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Rereading The Ungers: Utopian Realism as a Basis for Contemporary Urban Design

Oswald Mathias and Liselotte Ungers, Utopia, Communes, Degrowth, Urban Planning

/Abstract

Although much has been said about the work of Oswald Mathias Ungers, this essay aims to address the decade from '67 to '77, which saw the departure of the Ungers family for the United States of America, more precisely for the city of Ithaca in the state of New York. It was precisely the American period that allowed O.M. Ungers to reflect and revise much of the work that had seen him directly involved in some controversies, which culminated in protests in December '67.

The purpose of this text is to briefly review some of the events that took place during that period, in order to shed light on two almost unknown texts that saw their birth mainly thanks to the American period and the social ferment of the time: Kommunen in der Neuen Welt. 1740 - 1972, published in '72 by both authors and Die Rückkehr des Roten Mannes: Indianer in den USA, published in '74 by Liselotte Ungers. It is essetial to point out these publications, not only to bring to light a part of Ungers' work unknown to most, but also to clarify some of the urban strategies proposed by O.M. Ungers that become, now more than ever, fundamental references for the possible resolution of contemporary crises.

In a period that sees the rediscovery of utopia as a model for solving the many crises we are facing, as was already the case in the 1960s and 1970s, it is appropriate to recall and deepen Ungers' reflections on the Utopian device trying not to fall back on the proposal of sci-fi or retro-futuristic models.

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The field in which she operates is that of history of architecture and urban planning, paying particular attention to social and ecological dynamics. Specifically, she explores possible alternatives and solutions that place a degrowth model at the centre of urban discourse. To do so, she focuses on rediscovering the fundamental intellectual work carried out by Liselotte and Oswald Mathias Ungers between the 1960s and 1970s.

Whereas with us property is private and personal, with them everything is in common...I am convinced that where private property exists, where everything is calculated by money, it is difficult for things to unfold with justice and success for a state[1]

Introduction

The emergence of communes, interest groups, oppositions, is not a random and temporary phenomenon, but one that must be taken very seriously[2].

This was how Oswald Mathias Ungers introduced the *Internationaler Kongress Architekturtheorie* held at the Technical University of Berlin from 11th to 15th December '67, proving that he was fully aware of what was happening at that time in Berlin and more generally across the world. These were the years leading up to the better-known '68. Berlin was already shaken by student protests during the spring of '67, as evidenced by the 5th June 1967 cover of *Der Spiegel* magazine entitled *The Rebel Students of Berlin*[3]. Young people mobilised against the visit of the Shah of Persia, the dictatorship in Athens, the United States mission in Vietnam and, along with all these causes, they also fought "against schools and universities that produce the conformist type, reward the opportunist and prevent the development of critical consciousness. We want to dismantle authoritarian forms of government in the university and society and practice democracy here as elsewhere"[4].The conference saw the participation of some of the leading figures in architectural theory and critique of the time including: Siegfried Giedion, André Corboz, Julius Posener, Kenneth Frampton, Reyner Banham, Colin Rowe, Lucius Burkhardt, and many others. As Ungers himself admitted, the purpose of the conference was to initiate a reflection - in his view fundamental - on the theoretical foundations of architecture in an era that had seen, was seeing and would have seen a period of intense building activity. At the seminar's opening, which Ungers believed had the potential to change the course of architectural theory, he presented a stimulating challenge to the audience. The medium through which this was done was the story of Laputa Island, the levitating island described by Jonathan Swift in his book *Gulliver's Travels*. The island of Laputa, described by Jonathan Swift, is inhabited by people who devote their lives to the study of the world's most refined and abstract sciences

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1   The term Utopia was first coined by the English humanist Thomas More in his novel Utopia published in Latin in 1516 under the title "Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus de optimo rei publicae statu, deque nova insula Utopia". The following edition was consulted for the text: Thomas More, *Utopia* (Trento: Timeo, 2023), I book, 81-83. This and the following translations were done by the author.

2   Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Internationaler Kongress Architekturtheorie*, Veröffentlichungen zur Architektur series, no. 14 (Berlin: Technische Universität, June 1968), 6.

3   "Die aufsässigen Studenten von Berlin," *Der Spiegel*, no. 24 (June 5 1967).

4   "Nein, nein, nein," in *Der Spiegel*, no. 24 (June 5 1967): 46-59.

such as mathematics, geometry and music. Their interest in the theoretical nature of science went so far as to prevent them from transposing these useful notions into the real world. For them that was such a vulgar act that, years later, their island found itself in a state of complete decay. Their houses were of very poor workmanship, with the walls of the rooms not even presenting a regular corner, a direct consequence of the very abstract and incomprehensible instructions the workers received, as Gulliver recounts "I had never seen such poorly cultivated land, such ruined and dilapidated houses, and people so wretched in dress and so gaunt in appearance"[5]. The intelligence of the inhabitants of Laputa is thus limited exclusively to the theoretical sciences; invention, imagination and fantasy remain alien to them.

And it is precisely the passage in which the causes of the kingdom's misery are made explicit that Ungers quotes almost literally:

> "About 40 years ago, some people went to Laputa. After staying there for five days, they returned with very superficial knowledge but with a lot of fantastic ideas. After their return, these people began to find flaws in everything and made plans to re-found all the arts. To this end, they obtained a license to create an academy of designers. In this academy, the professors invented new rules of the art of building. The enterprise consisted of one man who would single-handedly do the work of ten men by constructing a palace in a week out of a material so strong that it would stand forever without the need for repair. Moreover, all the fruits of the earth would ripen in any season and one hundred percent more would be produced than at present. Such happy premonitions were given to the masses. The only misfortune is that none of these projects have been completed to date. In the meantime, all the land lies uncultivated and desolate, the houses are dilapidated and the inhabitants are without clothes or food. However, instead of being discouraged by this situation, they continue their projects with fifty times more vehemence, driven by hope and despair"[6].

O.M. Ungers hopes that the consequences of the conference will not be the same as those resulting from the journey led by those five men to the land of Laputa. This concern revolves around the notion that intellectual speculations, if confined solely to a theoretical realm, may risk lacking tangible impacts in reality. The apprehension is that such speculations could potentially become mere exercises in chasing unattainable ideals, rather than offering valuable contributions to the pressing issues faced by contemporary society. Particular attention should be paid in Ungers' choice to quote a passage from Swift's text. Infact if analyzed at a deeper, perhaps more subtle conceptual level, this act provides a key that will play a pivotal role in this essay for re-reading the works of O.M. Ungers and Liselotte Ungers: the role played by Utopia.

