit descriptions of each one, it is possible for one to identify common ground between the educational proposals: a teaching vision focused on autonomy and student self-awareness, valuing physical experience; the release of an established artistic culture (either architecture, theatre or scenic design) to the imaginative development of the student, allowing one to experience and identify other alternatives; and practical experimentation of one’s own body space in relation to the other (UNITÉ, 1981).

In 1976, Lecoq’s theatre school, after 20 years, finally found a place in which to settle in the rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis. Krikor Belekian was the architect responsible for the repurposing of the building, ‘Le Central’, for the school’s installation. The building not only freed the school from repeated changes of address, but it also inspired it to continue growing. Thus, from the partnership between Belekian and Lecoq, a new project emerged, as Belekian said:

The LEM started because we had the desire to be independent. We were dependent on the UP6. So we thought of opening a department that would allow us to be more independent to propel the pedagogy further and do our research much more freely outside a university framework. We were, Jacques and I, two teachers, and we had three students.

(Belekian, 2011)

Lecoq and Belekian also created the Association Pour l’Étude du Mouvement (APEM) [Association for the Study of Movement], which is the entity that governs the LEM. Belekian taught at the LEM from its foundation in 1976 until 2011, and in parallel, worked professionally as an architect, thus collaborating with Lecoq for 30 years (from the UP6 in 1969 until Lecoq’s death in 1999).

The LEM was not a simple transposition of the work already done in UP6. Both Belekian (2011) and Pascale Lecoq (2011) cited differences between the UP6 and the LEM, the latter being closer to theatre than to architecture. Belekian defined the LEM as a department autonomous from the school, but with the spirit of Jacques Lecoq, ‘devoted to scenography
viewed in the broad sense, not the scenography applied to a method of doing. That is, to give the fundamentals of what space really is' (Belekian, 2011).

In the beginning, the workshop activities were held in the school’s foyer. Each year the number of students increased, which stimulated the interest in and need for expansion. Thus, the manual and construction activities started to be conducted in an old glassware factory that was next to the school, where the studio is still situated today.

Lecoq taught at the school of architecture until 1988, when he retired from the UP6. At this point, Belekian also left the school of architecture. Pascale Lecoq attended the LEM more than once in the early 1980s. As a result of conversations with Belekian, she became interested in architecture, opting to undertake her education at the UP6 precisely because it is an institution with a very artistic vision. She graduated as an architect in 1987 and was again a student of Jacques Lecoq. During her studies, she gave special focus to philosophy and plastic arts disciplines (Lecoq, P., 2011).

In 1989, Pascale Lecoq became a professor at the LEM. At the time, Lecoq taught a movement class, and Belekian held a construction class. Pascale proposed a course in-between these two lines of teaching, giving a greater emphasis to the plastic arts (Lecoq, P., 2011). As Lecoq’s assistant, she also taught movement classes. After Jacques Lecoq’s death, Pascale co-directed the LEM with Belekian until 2011, when he left the laboratory. Since then, Pascale Lecoq has led the project with the collaboration of other teachers.

**LEM definition and program**

The LEM has been defined as a scenic department of the school, although the work it has developed is very broad and it can be understood as a creative laboratory. The term laboratory affirms its sense as a place for experiment, surpassing the idea and expectation of a more technical education than the term course could generate. The term study of movement only partially reveals the laboratory’s mission, as the name does not include the terms ‘space’ or ‘plastic representations,’ which are equally important. It is a difficult task, even for its coordinators, to frame and define the LEM.

An official ‘definition’ of the LEM can be found in the certificate of completion that represents the LEM:

> Laboratory of Movement Study, plastic and scenographic arts department of Jacques Lecoq's International Theatre School. A department devoted to the dynamic study of space and rhythm through plastic representation. The education includes movement, construction and design classes, involving the fields of architecture, design and scenography.

(École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq, 2011)

This definition demonstrates the diversity of the artistic languages and the extent of the proposals. Weekly classes contain three types of activities: plastic manual activities and constructions, research and analysis of body movement and space, and dramatic improvisation classes. These types of activities are usually applied to all program content, giving the student different experiences and understandings of the same theme.

