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Author(s): André Bideau

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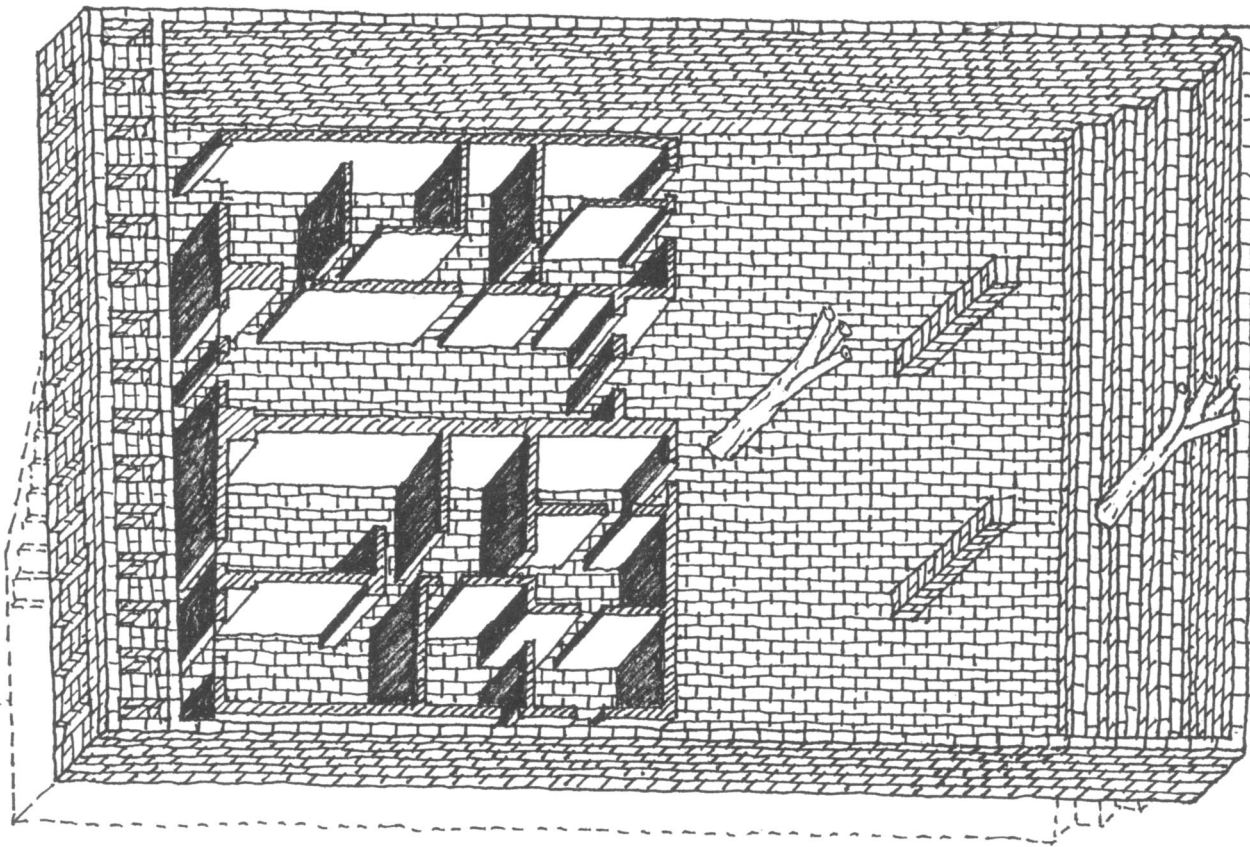


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Elusive Ungers

André Bideau



OM Ungers, German Architecture Museum, Frankfurt
Conceptual sketch, c 1979
© Deutsches Architektur Museum, Frankfurt

Rainer Werner Fassbinder is not typically regarded as an 'architect's director', a moniker lent more readily to Wim Wenders, his contemporary in the New German Cinema of the 1970s. In marked contrast to the spaces that Wenders so often celebrates in his films, Fassbinder's own characteristically intimate filmic language appears to advertise the very antithesis of cinematic spatiality. Instead, his work offers insights into contemporary Germany, and typically exposes the thin veneer over the trauma of the country's recent past. Like many of his generation, Fassbinder was politicised by a belief that West Germany had only superficially broken with its authoritarian traditions. For him, the postwar consensus and economic miracle were premised on a collective amnesia after Nazism, an argument that formed the cornerstone of a number of his films, notably *Veronika Voss* from 1982. Set in mid-1950s Munich, the film follows the fortunes of a faded Third Reich movie star as she struggles to make her comeback. What architecture there is centres around a ghostly interior where a doctor supplies affluent patients, among them Voss, with morphine and other sedatives. On entering the elegant interior, visitors are immersed in a world of blinding whiteness, with a partially glazed long corridor reflecting and filtering views, while bedrooms reveal themselves as minimalist cells. Cut off from the city and turned in on itself, *Veronika Voss* shows us a semi-domestic space of control – a sensibility heightened by the cinematography, which pans through the layers of the set, visualising an architectural modernity, but one lethally overdosed on its own manipulated, stylised whiteness.

Fassbinder was the ultimate auteur, illustrating social and emotional pathologies of repression from a post-1968 vantage point. As in the theatre, for which he also wrote and directed, his unique style of abstraction drew most of its strength from the qualities of a small troupe of actors who he repeatedly cast in his productions. Exhibiting the opposite of method acting, their particular stylisation was indebted to the revolutionary aesthetic of Bertold Brecht, whose own theatrical work looked always to strip performance of any sense of familiarity. This abstraction as *Verfremdung* – literally, rendering an object foreign – forms a powerful tradition in Germany, especially in architecture where it encompasses links between neo-classicism and modernism, bookended by the anti-naturalist vein of Karl Friedrich Schinkel and of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. In the work of Oswald Mathias Ungers (1926–2007) *Verfremdung* surfaces as a very specific and controversial legacy. But in the recent excitement generated by his ideas for West Berlin – and principally by the Green Archipelago – the overall context in which Ungers' long career evolved has been obscured, if not distorted.

Typical of a generation of architects active in postwar Germany, the bulk of Ungers' early work was made up of housing, with his initial projects in war-ravaged Cologne leading to ever larger-scale commissions, culminating in Berlin's Märkisches Viertel (1962–67). This vast housing estate would become a national scapegoat in the controversies surrounding public housing – a painful experience for Ungers, who presented himself as the victim of the demonisation of architecture by society and withdrew from any form of building practice for ten years. This absence proved to be pivotal in the development of a new type of architect, expert at fending off any form of criticism, and by the time Ungers resurfaced in the second half of the 1970s, a segment of the profession saw him as an alternative role model. To disenchanted practitioners who perceived themselves as hostages of an Orwellian welfare state and a pseudo-enlightened building industry, Ungers' 'humanist' professionalism and theoretical rigour appeared as inspirational architectural qualities.