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5   Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, first complete Italian version edited by Aldo Valori (Rome: Formiggini, 1921), chap. IV, 264. For the first English edition see: Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, (London: Benjamin Motte, 1726).

6   Ungers, *Internationaler Kongress Architekturtheorie*, 6.

However, there was not even time to wonder what the consequences of this fateful meeting might have been as the conference was brutally interrupted by the entry of over 2,000 students into the lecture hall, who in protest unfurled a banner bearing the slogan *"Alle Häuser sind schön - hört auf zu bauen!/All houses are beautiful - stop building!"*[7]. It was precisely these same students, later united under the collective name *Aktion 507*, who wrote and published the manifesto *Diagnose zum Bauen in West-Berlin*[8]. The manifesto offers a well-founded critique of the architectural landscape in West Berlin during the 1960s. This era was marked by a close intertwining between architects, the senate, and the construction industry. This symbiotic relationship often subordinated urban planning to economic and political objectives, neglecting the needs and perspectives of the city's inhabitants and contributing to a capitalist land policy.

It was as a direct consequence of this violent raid that O.M. Ungers decided to give up his professorship at the Technical University of Berlin and accepted the chair offered to him by Colin Rowe at Cornell University at Ithaca, in the United States of America.

American Lessons

This was the cultural background that Ungers left in '67 in order to travel with his family to Ithaca in the state of New York in April '68. Invited by Colin Rowe to take part in teaching activities at Cornell University, relations between the two deteriorated rapidly, mainly due to the divergence in their thinking: Ungers was interested in the great challenges dictated by the future and felt responsible for the world in the making, for Rowe, however, the situation was different. The divergent perspectives on urban development, architecture, and the architect's role were discernible, and these disparities could already be glimpsed during 1967 *Internationaler Kongress Architekturtheorie*. During the seminar, Rowe presented a paper entitled *"The Crisis in the Cultural Cabinet"*. Rowe's paper examined and analysed in a rather critical manner the imagined role of the modern architect within society, also discussing the opposition between technology and Zeitgeist.

> The persistent prophecy of an impending crisis also constituted an eminently dramatic backdrop for the architect's activity and offered modern architecture the opportunity to distinguish itself as a dynamic belief. Such insistence, in fact, gave the architect's spatial decisions the persuasive force of a moral judgement, charged them with the fate of society and, because it gave an aesthetic preference the appearance of a prophetic insight into human destiny, could also give the impression of elevating architectural practice far beyond mere matters of personal taste[9].

7   Oswald Mathias Ungers, Rem Koolhaas, Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Die Rationalisierung des Bestehenden," *ARCH+*, no. 179, *O. M. Ungers – Berliner Vorlesungen 1964-65* (July 2006): 10.

8   Aktion 507, *Diagnose zum Bauen in West-Berlin*, (Berlin: Technische Universität, September 1968).

9   Colin Rowe, *Internationaler Kongress Architekturtheorie*, Veröffentlichungen zur architektur series, no.14, (Berlin: Technische Universität, June 1968), 187-188.

Statements of this kind highlight Rowe's position at the end of the 1960s, regarding both architects perceiving the profession as redemptive and the feasibility of social and political architecture. Over the years, Rowe's stance solidified, prompting Ungers to remark that "He did not understand the zeitgeist he talked so much about and preferred to retire to his "Monticello in Itacha"...He was disgusted by the vicious and aggressive political world outside. He was a completely apolitical man"[10], but it is precisely because of this divergence of thought that Ungers saw Rowe as "an ideal counterpart for my own thinking in architecture"[11] stating to places itself in a completely different position to Rowe's.It is this feeling of being in some way responsible that makes Ungers' work more relevant than ever. From '63 onwards, using the possibilities offered to him by his teaching activity, Ungers confronted some of the greatest challenges of the time, probed possibilities, generated hypotheses, rationally weighed alternatives, and thus built up a remarkable design background. Even half a century ago, Ungers was able to perceive the problems generated by uncontrolled urban development, ruthless individualism, the logic of profit, and what would have been the direct consequence of an unrestrained consumption philosophy: the depletion and deterioration of natural resources, among them soil. Re-reading some of Ungers' passages and statements, these appear more prophetic today than ever before - precisely in the meaning given to this term by Sébastien Marot (2019) in *Taking the Country's Side: Agriculture and Architecture*[12] - and suggest that perhaps, after years of blind faith in technological progress, it is worth exploring some of the alternative models proposed.

It was precisely the U.S. period that allowed him to reflect and rethink much of his work, directly involved in the controversies that took place in Berlin[13] [Fig. 1]. This phase proved particularly eclectic and fertile not only for O.M. Ungers but also for Liselotte Ungers, his intellectual and life companion. It was precisely during this period that two fundamental publications, still little known and studied to this day, within Ungers' oeuvre came to life. The first was *Kommunen in der Neuen Welt. 1740 - 1972*, published in 1972 by both authors and the second *Die Rückkehr des Roten Mannes: Indianer in den USA*, published in 1974 edited entirely by Liselotte Ungers [Fig. 2, 3].

10   Oswald Mathias Ungers, "He Who Did Not Understand the Zeitgeist," in *Reckoning with Colin Rowe: Ten Architects Take Position,* ed. Emmanuel Petit (New York: Routledge; 1st edition, March 4, 2015), 65-73.

11   Ungers, "He Who Did Not Understand the Zeitgeist", 65-73.

12   Sébastien Marot, *Taking the Country's Side: Agriculture and Architecture* (Barcelona: Polígrafa Ediciones, 2019), 7.

13   See the interview with Sarah Diamant on 22 July 1969. The interview is part of a larger series for the "Challenge to Governance Oral History Project". O. M. Ungers traces the political and student movements in Berlin by comparing them with those in America, as well as making his position explicit. Oswald Mathias Ungers, in *Challenge to Governance Oral History Project*, ed. Sarah Diamant (Ithaca, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Archives 13-6-1285, 22 July 1969).

Utopia Is the Reality of Tomorrow[14]

Kommunen in der Neuen Welt. 1740 - 1972 is a collection of the main utopian socialist communes settled from the 18th century onwards in the New World, the United States of America, and of all those communes that were emerging in the same years that found their roots in these previous experiences.