The LEM program is presented in three terms:

The first term is devoted to: universal discovery of the laws governing movement and spaces; the creation of dynamic structures; how to put the human body into
The contents of the work are very tightly integrated, developing cumulatively but also unfolding to be reapplied in new ways. The transposition from body language to visual and architectural language is one of the means by which the research and learning process happens.

The pedagogical basis is similar to an actor’s preparation: the state of calmness and of neutrality, the balance of forces, the economy of the physical actions, improvisation, the collective observation of the result of the creations of the students in class, and le rejeu [the re-play] – the Mimodynamic Method [Méthode Mimodinamique] (Lecoq, J., 1995).

The Mimodynamic Method of Lecoq corresponds to discovering through rejeu the dynamics of the world through the movement of the sensitive body itself. It describes personally knowing, experiencing, and researching any element of nature or phenomenon produced by man by ‘seeing with the body’ through movement.

Lecoq took the term rejeu from the French anthropologist Marcel Jousse (1886–1961) who, in his studies about gestures, created his own vocabulary. For Jousse (1932), the human being possesses the instinctive and unconscious capacity of reproducing attitudes, rhythms, and movements of things and beings, which he called mimisme. Mimisme has two phases: the first, the intussusception (intus = movement which leads to one’s interior; suscipio/suscipere = receive, gather, bring together). The human being receives and registers everything which surrounds him/her, or that which surrounds him/her is registered within him/herself like clay, which receives an imprint (Jousse, 2008). The second phase is the rejeu: that which is registered tends to be reproduced, voiced, and re-played. Jousse affirmed that this capacity can become conscious and that one can play with it.

Before adopting Jousse’s vocabulary, Lecoq had already practiced mime exercises with his students – exercises of movements of identification and expression of natural elements and phenomena – various improvisation/dramatic game exercises he had experienced with Jean-Marie Conty and with Jean Dasté in the traditions of Charles Dullin and Jacques Copeau. Analyzing Lecoq’s publications before 1969 (Lecoq, 1967, 1968) and the Proceedings of the round table of Venice Biennale in 1969 (Ritorno, 1970), before Jousse’s L’anthropologie du geste was published, one can perceive the difficulty Lecoq had until then to define his comprehension of mime (Scheffler, 2013). Lucien Stefanesco (a student of the theatre school in 1969) affirmed that in 1972, Lecoq had recently come to know of Jousse’s book and that Lecoq had been enthusiastic about the vocabulary of the anthropologist, which appeared to him to be much more appropriate than others.

In the LEM, to rejouer spaces and architectures permits the identification of the dramas and forces organising the space, something which Lecoq worked on extensively with his students at the UP6.

The LEM and the Gestalt

As in the actor’s pedagogy, intuitive intelligence plays a central role in the LEM. The development of a visual perception is probably one of the main skills sought by the pedagogy: to exercise the visual perception, to verify through observation of movement the laws that
govern it, and to understand the laws that govern a visual composition. Thus, this pedagogy can be seen as a ‘school of visual perception’ (Belekian, 2011). A fundamental element of the LEM’s pedagogy is learning to read the student’s works, both plastic and corporeal. The base is verification, through observable factors and their effect on the viewer.

Significant principles in this awakening of the visual sensitivity (toward the construction of an object or of a scene with actors) seem to correspond with principles identified through the study of the shape of Gestalt exemplified by the works of Rudolf Arnheim, such as Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye (1954), and those of Donis A. Dondis, author of A Primer of Visual Literacy (1973). These authors propose that there are several inherent aspects of human visual perception – particular perceptive ‘forces’ such as the need for balance and the intuitive recognition of regularity, for example. This kind of intuitive knowledge, so often ignored, lost, or destroyed by excessive rationality, is desired and recognized as knowledge in the LEM.

Topics such as the importance of tension and contrast in different forms of visual composition, relations of attraction and grouping, the use of elements which provoke dynamics and the sensation of movement, as well as the relationship between the object and its abstraction are also central to the LEM – although it must be emphasized that the systematization of these principles is not usually explicitly presented by the teachers.

Gestalt principles can find correspondences in the bi- and tridimensional plastic works, as well as in the corporeal exercises of the LEM and in aspects of the professional program for actors.

