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An Interview with O.M. Ungers

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# An Interview with O.M. Ungers

Rem Koolhaas & Hans-Ulrich Obrist

Translated from the German by Sebastian Mittendorfer

Edited by Stephan Petermann, OMA

*In September 2004, the architect Rem Koolhaas, a student of Oswald Mathias Ungers (at Cornell) and later colleague, and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, a curator at the Serpentine Gallery in London, went to Cologne for the first of what was to be a series of conversations with the “rationalist” German architect. The interview published here – an edited translation from the German – took place in two of Ungers’ houses: Haus Belvederestrasse (1958–59), which is now the home of Büro Prof. O.M. Ungers and the Ungers Archive, and “Ungers House III,” or Haus Kämpchensweg (1994–96), where he was living. Arguably, these two buildings alone distinguished Ungers as the most important and perhaps most controversial German architect of his generation. Unfortunately a second conversation did not take place before Ungers died on September 30, 2007.*



UNGERS FAMILY OUTING, CIRCA 1932. LEFT: OSWALD MATHIAS UNGERS, 1946. ALL PHOTOS ACCOMPANYING THIS INTERVIEW ARE COURTESY OF BÜRO PROF. O.M. UNGERS OR JASPER CEPL.

REM KOOLHAAS: I want to start with a harmless question. Could you briefly tell us about the environment you came from – where you were born, what occupation your parents had, and how you grew up?

OSWALD MATHIAS UNGERS: I was born in a small village in the Eifel [in 1926]. My father was a farm worker and my mother a maid. After the war my father became a civil servant and we moved to the town of Mayen. Originally we came from a rural area inhabited mostly by very poor farmers. I grew up in a small town, in petite bourgeois circumstances, so to speak. There was always a mix between self-preservation through gardening, butchering, and all of these things – the farming business – and my father's civil job at the postal service. Thus they were rather small as well as economically limited circumstances.

HANS-ULRICH OBRIST: Since we are talking about beginnings, you said in an interview once that when you were young you wanted to build airplanes.

OMU: I built, and also designed, model airplanes with great passion. Those were insane constructions. Since my earliest youth I had done without many things and also had to work to be able to afford materials. For me airplanes were a great fascination. I was, however, less interested in the constructive than in the formal aspects of an airplane and the elegance of a flying airplane – how it could be constructed in its overall formal beauty.

RK: Could you say your life balances between the lightness of an airplane and the heaviness of architecture?

OMU: I had no knowledge of architecture during my youth. There wasn't any. I only learned of the terms *architect* and *architecture* when I returned from the war. Architects simply did not exist in towns such as the one I grew up in. It was trained master builders who built the houses. And my passion was airplane construction, drawing, and painting – which to my parents was a useless activity. Most of my early drawings were used to fire up the oven in the morning. For that reason there are hardly any left. There was also little time for these things because most of the time I was busy chopping wood, helping my father in the garden, or working on my homework. So it was a very mixed experience.

Only in the course schedule at the University of Darmstadt did I see that one could study architecture. I also had a great mathematical interest – during my high-school exams I gave an exceptional presentation in mathematics. Above all, descriptive geometry was of great fascination to me. After the war, when I was looking through the course catalogue to decide what to study, I saw that drawing, painting, model building, and all these things were included in the curriculum of architecture. It combined the artistic with the practical. Only because it was linked to a practical matter was I allowed to study it. And only then did architecture become important to me, because of this mixture.

RK: And this is how it started?

OMU: That's how it started. It was 1947, after I had returned from war captivity.

RK: Could you describe your war experiences a bit?

HUO: Rem told me this morning about your wonderful story of a soldier without a rifle.

OMU: It started when I was 16. At that time I was in the *Reichs-Arbeitsdienst* (the government workers service) and had to build airfields and parade with a spade. I actually wanted to become a pilot, but for some reason I wasn't qualified because of my health – why I don't know. Then I joined the signal corps section of the *Luftwaffe* and was quickly relocated to the Eastern Front. During my training period the story you alluded to happened. After a 14-day training march, I couldn't present my rifle anymore. I had slept in a different bed each night and must have forgotten the rifle somewhere. In Germany the rifle was considered the soldier's bride. I was of a different opinion. I searched for other brides, with whom I spent my nights – and there, one could easily have forgotten a rifle. Naturally that was quite a catastrophe, and detention for several days was imminent until it was changed to my being sent to the Eastern Front. At the front I only took part in the retreat. I had a principle as a soldier, which was to never push or volunteer for anything but rather to drift, to have all decisions simply come to me. I thought that any decision I could make would be wrong anyway – that it could not be correct under such circumstances – and therefore it would be better to let myself drift. Wherever I was sent, I went like a brave soldier. At the end – and this is strange – I was with the *Wehrwolf*, which was a guerilla group in the *Böhmerwald* on the Eastern Front. There were still some fanatics who actually believed that they could still change the outcome of the war. We were assigned to a squad and hid ourselves somewhere in the dark forest. One day I had to go to town dressed as a civilian to find out more about what the Americans, who already were in town, were doing. While in town I witnessed the company commander being arrested by the Americans. Upon my return to the base camp in the forest I announced that the war was over and we could march off. After this I wanted to get into American captivity. In a small village I went up to an American and said: "I want to be imprisoned." He was completely astonished until he finally understood that I was a soldier. I did not, in fact, have any medals or decorations anymore, but they locked me up. I ended up in an open-air prison camp, which was a pretty harsh situation. From that point on it was very serious. We were full of lice and fleas and only got watery gruel to eat. The sanitary conditions were, of course, accordingly bad. It was a harsh time. I was successful, however, in impressing a general and convincing him that I, with my schoolboy English, could act as an interpreter – which I also did. I asked him to see if I could return home. At that moment, however, there were no trains or trucks running yet. I sat around a campfire with GIs from Texas and told them I had flown bombing missions over London – all sorts of tales, none of which were true. But they were completely fascinated by the "great bomber pilot," and I managed to get on a Jeep with them. We drove from what is now the Czech Republic to Koblenz [in the Rhineland], which was then the French zone, in one day. This was like a dream come true. I asked them to drop me off 100 meters before our house so I could at least walk the last meters home by myself. Compared to others, I was home quite early. Afterward I had to finish my *Abitur* [secondary school exams], and then I decided to study architecture.

RK: The mindset to let yourself drift, did that continue after the war as well? Because I find – perhaps it's good to already talk about this – when looking at your life, there are three periods you can identify: the pre-American, the American, and the post-American – perhaps there are more. In the first period, you seemed to allow yourself to drift and were very much influenced by the circumstances and situations. The architecture you produced was very

much characterized by a form of “weakness,” and you strongly absorbed the circumstances and let yourself be strongly influenced by them.

OMU: Yes, I think that was true to a certain degree. Well, I also did not have any other opportunity. I chose a profession and took an interest in something of which I knew nothing, absolutely nothing. Neither my family nor my friends provided any motivation. So I had no other choice. There was an emotional interest in the present, in modernity, and a desire to move away from my earlier experiences and my youth. To do so, I initially simply had to dive into this unknown matter, not knowing where it would lead. I therefore had no definite objectives and also could not define any, because I did not know any. In that sense it was a “letting oneself drift.”

HUO: An open system of learning?

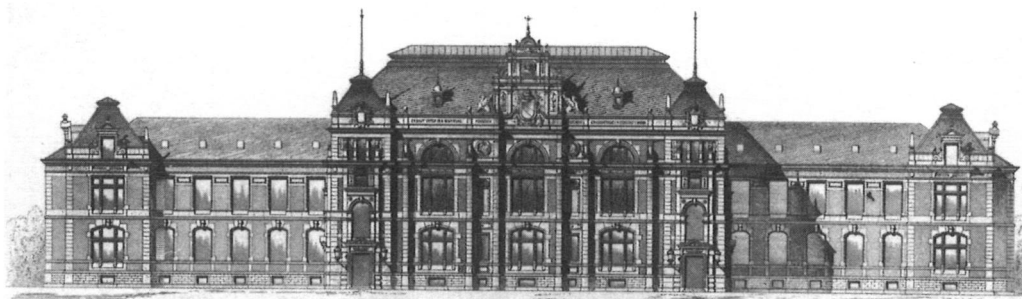
OMU: It was a completely open system of learning. It was fuelled by a lot of emotions, which I was not able to control – I was only able to choose emotionally what I liked and what I did not like, where I had an affinity and where I had none. But there was always a certain opposition on my part, which was not directly related to architecture, but rather against any form of authority or any form of influence. I came in contact with three people during my studies whom became very important to me. One was Egon Eiermann at Karlsruhe University, who fascinated me as a person and a character. At first, naturally, because of his architecture, which had a certain radicality to it – against which, however, I quickly developed an opposition. And the second man, who actually was even more important, was Otto Ernst Schweizer. Schweizer was from the Mies van der Rohe generation – same character, enormously impressive in all of his teachings and gestures. He built the renowned Frankenstadion in Nuremberg. Very much a “grand Seigneur.” They were two really different characters. Eiermann was the companionable, down-to-earth, casual guy. Schweizer had a cape, gaiters, and vest, as well as a well-founded education. He was a remnant of this great “grand Seigneur” tradition. They left quite an impression on me. Of course, they didn’t get along. Eiermann always provoked Schweizer and even disavowed him. Needless to say, all the young people followed Eiermann. I realized very soon, though, that he lacked a theoretical background. He was a real big shot [*grosser Macher*].

The third important person was the architectural historian Karl Wulzinger, also a 19th-century type, a man who was able to draw all kinds of different plans with both hands on the blackboard and who wrote ironic remarks in our lecture notebooks about our drawings, using this pointed pen. I really enjoyed these wonderful ironic comments about my drawings.

HUO: A fourth name that is often mentioned – I am not sure if he becomes important only later – is Rudolf Schwarz.

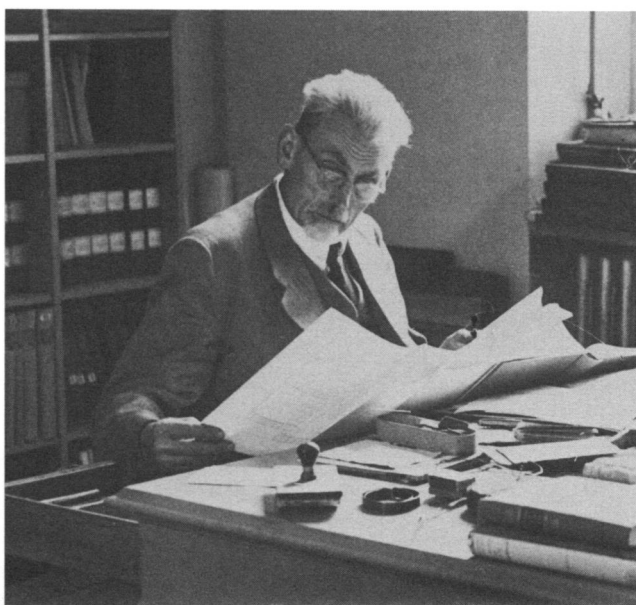
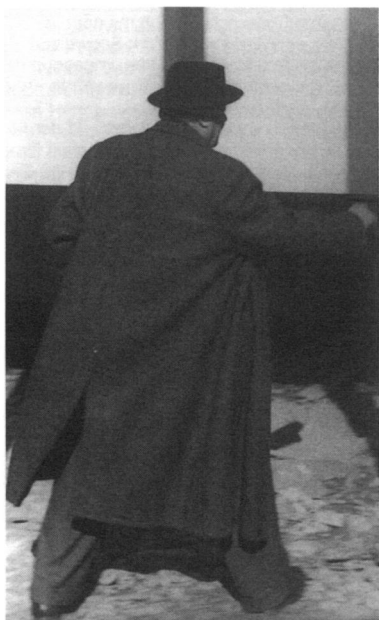
OMU: Yes, but that was later. I would like to talk a bit more about Wulzinger and architectural history. Back then he also wore a Turkish fez, which was normal at the time. There was an affinity toward Turkey and Asia Minor, and he had a small, Asiatic-looking room.

RK: It is so incredible to hear that shortly after the war there were such adventures.

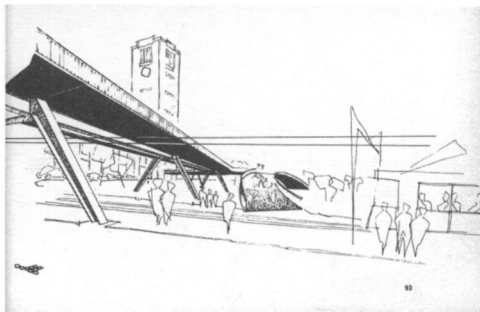
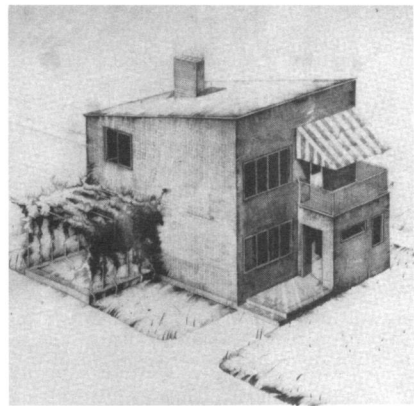
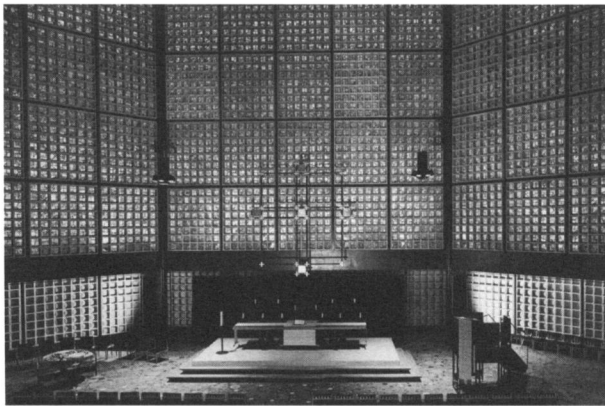
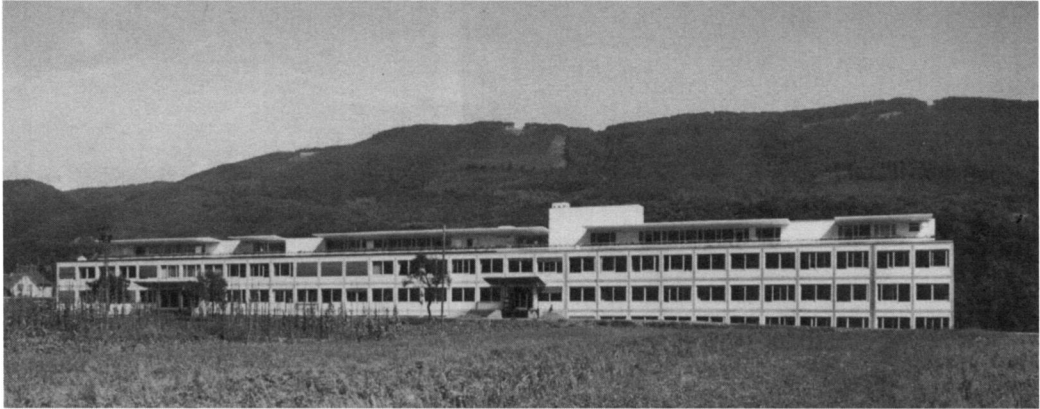