What emerges is an extremely concise overview, sometimes branded as superficial and lightweight, writes J.M. Carandell "But before indicating what is most interesting to learn from this work, I would like to dwell for a moment on two points, which may perhaps stem from the eminently panoramic nature of the work, or from a certain superficiality of the authors"[15] and again Dolores Hayden, "Unfortunately the authors seem to have approached their material with more concern for style than for social purpose. The unique achievement of the communitarians was to unite societal and environmental innovation; a survey which fails to demonstrate this unity misses the point"[16].
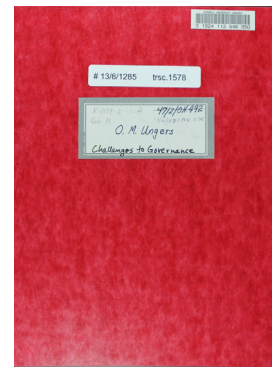
These complaints may prove well-founded if one gives the text the value of an essay with a historical-sociological framework, whose aim is to demonstrate through an analysis how political, social and ideological instances are reflected in the distribution and composition of architectural spaces, however, the text was not written with this assumption. Although the authors never specified their intent, one immediately notices the unusual disorganicity with which the topics are presented, the lack of notes and references to support the drafting of the publication, the scarcity of schemes and reworkings conducted by the authors, as well as the journalistic approach of the writings, which make it unthinkable to inscribe the text within the non-fiction genre. It should also be pointed out that, before being collected under a unique publication, the texts had been published by the Swiss magazine *WERK* in the form of six articles that came out in sequence from August 1970 until March 1971, and that the same had previously been published in October 1970 as a summary by another German magazine, *Baumeister*, corroborating the aforementioned statements. The articles were initially published under the title *Utopische Kommunen in Amerika 1800-1900*, representing one of the most evident and direct links between Ungers and the concept of utopia. For the authors communities earn the designation of utopias when they "derive their ideals not from what is, but from what could be"[17]. This assertion, directly excerpted from Karl Mannheim's influential work *Ideology and Utopia*, underscores Ungers' awareness of the theoretical foundations underpinning discussions on utopia.

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Fig. 1,2,3

Cover page of Challenge to Governance Oral History Project. © Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Archives 13-6-1285.

Cover page of Kommunen in der Neuen Welt. 1740 - 1972 © Ungers Archiv fur Architekturwissenschaft (UAA).

Cover page of Die Rückkehr des Roten Mannes: Indianer in den USA © Ungers Archiv fur Architekturwissenschaft (UAA).

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14   In explaining the motivation behind the design of the Märkische Viertel, Ungers articulates a profound perspective: 'Utopia is tomorrow's reality'. This statement encapsulates his vision and underlines the principles behind his architectural discourse. See: Office national de radiodiffusion télévision française, *Interview with the German architect Oswald Mathias Ungers on the streets of Berlin*, Eurêka, September 23, 1969, Oswald Mathias Ungers | INA, video, 0:39, Oswald Mathias Ungers | INA.
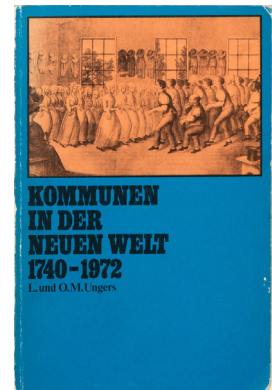
15   Liselotte Ungers, Oswald Mathias Ungers, Prólogo de J. M. Carandell, *Comunas* (Madrid: A. Redondo Beta, 1972), 5.

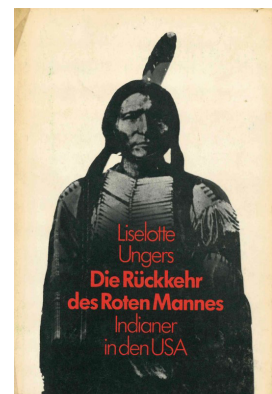16   Dolores Hayden, "Hayden v. Ungers early communes in the USA," *Architectural Design*, no. 8 (1973): 123.

17   Liselotte Ungers, Oswald Mathias Ungers, Communes in the New World, 1740 – 1972, translated by Winston Hampel, edited by Winston Hampel and Jack Self (London: REAL Foundation, February 29 2020), 23. First Edition: Liselotte Ungers, Oswald Mathias Ungers, Kommunen in der Neuen Welt, 1740-1971 (Colonia: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1972).

However, this is not the first time that Ungers discusses Utopia, or that he tries to give his own personal definition of the term. The sentence that gives this paragraph its title is extracted from an interview conducted by Oswald Mathias Ungers for the *Office national de radiodiffusion télévision française* in September '69. In the interview Ungers asserts that "Utopia is the reality of tomorrow. It isn't science fiction, it isn't a world which would exist outside the world with which we are confronted"[18].

This statement aligns with Karl Mannheim's exploration of the transformative nature of utopian thought, as evidenced in his analysis of Alphonse de Lamartine's words, "Les utopies ne sont souvent que des vérités prématurées"[19], wherein Mannheim elaborates on the concept that "The utopias of today become the reality of tomorrow"[20]. Furthermore, Mannheim observes a shift from a merely formal liberal conception of the future to a more concrete attitude stating:

> Here we find ourselves faced with an increasingly concrete attitude. Although this implementation of the present by means of the future is, in principle, imposed by the will and an imaginative aspiration, nevertheless this finalistic launch acts as a selective element in research and action. According to this view, the future is always being assayed in the present[21].

Given these considerations, it seems plausible that the intent of the collection *Kommunen in der Neuen Welt. 1740 - 1972* may be different, or at the very least, invites a nuanced understanding. The ultimate purpose of this publication is to acquaint with the existence, not of mere utopias but of concrete realities, encapsulating the myriad difficulties and imperfections that arise when, out of necessity, this experiences confront the real rather than the hypothetical [Fig. 4]. The essential orientation for interpreting this text extends beyond a mere compilation of documentation about the individual communes, an area for which more exhaustive and methodically structured bibliographies are certainly available[22]. Instead, the focus is on clarifying the processes underlying these communitarian experiences which, despite the interruptions and setbacks in certain historical periods, were never destined to disappear. As the authors claim, what links all forms of communes, past, present, and future, as well as those established in the new world and those belonging to the older one, is to reject the conventional norms of the current social reality and acting as concrete alternatives to it, in order to prove that "there is a possibility of

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18   Office national de radiodiffusion télévision française, Interview with the German architect Oswald Mathias Ungers on the streets of Berlin, Eurêka, September 23, 1969, Oswald Mathias Ungers | INA, video, Oswald Mathias Ungers | INA.

19   Utopias are often premature truths. See: Karl Mannheim, "La mentalità utopica" , in *Ideologia e Utopia,* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1957), 205.