With his subsequent shift away from public housing, Ungers evolved into a charismatic proponent of an intellectualised and increasingly mediated architectural discourse. In ways similar to independent German cinema, his architecture came to be defined by forms of its own self-reflection, commenting always on the state of the discipline and on its perception. And as with Fassbinder, the stark scenography of Ungers' later work cannot be subtracted from the political trauma and social fissures affecting Germany throughout much of the twentieth century. But whereas the post-modern noir of *Veronika Voss* is ripe with references to the traditions of German cinema before and after 1945, Ungers is indebted to a wider aesthetic lineage that ranges from the Renaissance to neo-classicism.

For Ungers, the breadth of this historicism, alongside the imperative to reflect on architecture's tradition, found its natural expression in 1979 with the commission to design the German Architecture Museum in Frankfurt – a building that when completed in 1984 represented the first institution of its kind. An early sketch of the proposal illustrated Ungers' idea of encasing and elevating the products of the discipline to the revered status of artefacts on a plinth. The commission came from the museum's director Heinrich Klotz, who was committed to restoring architecture's 'fictionalisation' (a key term for the inaugural 1984 show, 'Die Revision der Moderne: Postmoderne Architektur 1960–80',

OM Ungers, Tiergarten competition,
Berlin 1973/74
Zone of six block units immersed
in pre-war fragments
© Deutsches Architektur Museum, Frankfurt

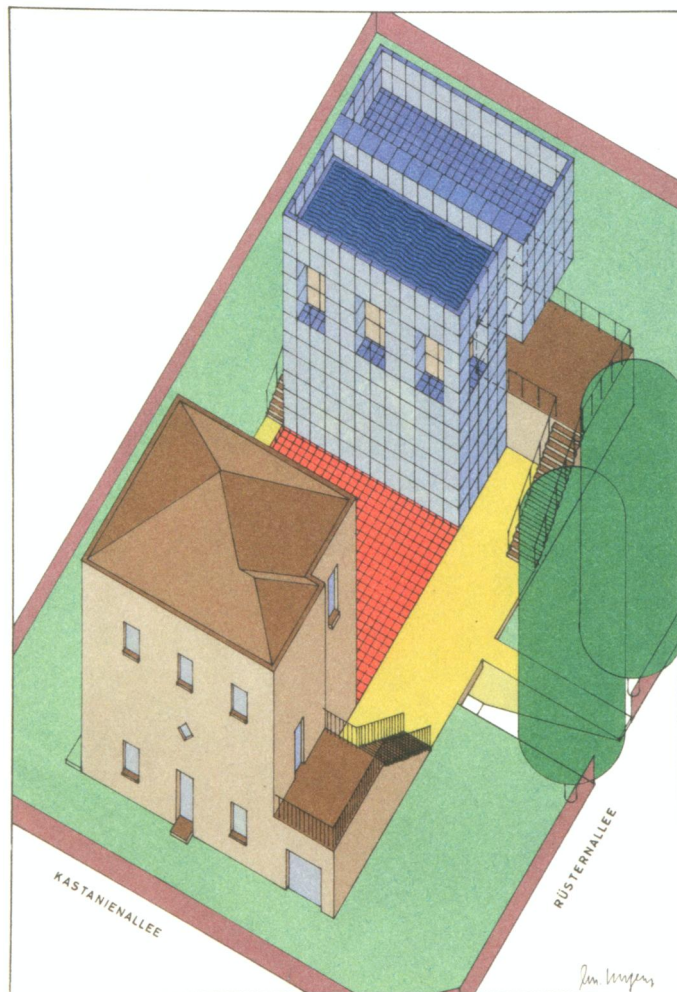
which presented a largely international polemic and stirred up some controversy both among the German public and the professional establishment). The narrative and artifice implicit in this term was seized upon by Ungers in his own use of the term 'architecture as architecture' – something he interpreted literally by exaggerating the fact that the new museum was to occupy the shell of a pre-existing neo-classical townhouse dating from 1912. Within this shell Ungers constructed an alternative exterior – an inner, external world of streets and squares built around the design's didactic culmination point, his notorious House within the House. Here, architecture's genesis moment, the Abbé Laugier's primitive hut, is updated into a kind of stereometric abstraction that spans all five floors of the townhouse. As the core of the museum, architecture is thus enshrined in a primordial representation of itself, confronting the public with a set of rigorous, formal and highly intellectualised positions.

By the time of this Frankfurt commission Ungers was convinced that only the articulation of autonomous 'themes' could make significant contributions to the field of architecture. Yet his House within the House was more than an empty sign. As an emblem of shelter it offered not only an acknowledgement of the conflict that Ungers experienced after his shipwreck as a designer of mass housing, but a prop for architecture's disciplinary truth, suspended within the core of a gutted building. In self-reflexive anguish, the abstract, primitive hut, stripped of all material and atmospheric presence, denotes nothing other than architecture, or rather Ungers' own authorial vision of how an 'architecture as architecture' should appear.

Distilled into a minimalist module, this architectural stage in Frankfurt nevertheless testifies to an ongoing interest in archetypal spatial configurations. Similarly, at Märkisches Viertel, the endless repetition of clusters can be understood as an exercise in group form, a variation on a theme, with the plan of the building blocks developed as an organic aggregation of cellular modules – a typology that underpins all of Ungers' work. However, this design strategy was poorly suited to the increase in height that Märkisches Viertel underwent at the insistence of the Berlin housing authority, and Ungers was unable to prevent modifications that transformed clusters into forbidding 16-storey walls. Compounding the pressures he was experiencing at his office, teaching also became increasingly tenuous in this period. A professor at West Berlin's Technische Universität (TU), Ungers was dean of the school of architecture during the tumultuous year of 1967. On 2 June of that year, during protests against the Shah of Iran's visit to the city, a student, Benno Ohnesorg, was shot dead by a police officer, triggering a massive wave of



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demonstrations in German universities. At the TU, Ungers attempted to mediate with the protestors, even offering the outraged and increasingly radicalised students the use of his university office for printing their posters and pamphlets. Inevitably, despite his efforts, he was still seen as a representative of the establishment.

As a dean at the TU, Ungers' goal had been to establish a chair of architecture theory – then tantamount to a disenfranchisement of architecture history. To this end, a symposium was hosted in late 1967 featuring guest appearances by Friedrich Achleitner, Reyner Banham, Peter Blake, Lucius Burckhardt, André Corboz, Kenneth Frampton, Sigfried Giedion, Colin Rowe and Eduard Sekler. Despite this stellar cast of characters the symposium descended into chaos as students – whose increasing wariness of 'design' had long troubled Ungers – interrupted proceedings with chants of 'hört auf zu bauen!' ('stop building!').¹ Combined with his troubles with the Märkisches Viertel, this incident was the final prompt he needed to consider a change of scene. Soon after the symposium Ungers accepted an invitation from Rowe to leave Germany and teach a studio at Cornell University. He got out just in time, for increasing student discontent would provoke stringent structural reforms at the TU. These resulted in the dilution of the school as an academic entity and instead its remodelling into new departments of social and planning sciences, environmental sciences, and construction and fabrication technology.