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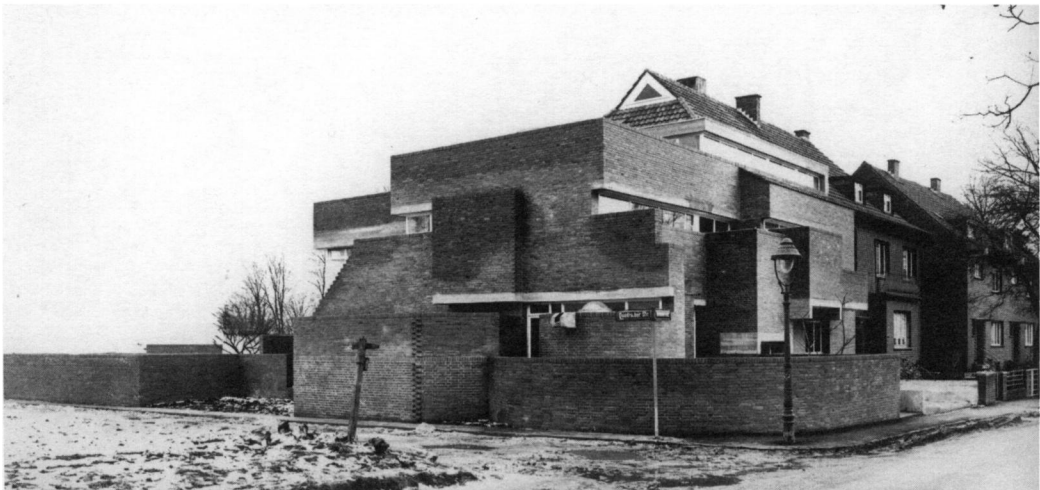
Abb. 4 Hauptansicht (Skizze)



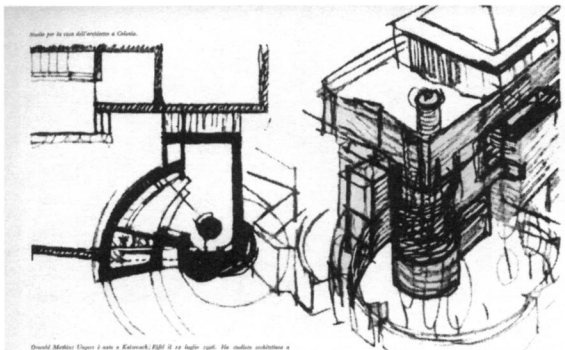
TOP AND MIDDLE LEFT: KARLSRUHE UNIVERSITY (FORMERLY THE INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY) AS CONCEIVED AND AFTER THE WAR. ABOVE LEFT: OTTO ERNST SCHWEIZER, N.D. MIDDLE RIGHT: KARL WULZINGER, 1948. RIGHT: EGON EIERMANN INSPECTING STUDENT WORK AT THE INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, KARLSRUHE, N.D.



TOP: EGON EIERMANN, CIBA AG FACTORY, WEHR/BADEN, 1948–52; MIDDLE LEFT: KAISER WILHELM MEMORIAL CHURCH, BERLIN, 1957–63; MIDDLE RIGHT: CONTEMPORARY HOUSE, 1931. ABOVE: OTTO ERNST SCHWEIZER, PROPOSAL FOR CITY CENTER STUTTGART, 1953–54; FRANKENSTADION IN NUREMBURG, 1927–28.



FROM TOP: O.M. UNGERS, ET AL., OBERHAUSEN INSTITUTE, 1953-58. O.M. UNGERS, HAUS BELVEDERE STRASSE, COLOGNE, 1958-59. ALDO ROSSI ARTICLE ON O.M. UNGERS, IN CASABELLA CONTINUITA 244 (OCTOBER 1960).



**Un giovane architetto tedesco: Oswald Mathias Ungers**

L'architetto di Oswald Mathias Ungers indica, in modo impegnato e deciso, la ripresa della giovane architettura europea e tedesca in particolare. Altamente stimolato il pensiero della ricostruzione tedesca sempre meno per la verità dei problemi e per il suo ritmo folle, ma sempre venuto da una forte coscienza, che per la qualità delle soluzioni e l'impeto della ricerca. La rapida ripresa della ricostruzione tedesca va sempre alimentata la soluzione della grande architettura tedesca dell'after-war e degli anni del 1950 al 1960, mentre i suoi successi operativi in altri paesi. Ma, come altre volte, si ebbe occasione di osservare, proprio nella impetuosità del ritmo della ricostruzione, scabrezza di soluzioni, specie nei più giovani, la fine di questo isolamento e l'aperta di una nuova ripresa. Il discorso d'insieme, invitando i rapporti tra i problemi dell'architettura moderna e la pratica commerciale, riguarda tutta l'Europa. A questo impegno comune, a questo

simone che cerca nuove strade si rivolge l'architetto di Ungers. Oswald Mathias Ungers ha molto interesse per l'architettura tedesca, in genere, ma si è ben conservata le sue costruzioni per rendersi conto di questo suo pensiero: ma al di là di questo interesse, di tutto e di più, egli non crede che oggi sia possibile ritornare ad una giovane diversa forma di espressione poiché nella cultura europea esistono problemi molto diversi, in loro contrapposizioni e interazioni, ad una idea universale.

L'Europa — egli scrive — non vive di una sola idea universale, di una forma. E' un terreno in cui esistono una varietà di idee, di immagini e di molte opinioni, è un paese in cui sono egualmente cresciuti il razionalismo e il misticismo. Nella sostanza, in questi due termini si sviluppa oggi una nuova vitalità, e la stessa ricerca Ungers dichiara che le sue costruzioni non sono né razionaliste né mistiche, né tradizionali né moderne, ma cercano di superare soltanto alla realtà di un luogo, alla realtà di chi

vive in quel luogo e alla sua storia. Personalmente credo che questi problemi, oltre a un più diretto aggancio alla cultura tedesca contemporanea, interessino per la loro storia e per questo hanno così nel in comune. Più volte abbiamo dichiarato che non crediamo a una architettura moderna, o peggio a un genere moderno come tale, ma a programmi e soluzioni che trovano la loro validità solo a contatto con la realtà di ogni, indaga il luogo che una seria posizione di ricerca come quella di Ungers, che il percepire di tutti gli aspetti del problema professionale, venga indaga di più degli appelli demagogici a ideali sociali e degli ideali umanitari. Il lavoro di Ungers ha una gamma molto vasta di applicazioni, dalle piccole case ai quartieri, alla periferia di Colonia, alla villa borghese, ai grandi edifici scolastici, ogni occasione di lavoro serve per ricercare e sperimentare la possibilità di una nuova architettura.

A questo punto le architetture che pubblicare meriterebbero una critica

seriosa, ma questa è una critica che non può essere fatta. Il lavoro di Ungers, che pubblicare meritano una eccitata critica, è il sviluppo continuo, dall'uno all'altro, di un'idea e di una concezione originale dell'architettura. Invece gli accenti e questa concezione e a questa ricerca, di cui ammiriamo con interesse lo sviluppo futuro.

Aldo Rossi

HUO: Especially so quickly.

OMU: Wulzinger was an absolutely unbelievable person, and very influential. With him one drew all of the *palazzi*, painted the facades wonderfully, the entire arrangement and such. That was simply part of the education. Apart from this I kept enjoying descriptive geometry. I was an absolute fan. I started to rebel against Eiermann, even though I was supervising the construction of a large office building by him (the Volkshilfe-Lebensversicherungs-AG in Cologne). There was some rivalry, and Eiermann used one of the earliest projects I designed<sup>1</sup> – the Oberhausen Institute – as an example of what happens when his pure ideologies weren't followed and technology wasn't at the forefront. What bothered me with Eiermann was that no books were read – neither books on art nor literature, nor anything else – only product catalogues. That was the only thing.

HUO: You already had an obsession with books? Did it start back then?

OMU: Yes, it already existed. It bothered me intensely that I was not supposed to read any books on architectural history and that the history of building didn't play any role. You asked me at the beginning whether I had specific goals or ideas. The first house, one of the early projects in the 1950s – which, after all, became internationally known – was this house, where we are now, on Belvederestrasse. There were two important events. The first was in 1959, when we had just started living in the house. Vittorio Gregotti, Aldo Rossi, and Giorgio Grassi, who were then editors for *Casabella*, came to visit, and Rossi then wrote the first article about this house, "Un giovane architetto tedesco," and it was published in *Casabella*.<sup>2</sup>

The second important event was that Pevsner classified the Belvederestrasse house as German Expressionism, and placed it partly with the Dutch Expressionist school – the Amsterdam School – as well. Only then did I begin to reflect on what I was actually doing.<sup>3</sup>

RK: Self-reflection?

OMU: Yes, self-reflection – what am I doing? At the start it was only an opposition to Eiermann, against purely technological thinking. At that time, however, this was not quite clear. My work was a bit influenced by Alvar Aalto and his kind of architecture. His early brick houses and these kinds of things fascinated me.

HUO: Was Leverentz important back then?

OMU: No, it was Aalto. And, of course, the Dutch, the Amsterdam School.

RK: Who in the Amsterdam School?

1. The school building in Oberhausen was the first building Ungers did entirely on his own, after having worked in partnership with Helmut Goldschmidt, an older architect. For more details on the design for Oberhausen, see Jasper Cepl, *Oswald Mathias Ungers: Eine intellektuelle biographie* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2007), 45f.

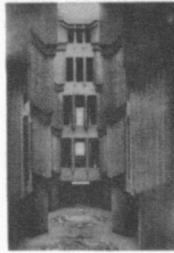
2. Aldo Rossi, "Un giovane architetto tedesco: Oswald Mathias Ungers," *Casabella continua* 244 (October 1960): 22–35.

3. Nikolaus Pevsner, "Modern Architecture and the Historian or the Return of Historicism," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, vol. 68, No. 6 (April 1961): 230–40. Also "Moderne Architektur und der Historiker oder die Wiederkehr des Historizismus," *Deutsche Bauzeitung* 10 (October 1960): 757–64

Man betrachte seine Details und dann dieses Mietshaus von Gregotti, Maneghetti und Stoppino in Piedmont (Bild 30)<sup>21</sup>. Ich möchte aber damit nicht fortfahren, da ich glaube, daß dies keine wichtige Richtung ist. Aber der neue deutsche Expressionismus ist es. Mit Bild 31, dem Chilehaus in Hamburg von Hoeger, haben wir eines der bekanntesten Beispiele dieses sehr scharfen, eckigen, aggressiven Stils vor uns, der in Deutschland am Ende des ersten Weltkrieges aufkam und der sich von den Arbeiten von Behrens und dem frühen Gropius vor dem Krieg so sehr unterscheidet. Die gleiche aggressive Eckigkeit spricht aus Bruno Tauts eigenem Haus (Bild 32). Auch hierzu gibt es heute Parallelen, wenn diese auch nicht sehr eng verlaufen mögen. Bild 33 stellt ein Landhaus von Albini<sup>22</sup> in der Nähe von Ivrea dar, Bild 34 macht uns mit einem französischen Haus von Claude Parent<sup>23</sup> bekannt.

Es gibt auch noch andere Aspekte des deutschen Expressionismus, für die man meiner Meinung nach Entsprechungen finden kann. Vergleichbar sind die Haupthalle des IG-Farben-Gebäudes in Hoechst (Bild 35), die Peter Behrens in den frühen dreißiger Jahren schuf<sup>24</sup>, und die ähnlich röhrenartig hochgezogenen und ähnlich polygonalen Wände des Innenhofes von Saarinsens amerikanischer Botschaft in Oslo (Bild 36). Dr. Banham machte mich darauf aufmerksam, daß man in Deutschland selbst eine Wiederauf-erhebung des wohlbekannten kompakten Stils aus den zwanziger Jahren findet, wie er sich zum Beispiel in der Liebknecht- und Rosa-Luxemburg-Gedenkstätte von Mies van der Rohe (Bild 37) verkörpert; dieses Mahnmal schuf Mies in seiner kurzen expressionistischen Phase<sup>25</sup>. Es entstand Mitte der zwanziger Jahre, während Bild 38 aus dem Jahr 1960 stammt und ein Haus von D. M. Ungers<sup>26</sup> in einem Vorort von Köln zeigt. Zu nennen wäre ferner der kürzlich von Dr. Joedicke wiederentdeckte und in der „Architectural Review“ veröffentlichte Gutshof von Hugo Haering (Bilder 39 und 41), der zwischen 1920 und 1923 geschaffen wurde, und das natürlich unabhängig davon entstandene Gegenstück in der neueren Arbeitsphase von Aalto (Bild 40). Haerings Motiv und der von ihm angestrebte Ausdruck waren auch nicht auf ihn allein beschränkt. Bild 42 führt ein Haus von Byvoet und Duiker aus dem Jahr 1925 vor<sup>27</sup>. Abschließend noch ein Postskriptum zum Expressionismus: Vielleicht sollte man auch einige der allerbesten Farbglasarbeiten, die in den letzten Jahren bei uns geschaffen wurden, einschließlich Ervie Hone und John Piper, als Wiederbelebung des deutschen Expressionismus ansehen oder handelt es sich hier um eine verspätete, direkte Inspiration?

Neo-Perret ist hierfür auch nur ein Nachtrag. Ich möchte nur auf die bei dieser Richtung so beliebten Screens (Gitterornamente) hinweisen, die jeder kennt. Nehmen wir zum Beispiel Perrets Kirche in Le Raincy (Bild 43) und sehen wir uns dann irgendeinen der heute so häufig verwendeten, schmückenden Screens an. Bild 44 zeigt das Haus von Ed-



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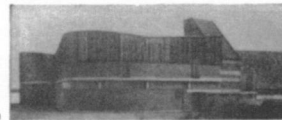
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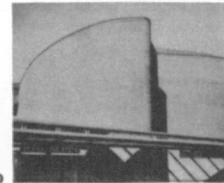
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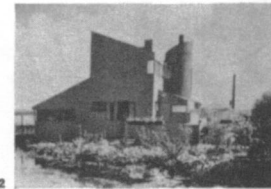
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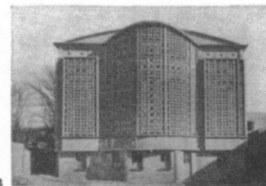
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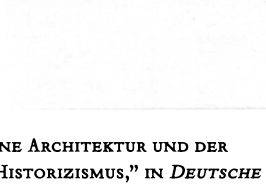
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PAGE FROM NIKOLAUS PEVSNER, "MODERNE ARCHITEKTUR UND DER HISTORIKER ODER DIE WIEDERKEHR DES HISTORIZISMUS," IN *DEUTSCHE BAUZEITUNG* (OCTOBER 1960), WHICH INCLUDES UNGERS' HAUS BELVEDERESTRASSE (FIGURE 38).

OMU: Well, above all, de Klerk, and also, of course, Oud and others. Still, I was classified by Pevsner under German Expressionism. He really triggered this reflection. Was I an expressionist or a rationalist? I did not feel like an expressionist, and to become certain of this I engrossed myself in Expressionism. For example, directly after my studies I visited Hugo Häring and stayed at his house for two days. Hugo Häring was in “inner emigration,” and the house was stacked from top to bottom with works by Malevich. I was fascinated, always with the perception in mind that this uneducated guy from the countryside now discovers Malevich, from top to bottom.

RK: When was this?

OMU: That was 1948–49, toward the end of my studies.

RK: So you remained uneducated for a very long time [laughs].

OMU: Yes, with regard to architecture.

RK: But this is also a certain concept, a certain fantasy – “I, the uneducated.”

OMU: Yes, sure. “I, the farmer from the countryside.”

So there was this first encounter with Häring. He had offered the works by Malevich to all the German museums, but they weren’t interested. He wanted thirty thousand Deutsche Marks for them. After the exhibition Malevich had left and Häring stored the work at his house and looked after it, until Willem Sandberg arrived from the Stedelijk Museum. Sandberg didn’t even have a look at them. He simply took all the crates with him, and today they are all at the Stedelijk Museum.

RK: And you know they are currently all being returned to Russia?