20   Mannheim, "La mentalità utopica" , 205.

21   Mannheim, "La mentalità utopica" , 249.

22   For a more comprehensive knowledge of the history of utopian socialist communes, see Dolores Hayden's seminal text: Hayden, Dolores. *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790 - 1975* (Cambridge-MA: The MIT Press, 1979).

Fig. 4

Some significant frames from the Interview with the German architect Oswald Mathias Ungers on the streets of Berlin. © Office national de radiodiffusion télévision française.

co-existence of people which is not based on the ideology of profit and competition"[23].

During that specific period, the Ungers were not focused on rigorously reconstructing the history of communes. Instead, their primary interest lay in exploring alternative pathways for future development of potential solutions to design problems expected in both contemporary and future contexts. This is because Ungers strongly believed that "the task of the town planner is to foresee today this reality of tomorrow"[24].

It is here that O.M. Ungers' very personal modus operandi emerges once again, rooted in a more than rational approach when faced with the complexity of reality. What Ungers is doing is nothing more than beginning to catalogue, through what is intended to be a collection, an abacus, a series of case studies, the material to form the basis of future personal elaborations. From this standpoint, the reported experiences should be construed as a fundamental starting point. In essence, the text serves as a catalyst for broader reflections that will later have significant repercussions in his idea of urban design.

Utopia as a Tool

This is not the first time that Ungers deals with Utopia to solve design problems, but unlike many of his colleagues who see Utopia as the ultimate goal, Ungers glimpses the possibilities of what it could be: a tool. During April 1968, O.M. Ungers was a visiting critic at Cornell University where he worked for five weeks on a project with students for a small American city, *ITHACA N.Y.* A recurring theme in Ungers' research is undoubtedly that of "big numbers", as is evident from the publication of *Grossformen in Wohnungsbau* from December '66 or from his involvement in the construction of the building complex within *Märkische Viertel* from '63 to '76. At a time when demographic studies predicted a staggering increase in population in a few years, it is not strange that the most pressing question seemed to be how to design to accommodate more people and more products in the years to come.

> Utopian models for architecture and urban development must of necessity be based on assumptions, but can never approximate the complexity of any 'reality', since that reality is never really able to be determined…When new models are proposed they invariably challenge the old system of order and often therefore evoke instant rejection. This has been the case with utopian schemes proposed in the past and is certainly a potential response to this proposal. One distinction should be pointed out, however. In relation to other recent utopias, if indeed there are any, and in relation to 'megastructure' proposals in particular, this case has a highly rational development of the argument implicit in its assumptions…This proposal has another distinction

23   Liselotte Ungers, Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Communes in the New World, 1740 – 1972*, 25.

24   Office national de radiodiffusion télévision française, *Interview with the German architect Oswald Mathias Ungers on the streets of Berlin*, Eurêka, September 23, 1969, Oswald Mathias Ungers | INA, video, Oswald Mathias Ungers | INA.

in that it is more conceivable than utopian schemes which become a kind of science fiction built around inventions of technological fantasy[25].

As the opening comment by John P. Shaw points out, the proposed solution for *ITHACA N.Y.* uses utopia as a device to investigate some of the possibilities and alternatives, ultimately evaluating their feasibility within the realm of the real, in contrast with the utopian projects that saw their genesis in the same years. Despite the fact that this is the first time that Ungers is confronted with an urban reality that does not correspond to that of the European city, the Genius loci, is set as the basis for subsequent speculations. In this case the material to start from, the *As found*[26], becomes the topography of the site, which is taken to ensure a greater efficiency of the mega-structures. That is in contrast to the tabula rasa of all those utopian projects based on the standardisation and homogenisation of space, made possible by the use of a cartesian grid that aims to solve the same problems regardless of the different boundary conditions [Fig. 5].

Of this substantial difference Ungers is fully aware, as this short extract from *Berlin 1995* - a study conducted in September '69 by Ungers and his students - demonstrates,
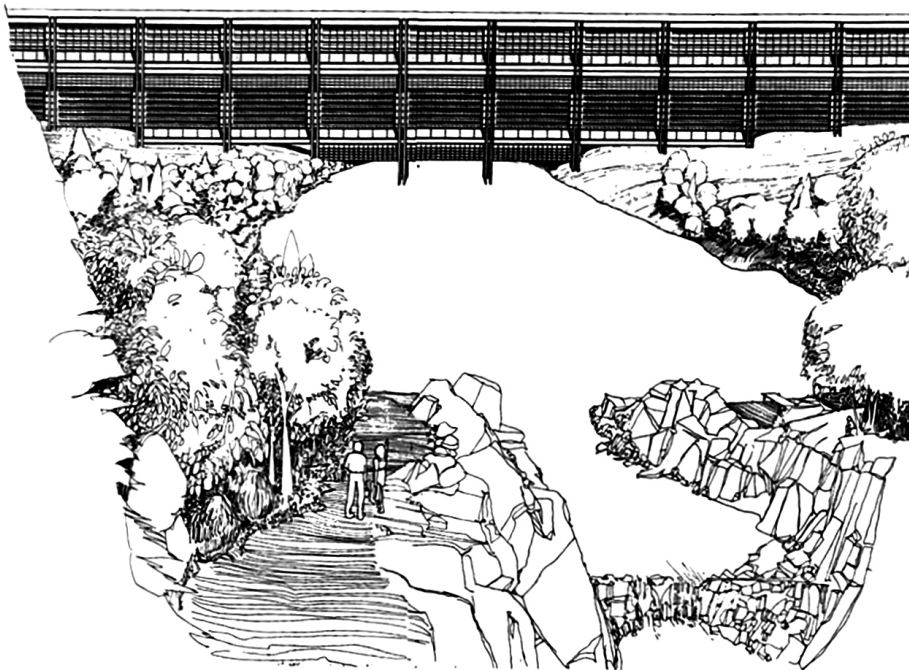
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25   John Preston Shaw, "Introduction II", in *Ithaca, N.Y.: Student Projects on a Small American City*, Veröffentlichungen zur Architektur series, no. 18 (Berlin: Technische Universität, November 1968), 5.

26   Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *With Hindsight... The 'As Found' in Architecture in The 'As Found' and the 'Found'* (Cambridge-MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 201.

Fig. 5

A perspective representation of the U2 Project within ITHACA N.Y.'s publication. © Ungers Archiv fur Architekturwissenschaft (UAA).

Starting with Yona Friedmann, a myriad of proposals for spatial building structures have been put forward. Most of them have attempted to combine construction and communication in such a way that structurally necessary building elements take over communication tasks at the same time. However, extensions or changes of use can only be made possible through the provision of huge superstructures, which can fulfill every type of use and every type of communication at any point. The waste incorporated in these structures requires enormous investments, of which only a part is used. Furthermore, terrestrial superstructures fix a unique state of development that can hardly be adapted to technical changes[27].