However, as dramatic as this departure from Berlin seemed, in retrospect Ungers' disconnect from Germany was less abrupt than the stories and rumours made it appear. Intrigue and gossip, partly fuelled by Ungers and his chroniclers, have shrouded Ungers' years in the US in a certain air of mystery, despite the seeming drama of his departure from Berlin.² And although he would build nothing for a decade, these transitional years did see the development of a series of conceptual strategies that revealed links between the cluster typologies of the 1960s and his later neo-rationalism. One reason for this continuity was the simple fact that Ungers never entirely abandoned aspirations of relaunching his practice in Germany (as shown not least by a design for an extension to his Berlin home in 1973). Nor did he fully sever his ties to the TU, despite his successes at Cornell, where he was regarded as an influential teacher and deft administrator, serving as chair of the department from 1969 to 1975.

In the early years of this period, Ungers' design courses at Cornell were run in tandem with parallel studios at the TU. The briefs he set for his students required a direct response not to any abstracted architectural enquiry, but to the very real economic and political situation in Germany at that time, with the 1969 government

looking to usher in a phase of co-ordinated industry, infrastructure and housing. Ironically, for practitioners such as Ungers this served as a rallying call, and his identification with enlightened entrepreneurship and a kind of Keynesian technocracy is still clearly apparent in his first Cornell–TU studios. Much to the displeasure of Rowe, who later claimed that inviting Ungers to teach at Cornell was 'the silliest thing I ever did', Ungers delved ever deeper into hyper-functionalism and prefabrication.³ His US research and ongoing Berlin studios fed a series of publications produced by his staff at the TU, the most radical of which was *Berlin 1995* – a scenario initiated in 1969 for a reunified future metropolis.⁴ Grounded in notions of limitless growth reminiscent of the work of systems architect Fritz Haller, this studio developed a service infrastructure on a territorial scale. While relegating the architectural object to mass consumption, the student projects put forward in *Berlin 1995* nevertheless broke with mega-structuralist ideology by contaminating the quasi-Jeffersonian supergrid with local insertions of historic monuments, truncated infrastructures and morphological fragments, all drawn from Berlin's decomposing urban fabric.

From the time of his own academic initiation to Berlin, with his appointment to the TU in 1963, Ungers had engaged with a history of ideas and a number of constructed architectural encounters. Chief among these was the at first covert and then, from the mid-1970s, explicit introduction of Schinkel as a key figure (and foil) for his projections of an urban landscape. For Ungers the most productive aspect of Schinkel's designs were the stylised, scenographic visions he provided for the Prussian capital, which Ungers revisited time and again as embryonic of the modernity of the city before 1840. Schinkel, who was just as active as a landscape painter and set designer as he was an architect, was especially predisposed towards presenting architectural artefacts like set pieces on a stage – something clearly apparent in his ensemble for the Altes Museum, royal palace and gardens and grand axis of Unter den Linden. Equally pivotal for Ungers were Schinkel's picturesque groupings of monumental public buildings and royal residences between Berlin and Potsdam, set largely within the bucolic landscape along Lake Havel. Working with the landscape architect Peter Joseph Lenné and an inspired crown prince – the future Friedrich Wilhelm IV – Schinkel provided an early conceptualisation of urban landscape in these paintings.

These romantic visions can be seen as one source for Ungers' own Green Archipelago of 1977 – the scheme that famously responded to

the depopulation of Berlin by reimagining the city as made up of dense islands adrift in an enveloping urban sea. But following Schinkel, the marine metaphors used to describe and define this project could just as easily be replaced with the theatrical – with architectural props on an urban stage. Yet another reading could see the forms Ungers produced as merely an assemblage of abstract, stereometric fragments, responding not to a bucolic or picturesque landscape but to Berlin's rise as the industrial capital of an emerging nation-state. In this sense, Ungers was drawing on two distinct Berlins – the noble, regal capital via Schinkel, and an uglier, more prosaic city of generic housing tenements. This less celebratory side of the city had been heavily criticised by Werner Hegeman in his influential 1930 book, *Steinernes Berlin*, which described a city largely composed of notorious tenements or *Mietskasernen*, literally 'rental barracks', the etymology making the association between the containment of the working class and the wholesale militarisation of the Prussian state.⁵

During the rash of speculation that swept Berlin after it became the capital of a unified Germany in 1871, the *Mietskasernen* had been deployed on a loose, wide-spaced grid, reflecting the growing authority of local building codes which prescribed uniform building heights and a minimum number of lightwells.⁶ For postwar urban planners, the elimination of the *Mietskasernen*, already decimated by the war, became the shared project vital to all strategies for urban renewal. The reversal that would eventually lead to them being seen as the hallmark of West Berlin's battered identity was in many ways the result of developments to which Ungers' teaching and work had long been tied.

The generic fabric of the imperial metropolis was therefore increasingly rediscovered as the anonymous counterpoint to the legacy of Schinkel and his disciples, part of a universal reappraisal of a period that had earlier been discredited by the proponents of the *Neues Bauen*. With the increased awareness of this other Berlin, what survived of the tenement and bourgeois housing stock began to embody a form of urban memory – a recognition of a collective consciousness that manifested itself in academic and design research. For example, the architectural historian Jonas Geist published the first volume of his vast, three-volume history of the Berlin tenement block, *Das Berliner Mietshaus*, in 1980, just one year after Josef Paul Kleihues and Hardt-Walther Hämer initiated the Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin (IBA Berlin) exhibition and urban preservation project.⁷

Ungers' own interest in the flotsam of the historic city – such as the incorporation of fragments into the supergrid of *Berlin 1995* – was neither systematic nor especially scientific. Rather, it was evidence of a desire

OM Ungers, addition to Ungers'
Berlin residence, 1973
© Deutsches Architektur Museum, Frankfurt

to conceptually appropriate elements of a differentiated urban landscape that can be traced back as far as his 1962 Grünzug Süd masterplan for Cologne. This architectural curiosity in turn led to one of the most surprising documents in Ungers' architectural evolution, a combined photographic and cartographic survey of the matrix of the nineteenth-century tenement city. Published by the TU in 1969, *Berlin Party Walls* presents an urban taxonomy based on random acts of destruction – when one building is knocked down, it has a jarring effect on the others around it, exposing individual property and making graphically visible the depth of Berlin's *Mietskasernen*. In the survey this sudden exposure is largely presented through grainy photographic spreads of accidental, windowless elevations. Aligned with cadastral plans, the images in the booklet document the economic reality underpinning the nineteenth-century urban texture, and in a premonition of Gordon Matta Clark or Rachel Whiteread, a formerly hidden layer of information affords x-ray views of the structural logic behind the often violent processes of urbanisation. Seen as another instance of modular group form, however, *Berlin Party Walls* appears to be not so much a disavowal as a continuation of a narrative of metamorphosis that underpins all of Ungers' work – and in particular the endless repetition of cluster configurations at Märkisches Viertel. In this regard, *Berlin Party Walls* fits into his broader quest for an overarching structural grammar, mining fragmented neighbourhoods for their random yet iconographic qualities.