OMU: Yes, I do. In any case, this encounter left a deep impression on me. I continued to occupy myself with Expressionism. I owned a collection of Expressionist art and spoke about Expressionism in art at a congress in Florence.<sup>4</sup> There was Stuckenschmidt talking about music, Giulio Carlo Argan about art, Ernst Bloch about philosophy, and Bruno Zevi and I talked about architecture. But I was finished with Expressionism by then and got into a fight with Zevi. For me, Expressionism in architecture was an impossibility because of its transcendentalism. I mean, it cannot exist in reality. I was always too pragmatic, having come from the countryside. This transcendental element, which is always part of Expressionism, and this emotional aspect always seemed contrary to my own emotions, my own intellectual understanding. And there was a huge argument between Zevi and myself. I tried the following day to come to a compromise but he was not willing to compromise. And that was the end. I sold my Expressionism collection. I concluded that Pevsner was not right and that I didn’t want to have anything to do with the Amsterdam School. It was the rational, basic forms in architecture that really concerned me, the pure geometry.

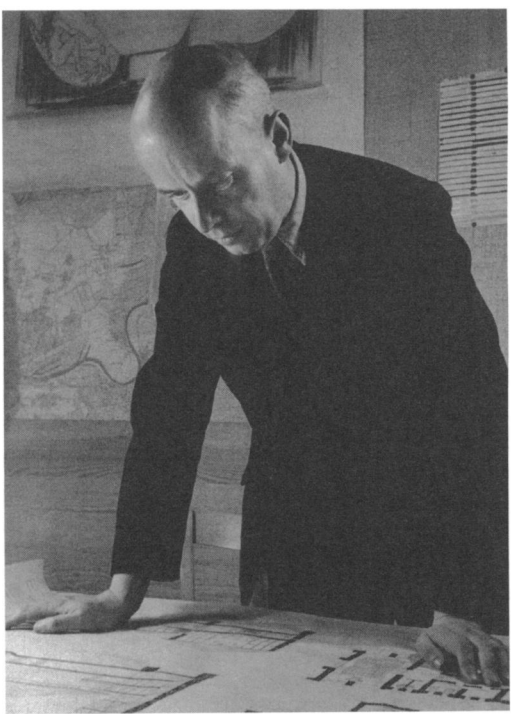
4. May 18–23, 1964. See Cepl, *Ungers*, on the conference, the conflict with Zevi, and the outcome of Ungers’ research into Expressionism, 150–58.



HERMANN FINSTERLIN, N.D. RIGHT: POSTCARD TO UNGERS FROM FINSTERLIN, N.D. BELOW RIGHT: RUDOLF SCHWARZ, N.D.

Mein Lieber Herr Ungers!  
 Vielleicht ist Ihnen die bei-  
 liegende kleine Betrachtung  
 über meine Darstellungen neben  
 den äthiopischen Ergüssen  
 der Kunst nicht uninteressant  
 Sie sehen aber auch daraus, dass ich  
 an meiner Kunstförderung  
 nichts geändert hat. -  
 Die beiden Modelle, die ich noch  
 herstellen liess, sind schon ge-  
 worden, ich werde sie morgen  
 an-suchen. Vielleicht gelangt  
 noch ein ganz neuer Typischer Ent-  
 wurf. -  
 Mit herzlichen Grüßen v. H. z. H.  
 und Genesung für Berlin,  
 vor allem auch für Ihre eigene  
 schöne Sache.

W  
 Finsterlin.



RK: So you could see this as either a thorough analysis, which at the end led to a rejection, or you could interpret it as having taken on a whole sequence of identities in order to better understand them.

OMU: To get a better understanding and to discover.

RK: This is exactly my theory about you, that you have a great empathic sense and this emotionality, which allow you to formulate completely different and opposing positions at the same time, and that what you call rationality will always win in the end.

OMU: Exactly [laughs]. I think you are quite right about that. In the end, rationality has always won. Now I want to talk about my second encounter, which also took place during this time. That was with Rudolf Schwarz. Schwarz was a neighbor. Finishing this house [at Belvederestrasse] was for me, as a young architect, very important – I wrote the manifesto “Zu einer neuen Architektur,” in November 1960, with Reinhard Gieselmann, over there in the living room. Schwarz came over, since he was a neighbor, and said that he wanted to get to know me and see the house. But there was this ambivalence as well. For example, Scharoun had recommended me as a professor to the University of Berlin, which had been rather early, in 1962, just shortly after the house was completed. I think Scharoun thought that I would be a worthy successor in the spirit of German Expressionism. Schwarz was interested in other things, in particular the question of the metaphor, the question of the image.

HUO: So the relationship between architecture and images?

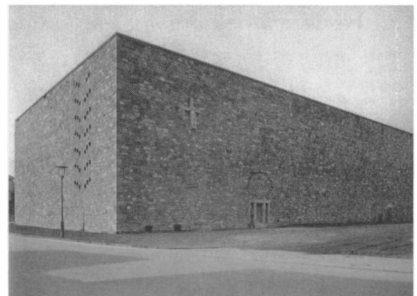
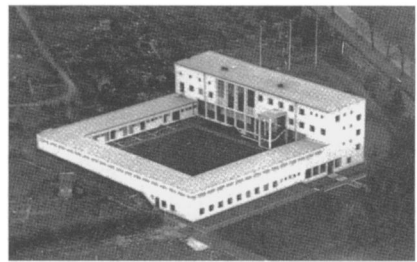
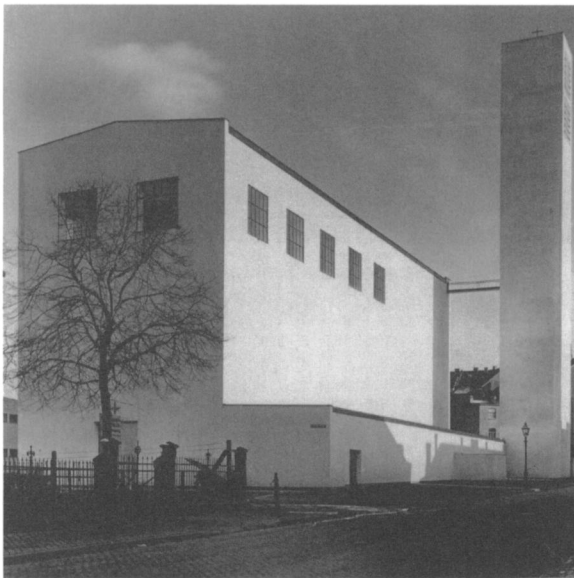
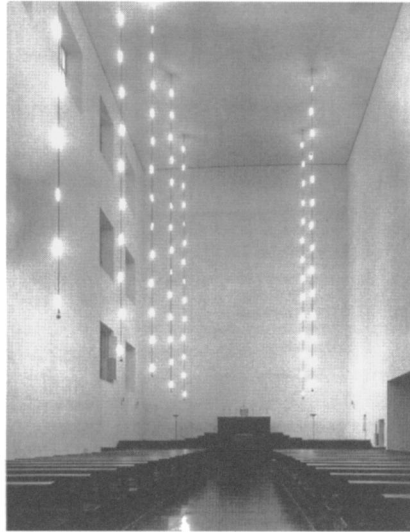
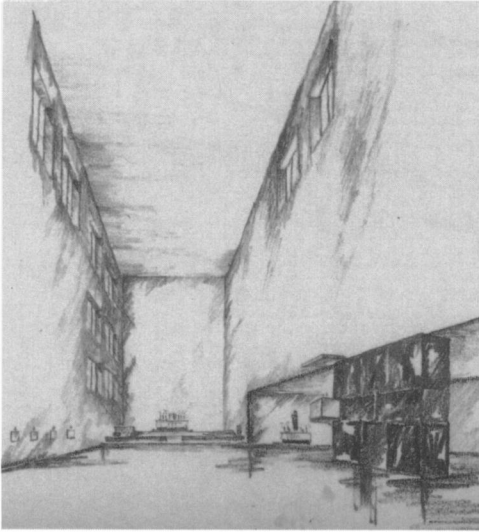
OMU: Exactly. The question of the image, that’s what I learned from Schwarz. Schwarz’s hypothesis is that through the image, the perception, the metaphor, architecture becomes pictorial. He transformed “Stabat mater dolorosa” [the Latin hymn “The sorrowful mother stood”] to architecture in the Fronleichnamskirche in Aix-la-Chapelle. This was, for quite some time, a far more intellectual and substantial thought to me than the simple concept of Expressionism. It was also very apparent to me partly because I really disliked this transcendental aspect of Expressionism. It was totally useless to me. I was a close friend of Hermann Finsterlin back then. I participated in an exhibition on Expressionism with him. I still have the letters Finsterlin sent me somewhere, in which he called me “My dear friend in spirit.”<sup>5</sup> We published the catalogue about the “Die Gläserne Kette” in 1963.

HUO: So you were also working as a curator?

OMU: It was the first time this correspondence was dug up, and it really, if I can be so honest, overwhelmed me. After I finished this, it was completely over for me. Lo,<sup>6</sup> who did the editing and proofreading, said that if she had to read the Finsterlin letters one more time she would puke. That was outrageous [laughs].

5. The correspondence, from July–October 1962, is in the Ungers Archive in Cologne. Ungers worked with Ulrich Conrads on the exhibition “Architekturvisionen, Formmetaphern, Modelle, Oelbilder, Stilbaukaesten, Zeichnungen,” which was shown September 1–15, 1962, at the Berliner Galerie Diogenes. After this exhibition he worked on “Die Gläserne Kette” (“The Glass Chain”) in 1963 in Museum Leverkusen. For more about his relationship to Finsterlin, see Cepl, 113–19.

6. Ungers is referring to his wife Liselotte.



TOP AND ABOVE LEFT: RUDOLF SCHWARZ, FRONLEICHNAMSKIRCHE (CORPUS CHRISTI CHURCH), AIX-LA-CHAPELLE (AACHEN), 1928–30; MIDDLE RIGHT: SOZIALE FRAUENSCHULE, AIX-LA-CHAPELLE, 1929–30; RIGHT: ST. ANNA CHURCH, DÜREN, 1951–56.

HUO: What interests me is your relationship to Schwarz.

OMU: There was this close connection with Schwarz, and high regard. He and I met often and went out for walks in the city park in the evening. Our conversations were mostly not about architecture, rather we talked about many everyday things. But he was a great influence. I valued him for this pictorial approach, which no other architect had made clear in this sense, or had utilized in this sense. I knew – already during my studies – an architect who worked at the head office of the postal service in Koblenz, who was a former colleague of Schwarz, and was working with him to build the Fronleichnamskirche and the Frauenschule in Aix-la-Chapelle, two key projects, especially the Frauenschule – such severity and rigor. And I collaborated with that architect. It was such a rational architecture, entirely reduced to its essences. This was much closer to who I was and my idea of architecture than the expressive thinking of Scharoun and others.

HUO: With Schwarz the collaboration with the artist or photographer also comes into play. There is this wonderful book of photographs by Albert Renger-Patzsch, an almost encyclopedic work, who also anticipated the amazing work by Bernd and Hilla Becher. I am interested in whether this was inspiring for you, since you have, like Schwarz, collaborated a lot with artists.

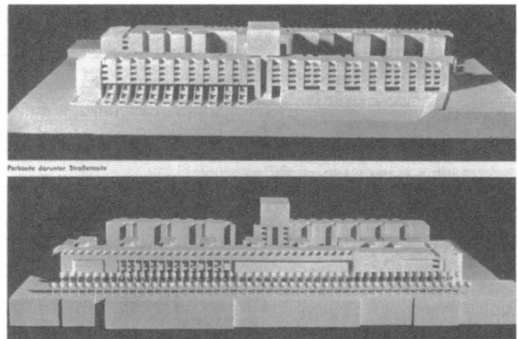
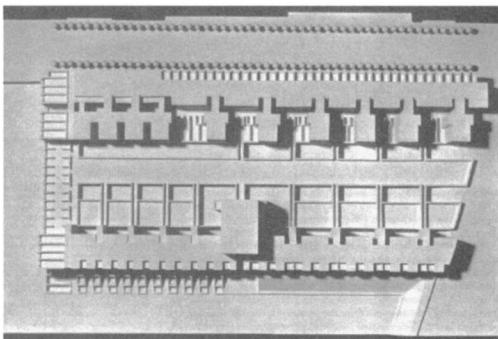
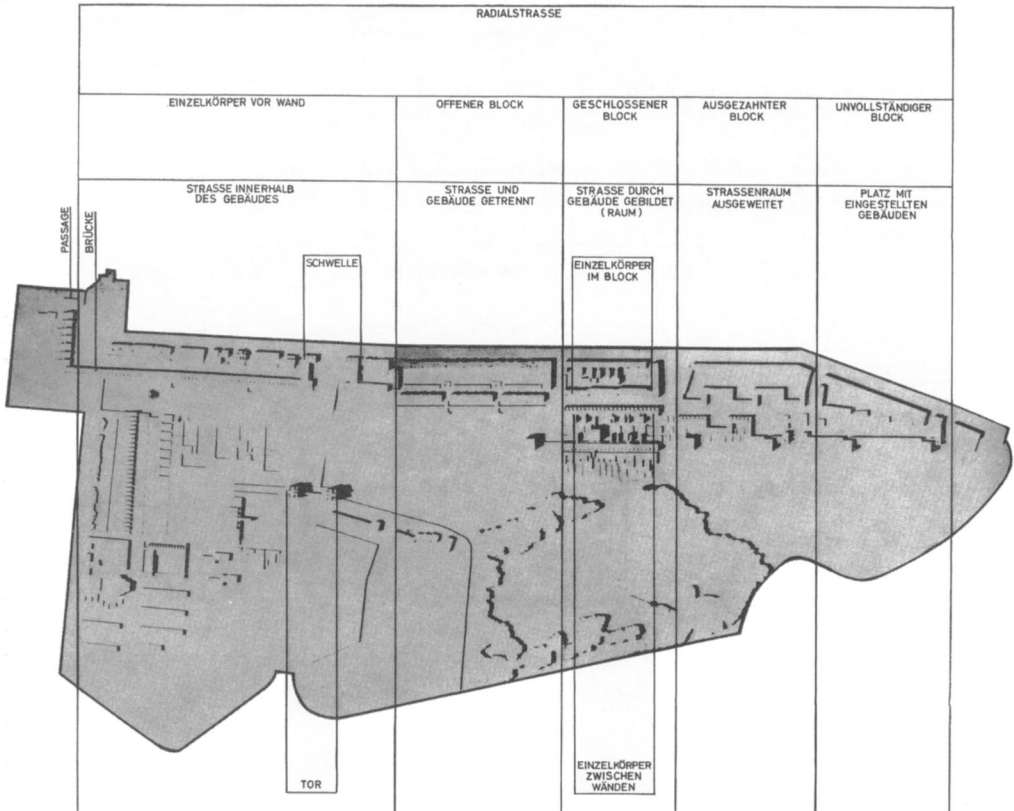
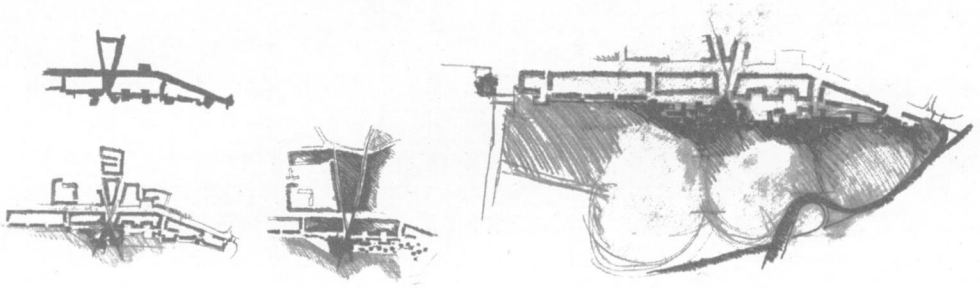
OMU: That was probably just in the air. There was no direct influence from this book. I have to say I also have my reservations about Schwarz. I admired him very much and admire him still, but mainly his early work. He lost the radicality of the early days and his later work was – in my opinion – too conventional. As a city planner – and I dare not say this, as I have too much respect for him – I think he completely failed. He really destroyed Cologne with his proposal for the “Nord-Süd-Fahrt,” the North-South expressway.<sup>7</sup>

RK: I would like to talk about the Grünzug Süd project. Was this designed around this time?