Many of these experiments, including Yona Friedman's *Paris Spatial City ('59-'61)* - which was inspired by the shortage of housing in France at the end of the 1950s and was never realised - contribute to such a detachment from the field of reality that they become true "sci-fi", whose results often turn out to be the opposite of what was hoped for: postponing the resolution of social and environmental criticalities to unspecified times, using models and technologies that are not yet, and perhaps will never be, available. Friedman's idea was to design what he described as "artificial topography"[28], a structure suspended in space that would delineate a new mapping of the territory by creating a homogeneous, continuous and indeterminate network, offering the city a prospect of unlimited growth designed to be built anywhere and to adapt to any climatic and environmental conditions.

It is precisely for this reason that the project for *Berlin 1995* sees the year 1995 as the choice for its future predictions. It is a statement against all those scenarios that placed the new millennium - the year 2000 - as a redeeming period, further contributing to the detachment from the current century, rejecting the connection between present and future and therefore dissociating themselves from reality. At the same time, the generalising manias of utopian projects deviate as much as possible from Ungers' characteristic modus operandi. As mentioned before his way of working always involves rigor, achieved firstly by gathering and cataloging information about the case study, such as its historical, political, social and cultural context. This information serves as the cornerstone for the ensuing design phase. Although inherently grounded in a Utopian approach, the design process consistently remains tethered to reality, thanks to the context generated by the analysis. This distinction sets it apart from other utopian projects proposed during the same period. In chapter four of the publication *Berlin 1995*, which goes under the name *Megastruktur*, Ungers tends to specify that the term megastructure "used in this work is not intended to indicate a universal super-development that is suitable for everything and "can" do everything, but rather to describe this new type of three-dimensional urban spatial planning"[29] placing a gap between itself and the utopian currents of the time.

27   Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Elemente der Bebauung in Berlin 1995 Planungsmodelle für eine Fünfmillionenstadt im Übergang zu den siebziger Jahren*, Veröffentlichungen zur Architektur, no. 25 (Berlin: Technische Universität, 1969), 91.

28   Yona Friedman, *Ville spatiale 1959-1960*, Frac Centre, collections.frac-centre.fr/collection-art-architecture/friedman-yona/rub-64.html?authID=72&ensembleID=164 (last access August, 2023).

29   *Oswald Mathias Ungers, Megastruktur in Berlin 1995 Planungsmodelle für eine Fünfmillionenstadt im Übergang zu den siebziger Jahren, Veröffentlichungen zur Architektur series,* no. 25 (Berlin: Technische Universität, 1969), 90.

We understand that Ungers is not looking for a panacea that can solve problems regardless of the context in which one finds oneself. Instead, he seeks principles that can inform the design process, aiming to create a more beneficial environment for both present and future inhabitants.

Throwaway Architecture

Ungers was aware of the numerous problems affecting the urban sphere as well as its periphery. More than fifty years later, we can confidently state that the announced crisis scenario has not been resolved, nor does it seem to have come to an end. Trends, already identified at the time, seem only to have been further confirmed.Since the 1960s, large cities have been experiencing permanent crises, due to the constant population growth and the attraction exerted by these large urban centers on neighbouring areas that contributed to the concentration of people, services, commodities, as well as cultural, political and social functions within a very small territory. This unhealthy form of accumulation had repercussions in the increasing precarious living conditions of the urban population, which faced increasing housing shortages, pollution, large-scale waste production within the city, and many other sociological problems of no less significance, such as the decay of human relations within communities and the dehumanisation of the self. A validation of Ungers' knowledge of these trends is the article written by Oswald Mathias Ungers in '71 for the German magazine *Transparent* entitled *Stadtprobleme in der pluralistischen Massengesellschaft*. Ungers placed the problem concerning the crisis of the city into a broader general framework, stating that "The crisis everyone is talking about does not seem to be limited to the city alone, it is rather the crisis of an extended continuum of decadence and excesses that has affected the entire arc from urban to rural areas"[30]. Once again, the tout court thinker realises that the problem extends far beyond the boundaries of the metropolis and that, just as the causes cannot be solely traced back to erroneous urban planning, also the solutions must be sought using an interdisciplinary approach "the problems of the city are not limited to the city itself, as they have transformed into an environmental problem, therefore they can no longer be seen and addressed in isolation, but only in an integrated manner"[31].

Although the focus of the writing is on American cities, the trend was the same in the settlements of large cities in Europe and elsewhere, as can easily be seen from some of the headlines of the time in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* of the time such as Notstand im Verkehr. *Sterben die Städte?/ Traffic emergency. Are cities dying?, Vergiftete Umwelt/ Poisoned environment, Sind die Städte noch zu retten?/ Can cities still be saved?, New York Tod einer Weltstadt?/ New York death of a global city? , Bedrohte Tiere - gefährdete Umwelt/Animals in*

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30   Oswald Mathias Ungers, "Stadtprobleme in der pluralistischen Massengesellschaft," *Transparent Manuskripte für Architektur Theorie Kritik Polemik Umraum*, no. 5 (Vienna: Günther Feuerstein, 1971), 19.

31   Ungers, "Stadtprobleme in der pluralistischen Massengesellschaft," 19.

Danger - Environment in Danger, Wachstum - im Wohlstand ersticken?/ Growth - suffocating in well-being? offering an overview of the concerns that were already gripping public opinion in the early 1970s [Fig. 6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14]. After all, these were the same years during which a first ecological awareness began to emerge, the years of the oil crisis, the rise of the first environmental movements and the affirmation of the Greens in West Germany.

A similar cultural panorama could be also found in Italy, where the editorial *Lotus International* dedicated issues no. 8-9-10 to *the problem of the dwelling*. In particular, issue no. 8 entitled *Luogo e abitazione/The place of Houses* opened the renewal of the editorial which "resumes its journey, improved in its appearance and above all in the direction and rigour of its choices and investigations"[32]. The ambition of Lotus, as Bruno Alfieri stated, was to find a cultural synthesis with a precise reference to the "global situation that announced major disruptions as a result of demographic, social, technological, ecological reasons and the then barely hinted at scarcity of raw material resources"[33].