This 'as found' perspective was somewhat indebted to Team Ten, with whom Ungers had maintained an informal but ongoing relationship (an unusual kinship for an architect in postwar Germany). Evidence of Ungers' mediating role can be found in the publication of the 1965 Team Ten meeting in Berlin within his TU series. Later, the Smithsons would guest-edit another issue on Mies, also in the same series, before they were themselves invited to teach at Cornell. However, the emphasis on morphology also points to a significant difference between *Berlin Party Walls* and Team Ten's forays into 'urban re-identification'. Ungers' interest, in contrast to the Smithsons', lay in the systematisation of 'pure' form – a strategy already apparent in the visual presentation of his study, in which the components of a neglected fabric, like a kit of parts, are subjugated to a detailed, analytical reconfiguration.

The survey also offers an implicit critique of the industrialised methods that had engulfed Ungers' own practice in Märkisches Viertel. Ungers was at this point investigating building systems at Cornell, and did not prepare the *Party Walls* publication himself.⁸ Nevertheless, its visual strategy appeared to announce the

scenographic 'turn' that would soon consume his work, most notably with the rear extension of his Berlin home, which was presented as the phantom of an existing structure. But, equally, it could be construed as a response to other contemporary artists, for instance Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* of 1966 or Dan Graham's *Homes for America* of 1965, both of which developed their own poignant and graphically charged commentaries on the side-effects of contemporary consumption and urbanisation. Ungers was an avid collector of art, and it seems highly unlikely that he would have been unaware of these works. Rather than Ruscha or Graham, however, *Berlin Party Walls* is most akin to the sensibility of photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher (Ungers' daughter Sophia remembers their works being in her parents' collection). By the time of the publication of Ungers' own party walls study in 1969 the Bechers had already emerged as a new voice in German photography through their taxonomy of industrial architecture: gasometers, mine heads and water towers, all meticulously photographed in flattened black and white. The Bechers' potent narrative of an everyday architectural vernacular finds a counterpart in Ungers' documentation of the accidental sculptures of Berlin's depressed real estate. And as with the Bechers' photographs, the force of repetition in *Berlin Party Walls* objectifies the nineteenth-century tenement, turning it into a kind of typological prop. Sculpturally isolated in the thinned and barren urban landscape, speculative architecture is suddenly endowed with an abstract, almost artistic aura.⁹

Thus, for Ungers, affirming, mapping and effectively staging the mutilated condition of the postwar city became crucial for the definition of an urbanism that was no longer predicated on quantitative growth, but was increasingly defined by the distribution of symbols. From that point on the idea of celebrating the contested ground of the city as 'void' would become the centrepiece of his urban agenda. It was also the main point of difference in relation to Rowe. Where *Collage City* relies on physical cohesion and a degree of artifice reminiscent of Camillo Sitte, articulating urban fabric as an interlocking mass of *poché* and history as a morphological womb, *Berlin Party Walls* and the Green Archipelago expose a reality of depletion and shrinkage. After the twofold scarring of war and postwar urban renewal, Ungers envisioned a city of fragments in which only the constellation of lost objects was formalised.

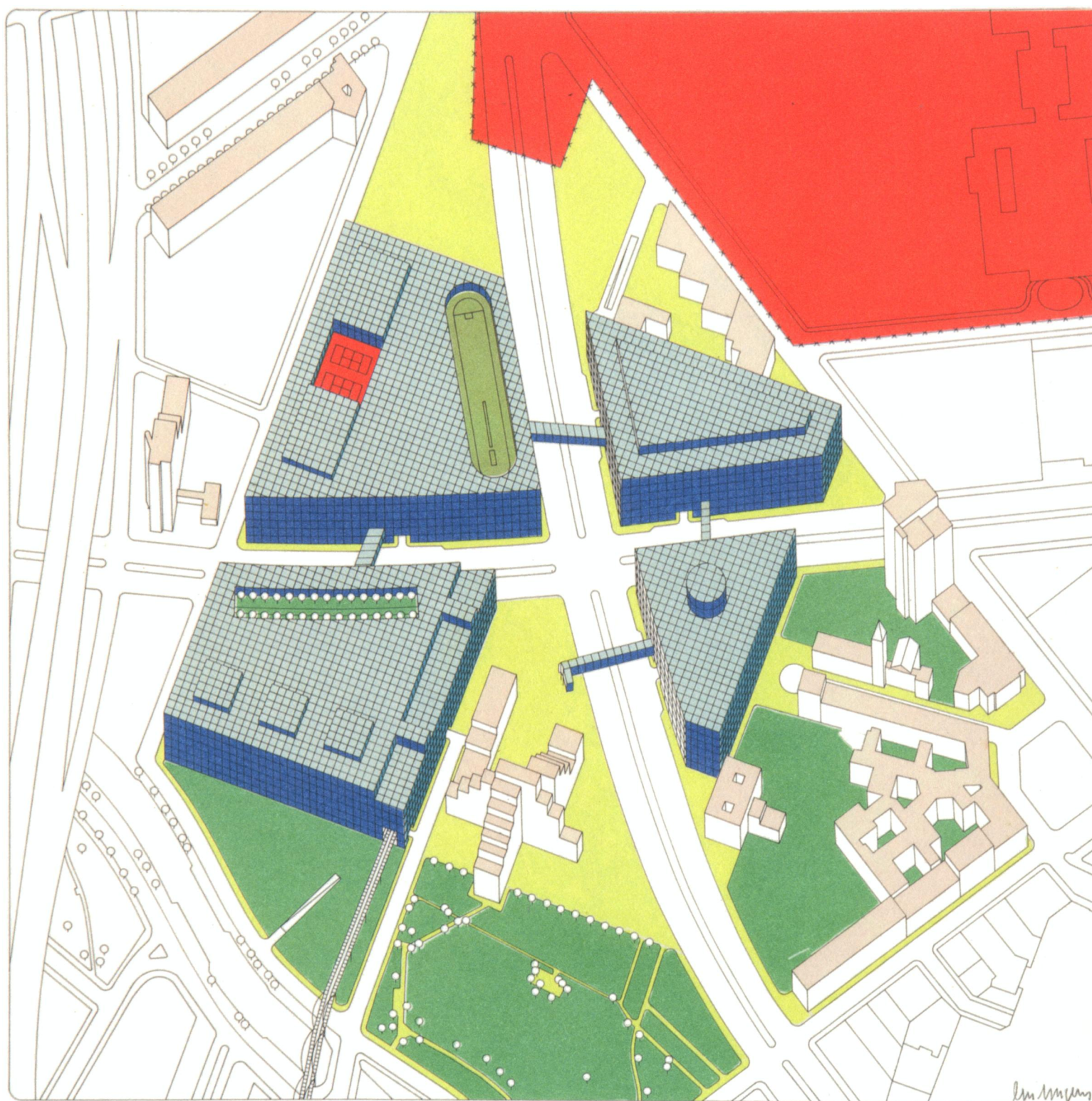
As a strategy for urban retrofit the Green Archipelago was also indebted to a particular