OMU: Yes it was. It started in the late '50s, early '60s.

RK: Yes, so it starts at about the time you finally converted to rationalism. But if you look at the project, there is much more than just rationalism. Grünzug Süd is the first project through which I came in contact with your work. What always fascinated me is to read you as a kind of provocateur, because you always describe adventures that are imposed on you by others, and then suddenly you simply wake up from these adventures to come to your senses. Of course, you yourself provoke these kinds of adventures in a way. The first thing that struck me about your work is that instead of imposing additional substance, your quality was to yield – looking for a more subtle and “softer” solution. You yielded to influences, obstacles, and distractions – to superior forces. And by yielding you added character, which was of great subtlety and, in a way, a revolutionary new dimension to architecture. I would think the rationalism in your work forms a cover for something that is actually more turbulent, more ambivalent and ambiguous – in a way, as much interested in formlessness as in form. For me this is a profound influence of Expressionism. If you look at Scharoun, you also see an aesthetic that

7. The expressway was only partially implemented.



O.M. UNGERS, PROJECT FOR GRÜNZUG SÜD, COLOGNE-ZOLLSTOCK, 1962-65.

has the same ability to yield. For instance, I remember your explanation of Scharoun's Kulturforum in the '70s. You made it sound so incredibly exciting, almost orgasmic. So I think your conversion to rationalism was never final.

OMU: Yes, that's true. I certainly tried not to construct my architecture from ideological sources – whether they are expressionistic or rationalistic or whatever – but to react to the situation in which I found myself. To react rationally, to be able to understand what I was doing, and also to be able to explain it. I have never relied on intuition, or *Eingebung*, the beautiful German word, because I was suspicious of it. There always was a rational explanation for what I was doing.

RK: A rational explanation or rationalization?

OMU: It depends. Grünzug Süd is a good example. Take these little photos on the side. They show completely banal situations, which we then translated.

RK: You just said that you do not like the word *transcendence*. But those are, after all, small transcendental leaps.

OMU: Those are transformations. But these random courtyard additions led to these two buildings with a random internal structure. This existing block is interpreted here again in the same structure. I tried to comprehend the structure behind it.

RK: That's what I found so immensely fascinating, particularly because it produces an amalgam of intuition and rationality, and certainly an architecture of softness as well.

OMU: But it functions in such a way that the rational controls the emotional or the emotional controls the rational. There is a strong relationship between the two, no doubt about it. It couldn't have been done without the emotional. The same is the case for interpretations like these. It's important to first understand the structure. By getting into it, you draw closer emotionally, and by rationalizing the matter you turn it into something new. Therefore you have this reciprocity between the emotional and the rational. This, of course, led to these other blocks, which are repeated in the same way, or to buildings put inside blocks, which are there at random and are being further complemented. It's always a rationalization of the existing.

RK: A rationalization of the existing – that is perhaps an important statement.

OMU: The creative idea is not born out of any ideology, but from what exists and from the specific location.

HUO: That's also something you later stress in the dialectical description of the city. You always say not to work inductively but rather deductively.

OMO: Exactly.

HUO: And it's the case here already.

OMU: Yes, we had these kinds of underlying ideas in most cases. That is the point of departure. It is independent from what is done in detail. And this interpretation and what it results in gives it a unique identity, which is not ideologically induced. It is also not simply repeatable at any random location, but rather only “correct” at that specific location. Although “correct” is not necessarily true – it is an interpretation of this specific location.

RK: OK. But that’s exactly what I find fascinating. You talk about this with such tremendous conviction. And it is so attractive to hear, and yet you can say that your work now is the exact opposite of this approach. I find it fascinating that you can always defend these different and diverse directions with the same power of persuasion. But what do you make of it now?

OMU: It’s a very current matter. This way of dealing with real urban situations was unfortunately not continued, but has time and again been replaced with ideological approaches.

RK: Why did this happen?

OMU: Because nobody understood it. But of course it’s an enormous intellectual effort.

RK: Yes, exactly. It is just too much work; you cannot extrapolate it. By itself it is wonderful, but applied worldwide it becomes a nightmare – and also a nightmare for your own work. It cannot work.

OMU: In this context I have to truly say that the only one who understands city planning intellectually is Rem Koolhaas. Everyone else understands it either mostly ideologically or, alternatively, formalistically. I mean, your view on urbanism is not my kind of interpretation and I have a different one. Urbanism continues to be a very important task and its intellectual consequence in that form was never again taken up. And that is the mistake.

RK: Do you occasionally feel the urge to pick this up again, or not?

OMU: Yes. I think I have done this in several instances. I have tried repeatedly to respond to the situation.

The dialectical approach is also very important in this story. It started out as a process in which we were looking for the ideal form. But since the ideal form can never be achieved, the urban fragments and destruction come into play and it’s turned into a dialectical condition. This approach was also adopted in the design for the area around the Lehrter train station in Berlin [1994], where it was quite explicit. The design consists of three areas, or blocks, which are dialectically opposed. One comprising the full block, one in which objects are placed – the same as [the library] in Karlsruhe – and a third where the building and the open space are equal. Contradiction emerges as the principle of city planning. With this approach, the question is not whether to build high or low – the entire discussion in my early days in architecture – flat roof or pitched roof, or, later, the ridiculous discussion, glass or brick, which are all superfluous. The dialectical discussion in architecture has to this day not been fully explored. For example, the project with Rem on “the city within the city” [*Die Stadt in der Stadt*, 1977] was about the dialectical principle of contradiction that the city signifies. The point was to consider this principle as one entity. You first have to recognize the

pure form in order to be able to apply the dialectical principle.

RK: You could say a culminating point of the first phase – soft and strong at the same time.

OMU: Absolutely. But it was never understood. I presented the idea to Team Ten.

RK: But you never widely published it. You never presented it as a key project.

OMU: That is true. But I did present it to Team Ten. Peter Smithson understood that this dialectical principle as an urban principle was important. I now want to take a small leap back to the principle of the dialectic – we are certainly going to come to Team Ten shortly. The early project in Enschede was also dialectical. It is not one form; there is not one principle, but rather a combination of forms ranging from the single-family house – the larger house and the villa – to the row house. There is the reversal, there is the building complex, and, accordingly, the different ways of living, from an individualistic lifestyle to a collective way of life. The development of this entire principle of morphological wholeness originated from this. And Smithson was the only one in Team Ten who understood this. So, when I presented Enschede at a meeting in Berlin [1965], I had serious doubts because it was initially seen only as a formal approach, and the principle of inner structure from the singular to the collective wasn't perceived. This whole morphological aspect that I wanted to address, explaining that society does not consist only of high-rise buildings or only of classes, but one as well as the other, and they complement one another. Peter understood that, but at Team Ten it was difficult to present because they were only looking at the social aspect. Aldo van Eyck and Giancarlo De Carlo only recognized the principle of social distress and its alleviation. Architecture cannot – and this I tried to make clear to them, and that was also the breach – cannot solve social problems. It is incapable of doing so.

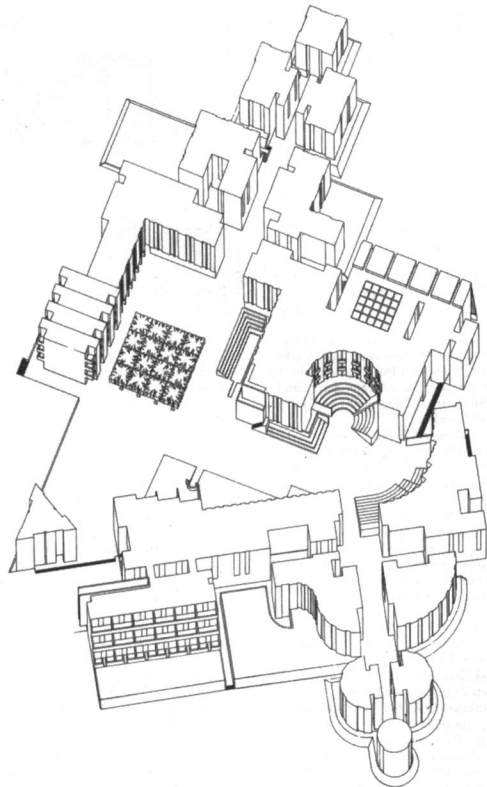
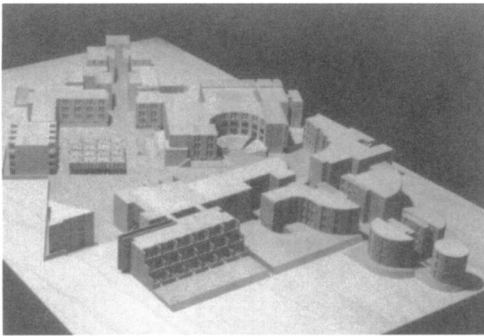
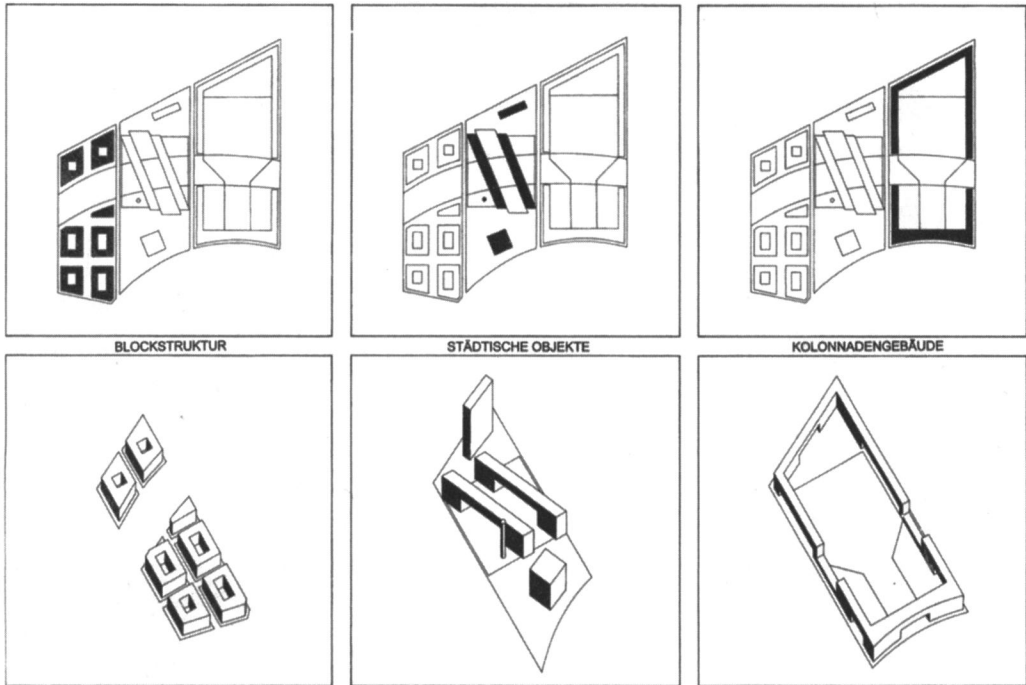
HUO: I had a conversation with Peter Smithson a few years ago and we discussed this. The connection between Smithson and you is this idea of “as found.” Smithson also says it's about the urbanism of discovery and not of invention. That is exactly your position, no?

OMU: Yes, exactly. I keep saying there is no invention, because inventing has come to an end. There is much to discover and there is much to interpret and to understand differently. One inventor is Lord Foster, who can invent these knots or all kinds of steel connections.

RK: I agree. I want to continue not with a flashback but with a flash-forward. You could say that after Enschede, and with the rise of the market economy since the 1960s, architecture has become more and more shapeless and is powered by forces other than architectural interests. I think that, relatively speaking, the position of architecture is becoming weaker and weaker. So this approach – and this is why it is still pregnant for me – could be more appropriate than the imposition of ideal forms on a shapeless condition, which is what you propose now in most cases. Can you comment on that?

OMU: I didn't understand the question exactly.

RK: I think the discovery or reinterpretation of found objects has a greater, or at least great,



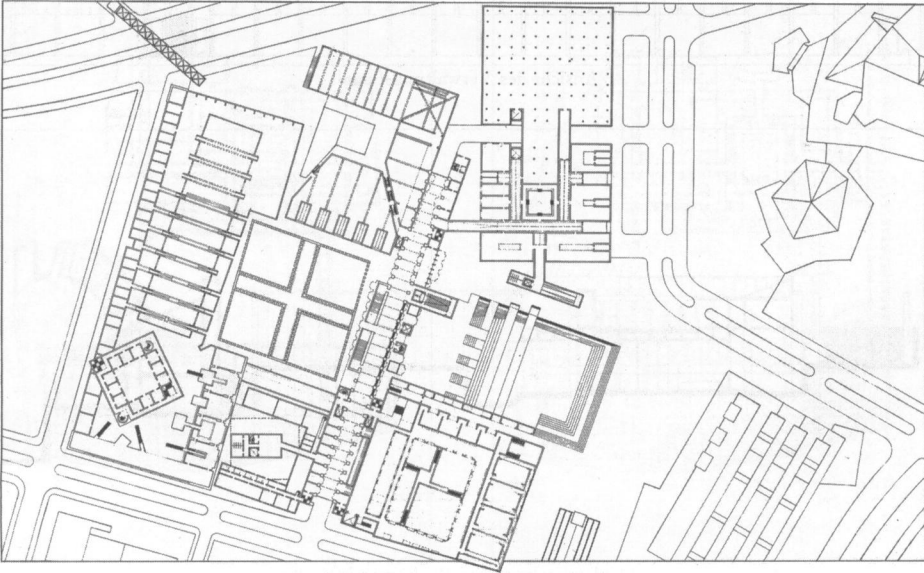
O.M. UNGERS, COMPETITION FOR LEHRTER BAHNHOF DISTRICT, BERLIN, 1994, DIAGRAMS. ABOVE AND RIGHT: DESIGN FOR STUDENT HOUSING, TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE, ENSCHEDE, NETHERLANDS, MODEL AND AXONOMETRIC, 1964.

potential at the moment, especially now that all the recognized forms are evaporating and we are being confronted with these new conditions. This process could have a very strong impact – an impact that could counter this wave of generic egalitarianism with recognizable and “eternal” issues.

