

Book Review 2: Baudez, Basile. *Inessential Colors: Architecture on Paper in Early Modern Europe* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021

Paul Emmons¹ and Negar Goljan²

¹Virginia Tech, ²Virginia Tech and Marywood University

Color's importance in architectural drawing is attested by Le Corbusier while addressing architecture students in 1929: "Consider this advice like gold: ...with color you characterize, you classify, you read, you see clearly, you manage. ...Color will save you."¹ Today, as color fully saturates our contemporary image-dominant world, it is valuable to look back to an earlier time when the inclusion of color in drawings required substantial effort and skill and therefore careful and critical consideration.

As one of the first book-length studies of the use of color in architectural drawing, *Inessential Colors: Architecture on Paper in Early Modern Europe* by Basile Baudez, represents a significant contribution to understanding the development of color drafting methodologies and their influences on architectural history. Examining original drawings, handbooks, and treatises from across the European continent, Baudez extensively surveys the role of color in architectural drawings from the Renaissance through the early nineteenth century. The Enlightenment-era French drawing research is particularly valuable. The book's illustrations serve its topic well, with a generous quantity of high-quality color reproductions.

Baudez's excursion into the role of color in architectural drawing begins by surveying how Italian Renaissance practice emphasized black and white drawing. Indeed, Leon Battista Alberti, while strongly recommending the study of painting for architects, distinguishes drawings by architects from those by painters and explicitly dismisses colored architectural models as "lewdly dressed with the allurements of painting."² The Renaissance emphasis on the harmonic proportionality of part and whole was seen as a prime theoretical motivation for preferring outline over color and appearance. Despite this general trend, however, the author ought to note a number of important exceptions, such as the substantial use of red wash and instances of yellow and green in drawings by Giuliano da Sangallo (c.1465-1516).³

The changing technology of color image reproduction (and its inevitable influence on the uses of color) is an important subtheme. During the Renaissance, the hand coloring of black and white prints was widespread, persisting even after mechanically produced color prints first appeared in Europe in the early sixteenth century. In England and the Low Countries, a center of color printing, Baudez notes, architectural drawings were quick to adopt color once it became technologically available.

The first chapter, "Imitative Colors," discusses the early development, primarily in the geographic regions of France and the United Provinces, of using color in architectural drawing to show the appearance of certain building materials. Baudez identifies the origin of color in elevations from the representational work of painters (at a time when divisions between these activities were not strongly drawn, as evidenced by the many painter-architects). One important use of color was for roofing materials: blue-gray wash for slate and red for clay tiles. Although not mentioned in the text, the drawing reproductions show that roofing colors are often graded in intensity from top to bottom to suggest the changing light on the roof's slope and thereby help to distinguish it from vertical walls in flat elevation drawings.

The discussion continues in chapter one through a search for the source of color in plan drawings that, Baudez argues, derives from mapmaking practices and writing that cartography primarily employs color as "natural signs." The broad distribution of printed maps influenced chromatic signs in architectural drawing. Baudez concludes that color in cartography played a taxonomic more than an imitative role, even when borrowing hues imitatively from the real world. While not introduced in the text, it should be noted that debates in semiotics question to what degree iconic imitations are conventional symbols,⁴ suggesting that the line between imitation and convention can be elusive and putting into question Baudez's claim that the use of color in elevation is a "straightforward imitation of the visible" (52).

A careful reading of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century drawing manuals is provided in chapter two, "Conventional Colors," to reveal a shift in thinking away from a simple imitation of reality and towards more codified symbolic representation systems. French military engineers led the adoption of color conventions in architectural drawing, which subsequently spread to civil architecture. Due to the centralization of authority within the French government, color was at the forefront of standardizing drawing codes. Despite Baudez seeming to equate convention with standard, it's helpful to appreciate the difference between convention itself, which can be devised by individual drafters for their own purposes

at hand, and standardization, which superimposes a convention across many practices. One widespread norm that was already present in the Italian Renaissance (eg. Baldassare Peruzzi) was the use of red to indicate proposed new construction to contrast with black for extant structures. While elevation drawings tend to be more imitative than convention-driven, certain materials such as glass presented unique representational problems that led to its being treated as blue or green. Baudez identifies the use of pink for masonry in section as the single most enduring color code. Perhaps because he isolates elevation from plan drawing, the influence of red for walls in plan is largely overlooked when discussing the use of color in section.