OM Ungers, Tiergarten competition,
Berlin 1973/74
Cross-block south of the former Potsdamer Platz
© Deutsches Architektur Museum, Frankfurt

genius loci that had miraculously remained intact in Berlin's abundance of parks, boulevards and waterways – a verdant infrastructure that reached back to the visions of Schinkel and Lenné. Paradoxically, it is here that Ungers seems also to have engaged with the concept of landscape propagated by another of his Berlin forebears, Hans Scharoun, whose romantic architectural organicism was as influential as it was destructive in the reconstruction of West Berlin. Ungers updated Scharoun's narrative of urban landscape by projecting his own 'green' architectural vision onto the sprawling city, responding to contemporary ecological sensitivities and to a call for participatory design – both seen as highly desirable qualities for German architects eager to relaunch their practices in the mid-1970s.¹⁰ Taking into account the social and economic realities of a de-industrialising city, the Green Archipelago envisioned a landscape of differences: it was no coincidence that when first presenting their scheme for West Berlin in 1977, Ungers and his Cornell assistants spoke of 'Cities within the City', with the more metaphorical 'Archipelago' serving only as a subtitle. While abandoning the notion of modernist spatial continuity, they introduced a concept of community and neighbourhood, recasting the depleted and divided city as a kind of petri dish of singularity and identity.

As a design strategy for Berlin the Green Archipelago takes disjuncture as a premise to reveal competing episodes of modernity. These range from working-class tenements, factories, institutional buildings and infrastructural fragments, to the landmarks built by Schinkel, Scharoun and Mies. As part of this appropriation, Ungers also incorporated fortresses of the welfare state, such as Märkisches Viertel – acknowledging that his own work had itself become a chapter in the troubled history of the city. All of these elements – the heroic and the everyday, the fragmentary and the ecological, the anonymous and the self-referential – came together as a compacted series of backdrops for a ground-breaking proposal by Ungers in 1973, prompted by a competition that invited architects to speculate on the fringes of Berlin's Tiergarten and the nearby Potsdamer Platz.

For Ungers, the *terrain vague* adjacent to the Berlin Wall was a site of clashing historical layers, with each stratum representing, in turn, the imperial city, the metropolis of the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich and the Cold War. Formerly a prestigious neighbourhood, comparable to London's Kensington Gardens, this heavily bombed area was further marginalised after 1961 when all physical ties to the defunct city centre, now in East Berlin, were severed. Disconnected from the rest of the city, the buildings that remained – a scattering of affluent residences, embassies and various institutions



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of the former Reich – exemplified the torn identity of postwar Germany just as readily as the more obviously symbolic Wall. As a result, even in a city as divided as 1970s Berlin, this particular site seemed to exist in denial of both the idea of the centre and that of the periphery, a confusion that left stranded the prestigious artefacts of Scharoun's Philharmonie and Mies's National Gallery – buildings that were commissioned to help establish a new cultural forum in West Berlin after the construction of the Wall in 1961. The aim of the Tiergarten competition was not only to explore ideas to resolve this isolation and to integrate the forum into West Berlin's central business district, but also to coordinate the development and renewal of the nondescript swath of land in between. Such an ambition itself represented a turning point towards a kind of political normalisation – a *détente* negotiated on the western side by chancellor Willy Brandt – which saw the two German states formally acknowledge their right to coexist.¹¹

Celebrating cuts and grafts, Ungers' own proposal for the competition offered an anti-contextualist case for robust form. However, in its earlier guise, the fragmentary state of the design was far less pronounced, with the proposal still indebted to a somewhat megastructuralist agenda and the Tiergarten fringe articulated as a web of superblocks. This system was spawned by other morphological fragments fronting the city's Landwehrkanal, where the superblocks appeared to be generated by the metamorphoses of a scattering of existing historical buildings. However, over the course of the design process this connection was abandoned, as was a metamorphosis infusing the superblocks with a range of sculptural gestures. Instead, Ungers reduced his proposed urban fabric down to the level of the generic, with the only differentiation being the injection of infrastructural expressways and subway lines.¹² This solution undermined the connectivity of form, offering only containment and heterogeneity in its place – a desertion compounded by Ungers' unwillingness to establish a link between the Tiergarten and West Berlin's commercial centre. Submitted in 1973, it would have immediately dashed any hopes of normalisation that the Berlin planning authorities might have entertained.

One can only speculate on what led Ungers to develop his scheme as a series of mutually isolated environments – five distinct interventions in total, each one characterised by a specific functional and formal condition, and all stylised for theatrical effect. In demographic terms these environments appeared to acknowledge the fact that West Berlin was not so much a homogeneous city as a disparate collection of neighbourhoods (in many ways the same post-industrial 'Soft City' that Jonathan Raban termed for London). And so at the core of his

proposal, Ungers provided insular hot spots in an attempt to reinvigorate urban experience. Interestingly, within the almost surreal narrative surrounding these territories, one can also detect the influence of Rem Koolhaas, and specifically of his final AA project, 'Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture'. Koolhaas, then at the outset of his research for *Delirious New York*, had collaborated on the Tiergarten project as Ungers' graduate student at Cornell, and when Ungers abandoned the initial megastructural approach, this collaboration appears to have yielded a more assertive, yet cynical form of authorship that benefited from Koolhaas' personal obsession with Berlin. The Wall had already been the key ingredient of 'Exodus', in which a totalitarian infrastructure of control was grafted onto the heart of London. With this grafting, Koolhaas foresaw the creation of 'a strip of intense metropolitan desirability', a combined state of fulfilment and dependency capable of re-animating an avant-garde paralysed by its own institution-alisation.¹³ One such set-piece – reminiscent of Superstudio's dystopian environmentalism – was the 'Institute of Biological Transactions', reintroduced for Berlin in 1973 almost literally as a pedestrian crossing.

In the Tiergarten proposal these blocks and other interventions are rendered either as an infrastructural node or as a monument or morphological fragment, as a nod to the nineteenth-century perimeter block and the ubiquitous *Mietskasernen*. Oscillating between iconic markers and visionary delineations of abstract space, they become in the process extruded macro-forms, occasionally even continuing to span existing streets as superblocks. And consistent with Ungers' reading of the city, the relationship that these inserted blocks establish to their host structure is parasitic rather than contextual. Prefiguring the disembowelment of the German Architecture Museum in Frankfurt, the existing courtyards are occupied and the fragmented perimeter blocks flipped inside out. The nineteenth century is thus revisited, not in order to recreate a lost urbanity, but instead to subvert its fabric, accentuating the porous condition that had earlier been mapped in *Berlin Party Walls*.