It is relevant to point out that one of the many contributions within the volume was the one by Oswald Mathias and Liselotte Ungers entitled *Le comuni del nuovo mondo*, in which appears - with a few pictures and illustrations added - an extreme summary of the homonymous publication translated into Italian. It becomes more and more evident how, in order to understand and attempt to solve the numerous problems caused by the consumer society, the study of alternative practices and experiences was considered essential not only by the authors, who have decided to collect these efforts under a publication, but also by many other exponents within the architectural debate of the time who have contributed to their dissemination.

As Ungers states:

> Big cities are suffocating amidst the waste and discards of a consumerist and throwaway society. The ever-increasing and ruthless degradation of the environment, which an American scientist calls ... the landscape of 'newness', is ultimately the result of an ideology deeply absorbed in the acceptance of novelty for its own sake. Invention and rejection go hand in hand. Almost nothing is produced in the long run, and so many things end up in the trash, or are left as relics somewhere in the landscape[34].

It is precisely these relics, these scraps of consumer society, that are the main building material of many of the new communes described by Ungers, amongst which we can definitely remember the most popular *Drop City* but

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32   Bruno Alfieri, "Luogo e abitazione/The place of Houses," *Lotus International*, no. 8 (September 1974): 3.

33   Alfieri, "Luogo e abitazione/The place of Houses," 3.

34   Ungers, "Stadtprobleme in der pluralistischen Massengesellschaft," 9.

also other ones such as the lesser-known *Lama Foundation* and *Morning-Star*[35]. Inside these communes geodesic structures, derived from the theorisations of Buckminster Fuller, are built using old sheet metal and metal cladding belonging to abandoned vehicles in the landscape [Fig. 15]. In this way, not only is the product of unrestrained industrialisation put back into circulation through an original work of recycling, but the myth of standardisation as a premise for future monotony is subverted, giving rise to unique and original artefacts that are able to become a shelter for those who decide to defect from the status quo. We can always refer to a sort of recycling model when we mention the so-called urban communes, which - unlike the prevailing imagery in which the commune is located within a locus amoenus, uncontaminated by the vices of the metropolis - settle right within the city. These communes, either due to the absence of vacant land within the urban fabric or for reasons of convenience and affordability, find themselves inhabiting old abandoned or disused houses within the city environment. Despite the fact that in this specific case the members of the communes have almost no power of decision regarding the conformation of the spaces they are going to inhabit, and therefore do not act on the actual composition of their living spaces, it is precisely through this act that they are able to activate a mechanism of reuse and care towards the existing that allows them to alter the prevailing order of things even within the metropolis itself.

Now that a broader overview highlights the insights at the margin of what surely remains the lesser-known and studied work of Oswald Mathias and Liselotte Ungers, we no longer struggle to contextualise the publication *Kommunen in der Neuen Welt. 1740 - 1972*, which has been seen until now as a foreign body within Ungers' organic work.

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35   Wolf Gerischer, "Anti-industrializzazione: come crearsi un ambiente con le proprie mani rimettendo in ciclo prodotti industriali", *Lotus International* no. 8 (September 1974): 184-188. Also mentioned in the article: Liselotte Ungers and O.M. Ungers, "Neue Kommunen in den USA - Tendenzen und Trends," *Das Werk 57* (September 1971): 627-631.
For a more extensive discussion of these realities see: Steve Baer, *Dome Cookbook*, (Corrales, NM: Lama Foundation, 1968). Peter Rabbit, *Drop City* (New York: The Olympia Press, 1971). Caroline Maniaque-Benton, *French Encounters with the American Counterculture 1960-1980* (Routledge, November 2011). Stewart Brand and Lloyd Kahn, *Whole Earth Catalog* (Fall 1969).

Fig. 6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14

Some of the front covers of the German magazine Der Spiegel published in the 1970s. © Der Spiegel.
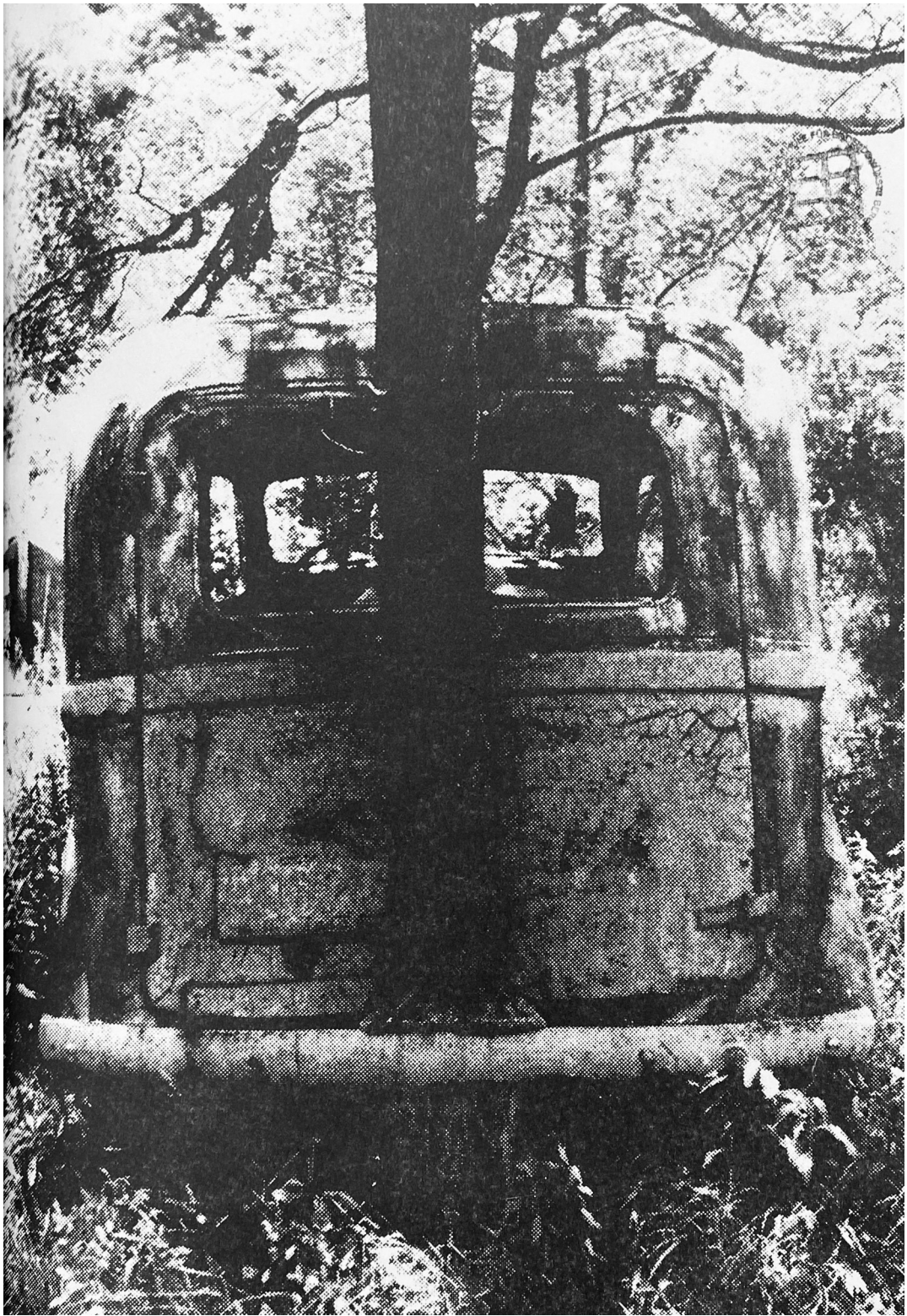
The First American Communes

