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Photo © Aric Mei

### L'Ecole de Choix

Studio Drum Collaborative with Malcolm Morris

Mirebalais, Haiti

By Jenna M. McKnight

One rarely sees a new building when traveling through Haiti. While aid groups have tossed up temporary shelters in Port-au-Prince and outlying areas since the deadly January 2010 earthquake, ramshackle structures still dominate the impoverished country.

Yet standing on the dusty fringe of Mirebalais, a town 37 miles north of Port-au-Prince, is a collection of handsome new buildings that comprise L'Ecole de Choix, or the School of Choice, which presently houses 200 students, from pre-kindergarteners through fourth-graders (expansion plans are in the works). Designed by a local firm in collaboration with a Chicago architect, the campus is a welcome sign of progress in this struggling nation. Nearby, construction of a large hospital offers added reason for optimism.



Like most Haitian schools, L'Ecole de Choix is privately owned and operated. The Foundation for the Technological and Economic Advancement of Mirebalais (FATEM), a Boston-based charity that works to boost educational services in central Haiti, spearheaded the project. Plans for the new facility emerged after the quake due in part to the influx of refugees into the region. L'Ecole de Choix is intended to "serve as a model school that people can look up to—a shining light," says FATEM president Jacky Poteau, who grew up in Mirebalais.

Funding for humanitarian projects can come from unexpected sources. In the case of L'Ecole de Choix, players of online games offered by the company Zynga largely backed the \$900,000 project. In FarmVille, for instance, users bought virtual sweet-potato seeds at a premium price, with proceeds donated to Haiti initiatives. Zynga's

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**College Mixte Le Bon Berger**

CEO is the brother of Laura Hartman, a DePaul University business-ethics professor who served as FATEM's strategic adviser during the school project.

To oversee the facility's design and construction, FATEM turned to Chicago architect Malcolm Morris, whose expertise in high-end residential projects made him an unlikely candidate. "I accidentally raised my hand at a dinner party [hosted by Hartman]," he jokes when asked how he got involved. The organization also hired the local firm Studio Drum Collaborative to serve as the architect. Hervé Sabin, a Pratt Institute alum and firm cofounder based in Port-au-Prince (his business partner, Colin Montoute, lives in New York), says he initially heard about the project through a pal's Facebook message, which led him to pursue the commission.

Completed in November 2011, the three-acre campus features clusters of cubic and rectangular volumes positioned at various angles to provide views of the surrounding countryside. In total, the school has three single-classroom buildings and six double-classroom buildings, plus an administration area, nurse's office, kitchen, and open-air dining hall. Landscape design elements include white gravel to help mitigate flooding during the rainy season and almond trees that, once mature, will offer respite from the intense sun.

Structurally speaking, the buildings are rather straightforward: Concrete columns with concrete-block infill form the walls, and steel trusses support corrugated metal roofs. Unlike much concrete construction in Haiti, reinforcing bars are properly tied together to ensure stability during earthquakes.

The architects' ingenuity is evident in the details. To supply daylight and foster air circulation, the designers incorporated rooftop ridge vents, clerestories, and open-air windows lining opposite sides of the room. The windows and classroom doors feature hand-woven grass affixed to steel frames—an attractive design element that utilizes a native material and local craft tradition. "Each panel took about a half day," says Sabin, noting that they hired six Haitians to fabricate the screens. To further connect the architecture to its pastoral setting, the buildings were painted earthy colors, from spring green to terra-cotta.

FATEM recently transferred ownership of the campus to the new School of Choice Education Organization, based in Illinois and overseen by a board of directors chaired by Hartman. If money can be secured, the group hopes to construct teacher housing and six more classroom buildings to accommodate grades five through 12. Perhaps another FarmVille fund-raising campaign could help this growth become reality.

**ARCHITECT:** Studio Drum Collaborative with Malcolm Morris.

**BUDGET:** \$900,000.

**CONTEXT:** Outskirts of Mirebalais, a town in central Haiti. FATEM, an aid group, estimates that roughly 60 percent of children living in rural areas outside of Mirebalais don't attend school.

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