Quite predictably, given the hopes of the competition organisers, this proposal failed to win. Instead first prize – ironically – went to a group of Ungers' former TU students, who had resorted to a contextual reading of Berlin (evidence that by 1973 the pre-war fabric was positioned as a site of resistance against

large-scale urban renewal). Ungers would later deplore this winning scheme, insisting instead on a different form of historicism composed of the episodic and the fragmentary and in constant opposition to the *Stadtteparatur* contextualism that would soon become an inescapable reality in West Berlin.¹⁴

Evolving in the four-year period immediately after the Tiergarten competition proposal, Ungers' Green Archipelago became the next decisive step in his demonstration of cuts, ruptures and discontinuities, but this time expanded from just one of Berlin's isolated neighbourhoods to the scale of the whole city. Neither a fully-fledged theory nor an actual project, the Archipelago was offered merely as a conceptual model – a surprisingly modest beginning given its subsequent – posthumous – status as an allegory of Ungers' whole career. Even if one challenges its suitability in this regard, there is undoubtedly something resonant about the metaphor of an archipelago. The idea was first presented in a series of articles, and then expanded further in the Cornell Summer Academies that Ungers organised in West Berlin in 1977 and 1978. Co-hosted by the city's International Centre for Design, these studio academies enabled on-site research, with Ungers, his teaching assistants and a group of American students presenting their findings to the Berlin planning authorities. A further step was the 1978 publication in *Lotus* of the 11 theses of 'Cities within the City', which appeared alongside the Archipelago mappings and various case studies.¹⁵ The accompanying programmatic text encouraged private initiative and ownership as opportunities for a less universalist, more community-oriented approach to urban development, even suggesting citizen participation and urban farming as essential components of city living. As part of this a novel type – the 'urban villa' – was offered as a key ingredient of the Archipelago's dispersed urbanism. Through this type, which had been the focus of the 1977 summer academy, Ungers extolled a multiplicity of 'identity spaces' that would allow for the proliferation of a 'differentiated urban structure' in terms of morphology, community and usage.¹⁶ This soft urbanism then itself became a product of the city.

After the demise of the civic megaproject, it could be argued that the refusal to suggest a more targeted approach became a political gesture in itself. But beyond the socio-economic diagnoses it made for the city, what was interesting about the Green Archipelago was that it presented no real agenda for its implementation, merely recommending that, based on the reassessment of Berlin's fabric, the city should host an international architectural exhibition through which invited architects and planners would be encouraged to spend long periods of time in the city. This may well have been key

OM Ungers, Tiergarten competition,
Berlin 1973/74
Conceptual sketch showing cultural buildings
by Mies van der Rohe and Hans Scharoun
© Ungers Archiv für
Architekturwissenschaft, Köln

to the IBA gaining political approval in 1979. As the core of its curatorial policy, the IBA appropriated the key Archipelago idea of a disparate urban landscape dotted with a series of decentralised interventions. A short while later it changed tack, opting instead for a *Stadtrepauratur* strategy that entailed editing out the presence of modernism from Berlin's urban fabric. Ungers – one of the IBA's two directors – resigned his post. His resignation, however, freed him to take on a series of IBA commissions, two of which were for sites around the Tiergarten – abstract housing blocks at Lützowplatz and on Köthener Strasse, both of them again controversial.

What this IBA work and the preceding Archipelago and Tiergarten proposals reveal is that, despite his academic exile to upstate New York, and his long absence from building practice, it was above all West Berlin that compelled Ungers the designer, teacher and author to rethink the relationship of architecture, infrastructure and the urban. It was also Berlin's walled city that allowed Ungers to set himself up as German architecture's favourite anti-establishment figure. But it was only later in his career, when he was repositioning himself professionally, that the strength of this iconoclasm fully became an asset: when he returned to the city in the latter half of the 1970s his presence as a controversial polemicist only added to the dynamic of a vital architectural scene rich in symposia, planning workshops and ideas competitions, and the collective desire to articulate a new discourse on architectural form and urban identity. Such a repositioning was essential given the contested field in which urban planning, in particular, had found itself in the wake of 1967, to say nothing of the ensuing self-castigation of designers. This was also partly explained by the fact that it had taken a deep economic recession, triggered by the oil crisis, for architects and urban planners to finally align themselves with a fundamental rejection of technology. The ensuing alienation amongst the profession was profound – compounded by the fact that German architects primarily identified themselves as service providers, and in times of crisis had nothing like the back-up provided by pop or other radically conceptual architectures in Britain, Austria or Italy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, nor even anything resembling the paper architecture of the US east coast, to assuage fears of their own productivity.

By that time it was apparent that the lack of conventional demand in Berlin's heavily subsidised local economy called for a new discourse on architectural form and urban identity. For Ungers, the recent political gains made by the historical preservation lobby also acted as a kind of spur. As an experiment following on the heels of the 1975 European Year of Historic Preservation, the Archipelago could be interpreted as representing a conscious

move to the site of postmodern identity politics – the core – where architecture participated in the symbolic economy of a shrinking city by curating its historical artefacts. Another influence, though, would have been Ungers' recent first-hand experience with another failing model of urbanism, New York City, where he had participated in an ambitious housing competition for Welfare Island hosted by governor Nelson Rockefeller's defaulting Urban Development Agency. And like the failing fabric in many American inner cities, the Archipelago and other Berlin projects all revolved around a dialectic of growth and decay premised on market forces. In this regard, Kevin Lynch's earlier 1960 analysis of distressed downtowns was equally pivotal. Lynch had called for 'environmental imageability' and a 'coincidence of association and imageability', qualities echoed in some of Ungers' mid-1960s work, as well as in the Berlin Party Wall mapping project.¹⁷ But the full potential of Lynch's *Image of the City* only develops after a transatlantic time-lag when Ungers envisions Berlin's walled city as a loose fit for isolated architectural events swimming within the urban dross.

A counter-reading of the prodigal Ungers' return to Berlin, and the projects he produced there, might look not to the city he came back to, but to the country from which he had departed. Crucial to a discernible rise in professional insecurity in Germany in the late 1960s, and to the fracture in Ungers' own biography, is the 'Red Decade'. Marking the end of the period of postwar consensus and the prosperity this brought, these years saw the radicalisation of Germany's extreme left, expressed in numerous terrorist acts starting with the fire-bombing of two Frankfurt department stores in 1968 and culminating in the 'Hot Autumn' of 1977, in which a Lufthansa jet was hijacked, an industry representative – Hanns-Martin Schleyer – was kidnapped and murdered, and a number of key figures in the Baader-Meinhof gang killed themselves. These ten years of extreme political radicalism coincided with the period of Ungers' exile. And so in contrast to a backdrop of bombings, kidnappings and assassinations, Ungers spent most of the Red Decade enveloped either by Ivy League elitism at Cornell, or exposed to the intellectualism of Peter Eisenman's Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York.¹⁸

When he did return home to Germany he did so as an architect who was shrouded in theory, and increasingly aware of his own role

as purveyor of architecture's cultural capital. His increased investment in a kind of philosophy of architecture also reflected changes in the marketplace of culture. Just as Märkisches Viertel could only have happened within the context of the heyday of the postwar welfare state, the abstract self-referentiality of Ungers' later work was highly contingent on the social, political and economic conditions of West Germany in the 1980s, led by its chancellor Helmut Kohl. In a climate of conservative paternalism, Ungers confronted the public with what he coined an architecture based on 'themes' (for this, read 'theories'), with their built manifestation and spiritual home being Frankfurt's new architecture museum – a space that resounded as much to the tireless promotional activities of its founding director, Heinrich Klotz, as it did to Ungers' growing interest in architectural history.¹⁹ And while his continuing defence of the inner logics of architecture fuelled an ongoing discursive and philosophical enterprise, the increasingly mute phenomenology of his built work was fast becoming a successful commercial signature.