**The final project – l’expodrame (drama exhibition)**

The final project is an important part of the LEM, about a third of its duration. The project is linked to processes of experimentation with new content, and its creation proceeds through collaboration with the professors, generated by different proposals of exercises and provocations.

The final project may result in different types of work: as a mask (dynamic form) to change the body; as a portable habitable structure on a body scale, segmenting the body; as a proposition in space (a dynamic composition); as a dynamic pattern; or as a non-catalogued form involving construction and the body. These experimental objects have somewhat vague denominations to avoid pre-determined forms and to stimulate the exploration for new alternatives.

The definition of the driving theme or the reference work of the final project changes every year: ‘We try to see if in the theme spaces are constructed, if there is the notion of space, a transcription about space’ (Lecoq, P., 2011). The themes can come from literature, paintings, or music (such as Kafka, Rabelais, Saint-John Perse, Miró, and Stravinsky). Works such as Goethe’s Faust, Homer’s The Odyssey, Dante’s The Divine Comedy, Cervantes’ Don Quixote, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Haruki Murakami’s After Dark, and the tale of Ernst Hoffmann’s The Sandman have been used. It is often about initiatory travels and texts of origination. It can be a single story or a whole literary work. Sometimes there is a theme and a text, as was the case for the 2010–11 session (the theme death and the text The Sandman). Also, for two years, the theme taste [le goût] was chosen, always with a text.

The annual change of issues has to do with the attitude that the teachers want to maintain, focusing on research and availability: ‘To teach is not to give something that is known. Creation is not taught. Nevertheless the goal of education is to give the possibilities of creation’ (Belekian, 2011).
The creation process merges corporeal experiences with the perfecting of construction. The idea of shape-movement reaches its apex in the learning process, because at this point all the aspects dealt with that are related to construction and movement are required. The way to move or handle the body and/or the construction is being explored, and hence the form is discovered dynamically.

The final projects of the LEM are presented to the public in the Grande Salle at the end of the course while various plastic works produced during the term are displayed in an exhibition.

**LEM and the Bauhaus**

It is possible to establish a relationship between the German Bauhaus School and the LEM in at least two respects: regarding the studies of shape, colour, and of other plastic and architectural aspects; and regarding the experiments of Oskar Schlemmer.

The influence of Bauhaus on Jacques Lecoq was reported by Pascale Lecoq (2011), who recognized a link between what is produced in the LEM, in the Bauhaus, and in Russian Constructivism.

It is likely that Krikor Belekian and Pascale Lecoq’s education in UP6 led to the absorption of diverse influences of the Bauhaus. In the LEM, several times Kandinsky and Klee are mentioned, especially on issues like colours and abstraction. In the bibliographies of the final course papers of architecture students who were guided by Lecoq in UP6, one can find references, as in Belekian’s, in which Schlemmer and the book edited by Walter Gropius, *The Theatre of Bauhaus* (1961), is mentioned.

However, Lecoq and Belekian argue that there is a distinction between the LEM and Schlemmer’s *Triadic Ballet*, also called *Mechanical Ballet*. For them, Schlemmer was more connected to shape and mechanics than to dynamics and poetics. The form-movement-space association proposed in the LEM seeks to go beyond form. What is sought in a *movement-form construction* is an object that is provided with possibilities for movement in a way that makes the human body dynamic, and that the movement alters the perception/knowledge of this object while revealing its possibilities.

This kind of thinking is present in several instances in the LEM: to think of the colour-shape, colour-motion, colour-shape-motion, the material-shape-motion; to think of the elements in combination.

**The presence of éducation nouvelle principles in the LEM**

During my experience as a student of the LEM (2010–11) and the realization of my doctoral research, in which I reviewed the history of Jacques Lecoq’s educational training, I tried to understand and identify the pedagogical bases of the LEM (Scheffler, 2013). Although I have not found a reference made by Lecoq, I believe there is a filiation of his pedagogy to the education reform movement called *éducation nouvelle* (progressive education) in France. This is suggested by the context of Lecoq’s training as a physical education monitor and in theatre during the 1940s, and the affinity of numerous procedures and principles.

