

# The *Cercle de l'Ermitage* by Alberto Sartoris. Axonometry as a Synthetic Representation of the Project

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A chromolithograph by Alberto Sartoris, published in 1936 in *The Architectural Review* [Morton Shand 1936], depicts an axonometric cutaway of the dance floor and bar of the *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, designed and realised by the architect in 1935, transforming an old mill into a cultural and social centre for international exhibitions, a private club for artists [1]. Sartoris articulated the interior with a succession of superimposed platforms “in a radically modern way, in order to embody and conceptualize the space into a manifesto of rationalistic architecture, without modifying the outer envelope” [Dunant 2016, p. 78], as requested by the Swiss authorities [2].

The choice of oblique isometric axonometry is a constant in Sartoris' projects, allowing him to control, in a geometrically rigorous manner, the design process, both

when he represents the exterior through overall views of his architecture, sometimes hyposcopic views, and when he needs to focus attention only on the interior. In the second case, by means of axonometric cutaways, Sartoris extrapolates the detail of a part of the project, as he does, for example, for the library of the “House for the painter Jean Saladin van Berchem in Auteil” (1930) or for the studio designed for his “Ideal house in Florence” (1942) [3]. “In the actual experience of the object, the overall meaning is revealed little by little: the perception of a complex space is a process that takes place over time. The axonometric drawing conveys an integral and simultaneous message. Thanks to axonometry, all the dimensions of the building are perceived at a single glance: time becomes space” [Colquhoun 1992, p. 21, authors' translation].

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The representation method often allows Sartoris to draw an ideal architecture, which is not contaminated by the contingencies of its realisation and is not conditioned by the observer's choice of a privileged point of view; isometric axonometry also guarantees him the security of the relationship between the measurements that are kept constant on the three axes. "If perspective is functional to the observational conditions of the subject, axonometry is functional to the properties of the object" [Reichlin 1979, p. 87, authors' translation].

The drawing of the *Cercle de l'Ermitage* depicts an oblique axonometry in which the architecture is represented as if it were an object, a box with curved corners, without a lid, inside which the space, articulated on several levels, is contained by walls without thickness. It is a synthetic representation of the project, a mental graphic reconstruction of it, which allows Sartoris to reveal the articulation of the surfaces and volumes in the space, in close reciprocal relation: from the lower level, on the right, that houses the bar with its furnishings (counter and wall cabinet), one reaches the dance floor with its luminous circle on the floor, on the left of the drawing, via a short flight of stair, of which only the last steps are visible. The two levels are visually connected by a balcony that from the dance floor overlooks the bar. On some flat and curved surfaces, placed at opposite corners of the large room represented, articulated on two levels, Sartoris uses a corrugated sheet metal laid vertically, to accentuate the perception of free height. In the axonometric cross-section, these sheets are represented by a dense sequence of vertical lines and are coloured grey, near the bar, and turquoise around the dance floor [Morton Shand 1936, p. 183].

Sartoris's drawing continues the series of axonometric cutaways that express theories of colour, applying them to furnished interiors. Thus, for example, the orthogonal axonometry of the "Director's Office at the Bauhaus in Weimar" (1923), draft by Walter Gropius and drawn by Herbert Bayer, is a transparent cube in which the coloured furniture, carpet and lights frame the space; the axonometry of Gerrit Rietveld's "Schröder House" (1924) shows the distribution of the furnishings, in primary colours, leaving the walls transparent; the axonometric cutaway of Le Corbusier's "Maison Cook" (1926) cuts out a portion of the house, as if it were a photographic shot, telling, in the foreground, the use of colour to distinguish surfaces.

Colour gives the architecture of the *Cercle de l'Ermitage* a sculptural and plastic appearance. Abstract painting and construction combine harmoniously [Morton Shand 1936, p. 184]. For Sartoris, colour is "the fourth dimension of architecture", it is its organ, a creative and non-decorative element, which emphasises and transforms forms and planes [Sartoris 1983, p. 436]. The *Cercle de l'Ermitage* "is a chromatic work, composed of planes, a bit like a theatre set" [Frochaux 2018]. For the Epesses project, the architect uses around thirty different shades of paint [Morton Shand 1936, p. 184]. Three, according to Sartoris, are the methods of colour architecture: neoplastic, dynamic and functional [Sartoris 1983]. The first method is based on the principles of *De Stijl* and uses primary colours by integrating them into the geometry of surfaces. The dynamic method, which can be traced back to the theories of Le Corbusier, and which partly inherits Dutch Neoplasticism and French Cubism, uses primary colours on the outside and wider colour ranges on the inside, depending on the different light conditions [4]. The functional method, favoured by Sartoris, uses all colours by integrating them with the architecture, according to psychological and perceptive criteria, to accentuate the parts of the organism, arrange the furniture in a rational manner, determine the proportions, and establish the function of the parts and rooms of a building [Gavello 2019, p. 82]. Thus in the bar and dance floor of the *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, as depicted in the chromolithography, the surfaces of the same room have different colours distinguishing functions in a "juxtaposition of 'discordant' tonal values" [Morton Shand 1936, p. 184], composed in such a way that there are no overlaps or zones of contact between areas of the same shade: the floor of the bar is blue, that of the dance floor is orange, a colour that in the evening enhances "the beauty and skin tone of the women in lounges, boudoirs and dining room" [Sartoris 1983, p. 439, authors' translation]; the walls are alternately grey, turquoise or white, to broaden the perception of space, red is assigned to the bar which has a black counter [Sartoris 1990, pp. 100, 101]. The red band that turns on the curved corner of the dance floor indicates the place allocated to the large painting by Rodolphe-Théophile Bosshard. "The optical function of these elements is thus tested in the design of the Club, which is presented as a visual synthesis of