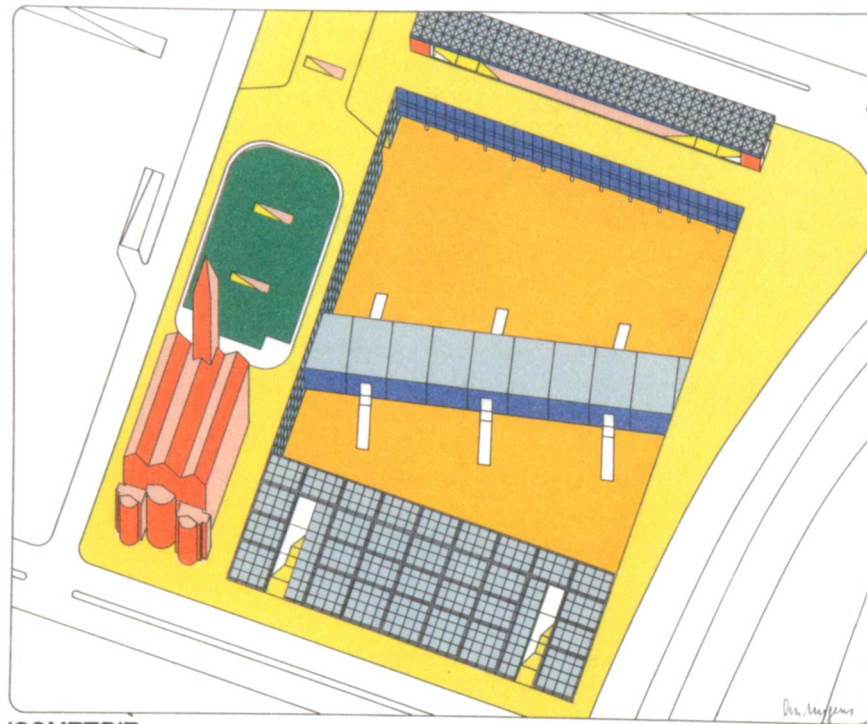
The contradictions of this impasse were in many ways part of a general dislocation of architectural practice from discourse. And not unlike the advent of New Minimalism in the following decade, by the 1980s the archetypes of an 'autonomous' architecture suddenly came to be seen as compatible with the representational needs of institutional and private clients. As a result, Ungers' discourse on fragments, coincidences and abstraction, while still fundamental, was only really publicly articulated in support of increasingly corporate work, with commissions for trade fair complexes, courthouses and business headquarters following in the wake of his success with the Frankfurt architecture museum. At the same time, Ungers continued to wrap his methodological struggles in Adornian rhetoric as a rebuttal of mass culture. Foremost among these was his own 1983 monograph *Architecture as Theme*, in which he distanced himself from both the tribulations of postwar mass housing and (like all postmodernists) a rampant postmodernism. Instead, and in defence of what he saw as the quintessence of architecture, he adopted a more traditionalist rhetoric that chimed with the tone of a number of politicians, notably Frankfurt mayor Walter Wallmann. During his tenure from 1977 to 1986 Wallmann embarked on a successful campaign of city branding through high culture and contemporary architecture, distancing Frankfurt from everything it had come to represent during the Red Decade. Counteracting its physical ugliness and its lack of cultural distinction, Germany's financial hub soon benefited from lavish investment in new arts venues, such as the architecture museum and the adjacent Museum of Arts

OM Ungers, Tiergarten competition,
Berlin 1973/74

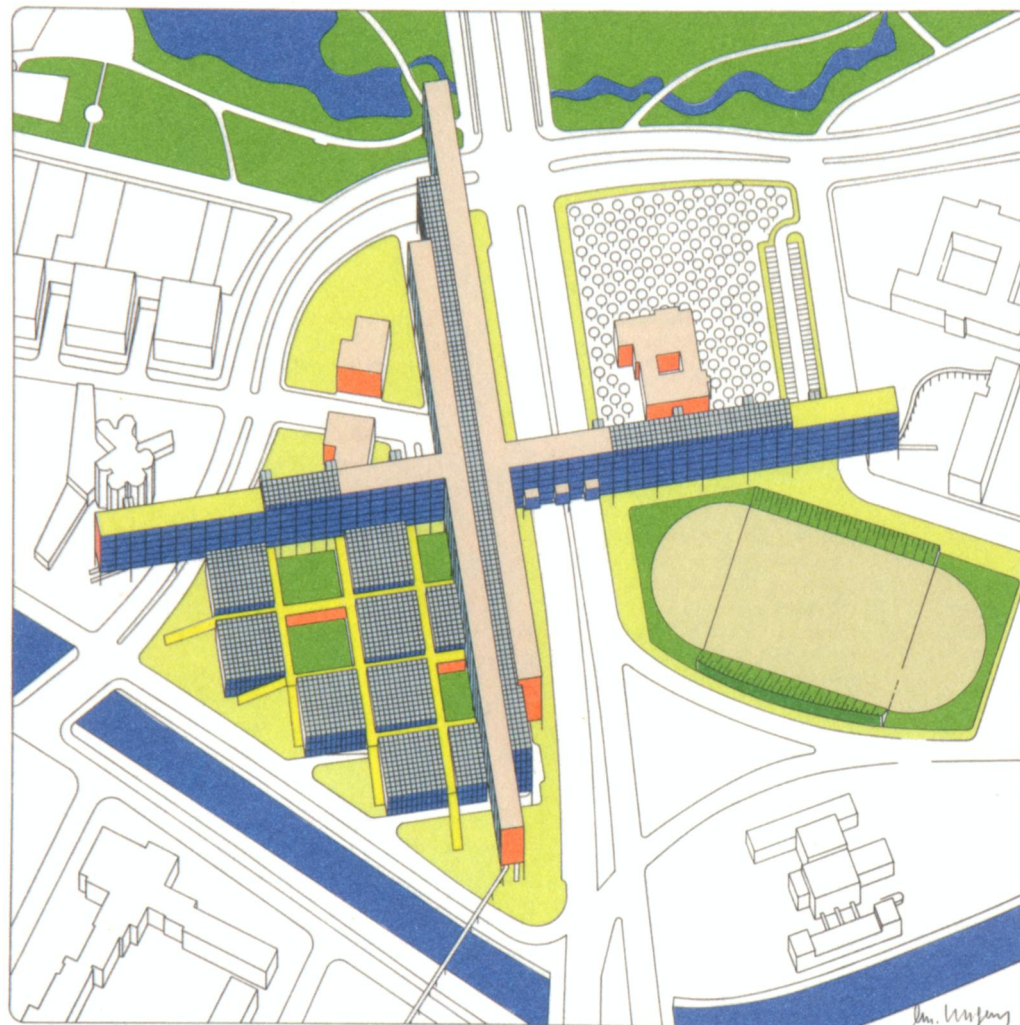
Top: Building as pedestrian crossing,
north of the Landwehrkanal

