

Restoration of the *Cercle de L'Ermitage* in Epesses, Switzerland

BY JEAN-CHRISTOPHE DUNANT

In 1935, Alberto Sartoris transformed an old mill into a private club for artists: *le Cercle de l'Ermitage*. The young architect conceptualized the space as a manifesto of rationalistic architecture. The resolutely modernist choice of the intervention contrasted with the rural and bucolic existing building.

In 1971, the work disappeared under fake rustic decoration and everybody considered it lost, only remaining one of the most famous axonometries of the Italian master. Forty-five years later, the work reappears miraculously while the space is under transformation into a private residence. The demolition work has revealed an unexpected amount of original elements, which will allow a faithful and rigorous restoration of the *Cercle de l'Ermitage*.

"One day we will reconstruct the *Cercle de L'Ermitage*!"

Alberto Sartoris, 1987

In 1933, a winemaker from Epesses and owner of a water mill, asked Alberto Sartoris, a rationalist Italian architect, to transform the latter into a private club for artists: the *Cercle de l'Ermitage*. The young architect proposed to rearrange the interior in a radically modern way, in order to embody and conceptualize the space into a manifesto of rationalistic architecture, without modifying the outer envelope. Once the construction work was finalized, the project was published in the internationally renowned journal *The Architectural Review*. The following year, the public administration refused to give out the license for a private club, fearing the place would turn out to be synonymous with debauchery. As a result, the building became a bar-restaurant, known as the *Vieux Moulin*. Until 1948, Sartoris continuously transformed the restaurant, adding multiple annexes, principally intended for service. But in 1971, at the time of a new transformation, the architect saw himself stripped of his piece of work, the latter disappearing under a jumble of fake beams and stucco.

In 1987, while studying architecture at the EPFL, I was intrigued by the title of one of the famous axonometric drawings from the architect Alberto Sartoris, the *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, Epesses. Living in this small village of the Lavaux region, I could not picture the whereabouts of this *avant-garde* architecture. I later discovered that the site corresponded to an actual restaurant and dancing club

decorated with heavy false rustic decor typical of the seventies. Only the typology remained, a luminous circle embedded in the ground of the dancing floor and a back stairway. I decided to undertake the study of this work and was able to meet Alberto Sartoris. He was so disappointed and furious about the demolition and disappearance of his masterpiece that he no longer wanted to talk about this case. However, the students' interest rekindled the flame of the old master who then said: "one day we will reconstruct the *Cercle de L'Ermitage*". This sentence, 27 years later, sounded like a prophecy.

Since, I have contacted every new tenant or owner to alert them of the historical content of the site and possible hidden remains. I took advantage of this opportunity to conduct structural surveys and analysis on site to examine for possible remains. After several bankruptcies, the restaurant ended up closing and was put up for sale. The new owner, intrigued by the origin of the building, commissioned me to transform the space into a private residence.

In the light of numerous parameters on which this renovation depended, the success of this operation holds to a miracle. There was indeed almost no visible trace of the original work. Moreover, resulting from inner transformation, there was a great possibility that decorative elements have been irreversibly replaced. Secondly, changing the building's allocation from bar-restaurant to a private residence, implied redrafting the original program. To make things even more complicated, the building is located in a wine-growing zone in the heart of Lavaux, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Finally, the building is not labeled as a Historical Monument, and must therefore meet all standards (security, insulation, comfort, etc.) of a common transformation, without any possible concession.

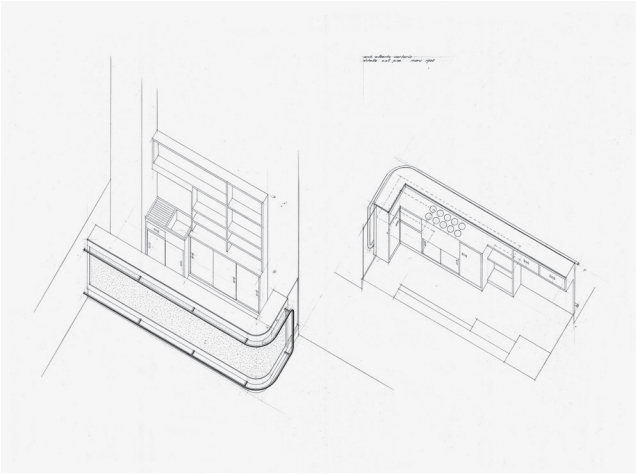
Archaeology of a relic from the 20th century

Given the lack of visible traces, it was difficult to estimate what could still remain from the *Cercle de l'Ermitage*. Therefore, the first concern was to restore the original space. The number and the quality of the items discovered during the demolition, will orientate the restoration project. This process is similar an archaeologist's exploration, but also implies that the space needs to be restored to a livable condition.