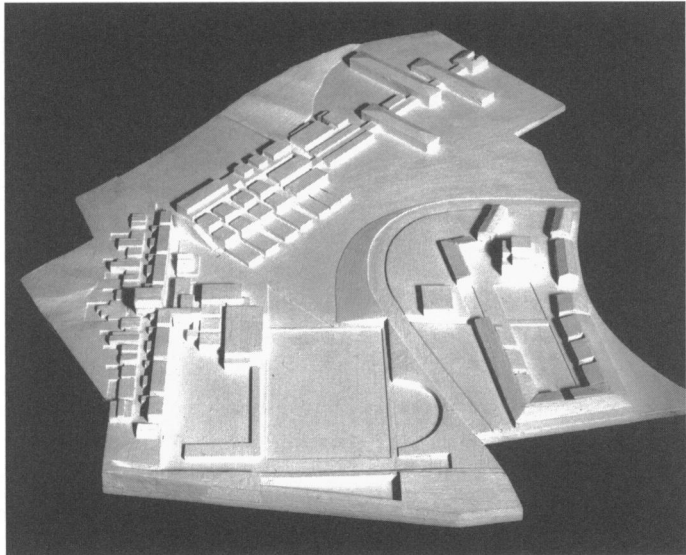
OMU: There is a great misunderstanding among architects. They think they are inventors and always need to be avant-garde. But you cannot permanently exist as an avant-garde. That is impossible. But architecture can be carried forward in a dialectical process, meaning a confrontation with the existing or with that which one wants to provoke at a certain moment. From a morphological point of view – which is not exclusive but inclusive, and not contrary but complementary – you can assess that certain elements are missing that could be added. I will give you a banal example. In a certain area only four-story houses exist. But we know that people also live in single-family houses. And we also know that people live in high-rise buildings as well as many other building types. In order to have a complex living environment, and to have a complex architecture, it is possible that certain things need to be added to achieve this complexity. That is what we did, for example, with the Kulturforum project in Berlin. We said, if it's a forum this means that all ideas and concepts should be gathered. So we gathered all the different existing museum types into one complex, all prototypes in their dialectical presence or argument. But it is always an intellectual process, which is necessary in order to be able to search. There is this famous Zwicky-Box, which I developed for myself. Zwicky is a Swiss philosopher and a morphologist. The principle of the box is that for a certain assignment you make small boxes. Say, for example, you want to solve organizing parking spaces and are listing all possibilities – park one above the other, park one behind the other, park crossways, diagonally, etc. You can use the box to invent even more options. Or the problem of the terrace – the terrace can be open or closed, can be this or that, and so on. During the analysis or during the work itself, you already invent. You consider the entire complexity of a particular function and try to parse it morphologically. And the Zwicky-Box provides a set of tools – that's how I use it – like a vocabulary. As if I were to develop the grammar for a language I would want to speak. And then – now comes the problem of emotion – comes the decision, when you speak. Through the sentence emotion is added – what you choose to say so that the sentence makes sense. And you must always provide a sense. It is also a matter of emotion and imagination. But you must first know the whole set of tools and have parsed them. Otherwise you will have no language; otherwise the syntax is at an end. Most of today's architects are designing by taking a look at what is in fashion, what is useful, what is popular, what is done. For me they simply have become a speechless society of architects who can no longer articulate themselves at all. They sit down with a pencil and scribble and something is created, and then they present this attempt and fail.

The Enschede project has really almost been parsed academically for what we tried to do and then really failed to do. It has three basic shapes: circle, triangle, and square. All of the transformations are performed according to certain criteria. If not, it would lead to an infinite combination and you would drown. It becomes pointless. It becomes absurd. It no longer works. A counterbalance is needed to limit the possibilities, to regulate or, alternatively, to give this an objective.

HUO: But this is very interesting, because it is a question not unlike the one Sol LeWitt posed in art. There is a real parallel.



O.M. UNGERS, COMPETITION  
DESIGN FOR MUSEUM PREUSSISCHER  
KULTURBESITZ, BERLIN, PLAN, 1965.  
RIGHT: O.M. UNGERS, COMPETITION  
DESIGN FOR SCHOOL CENTER,  
MAYEN, 1965.



OMU: There is indeed. And in Enschede we transformed it. You have individuals living here, and when this circle is divided, you get two semicircles and create group living. This story is then inverted and row and terrace housing are added so that the entire spectrum of living is parsed in the axis here fanned out with the square. Only with the triangle it is not formally possible, because again and again triangles emerge.

HUO: Can it be said that the openness increases due to the constraint?

OMU: Exactly. This research process was an important attempt, which in the end led to nothing but absurdity. If a further limitation, a function or situation had been added, then this could have led to something. It would have excluded certain combinations or made only certain combinations possible.

RK: Yes. The interesting thing is that you describe this as a mistake – but at the same time, it is a gesture of an architectural language that now has conquered the world.

OMU: I did not describe the project as a mistake, but rather the research that emerged from it. Given the euphoria during the project we wanted to offer the ultimate architectural catalogue. And that was the mistake.

RK: Because what was adopted was the language, but not the content?

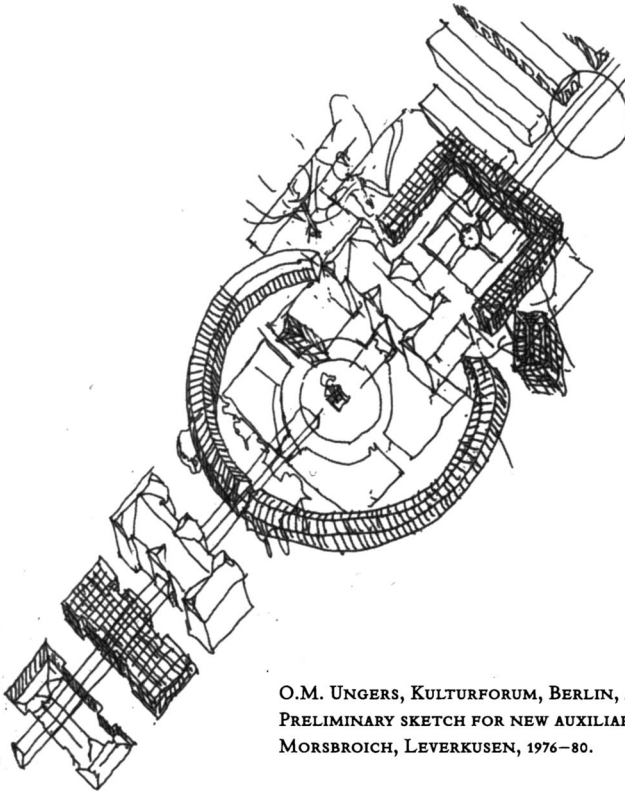
OMU: Exactly. The mistake was not in developing a proper syntax, but in turning it into an end product. The same thing happened with the three schools in Mayen.<sup>8</sup> One has several wings with a central inner corridor, one is terraced, and the third has an arcade with a wall. Or the project for the museum [for Prussian Culture] at the Berlin Tiergarten. It has nine squares as a basic organizational principle. Of course each of the individual museums has a variety of objects and artifacts, a variety of technical requirements, and different architectural demands from our side. The development of this simple, basic principle leads through superimposing additional layers to a differentiated museum complex. Each part is different and the whole is actually a dialectical relationship of different museum types.

HUO: You could say it is like a typology of museums. But what is very interesting – especially at a time when the homogenization of the museum is rapidly spreading – is that this would not have been a homogenized museum, one would have had all forms of museum types in one.

OMU: Yes. For example, the antiquities museum is like a Roman basilica, the modern museum has glass skylights, and so on. Through further differentiation and superimpositions the purely rational nature is further clarified.

RK: I want to try to make a synopsis of the period before you went to the US, and then maybe we should move on to your time in the US. First there is the country boy who was uneducated for an unusually long time, which meant that you educated yourself for quite some time. Then there is the person confused between Expressionism, transcendence, and

8. A group of three schools, known as the Realschule, Volksschule, and St.-Josef Schule.



O.M. UNGERS, KULTURFORUM, BERLIN, AXONOMETRIC, 1983. BELOW:  
PRELIMINARY SKETCH FOR NEW AUXILIARY BUILDINGS FOR MUSEUM SCHLOSS  
MORSBROICH, LEVERKUSEN, 1976-80.

rationalism who benefits from this confusion. After that comes the person who is able to create a dialectic out of imperfections – who engages this, and who exploits an architectural weakness as a form of sensitivity. And then, in the early '60s, there is the manipulator of form and content, and the dialectic almost goes out of control, to become a spinning, self-referential system that couldn't achieve a synthesis. This all happens in a very short period, between 1956 and 1964. An enormously intense period, so no wonder you were confused [laughs].

So, then you started your academic career?

OMU: That was my beginning at the Technical University in Berlin [1964].<sup>9</sup>

RK: Is it fair to say that Märkisches Viertel was a break with a formally and programmatically rich architecture and a move toward a slightly more systematic aesthetic?

OMU: Yes.

RK: And is it also fair to say that the reaction to it was very traumatic for you. And is that what encouraged you to start teaching at the Technical University in Berlin? Or is it disconnected?

OMU: I received an offer from the university and accepted it because I thought it would be very interesting to go to Berlin. It was a challenge for me. When I began teaching in Berlin, this meant that I had to be articulate and explain what I meant. And that was the challenge for me. We held seminars at the university that dealt with topics I had not defined for myself but were developed there, such as transformation, morphology, or different concepts of metamorphosis, all in relationship to architecture. The seminars were tremendously fast-paced and controversial, because the explanations were bungled and dilettantish.

RK: From your side?

OMU: Of course, but also from the student side. Because we were discovering something. We had nothing that we could refer to, but had to work on the concepts on our own and also had to justify them. Within the university there were two camps: there was the rationalist camp – as it was called – which was my side, and Scharoun's expressionistic camp. Needless to say, they were completely against us. That was quite a fight. They came to the seminars and disrupted them.

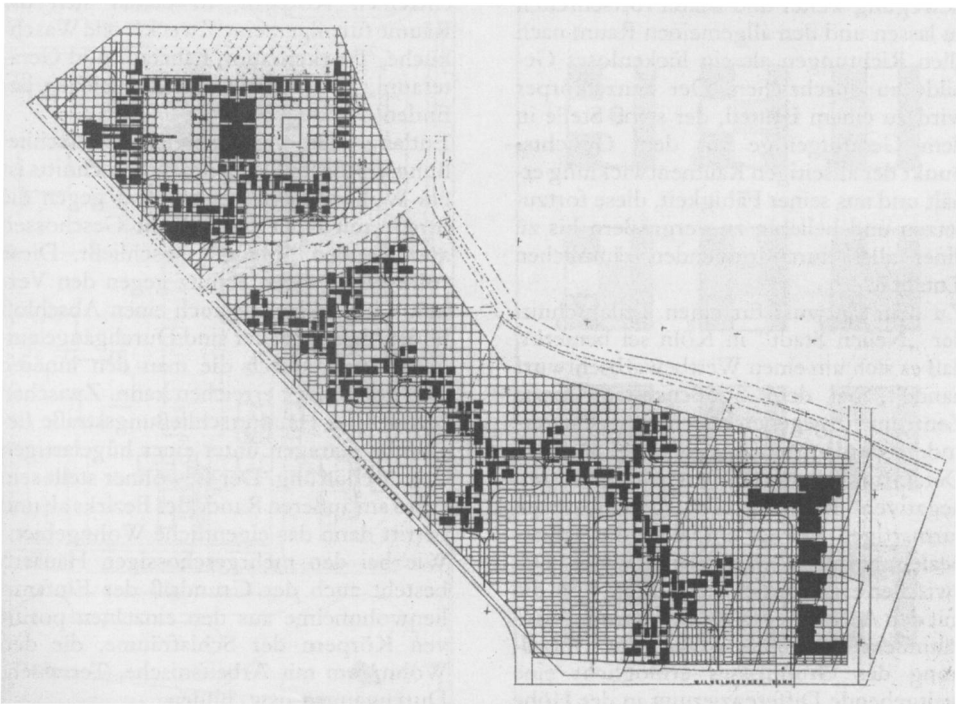
RK: Scharoun himself?

OMU: No, Scharoun stayed out of it, but the epigones were there. They were bad.

RK: Are there still any left?

OMU: Yes, Edgar Wisniewski, and all the other followers.

9. Ungers was appointed a professor in late 1963 and started teaching in Berlin in 1964.



O.M. UNGERS, MÄRKISCHES VIERTEL RESIDENTIAL COMPLEX,  
BERLIN-WITTENAU, 1962-67.

HUO: When I did some research in Berlin, people time and again told me that your seminars were like a laboratory for collective knowledge production. Could you talk a bit about how you intended the seminar to work in this way?

RK: I think organizing them in Berlin was key, and enabled them to declare the city a laboratory with the possibility of investigating any condition.

OMU: That was the first thing I did when I went to Berlin. It was customary at the university to design projects under ideal circumstances – for example, a house for an artist, or a house near a lake. The first thing I decided was that we would only work on projects within the city – Berlin as the laboratory in which we would work. We could see it and could experiment with it. We could therefore take the entire city – and Rem is quite right in this respect – as a laboratory. Berlin was the ideal location for this. There were fierce debates between the romantic Scharoun camp and my rationalistic camp. We wanted to have openly structured seminars. For example, we invited Bloch, who was a Marxist philosopher. The meetings were very open and not about fully developed topics.

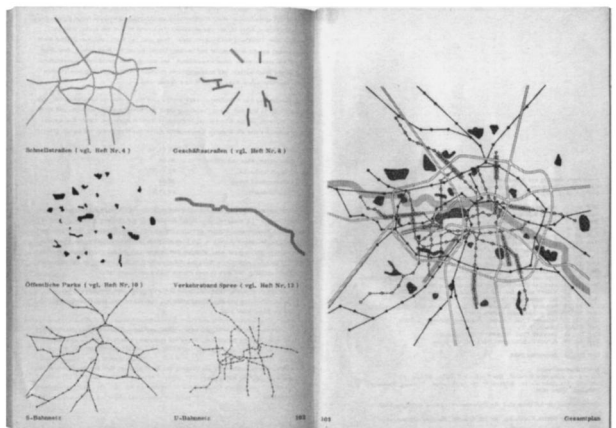
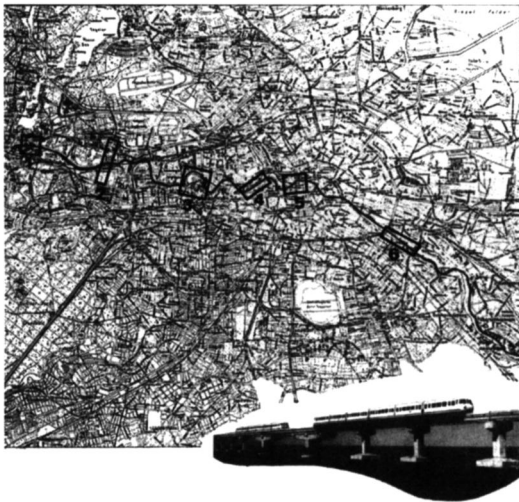
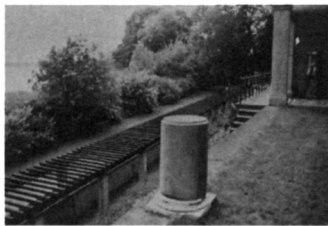
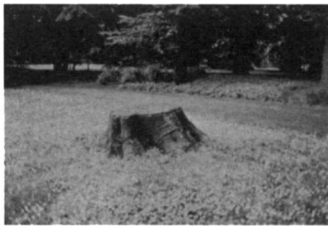
HUO: It was in this sense transdisciplinary. It went beyond the fear of pooling knowledge.

OMU: Exactly. Take Bloch, for instance. Bloch had written about ornament, and we were interested in the ornament or nonornament debate, since we were doing this spare architecture. This, however, only led to misunderstandings and wild discussions. The same happened with student theses and at seminars where we invited others from outside to clarify these terms. But in these clarifications there were many differences and disagreements. They led to different understandings, which led to further controversies, which strengthened the different camps in their convictions, so that at a certain point thesis projects by my people were pelted with eggs. This happened, for example, to Ulrich Flemming. Beautiful work, rationalistic architecture, and the next morning eggs were dripping from it. It was an aggressive situation and one had to maintain one's ground. None of this would have been possible without a theoretical background. In this respect, Berlin was an important station for me, because I had to find explanations for my work. The first Berlin Plan, for example, later proved to be the basis for Grünzug Süd. For the Berlin Plan we took the structures of the city – the Autobahn, the main shopping streets, the parks, the waterways, the Spree, the U-Bahn, and the S-Bahn – and asked what architectures were provoked by these structures. We then designed these and superimposed them. Out of this the larger plan emerged. This is a structural plan for Berlin. It's not that everything can be done everywhere, it's about the structure. These were then included in the thesis projects. From the larger plan we then developed individual assignments, which referred to the structure.