Bottom: Access plaza to a future subway line
at the New National Gallery

© Deutsches Architektur Museum, Frankfurt



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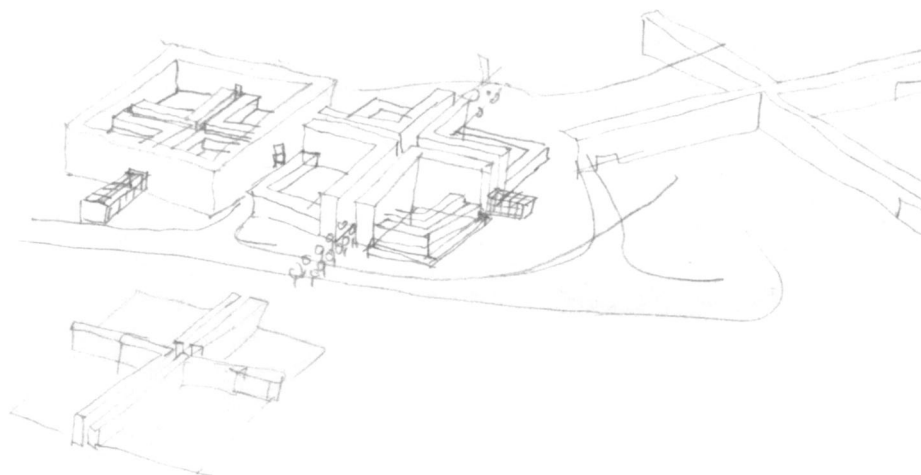
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and Crafts, Richard Meier's introduction to the European architectural scene. And with the media presence that this flashy *Kulturpolitik* afforded, Ungers became one of very few German practitioners to reach an international architectural public.

There is a certain irony to Ungers – an architect whose career up to that point had been defined by his relationship to Berlin (even while he was absconded in upstate New York) – suddenly finding recognition and even respect through work he carried out in Frankfurt (in no sense the bruised, scarred but still fundamentally invigorating urban terrain of the former capital, but West Germany's economic engine and emerging global city). Under mayor Wallmann, however, Frankfurt's ambition was

to become the Federal Republic's signature architectural city, not simply through the cast of celebrity designers whose buildings increasingly came to line its riverbank, but through its relationship to an urban local history. By partially reconstructing its medieval centre in the 1980s, Frankfurt played a key role in showing other German cities how to repair their urban past – a model, significantly, that would also be offered up to Berlin when the city embarked on its own 'critical reconstruction' immediately after reunification. Although he remained apprehensive about this shift, and the adoption of a German strain of New Urbanism, Ungers no longer interpreted the urban condition as a disparate assemblage of architectural fragments but as a more cohesive, market-led whole.

It would, however, be disingenuous to suggest that, pampered by the opportunities provided by the 1980s economic boom, Ungers switched urban allegiances and sold Berlin out to Frankfurt (a misreading complicated, not least, by the fact that throughout his whole working life Ungers' base of operations and home to his vast architectural library had been the house he built for himself in 1958 in Cologne – site of pilgrimages by architects and critics as diverse as Aldo Rossi, Reyner Banham and Rem Koolhaas). Instead, what these shifts – of terrain, of ideals, of authorship – reveal is an architect of the generic who never let his own buildings temper the complexities of his architectural thinking, but who remained, throughout, appealingly elusive.



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1. See Nikolaus Kuhnert, Anh-Linh Ngo, Stephan Becker and Martin Luce, 'Die Berliner Vorlesungen von Oswald Mathias Ungers', *Arch+*, no 179, p 4.
2. Jasper Cepl's *Oswald Mathias Ungers: Eine intellektuelle Biographie* (Cologne: Walther König, 2006) has finally shed light on the conflicts in this transitional period.
3. For Rowe's subsequent regret, see Colin Rowe, *As I Was Saying: Recollections and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol 1, edited by Alexander Caragone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p 5.
4. See *Berlin 1995: Planungsmodelle für eine Fünfmillionenstadt im Übergang zu den siebziger Jahren*, no 25, 1969. On Ungers' TU publications, 27 issues of the *Veröffentlichungen für Architektur* were released between 1965 and 1969, ranging from visual records of studio work to more speculative topical issues, some of them guest edited – a testimony to the openness of Ungers' research in this period.
5. Werner Hegemann, *Das Steinerne Berlin: Geschichte der größten Mietskasernenstadt der Welt* (Berlin: Kippenheuer, 1930).
6. Visionary when conceived by Prussian urban planner James Hobrecht (1825–1902), the plan for Berlin and its suburbs was already implemented in 1862.
7. Jonas Geist, *Das Berliner Mietshaus 1740–1862* (Munich: Prestel, 1980); the IBA met political approval in 1979, but stalled after a series of competitions and resulting buildings delayed the exhibition until 1987.
8. Recommended by Ungers' collaborators at the TU, photographer Arthur Laskus had begun the documentation before Ungers' 1967 departure. *Berlin Party Walls* was assembled by Ulrike Pampe and Jürgen Sawade and became the last publication in the *Veröffentlichungen zur Architektur* series.
9. It is noteworthy that Austrian artist Arnulf Rainer conceived an issue of *Veröffentlichungen zur Architektur* in 1967 (no 6). This *Schwarze Architektur* (black architecture) presents a collection of blotted out elevations not unlike the final 1969 product of *Berlin Party Walls*. Informal and gestural, Rainer's urban camouflage is a visceral comment on the uncontrollable dynamics of capitalism and war, with the author's explicit reference to bunker architecture echoing the research of Paul Virilio and Claude Parent.
10. In 1979 Ungers will even design a solar house with a surprising compositional similarity to his initial sketches for the Architecture Museum, developed at the same time.
11. Two years after the first meeting between the heads of state of West and East Germany, the decisive Grundlagenvertrag Treaty was signed in 1972.
12. As an enduring ghost of 1970s planning, one such subway fragment still hovers through the recent underground Potsdamer Platz commuter station.
13. See Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (Rotterdam: Monacelli, 1995), p 7.
14. See the 1977 conversation with Heinrich Klotz in *Architektur in der Bundesrepublik: Gespräche mit sechs Architekten* (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1977), p 270.
15. See Oswald Mathias Ungers, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff and Arthur Ovaska, 'Cities within the City: Proposals by the Summer Academy for Berlin', *Lotus*, no 19, 1978.
16. See Oswald Mathias Ungers, Hans Kollhoff and Arthur Ovaska, *The Urban Villa: A Multi-family Dwelling Type* (Cologne: Studio Press for Architecture, 1977).
17. See Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), pp 13, 101.
18. As much as the lure of Eisenman's IAU, in terms of Ungers' biography New York also represented the site of his seminal 'City Metaphors' installation, which Ungers presented at the Cooper Hewitt Museum in 1976.
19. Like Ungers, Klotz was exposed to and inspired by teaching in American academia during the early 1970s. Jasper Cepl dates their first encounter in 1975 at the Berlin symposium 'Old and New'. See Jasper Cepl, *op cit*, p 325.

OM Ungers, Tiergarten competition, Berlin 1973/74
Conceptual sketch showing building as pedestrian crossing
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