An almost unknown, though remarkable text, closely related to the previously discussed publication, published exactly two years later, is the essay *Die Rückkehr des Roten Mannes: Indianer in den USA*, totally edited by Liselotte Ungers. Through this text, Liselotte Ungers offers an overview of the violent events suffered by Native Americans as a result of their colonisation, while highlighting and exemplifying their culture, traditions and diverse social structures.

The two texts can be linked for several reasons, the first certainly is the geographical and cultural context from which they originate. They are both writings that probably would not have been published if the Ungers had not migrated to the United States of America between the 1960s and the 1970s. The material included within the two writings is in fact collected during the family's wandering journeys[36]. Guided by curiosity and interest, the family began to visit the places where the old utopian communes, modern communes and Native American reservations were settled, collecting pamphlets and material for a better comprehension of those experiences. Many photographs were taken during these trips, mostly by O.M. Ungers, who in this research leaves more space to Liselotte Ungers' insights and follows her by documenting, through sketches and photographs, all the visited settlements. The second reason is the strong resonance that Native American stories acquire thanks to the rise of the student movement and the emerging counterculture. They became spokesmen for the rights of minority groups, thus giving new impetus to the Native struggle, of which movements such as *Red Power* or *Indian Power* became the representatives. In addition, it is precisely the New Communes that embrace Native American values and culture, as the authors themselves report "The desire to escape the meaningless consumer society and to find one's own values is mixed with various motivations...The image is the culture of the Indians based on nature, to which the 'hippie' generation is now giving a completely new value"[37].

It is quite clear from Liselotte Ungers' description that the very lifestyle, organisation and principles on which many of the American Indian tribes were based on corresponded to the fundamental points underlying the communes:

> • the renunciation of any kind of violence and aggression, above all of wars;

> • the abolition or limitation of private property;

> • the rejection of competitive struggle, desire for profit, consumerism, inhumane mechanisation and exploitation[38].

The third reason linking the texts might be the most subtle of all, and is the a posteriori realisation that the utopian socialist communes, settled in the new world around the mid-1700s, were able to establish themselves - acquiring large

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36   Alberto Geuna, Giulia La Delfa, and Niccolò Suraci, "Go West, Omu", *San Rocco 66* (Spring 2018): 62-68.

37   Liselotte Ungers, Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Communes in the New World, 1740 – 1972*, 101.

38   Liselotte Ungers, Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Communes in the New World, 1740 – 1972*, 20.

Fig. 15

The wreckage of an abandoned car in the landscape.
"Transparent" no. 5 (1971), 1. © Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft (UAA).

pieces of land at a good price - only because the land was made available as a result of the extermination and conquest of the native peoples, began in 1492 with the colonisation of the Americas. The different experiences of European utopian socialism are thus only possible thanks to the dystopia experienced by the Native Americans a few centuries earlier, in a similar manner to Thomas More's novel in which the island of Utopia is only made possible as a result of the colonisation and subjugation - by Utopo, after whom the island is named - of the inhabitants of Abraxa. The text can therefore be understood as an addition to the study of communes in the New World, a prologue, going on to mark the customs of the commune who first of all preceded the later ones: that of the American Indian people. In spite of years of abuse and oppression confined to small reservations "the 'communal' lifestyle of the Indians, in stark contrast to the 'American way of life' based on profit and competition, had survived. The Americans identified Indian collectivism as barbarism, while calling their way of life 'civilized'"[39].

All this was happening precisely at a time when, as Liselotte Ungers notes,

> In their own country, progressive immigrants and Americans were testing and realising both the teachings of early Christianity and socialism in the form of communes, because they found the roots of selfishness in private property competition and social injustice, while at that same time, politicians and officials had not the slightest doubt about the exclusive correctness of the capitalist system[40].

Although to a lesser extent than the '72 publication, in which her husband was personally involved, once again the author seems interested in how certain ideologies or social structures are reflected in the physical construction of communities, as the following excerpt suggests

> Pueblo - the Spanish word for village - serves as a designation for all small or large settlements found in New Mexico along the Rio Grande and in Arizona on the highlands, the mesas, although their inhabitants belonged to different Indian tribes and language families... Up to 5,000 people lived in these terraced buildings - America's first 'apartment complexes'[41].

This is why, among the few pictures accompanying the book, we find some photographs depicting more or less typical native dwellings or some plans showing the urban distribution of the settlements brilliantly named as "America's first apartment complexes or siedlung"[42] by Liselotte Ungers herself, in a similar way to what has been done with the publication *Kommunen in der neuen Welt*. The assumptions that fueled such a marked interest in the observation and

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39   Liselotte Ungers, *Die Rückkehr des Roten Mannes: Indianer in den USA* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1974), 54.

40   Ungers, *Die Rückkehr des Roten Mannes*, 55.

41   Ungers, *Die Rückkehr des Roten Mannes*, 18.

42   Ungers, *Die Rückkehr des Roten Mannes*, 121-125.

cataloguing of these settlements, seen as future suggestions and models for the development of new urban prototypes, are thus confirmed, as Pierluigi Nicolin confirms:

> There can be no doubt that the investigation of these collective enclaves—engaged in the laborious development of models of what they believed to be the perfect city - and the study of the interaction between ideology and architecture and between social planning and physical planning in the American utopian communities, stimulated the development of O. M. Ungers's architectural and urbanistic ideas[43].