This was like what we did at Grünzug Süd – to discover the existing structure, to extract it, and then to examine what it means and provokes in architecture. From this the city emerges; it is no longer a uniform city, it is no longer a master plan in the sense of the 19th century – with corners and secluded places – but a structure for the entire city with its various existing qualities.

HUO: In the book about the Dorotheenhöfe, there is an interview with you about Berlin.<sup>10</sup>

10. Frank Peter Jaeger, *Dorotheenhöfe: Oswald Mathias Ungers baut in Berlin* (Berlin: Jovis, 2003).



O.M. UNGERS ET AL., MAPS FROM SEVERAL OF THE STUDIO RESEARCH PROJECTS IN BERLIN. ABOVE: VERKEHRSBAND SPREE, 1967; SCHNELLBAHN UND GEBÄUDE, 1967-68; RIGHT: SCHNELLSTRASSE UND GEBÄUDE, 1965-66.



You say that in your initial affinity for Berlin – which also had to do with the classicism of Schinkel, Humboldt, Hegel, and with a humanistic spirit – it was primarily the 20th century that was important for the seminar, that Berlin in the 20th century was a bit like a large theater and like a sponge.

OMU: Exactly. The cause or a parallel for this was this story of Glienicke, where the entire morphology is also represented.

RK: You discovered Glienicke in Berlin?

OMU: Yes.

RK: Which at that point was a retroactive manifesto for your early work?

OMU: It was a retrospective manifesto. I saw everything validated in it. For example, there was the tree stump, the broken column, then the complete column with a bird on top, and then the fictional column painted on the wall. So the entire morphological breadth and the entire park – as well as Wörlitz – with these different architectures, which are all contradictory, all opposing, but which display uniformity in a different manner. Glienicke was practically the textbook for my theoretical work in Berlin.

HUO: There is a set of booklets on your Berlin projects and it is very interesting to see that they are still being discussed today. Generations of Berlin architects and urban planners draw on this material. How did you get the idea back then to create small publications, to develop this kind of book machine?

OMU: Yes, it was a book machine. It happened as follows: we had no money and had to print these ourselves. We used a Rotaprint machine.

HUO: You printed them all yourself? That I did not know.

OMU: Yes. And with the sale of one book, we financed the next. We didn't have a publisher or anything. Afterward we even had a small surplus. We just wanted to capture the themes and issues we were dealing with – otherwise the material was quickly lost. Here, for example, is the issue about highways in Berlin. This is the structural plan, which later was incorporated into the whole. This could have continued this further.<sup>11</sup>

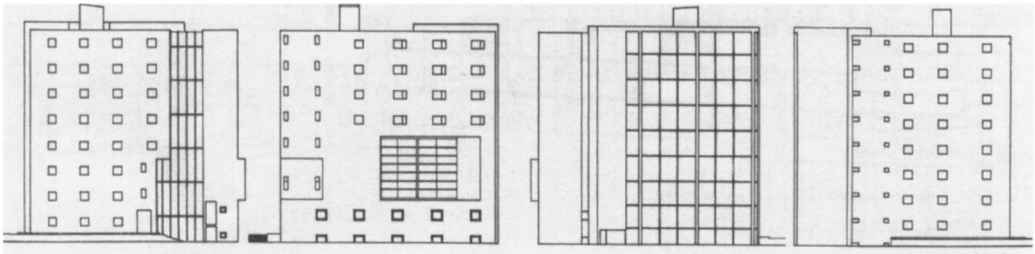
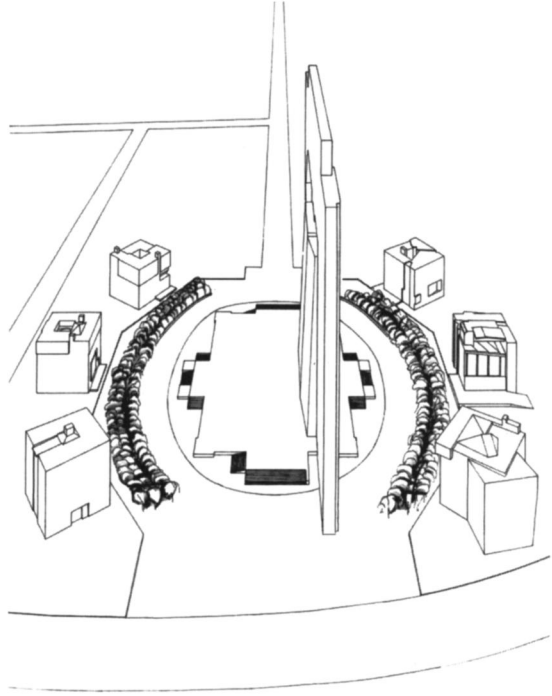
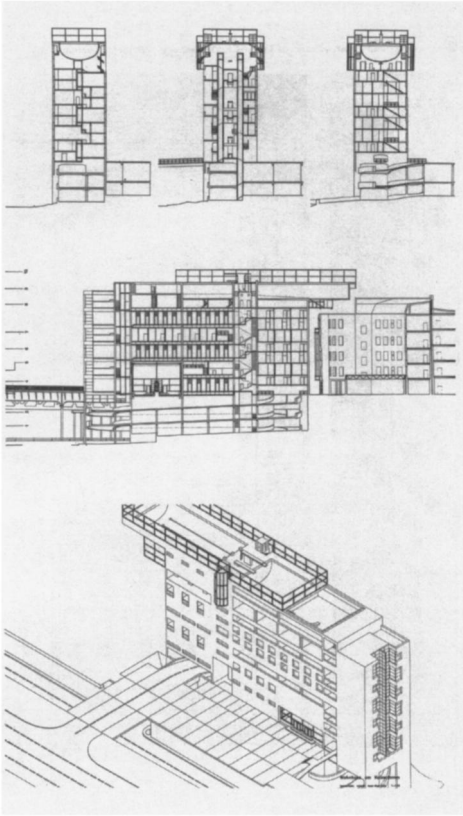
RK: For example, this here [Wohnhaus am Kaiserdamm] was a world-famous project.

OMU: By Wolf Meyer-Christian.

RK: And what became of him?

OMU: I met him again about half a year ago in the Eifel, together with Michael Wegener,

11. Various elements of the plan can be seen in "Berlin 1995," Vol. 25, of the TUB seminar publications.



TOP LEFT: WOLF MEYER-CHRISTIAN, WOHNHAUS AM KAISERDAMM, 1966. TOP RIGHT AND MIDDLE: ECKHART REISSINGER, PROJECT FOR LEIPZIGER PLATZ, AXONOMETRIC AND BLOCK 6, ELEVATIONS, 1966. LEFT: WERNER DÜTTMANN, JÜRGEN SAWADE, O.M. UNGERS, JOSEF PAUL KLEIHUES, GEORG HEINRICH, HANS CHRISTIAN MÜLLER, CIRCA 1978.

Jürgen Sawade, the early generation of students. That was great.

RK: Is he an architect?

OMU: Yes, architect and engineer – something in between. He is still trying to find out how the pyramids were constructed. Highly interesting types. Volker Sayn, for example, with all his knowledge of world architecture, is a local architect in a small community and prepares building applications for the farmers. He is so happy, you can't believe it. He does origami. He sends me elephants and such things.

RK: This is a beautiful project, what was it for?<sup>12</sup>

OMU: That was [Eckhart Reissinger's project] for Leipziger Platz.

RK: Which has now been redone with block developments.

OMU: These blocks here, you must like them. It was important for me in Berlin to teach architectural thinking; not the architectural style or architectural workmanship, but to think architecturally, to see the things architecturally. The first exercises with these small houses were intended to get the students to understand this. I combined a house and a functional program, each time, however, in a combination that is so absurd that the architectural thinking would become the core issue. For example, only bricks could be used, or the bathroom had to be located directly adjacent to the living room. So, changing relations, changing materials, changing the situation – but always with the same program.

HUO: Like changing the rules of a game . . .

OMU: Like the rules of a game. And they could no longer copy or do any crazy things, but were forced to think architecturally. There were two important people in Berlin, Wolf Meyer-Christian and Rainer Jagals. Colin Rowe knew them and he came to the congress I organized – which was the last great architecture congress. We organized this architecture congress because we wanted to define precisely where architecture stood theoretically. Reyner Banham, Peter Blake, Lucius Burckhardt, Ulrich Conrads, André Corboz, Kenneth Frampton, Sigfried Giedion, Otto Graf, Antonio Hernandez, Jörn Janssen, Jürgen Joedicke, Julius Posener, Colin Rowe, Eduard Sekler, Sam Stevens, Max Adolf Vogt, they were all there. And the congress ended in disaster.

HUO: Why in disaster?

OMU: It was a protest rally. There were 2,000 students there. At the end the students unrolled a huge banner, "All houses are beautiful – stop building." They were completely frustrated. Giedion was on the podium and didn't know what to say, and he still spoke too long.

RK: And that was in December 1967.

12. For details on Reissinger's project, see *Arch+* 179 (2006): 454–55.



**BERLIN SUMMER SYMPOSIUM (UNGERS IS STANDING AT THE REAR, FAR LEFT),  
1964, ATTENDED BY PETER BLAKE, GIANCARLO DE CARLO, JERZY SOLTAN,  
JAMES STIRLING, AND SHADRACH WOODS, AMONG OTHERS.**

OMU: Yes, it was our “1968” – and with this everything came to an end. They ruined the entire congress.

RK: When did you start teaching?

OMU: 1964.

RK: So after four to five years was everything over?

OMU: Absolutely. It was completely shattered. This was the last big event we organized. All my illusions – that I could bring intelligence, thoughtfulness, and creativity back into architecture in Germany – were completely destroyed. After this some students wanted to negotiate the grade for their thesis project first – namely, the best – and only then do the work. And the submitted thesis would then only be an empty sheet of paper. Then I said that this has no meaning anymore, there is nothing more I can say. I did not make a scene, I simply left the room and walked away.

RK: And never went back.

OMU: Yes. I was accused of arrogance. We demanded intellectual performance. We required students visiting our seminars to develop the ability to think. But that was not what they cared about. Their interest was to organize a revolution, and this I was not capable of. That is why I felt out of place and walked away.

HUO: The first interview I had with Rem, about seven or eight years ago, was about Berlin. It was for the first Berlin Biennale and it was about Rem’s project for the Berlin Wall. Perhaps it would be interesting to talk a bit about your first encounter.

OMU: Yes.

RK: Well, maybe it was actually not the beginning of our meeting but it triggered our meeting eventually. I discovered Mathias’s work in 1969, so after the explosion at the university and after he had left Berlin. I bought those books and I was totally fascinated. Then I found out that he was teaching in the US.

OMU: Yes. I want to add that at the congress Colin Rowe saw the work of Jagals and Reissinger, and he took it with him to the US. He then showed it to his Texas group at Cornell and told them that something interesting was happening in Berlin. He was an intelligent man who was certainly able to assess things. And he said, we need to get this man to Cornell. But then, of course, there were other problems.

RK: But can we continue to talk about the time at the university? Your discovery of Schinkel and the student revolution were happening at the same time. Could you talk about this tension? It obviously was not typical, especially in the ’60s, to rediscover an eclectic genius from the 19th century.

OMU: Yes, but we regarded Schinkel structurally and not eclectically. Not as a historical “mine,” in other words, but as a thought process that did not lose its relevance. In the course of the 19th century this was lost, and the rote copying that ensued was a travesty, but we tried to rediscover Schinkel in his structural approaches, to rediscover the possibilities of his architectural thinking in its full range. We also did not use Glienicke as a “mine.” Not one formal element of Glienicke was adopted in any design – only the thinking played a role in these processes. Some of the revolutionaries – who, such as Neitzke, are to some extent friends today – were not unintelligent people. They really wanted to achieve something on the social level. So it was an enormously excessive change for what they believed they would be able to do; toward a more intelligent, enlightened society. They were, of course, more or less agreeing with these ideas. The polemic came from the stupid side. The success of the revolution was that afterward the intellectuals did not take the lead, but rather those who sat in the holes, the so-called “discount-professors,” did. They ruined the university for at least one, if not two, generations, because they abolished absolutely all thinking and were only interested in getting a position.

To a great extent, this break with the really intelligent didn't happen with me, they all stayed with me. There was a break to the extent that they weren't doing architecture anymore. They were afraid to do so. Designing as a process was practically wiped out. One was not allowed to design because it was regarded as a bourgeois activity. “Designing? What is that? It is a middle-class activity that can no longer be done.” They then turned to working with computers and became specialists. One of them now designs intelligent machines in America. Neitzke became a pure theorist and developed social theories. So they no longer had any trust in architecture but were excellent designers. But designing was an activity that was no longer accepted.

RK: Were you ever politically active?

OMU: No. My political activity ends at a quite specific moment. I was, of course, for change, but change in the sense of evolution. I said that if we worked together we could achieve some changes. I had already achieved some change in my seminars – there was no hierarchy, for example. But one evening helmets were distributed and a confrontation with the authorities was prepared. If the authorities tried to break up the gathering, we were to pick up paving stones and attack them. But the only ones who would be injured by this violence would actually be the “revolutionaries.” At that moment I declined to take a helmet. I said, you can have evolution with me but not a revolution; neither a revolution against objects nor against people, and I went home. From then on I was the damned bourgeois professor. So that was finished, I had no other option. I had no more influence. Even some of my best friends, who had worked with me and distanced themselves from architecture – some, for example, like Flemming, whom I had known since my childhood – said after this congress: admittedly we are friends, but we can no longer be friends with you because you belong to the Establishment. That was inevitable. So it was a fateful situation that was not to be solved.

HUO: How were the connections at the time to the art world? Earlier we talked about serial moments, as well as the idea of the “as found,” to map found things, in the '60s.

OMU: My relationship, or in general?

HUU: Both. You were aware of contemporary art at that time, right?

OMU: We still had a very good relationship in the early '60s. We collected art, not properly, but we had a very nice collection. We became afraid to show it, because collecting also belonged to the bourgeois realm. It was considered a bourgeois activity, or an upper-class attitude, and not allowed. The artists were all frightened and were no longer accepted, just as collecting was no longer considered appropriate. We no longer put it on display. We stored it and gave parts away.

RK: That was really a long time ago.

HUU: Was there a dialogue with artists?

OMU: I am just thinking whether we had artists at the seminars. In any case, no one like Sol LeWitt. Interest in this came later.

RK: The exciting part of this story is that until 1968 it was actually quite German, with very little influence from abroad.

OMU: No, absolutely none. It came later.

RK: Aside from the political discussions at the university I think your work – even from the very beginning – cannot be looked at without feeling an evident political dimension. And you actually say in every project that a formal and morphological solution exists for these issues, but not a social solution.

OMU: Exactly.

RK: Do you see this in retrospect as a strength or as a weakness?

OMU: I think social problems cannot be resolved by architecture.

RK: Absolutely not. We have no means.

OMU: Indeed. You can only solve architectural problems. Likewise, art cannot solve social issues and neither can literature. Political literature, as Thomas Mann says, is actually an appropriated literature and does not solve political issues. This is perhaps the mistake made by Team Ten. The break began in Aix-en-Provence. Until then all projects of CIAM were composed by the grid with the five points: recreation, habitation, etc. And then the young people came – some of whom were just back from Africa – and they had no knowledge of recreation, likewise of transportation, as they only had bicycles – and so they constantly fell through the grid. At that point there was the demand to assess things on their own material basis and not by some abstract criteria – although including social criteria to a certain extent. This was the beginning of Team Ten. In Otterlo, the dispute between Peter Smithson and Ernesto Rogers took place. Rogers was the first to make historical references to the city and absorb historical elements of the city in his design for the Torre Velasca. Smithson polemicized

against this. CIAM was at this point already breaking apart. They had already made a historical mistake because they did not recognize that historical references are of importance.