*Éducation nouvelle* arose in opposition to a traditional education system in which education programs were rigid and inflexible, passing on accumulated knowledge through repetition and abstracted information. In contrast, *éducation nouvelle* suggested that education should be an active process in which practical research, observation of the world, and formulation of objective knowledge are considered fundamental, generating an experiential knowledge through discovery (Bloch, 1968).
Éducation nouvelle spread widely and was absorbed by many fields of knowledge and in various educational practices, among them the Natural Method of Physical Education proposed by Georges Hébert. The Hébert method was the basis for the formulation of the National Doctrine for General and Sports Education that dominated the youth and student context in France during the Vichy regime in World War II. It was in this period that Lecoq had his training as a physical education monitor at the École du Polo de Bagatelle.

The éducation nouvelle movement gained new momentum in France after the Liberation. The Association Travail et Culture (TEC), an institution in which Lecoq took theatre and dance courses in 1944, was affiliated to this movement (Scheffler, 2013). Jean-Marie Conty, responsible for Lecoq’s education in Bagatelle, was educational director of the TEC, where he offered ‘initiation in methods of the éducation nouvelle’ courses in 1944, along with Henri Laborde, pedagogical director of TEC and center director of the Training for Active Education Methods.

The influence of éducation nouvelle on Conty is evident in the core tenets of Éducation par le Jeu Dramatique (EPJD), a school he founded in 1946, in which Lecoq also participated. Thus, Lecoq was influenced by the éducation nouvelle through the theatrical principles advocated by Conty during Lecoq’s period in Bagatelle, in the TEC and in the EPJD.

The influences of éducation nouvelle in theatre can also be seen in Jacques Copeau’s École du Vieux-Colombier, and in the teaching of Charles Dullin, who, in 1921, founded L’Atelier – école nouvelle du comédien. The institution’s name indicates two associations with the éducation nouvelle: the idea of atelier as a learning environment, and the use of the term école nouvelle [new school]. Dullin was an important personality at the TEC, and a significant number of the theatre professors at the TEC and the EPJD were his students.

Adolphe Ferrière, author of L’école active [The active school] (published in 1922), proposed that one should think of education as a laboratory or a workshop, environments where action and practical activities are constant, with a more dynamic character and an emphasis on the investigative act; a place where the boundaries between course units can be deleted, adopting multidisciplinary perspectives. This is also how the LEM is constituted.

Practical, manual activities have great importance within the éducation nouvelle (and within the LEM). Manual and physical work present a contrast to the overly intellectual, dogmatic, and abstract work of traditional education (Bloch, 1968). Artistic practices, crafts, and manual activities, as well as the theatre, are considered important (Ferrière, 2004). These sorts of activities were also included by Hébert and presented in the National Doctrine of General and Sports Education of the Vichy regime. Thus, great importance was given to manual activity during Jacques Lecoq’s training as a physical education monitor and in his first experiences with theatre.

Final considerations

The LEM involves different fields of knowledge that, in a fluid manner, are organized in a complex way for a proposal of active artistic education that seeks to maintain a living spirit. As in every pedagogical project of Lecoq, his references are not highlighted, because the knowledge he considers most important is the one that the student builds himself.

I believe that, as Simon Murray (2003) says, although the daily routines of the LEM and of the school are separated, the LEM significantly influenced the development of Lecoq’s pedagogy as applied in the two-year actor training. Therefore, the LEM should not be considered as something parallel to Lecoq’s pedagogy. It can be considered one of its most interesting
fruits. Starting from the architecture school, Lecoq opened up a number of new influences and collaborations, which suggest that the pedagogy of actor education would not be the same without the existence of the LEM.

References


As an extension of the courses given by Jacques Lecoq to the architect students at the Paris School for Fine Arts (École Nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts), Jacques Lecoq created in 1976 a stage design department, the L.E.M. (Laboratory of Movement Study) with the architect Krikor Belekan who directed it until June 2011. The L.E.M. is now run by Pascale Lecoq, architect and stage designer, with a team of teachers from the school.

(École Jacques Lecoq, 2016)

The following photographs have been kindly supplied by Richard Lecoq to give examples of the recent work of students on the LEM course.

École Jacques Lecoq, 2016.
accessed April 26, 2016
Figures 21.1–21.5  Images illustrate the work of the LEM, where students work with structure, space, colour, and movement. © Richard Lecoq.