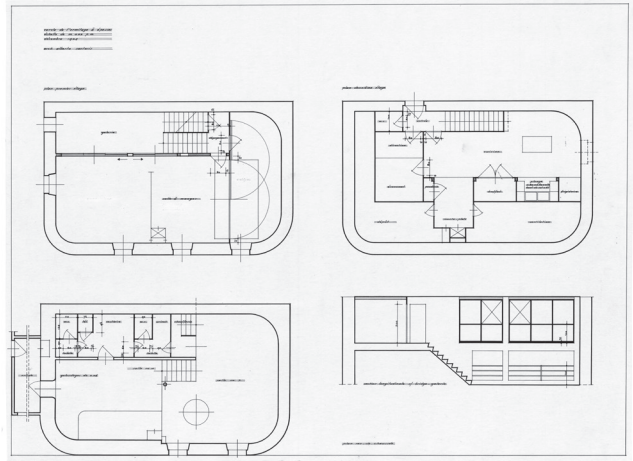
The demolition work has revealed an unexpected amount of original elements. They were hidden behind stucco decorations making up the interior space. Thus, thanks to this awkwardly makeshift job, important original pieces were discovered in their quasi-integrity despite their great fragility. An inner sliding glass screen, separating the restaurant from the gallery, still contained intact original structural window glass. A piece of the original steel railing gave important information about the sections, materials and colors of the internal barriers. The structure of a luminous ceiling of 15 square meters reappeared behind a false plaster vault. Finally, a 12 meter long wall, made of steel angled profiles, was discovered, although very damaged by rust. The main elements used by Alberto Sartoris for the *Cercle de l'Ermitage* appeared to be in a more or less good state of conservation, but sufficiently complete in order to restore the place in a very faithful manner.

Intervention strategy

As the building was not protected by the office of the Historical Monuments, the transformation work was undertaken through a regular process, under the sole responsibility of the architect and his client. The use of experts then became necessary. Some of Sartoris's archives, made available by the *Archives de la Construction Moderne* led by Professor Pierre Frey, were a source of essential information, including plans, color studies and black and white photos of that time. Additionally, the advice from Professor Franz Graf, (*Laboratory for Techniques and Preservation of Modern Architecture, EPFL*), helped develop a strategy of intervention balanced



01 Alberto Sartoris, *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, Epesses, Switzerland, 1935. Axonometric projection of the bar. © EPFL-ACM, Fonds Alberto Sartoris, 1935.

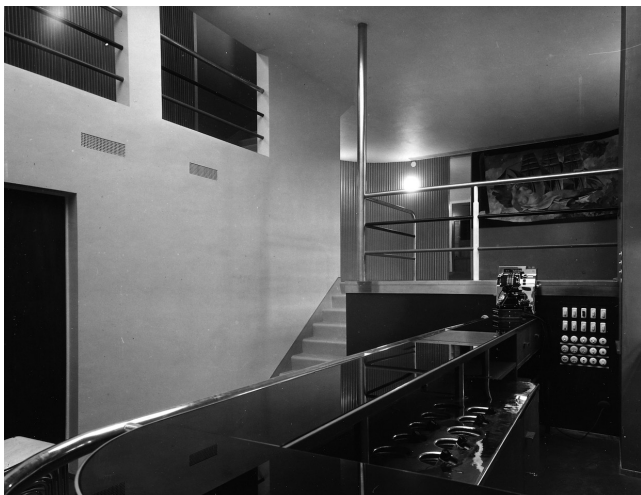


02 Alberto Sartoris, *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, Epesses, Switzerland, 1935. Plans. © EPFL-ACM, Fonds Alberto Sartoris.



03 Alberto Sartoris, *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, Epesses, Switzerland, 1935. Axonometric projection of the dancing-bar, chromolithography. © EPFL-ACM, Fonds Alberto Sartoris.

04 Alberto Sartoris, *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, Epesses, Switzerland, 1935. Bar. Opening of the club. In the background of the dance floor, the painting of R. T. Bosshard. © EPFL-ACM, Fonds Alberto Sartoris. Photo by Claude Budry, 1935.



05 Alberto Sartoris, *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, Epesses, Switzerland, 1935. Bar. Le Vieux Moulin, le Cercle de l'Ermitage disappears under a jumble of fake beams and stucco. © Jean-Christophe Dunant, 2010.