We live in a world that is built up out of historical form – I am not talking about the great history but about reality, about the small, banal history. If one fails to realize this and attempts to reestablish an ideal society, like Van Eyck and these people did, then it is condemned to fail from the start, because architecture isn't able to do that.

RK: But if we take, for example, the Free University in Berlin and compare it with Enschede or with the Museum of Prussian Culture in Berlin, then there is, without it being explicit, a political intention after all.

OMU: Yes, but not in the sense of a political mission, or any sense of mission for social improvement.

RK: Is improvement a taboo word?

OMU: I mean trying to heal people, make them better.

RK: So no moralism?

OMU: Yes, no moralism. That is worded better. A personal sense of morality, yes, but making it a point for others, no.

RK: Do you think that the Free University is not a moralistic project? With its egalitarian organization and absence of hierarchy?

OMU: In my opinion? No.

RK: Because you like it, right?

OMU: Yes, you could say that. But from my perspective it has nothing to do with morals.

HUO: I am still interested in your publishing of books, the curatorial activity.

OMU: That has always interested me very much, and I always wanted to have a small architectural publishing house. I did consider purchasing the Skira Publishing house with Michael Krüger when it was for sale a few years ago, because I would very much have liked to make exquisite architectural books. Financially this is very difficult, so I published small books partly within my foundation.

HUO: Books on architecture?

OMU: Only books on architecture.

HUO: And what is the name of the publishing house?

OMU: It's Ungers Archive for Architectural Science, for short, Ungers Archive. So this activity – not as a publisher, which is a bit much – this literary activity to make books and all these things is really a particular passion.

HUO: And especially influential to this day for a young generation of architects and artists are these three volumes, Studiopress for Architecture. They were never properly “published” – they are virtually unrealized books. Could you tell me something about these books? The first is “Urban Block,” or *Gotham City*, which discusses the building block, the second topic is *The Urban Villa*, and the third, *The Urban Garden*.

OMU: Studiopress for Architecture was the name we hastily issued for the publishing house.

HUO: For your publishing house?

OMU: Yes, our private publishing house, so to speak. These three volumes are the results of three summer academies with international students. They are the result of collaborations with students in Berlin and in New York. They were published as a trilogy with a print run of – a luxury – 300 copies. We have only one copy left of each. There was a request to reprint them, but I did not want to because the authenticity would be forfeited – or one would need to republish all three of them.

HUO: The first volume discusses the block. In a sense, it had an encyclopedic quality.

OMU: Yes. The first volume is about the block, but it is in New York. The second is on the urban villa, which is in Berlin, and the third volume, on the garden, is also in Berlin. What we still want to publish within the foundation is the architectural congress we organized two years ago here in Cologne. Only the final proofreading needs to be done.

HUO: Could you tell me about the methodology for these three volumes? Rem has often said that he was very inspired by it for his own books. With this method you predefined a grid that could be varied to fill itself up.

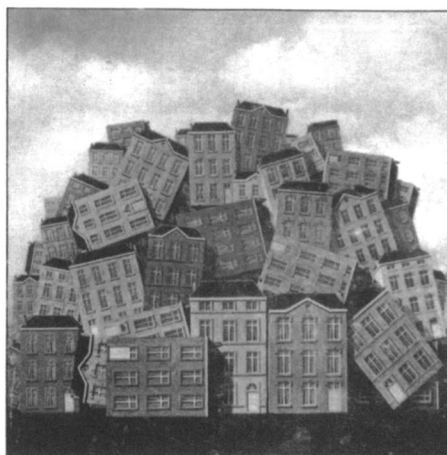
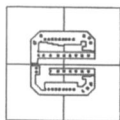
OMU: Yes, exactly.

HUO: Could you describe this method a bit more?

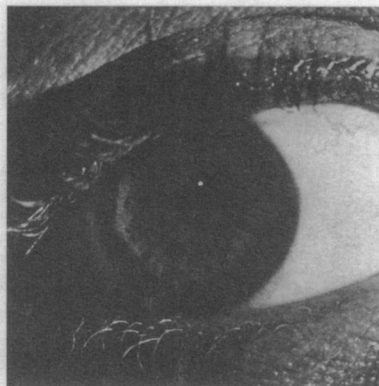
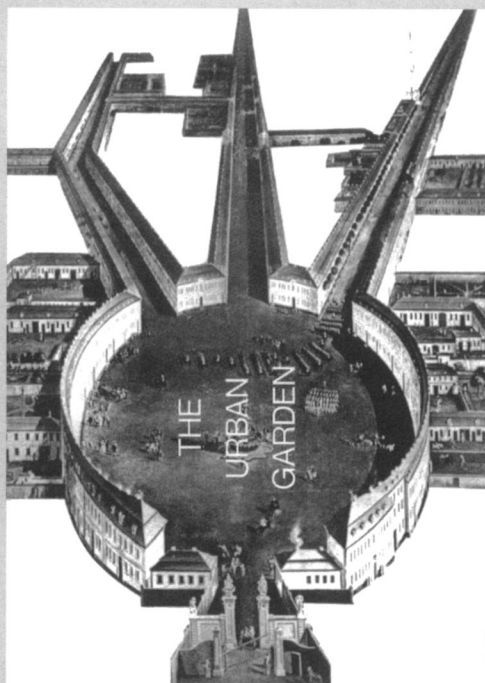
OMU: There was actually no particular method; it simply emerged from the material we dealt with. It was not to be seen as very professional but rather as more improvised. We simply wanted to present the material comprehensibly. And also present it straightforwardly, so not on high-gloss paper or in a special print or something, but rather as spontaneous and immediate. All these books have a spontaneous character.

HUO: So you used source materials that were simply available?

OMU: Exactly, material that is made available. We were also not professional bookmakers, but amateurs or enthusiasts of books and of the message one wants to convey.



## THE URBAN VILLA



O. M. Ungers  
Morphologie  
City Metaphors

Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König

"MANUALS" PRODUCED IN UNGERS' SUMMER SEMINARS: *GOTHAM CITY* (1976);  
*THE URBAN VILLA* (1977); AND *THE URBAN GARDEN* (1978). O.M. UNGERS,  
COVER OF *MORPHOLOGIE: CITY METAPHORS* (1982).

HUO: There is a very good text on these books by Pierluigi Nicolin in the book on your birthday.<sup>13</sup> It is also about this game with the machines. He describes these machines as a sort of production of disorder and also says that your books are almost design machines. Are these books machines?

OMU: Yes. Especially *The Urban Villa*, which contains an incredible variety of options in the architectural interpretation of a house. Of course it depends on the intuition and intelligence of the user, whether he is able to read them. The house is taken apart and made into elements, which is also subjective. The book shows what these elements are and how they can be brought back together again, into one house, into one whole. And perhaps Nicolin means this kind of thinking, to analyze things and isolate elements and then to reflect and to rejoin these elements in a different formation. This is like a design machine, if you will. I was always a bit afraid that it could be used incorrectly. One can say that the “design machine” can, as a practical instrument under certain circumstances, be quite useful for a little less intelligent person who wants to make changes. There is, of course, a danger in making manuals, because if the rules are not understood, it just leads to copies.

HUO: Such a misunderstanding.

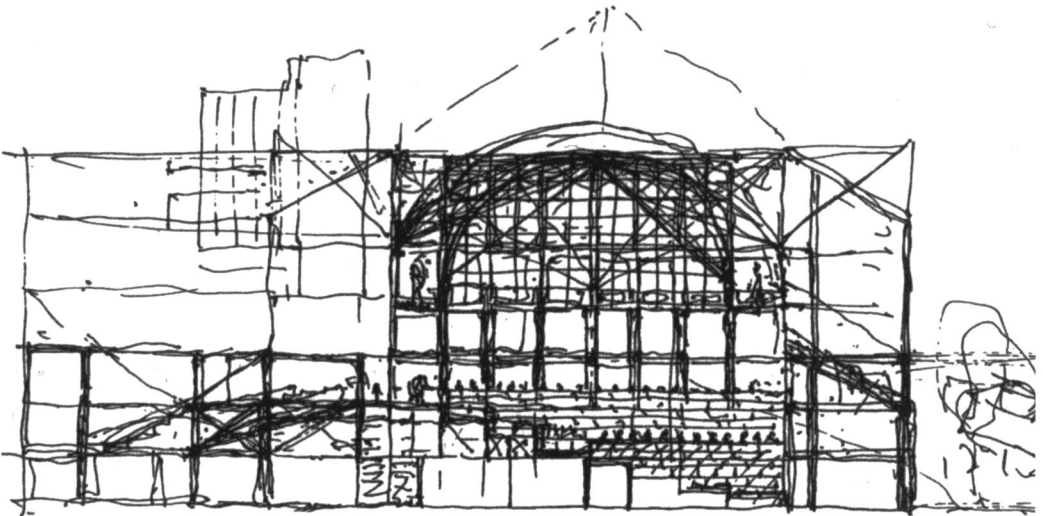
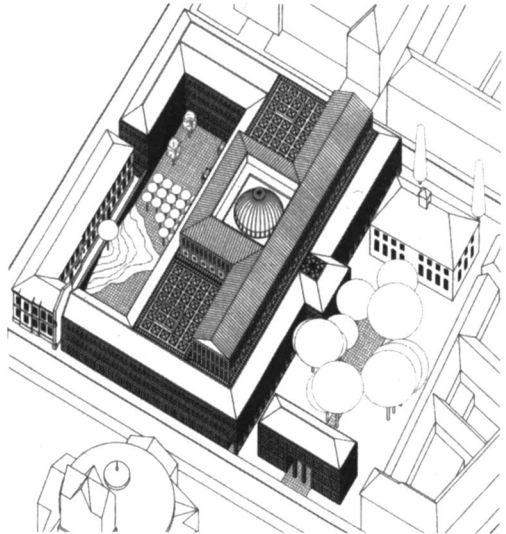
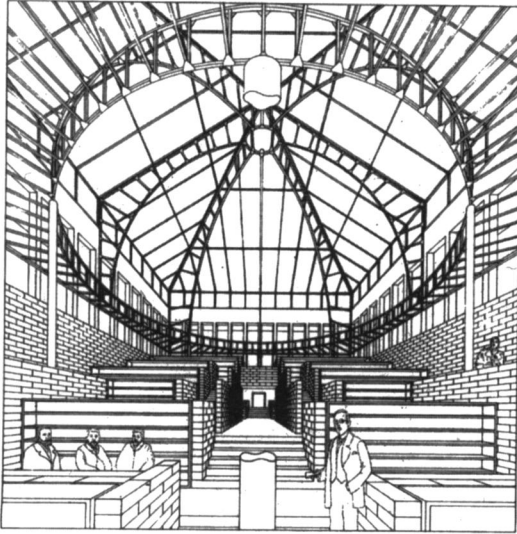
OMU: Yes, and that is why I was a little reluctant to publish them. Because it is just too tempting to think these things can be easily understood. Architects are often uncertain about what they should do when they are confronted with a task in which they have to assemble a collection of heterogeneous elements into a useful whole. This is not an easy process, and they are often unsure about what they are doing. They try it once, and if someone then shows them a method for it, they are naturally thankful and simply use it as a template. These should not be used as template books, but should stimulate a thinking process. I was not sure if this would work out, and therefore had my concerns about publishing this.

HUO: Nicolin also reacts to the references to *Collage City*, by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, and states that the dialectical city is your response.<sup>14</sup> But it is something quite different from *Collage City*.

OMU: Yes, it is. My dialectical city is not the collage city. The dialectical city, which is also in the [birthday] book, is a confrontation with the situation. Not in the sense of a simple black-and-white addition, and thus purely formal, as is the case with Rowe, but also real – a confrontation with reality as it is. This is much more important. I believe that in most cases this didn't matter to Colin. He saw that he had created a beautiful figure, which represented *La Bella Figura* – which, of course, is attractive – but he did not deal with the situation and did not ask himself what this situation could be if it were represented architecturally or artistically. And that is the difference.

13. Pierluigi Nicolin, “Kombinationskunst und Mythos,” in *Sichtweisen: Betrachtungen zum Werk von O. M. Ungers*, eds. Anja Sieber-Albers, Martin Kieren (Braunschweig/Wiesbaden: Friedr. Vieweg & Sohn, 1999). The “birthday book” is O.M. Ungers, *Was ich schon immer sagen wollte über die Stadt, wie man sich seine eigenen Häuser baut, und was andere über mich denken* (Braunschweig/Wiesbaden: Friedr. Vieweg & Sohn, 1999), itself a set of three books: O.M. Ungers, Stefan Vieths, *Die dialektische Stadt*, O.M. Ungers, *Aphorismen zum Häuserbauen*, and the aforementioned *Sichtweisen: Betrachtungen zum Werk von O.M. Ungers*.

14. See O.M. Ungers and Stefan Vieths, *The Dialectical City/La città dialettica* (Milan Skira, 1997) for English text.



O.M. UNGERS, BADISCHE LANDESBIBLIOTEK (STATE LIBRARY OF BADEN),  
KARLSRUHE, INTERIOR PERSPECTIVE, AXONOMETRIC, SECTION, 1980-87.

HUO: So a very fundamental difference.

OMU: The two are not comparable.

HUO: Another book of yours, *Morphologie*, is about city metaphors.<sup>15</sup> It is a picture book, one could say, a dialogue of pictures. I want to ask if you could tell me something more about it. It is almost like an artist's book.

OMU: It really is an artist's book. You can compare it with the work of Joseph Kosuth – the object, followed by the photograph of the object and its definition. In this book it is the object, the analogy – early in the book I write about thinking in analogies – and the concepts of sequence and doubling, To see the world in these concepts suddenly enables you to compare objects and to see the world in analogies – for example, the city can be seen as a web, so you show the web as an analogy and you show the concept. It is really an artist's book, comprehensible to anyone who is creative. After all, how else do you want to explain reality? You can explain it with facts, but when you want to describe it in metaphors or as thoughts, you are making use of analogy. That was my difficulty during my teaching in the US. I must say that in general Americans are not able to think analogically or see analogies, because for many of them things are what they are. If you were to say that one thing is not the same thing as another, but only analogous to it, they wouldn't understand it. It requires abstract thinking, and they must learn to recognize this abstract reality so that they can find analogies. And when they then find these analogies, they must be able to re-abstract them from reality, in order to use them in the ways they want.

HUO: And this could not to be conveyed to the Americans?

OMU: They did not allow it to be conveyed to them. They took everything for granted, so to speak. When I explained something about analogy, they then thought they understood. But when I then said no, that's not it, that's only an analogy to it, they did not know what I was talking about. And this book, *Morphologie*, is exactly about this issue. It is the most beautiful little book that I made. It is typographically wonderful and it has a lot of content. An artist understands the book. I think a normal viewer only sees superficial relationships and finds it quite nice, but may not see the substantive values of this book.