“Affective Colors,” the third chapter, highlights the rise of the art of draftsmanship during the late eighteenth century, especially in Paris. The Enlightenment-era progression from pure taxonomy and categories into an artform which sought to excite emotions in the viewer developed from empiricist theories of knowledge by Locke, Condillac and Burke, among others. Here, Baudez explains the increasing use of polychromy as an aesthetic medium in architectural drawings – architectural color “would achieve something new, inspired by painting: it would please and delight the senses” (160). In light of this new subjective turn, architectural painting expanded beyond its previously limited boundaries, combining the technical skills of the draftsman with the aesthetic expression of the painter. These emotive drawings began to rely heavily on color and paint. With reference to Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (“If you would become an architect, begin by being a painter”), Baudez champions a “sensualist approach” to architecture (170). Technical developments in color image reproduction at this time also probably played a role in exciting polychromic enthusiasm.

In another section of chapter three, “Polychromy to Sublime Monochromy,” the emphasis gradually shifts from the use of overwhelming and emotive color to large, greyscale, atmospheric designs, like those of Boullée, Froideau, and Campana, aiming to evoke a sublime sense of awe and wonder. This relied heavily on tremendous scale, ink-washes, and huge volumes and spaces, and marks a distinct shift towards the coming Romanticism.

After the turn of the century, we see a schism in architectural drawings and their purposes. Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, at the *École Polytechnique*, favored highly reductive black-and-white outline drawings, whereas others took their skills as draftsmen into creating evocative paintings in the new Romantic styles. One key aspect of this was in the relative expansion of engraving techniques, which were largely color-neutral, but highly refined and reproducible. Practical issues therefore relegated the overtly expressive use of color and drawing techniques to the artist’s easel, effectively banishing them from the draftsman’s drawing board for the best part of a century. However, they did not prevent the advancements of polychromatic washes as an integral part of a designer’s training.

A very helpful appendix describes the tools, media, and instruments of architectural drawing in a historical survey that unfolds from an analysis of Lequeu’s 1782 iconic image of a draftsman’s tools. Baudez writes that there is no T-square, only a straight edge in Lequeu’s drawing (227)⁵ and mentions the

late appearance of the T-square in architectural drawing that probably derives in part from Maya Hambly, who, in a rare oversight, identifies an illustration from 1642 as “one of the earliest illustrations to show a tee-square with a drawing board” but fails to note that the engraving was adapted from an earlier 1509 woodblock print.⁶

The concluding summary, *Anxiety of the Architect*, clearly sets out the book’s main points, but lacks the nuance of the full text, making the argument appear overly black and white. Nonetheless, this excellent foundational work of extensive range opens an important field of study with numerous lines of inquiry for further investigation.

Notes

- 1 Le Corbusier, *Precisions: On the Present State of Architecture and City Planning*, translated by Edith Schreiber Aujame (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991) 225. See also: William Braham, *Modern Color/Modern Architecture: Amédée Ozenfant and the Genealogy of Color in Modern Architecture* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2002).
- 2 Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, translated by Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1988) 34, 317.
- 3 Cammy Brothers, *Giuliano da Sangallo and the Ruins of Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).
- 4 Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, translated by Alastair McEwen (New York: Harcourt, 1999) 337-392.
- 5 Hambly identifies Lequeu’s horizontal straight edge to be part of a T-square. Maya Hambly, *Drawing Instruments 1580-1980* (London: Sotheby’s, 1988) 17.
- 6 Hambly, 14, 113. Viator (Jean Pélerin), *De Artificiali perspectiva* (1509 second edition). See: Paul Emmons, *Drawing Imagining Building* (London: Routledge, 2019) 56-7.

About the Authors

Paul Emmons is a registered architect and the Patrick and Nancy Lathrop Professor in Architecture at Virginia Tech where he is Associate Dean of Graduate Studies for the College of Architecture, Arts, and Design. Based at the Washington-Alexandria Architecture Center, Emmons is chair of its PhD in Architecture and Design Research program.

Negar Goljan is visiting faculty at Marywood University and is a PhD Candidate in the PhD Program in Architecture and Design Research at the Washington-Alexandria Architecture Center of Virginia Tech. Her dissertation examines the representation of atmosphere in the drawings of Étienne-Louis Boullée. She has presented and published her research in numerous venues, including in the recent book *Expanding Field of Architecture*.