06 Alberto Sartoris, *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, Epesses, Switzerland, 1935. Gallery. Opening of the club. View from the gallery towards the dance floor and the bar. © EPFL-ACM, Fonds Alberto Sartoris. Photo by Grete Hubacher, 1935.



07 Alberto Sartoris, *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, Epesses, Switzerland, 1935. Gallery. Le Vieux Moulin, le Cercle de l'Ermitage disappears under a jumble of fake beams and stucco. © Jean-Christophe Dunant, 2010.

between maintenance and replacement of the existing elements. As we were facing an exceptional chromatic work, color was evidently a fundamental aspect of the transformation. An important stratigraphic study allowed us to precisely analyze the shades and type of the paints that were used. Finally, the artisanal experience of some companies significantly contributed to the success of this transformation.

In order to ensure a consistency in the intervention, five guidelines were established directing every decision:

- Free the main space of the *Cercle de l'Ermitage* which was to be restored, by placing the program of the living quarters in the annexes that were built later.
- Preserve as much as possible of the original elements, even though they have defects, traces of wear or alteration.
- Replace the items that are over-damaged by replicating them using the same construction methods and craftsmanship

of the last century. All the materials and colors were reproduced using the same process: steel, chrome, glass, linseed oil paint.

- Recreate the main fixtures, such as the bar made of chromed steel and glass, by examining Alberto Sartoris's archives, plans, axonometric drawings and various color studies.
- To proceed by analogy when the purpose and usage of an item changes. For instance, the original dumbwaiter becomes a fireplace in the living room on the upper floor and a wine rack on the lower floor behind the bar.

Strong aspects of the *Cercle de l'Ermitage*

The renovation allowed the enhancement of the project of Alberto Sartoris.

- The sheathing in steel angles: when Alberto Sartoris undertook the mill transformation, some exterior walls buried more than 7

meters underground had no water drainage installed, thus allowing the rain water to enter through the wall and inside the dwelling. He decided to install an inner self-supporting sheathing made of welded steel angles and recollect the permanent dripping water by a hidden collector installed between the existing wall and the sheathing, thus allowing the runoff of the excessive water back to the old mill's moat. The plastic effect and flexible look of the steel sheathing's folds, evokes a textile while the vertical lines enhance the sensation of ceiling height. As a result in resolving sanitary issues, this sheathing becomes a major element of the architectural project.

- The sliding glass screen: while planning the interior as a succession of superimposed platforms, Alberto Sartoris relates the floors to one another with no interruption. In fact, the sliding glass screen maintains this spatial continuity while protecting

08 Alberto Sartoris, *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, Epesses, Switzerland, 1935. Bar. The undergoing demolition work has revealed an unexpected amount of original elements © JC Dunant, 2012.



10 Alberto Sartoris, *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, Epesses, Switzerland, 1935. Gallery. The undergoing demolition work has revealed an unexpected amount of original elements © JC Dunant, 2012.

09 Alberto Sartoris, *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, Epesses, Switzerland, 1935. Bar rehabilitated. © Lucien Caceres, 2014.



11 Alberto Sartoris, *Cercle de l'Ermitage*, Epesses, Switzerland, 1935. Gallery rehabilitated. © Lucien Caceres, 2014.

the restaurant from the noisy bar below. The daylight coming from the upper floor windows, passes through the sliding glass screen, illuminates the mid-level gallery and reflects on the metal wall down to the lower space where the bar is set up; thus allowing the daylight to illuminate the most obscure corners.

- The luminous ceiling: a ceiling, more than 4 meters high, composed of 32 opal glass panels, lights up the entire area of the bar, evoking a winter garden's canopy. Through an intense and diffuse light, the luminous ceiling highlights the vivid hues of the walls and floors. On the ground of the dance floor, a flush oculus sheds light over the dancers' feet while bringing a bright counterpoint to the ceiling
- The bar: a frame made of 15 millimeters thick glass slabs supports a top of black lacquered glass, all bordered in chrome steel. The bar's refinement contrasts with the rest of the surrounding space where color

dominates over materiality. Its refined design distinguishes itself from the rest of the work which has a rather more plastic, sculptural and chromatic appearance. The reflections caused by the chrome finishes and the glass coverings, duplicate the effects of depth through a game of symmetry. Recognized as an important built heritage work, the transformation of the *Cercle de l'Ermitage* is now protected by the Historical Monument's department. ■

Notes

- 1 Morton Shand, "The Cercle de l'Ermitage at Epesses, Canton de Vaud, Switzerland", *The Architectural Review*, No. 14, April 1936, 181–184.

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