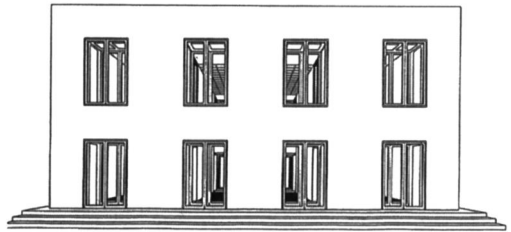
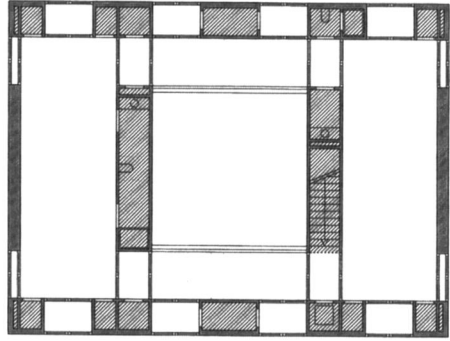
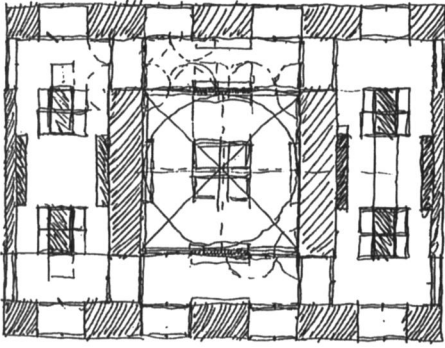
HUO: You published a book on interstitial spaces [*Zwischenräume*]<sup>16</sup> in which you talk about art in architecture and elements of architecture that are stored in art. I want to ask whether you could talk a little bit about architecture's dialogue with art.

OMU: Yes. I had exemplified this very strongly in the library at Karlsruhe with its three blocks: one is a normal street block, the other is the block of the house, and in-between is an open block with inserted objects. The objects that are inserted are partly architectural objects and partly art objects – and therein lies a progression. So I can, for example, place a tower house by Georg Herold there<sup>17</sup> and now the next thing is naturally a stele by Hubert Kiecol. Or you

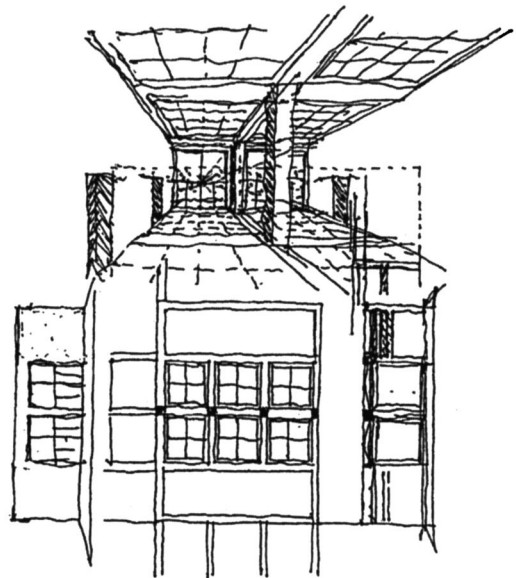
15. O.M. Ungers, *Morphologie – City Metaphors* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 1982).

16. See O.M. Ungers, *Zwischenräume* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1999).

17. Ungers is describing the art installed at the Badische Landesbibliothek in Karlsruhe (1980–91).



O.M. UNGERS, UNGERS HOUSE III (HAUS KÄMPCHENSWEG), COLOGNE, 1994–96.



have these walls – if you will – by Per Kirkeby here. Those are extensions of architecture into the art of architectural spaces or elements. I deliberately wanted this entire spectrum. Admittedly, I consider architecture as art, but it is still burdened by function. This entire spectrum only becomes clear when one combines it with art and complements this missing aspect in architecture partly through art.

HUO: So there is a complementary relationship.

OMU: Exactly. These are all laboratory experiments – including this [Kämpchensweg] house. I can show you the sketches. I wanted to see to what extent architecture would be capable of being abstract. The problem with art is that abstraction in art is possible up to monochromy, where the picture is, in a way, the background for reality but no longer depicts it. I have asked myself whether architecture would be capable of achieving this degree of abstraction. Therefore, there is no ornament on this house, no details – or as little as possible – no top and no bottom. Even the material is already so dematerialized that nothing is left. If I had used brick or if I had used stone, it would tell a story and immediately appear to be metaphorical. You must also see this in relation to Samuel Beckett, who had a great influence on me. I want to create an exhibition in 2006 in the New National Gallery in Berlin with the title: “And still no more.” That was the German title of Beckett’s small story, “Stirrings Still.”<sup>18</sup> I do not know if you are aware of the radio plays by Beckett or the television plays with the square,<sup>19</sup> where he no longer has an adjectival relationship, no metaphors, no graphic quality. Nothing is left but the movement of four characters within a specified field. Obviously this is a very dangerous matter, since you are suddenly working on something that no longer represents anything. Francesco Dal Co understood this with his “casa sine qualita,” or the house without qualities.<sup>20</sup> I found that very sympathetic. The house no longer has properties: it has no top; it has no bottom; it has no base, and it has no cornice. It has nothing. All that one could associate with “house” was removed.

HUO: Everything was subtracted.

OMU: Subtracted to the absolute core. The essence, I believe, the most extreme form of abstraction – nothing can go further. Kollhoff saw this and said, “What do you want to still leave for us, what should we still do?” It was really an experiment. I talked for a long time about this with my son Simon. I believe that many of my laboratory architecture and art experiments actually do live from failure, from the inability to achieve what one believes one wants to accomplish. And that is also the case here. I then came to the conclusion that architecture may not, after all, be able to achieve abstraction.

HUO: That is a very extreme experiment.

OMU: Exactly. And that is what has fascinated me. But at the end you do, after all, need an entrance, and then you have another differentiation. What painting creates, the monochrome

18. Samuel Beckett, “Stirrings Still” (1988). The title of the exhibition in 2006 was “Kosmos der Architektur.” Beckett’s original title, “Stirrings Still,” was translated into German as “Immer noch nicht mehr,” which roughly equals “And still no more.”

19. Ungers is referring to a “performance” produced for the public German television network “Süddeutscher Rundfunk” in 1981. See: [www.mediaartnet.org/works/quadrat/video/1/](http://www.mediaartnet.org/works/quadrat/video/1/)

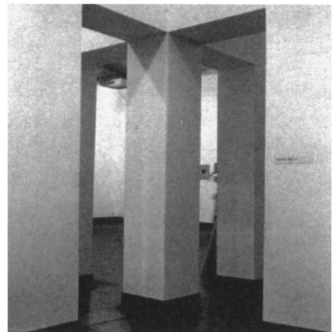
20. See Francesco Dal Co, “OM Ungers, Schinkel als Erzierher,” *Casabella* 635 (June 1996).



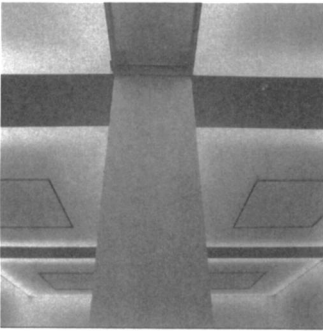
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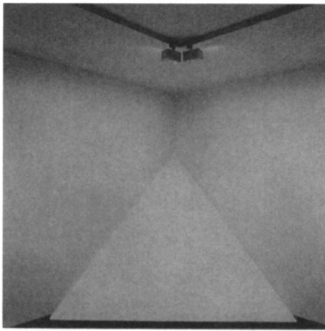
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Raumverbindung



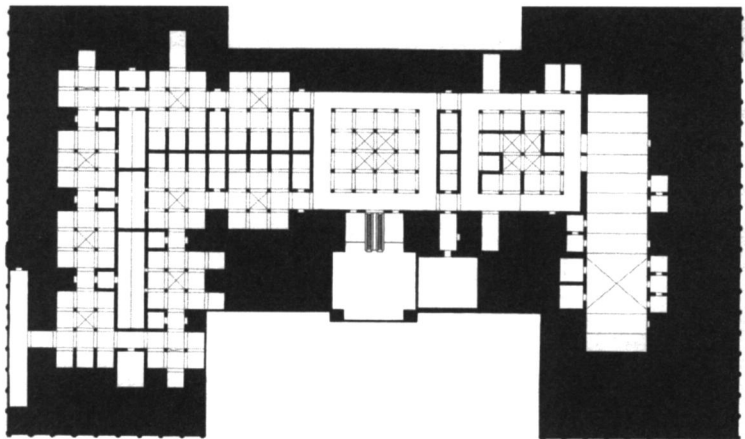
Stütze im Raumraster



Raumecke mit Objekt



Ausstellungsobjekt vor Stütze



O.M. UNGERS ET AL., TEMPORARY MUSEUM, WESTKUNST EXHIBITION, AND PLAN FOR ITS INSTALLATION IN COLOGNE TRADE FAIR HALL, 1981.

image, the highest degree of abstraction, has obviously been denied in architecture – I am talking now of architecture as art.

HUO: So something that, for example, Gerhard Richter is doing with his gray paintings.

OMU: Exactly. We are good friends.

HUO: I have worked with Richter a lot. And he always told me that there exists a close dialogue between you and him.

OMU: Yes, a very close dialogue. He always tries to break away from it [abstraction] – I find that quite interesting – by creating these motifs, finely painted pictures of landscapes and such, or these colorful things. He does not stay at the highest degree of abstraction. We worked together on these wonderful gray walls in the Hypo-Bank in Düsseldorf. And he also now has these glass works, which he made available to a museum. He is striving to achieve a complete abstraction no longer related to the spectator – not even in the way that Barnett Newman does, where the spectator should step into the picture and become part of the image. One can no longer enter into the picture because it only reflects and declines entry. These experiments are difficult to describe, but they exist and are the background of what is part of the process. Therefore, one must take this seriously. I am always very sad when people do not take this seriously. For me, it is a very personal confrontation with important questions about the possibility of architecture achieving abstraction. I believed that I could achieve this through a complete elimination of any narrative or metaphor. But still there remains a top and bottom. That cannot be removed.

HUO: You curated exhibitions and you also did exhibition design. Could you talk more about this work?

OMU: One of the most beautiful exhibitions we made was “Westkunst.”

HUO: Yes, one of the most influential.

OMU: I worked together with Kasper König and with Laszlo Glozer. It was one of the most strenuous processes, as no meetings – they always took place in the room in which we were sitting today, which was then still the library – ever ended without someone leaving the room in protest. And there is now in the König book a very nice diagram by Glozer, where he shows the structure of the exhibition.<sup>21</sup> As long as art is still part of history, such as Magritte, Expressionism and so on, it is quite clear, but then it becomes more and more confusing, and in the end it is a lump of things. We wanted to show this. When you look at the exhibition with this notion, the first rooms for the early modern work, which can be clearly identified, are simple cabinet rooms, clear exhibition spaces. The middle section, where the movements begin to become uncertain, are open spaces, like a space by Mies or Frank Lloyd Wright or something similar. And the last section, where the confusion is complete, is simply a large

21. Ungers is referring to *Kasper König zum 60. Geburtstag, 21. November 2003*, eds. Thomas Weski, Ulrich Wilmes, and Walther König (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2003). The diagram reprinted there is part of OMU's contribution, “Die Ausstellung ‘Westkunst’ (1981).”

hall in which everything is placed.

HUO: That was the display.

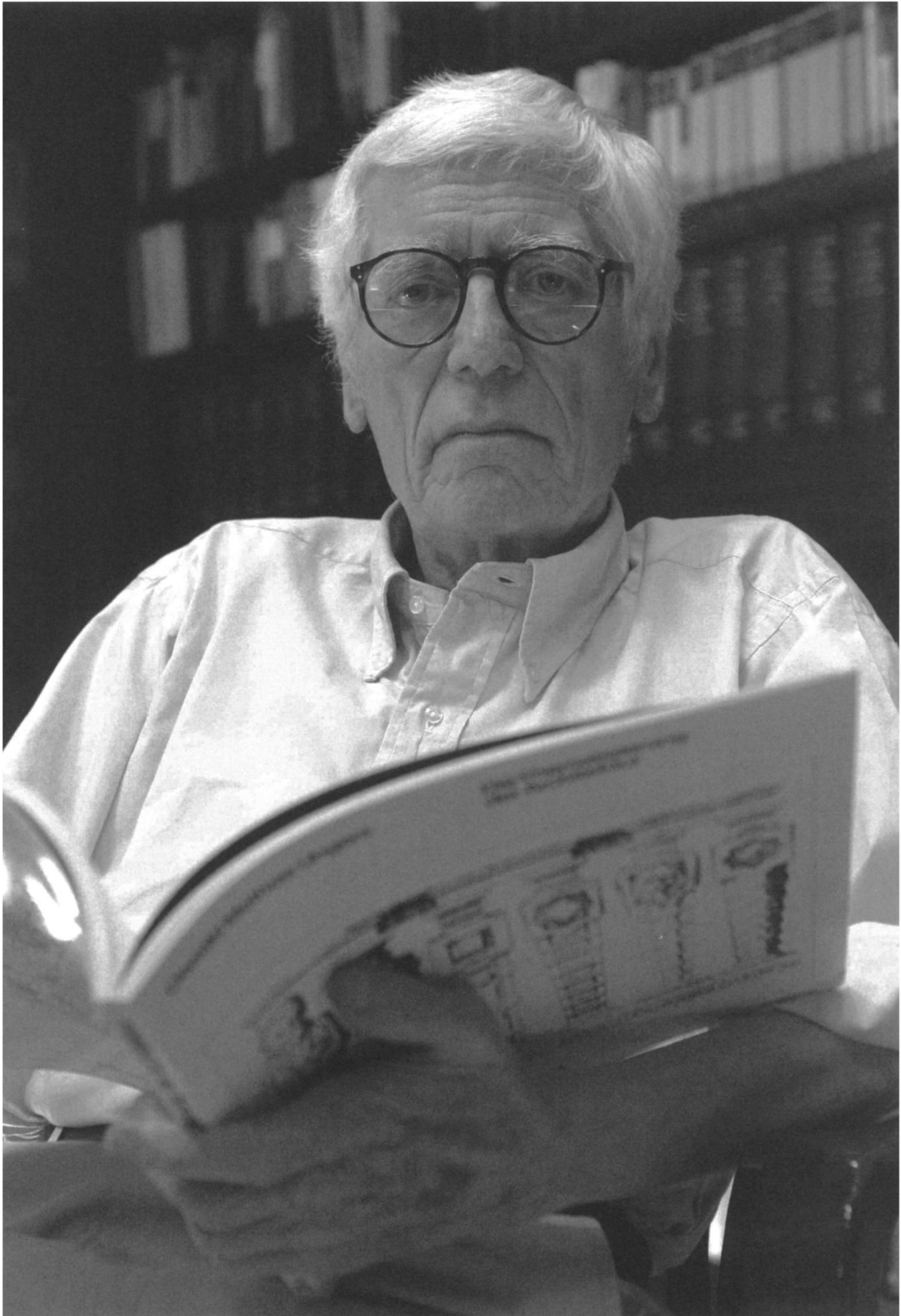
OMU: That was my architectural answer to the exhibition concept. And this argument, which I spoke of, where someone always left the room and slammed the door, was, of course, not malicious, as he always came back. You can see that a struggle for these things took place. That was really a strain, but it was highly interesting. It was a Sunday and König was still unsure and wanted to knock everything over again when Richter joined in. And I will be forever grateful to him for this. It was a large gathering: König, Glozer, and so on. König asked Richter what he thought of it, and Gerhard said – he is very sparing with words – “I think it’s great. I find it quite wonderful. Such a splendid concept. Still corresponds to what is desired.” And from then on everything went well. There were other problems – the budget was exceeded and such things. But it was one of the most beautiful experiences and exhibitions.

HUO: Do you have any final statement for today’s interview?

OMU: I am not a collector, but I see the things structurally. Not art-historically correct. Things are structurally comparable to me, regardless of the era they are from.

HUO: So like Aby Warburg, in some way.

OMU: Exactly, like Warburg, or also like André Malraux, with his “Musée Imaginaire,” in which things are not sorted art historically, stylistically or in work groups. For me, the things are really structurally comparable, because they are part also of my thinking in my work. And that is why they are there. I am not a collector of antiquity, just as I am not a Modern collector. Of course, when I occupy myself with abstraction I cannot resist. I purchased myself a Mondrian for an insane amount of money, which, by the way, belonged to Mart Stam. That was fabulous.



OSWALD MATHIAS UNGERS IN COLOGNE, 2006.