what should be the final realisation, capable of rendering, if not the actual effect, at least a concentration of it" [Versari 1997, p. 211, authors' translation]. Since the 1970s, Alberto Sartoris has produced hundreds of serigraphies based on old drawings, conceiving them as autonomous artistic forms in which the boundaries between painting and architecture are blurred. Some of these, produced between 1982 and 1995, reproduce, with colour differences, the axonometry of the bar and dance floor of the *Cercle de l'Ermitage à Epesses* and are kept in the *Archives de la construction moderne (Acm)* of the *École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne EPFL, Fonds Alberto Sartoris* [5]. Realised after the circle had been heavily transformed, these polychrome serigraphies are autonomous works of art, the manifesto-images of the relationship between colour and architecture according to Sartoris, an opportunity to continue experimenting with ideal chromatic solutions on an architecture that was no longer his own, but which continued to live on through drawing. The series of serigraphies, produced by the architect several decades after the realisation of the *Cercle de l'Ermitage à Epesses*, brings back a pure dimension to his architecture, freed from its real context and deprived of its accessory elements. In the chromolithography of the *Cercle de l'Ermitage à Epesses*, the coloured surfaces, placed on different

layouts or adjacent to each other, are separated by a white line, by the absence of colour. In the serigraphies, on the other hand, the perimeter of the surfaces is distinctly separated by the compact use of colour without nuances, in a perfect interaction between shade and geometry, adhering to the lesson of *De Stijl*. In either case, the fields representing the walls without thickness also show the colour within their own skin, on the inner face of the masonry, anticipating the possibility, peculiar to digital drawing, of visualising, in shaded mode, the chromatic characteristics of a surface on both its faces. This artifice, in Sartoris's drawing, has a twofold significance: on the one hand, it allows us to show, by reversing the direction, the colour and partition of all the vertical perimeter surfaces, even where the faces of the walls, inside the structure, would not be visible to the observer; on the other hand, it reaffirms that colour is itself a construction material, it is structure. The axonometric view is, therefore, the most appropriate to represent, impartially and without any emotional involvement, all the coloured elements in space, freeing them from perceptual aspects. "These colours, projecting off the floor and walls, demolish the coherence of the usual visual pyramid: the code system that governs illusionism is broken" [Versari 1997, p. 212, authors' translation].

## Notes

[1] The chromolithograph *Cercle de l'Ermitage à Epesses* is kept at the *Archives de la construction moderne – EPFL, Fonds Alberto Sartoris, Cote archivistique 0172.04.0266*. The folder contains several project drawings. See <<https://morphe.epfl.ch/index.php/cercle-de-lermitage-a-epesses>> (accessed 10 October 2022).

[2] In 1971, the *Circle* was profoundly transformed and altered. It was recently converted back into a private residence, following a project by Jean-Christophe Dunant, who preserved the spaces designed by Sartoris, restoring many original elements that had been hidden by previous transformations [Dunant 2016, p. 78].

[3] The axonometry of the studio of the "Ideal house" encloses the space in a transparent prism, traced in wire, which, like a mask, isolates the elements represented (the double-height space, the

balcony, the walls, the elements of the house that overlook the studio space from the second floor, on the level below).

[4] In 1931, Le Corbusier designed a collection of solid-colour wall-papers, selecting a range of 43 shades, which, however, did not meet with interest among designers and clients, so much so that the factory stopped producing it. Sartoris often used this colour palette in his interior designs [Sartoris 1983, p. 438].

[5] See, for example, *Cercle de l'Ermitage, Epesses I*, serigraphy from 1982 (Cote 0172.08.0009), *Cercle de l'Ermitage, Epesses II*, serigraphy from 1995 (Cote 0172.08.0030, numéro 9b), *Cercle de l'Ermitage, Epesses III*, serigraphy from 1995 (Cote 0172.08.0031). <<https://morpheplus.epfl.ch/fr/nos-collections/serigraphies/serigraphies-alberto-sartoris/>> (accessed 10 October 2022).

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