A Retrospective for the Future

1977 was the year in which Ungers interrupted his teaching period in the United States and returned with his family to Germany, more precisely to Cologne. 1977 was also the year that saw the publication of what remains one of the most forward-looking and subversive urban manifestos of the last century *Die Stadt in der Stadt; Berlin, der Grüne Stadtarchipel*. The strength of the manifesto, and most probably the real reason why it is periodically rediscovered and studied, is that it lays the foundations for an alternative model of urban planning, in fact it was "One of the first manifesto projects to explicitly address the negative growth of cities, along with a number of other problems that have become only more pronounced since then"[44].

Ungers overturns the dominant paradigm of infinite growth - which is still at the basis of our economic, social and urban models today - and places the concept of degrowth, compression and reduction at the basis of his model of urbanism. This was the premise that allowed him to outline an alternative discourse to urban renewal, then at the core of the architectural debate, developing a model based on the contraction of the city that was diametrically opposed to that of urban sprawl or densification. "Any future "plan" for Berlin has to be a plan for a city in retrenchment"[45], this is how the manifesto laconically opens, once again the city of Berlin is chosen as a prototype for the development of future urban models. The real task of this proposal, however, lies in acting as a laboratory for future urban planning also in contexts that are different from the city of Berlin, since this is not the only city facing the dynamics of the so-called shrinking city. It is a model that stands as part of a scenario for a Zero-Growth- Europe.

And it is exactly this concept of degrowth planning that makes it, now more than ever, desirable as a contemporary model. As Ungers pointed out back in '77

43   Pierluigi Nicolin, "Kommunen in der neuen Welt: Looking for a New World," in *The Other Architect: Another Way of Building Architecture, ed.* Giovanna Borasi (Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture & Spector Books, 2015), 387.

44   Florian Hertweck and Sébastien Marot, *The City in the City Berlin: A Green Archipelago. A manifesto (1977) by Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas* (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2013), 9.

45   Hertweck and Marot, T*he City in the City Berlin*, 12. As reported by Florian Hertweck at that time Berlin could be defined as a shrinking city "The population numbers for Berlin fell only slightly between 1961-the year in which the Wall was built-and 1970 (from 2.187 million to 2.115 million), whereas the city lost approxi- mately 219,000 inhabitants by the end of the 1970s. This equates to a population decline of more than ten percent".

The present idea that inner-city areas can only be rehabilitated through more construction that restores a primordial state is counterproductive and should be exorcised. On the contrary: in the context of a program of selective deflation of urban pressure, even of a partial dismantling of malfunctioning parts of the present city, Berlin's human shrinkage offers a clear and unique opportunity to identify and 'weed out' those parts of the city that are now substandard, for architectural or other reasons, and to intensify and even complete the fragments that would be preserved. The remaining enclaves that are thus saved and disengaged would lie like islands on the otherwise liberated plain of the city, and form an archipelago of architectures in a green lagoon of natures[46].

At first glance, this proposal might remind the models of naturalist town planning, and among them the one proposed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Broadacres City on which Wright began working in 1931 and which continued to be implemented until his death in '59, can be taken as an emblematic example. Although the word "city" remains embedded in the concept, in practice the model suppresses any idea of the city that has been built up over the centuries, just as it suppresses the idea of the countryside that has always participated, although dialectically, in the definition of the city itself. Even though in a different way to what happens in other models, such as the aforementioned Friedman's Spatial City, Wright's model also makes use of a super-imposed grid. Thus this time the grid aims to accommodate the topography of the territory, it does not abandon the cartesian matrix made of a rational geometric fragmentation, remaining a form of tabula rasa that in this particular case forgets to level, flatten and standardise the conformation of the territory. The grid is based on the minimum unit of the acre, an essential space that every citizen should be able to possess. Within this grid, what is proposed is a decentralised, dispersed and therefore diffuse urbanism, a model of suburbanism or disurbanism. The functioning of this model is thus based on the assumption of a universal transport and telecommunications network equally extended and reproducible over the entire globe, which allows the circulation of people, goods, ideas within an ever-expanding system, of which the machine becomes the privileged vector. Therefore, the network of civil infrastructural works is fundamental, since without these, there would be no contact between the inhabitants of the Broadacre "community", who in fact live isolated in comfortable fences - of an acre in size - symbolising more an extreme individualism than a democratisation of living. This vision of the ideal city, as Ungers himself reports, has allowed the emergence of a widespread urbanisation model that

supported a dream which never can be realized for all except a small privileged society minority and it probably generates more frustration than satisfaction. The golden days of suburbia promoted by the early naturalist movement, presented in the most extreme form by Frank Lloyd

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46   Hertweck and Marot, *The City in the City Berlin* (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2013), 12.

Wright are gone…The traditional vision of Suburbia that once promised attractive homes and free life style for millions has reached a stage where it turned out to be: but an illusion"[47].

In the first instance, the plan for the city of Berlin proposed by Ungers is not a plan for a new city, but a plan for a city that already exists, a plan that speaks to us of care and reuse. In addition, the manifesto for the city of Berlin does not propose itself as universal, it does not propose a grid to superimpose on a territory, remaining anchored in a "concrete and creative temporality"[48]. Offering itself as a laboratory experiment in a given space and time, removes the recourse to a unique model in the fertile intuition that there will not be a typical city of the future but there will be as many as the particular cases. Again, we see how Ungers' particular rapport with the utopian medium transforms the manifesto into a hybrid work "oscillating between an evocation of a contemplative Utopia and a strategic arsenal of arguments for a project developed for a specific city in a given set of circumstances"[49], resonating with Karl Mannheim's thoughts. Similarly, the cities within the city, the islands, or as O.M. Ungers prefers to call them *the enclaves* do not constitute "an open urban system, in which many different places together form a diversified and complex urban environment. It is also, from a political and social point of view, a pluralist concept, in which many different ideological visions find their own places next to one another"[50].

It is finally clear that the manifesto is nothing more than the conclusion of a path and the synthesis of all the reflections conducted during the American decade: it is his ultimate proposal, his *Rational Utopia*, the model that after years of hypothetical imagined scenarios chooses to favor, and within which one cannot deny the fundamental importance played by the study of the communard utopia in America and elsewhere [Fig. 16,17,18].

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47   Oswald Mathias Ungers, "Biology and Society Lecture, January 4, 1971/Habitations: Alternatives in Mass Societies, or what is a home," Ungers-Archiv, 8-9.

48   Françoise Choay, *L'urbanistica in discussione, La città: utopie e realtà* (Turin: Einaudi, 1973), 58.

49   Hertweck and Marot, *The City in the City Berlin*, 25.

50   Hertweck and Marot, *The City in the City Berlin*, 96.

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Fig. 16,17,18

Settlements in comparison. All photos were taken by the Ungers.

Starting from the top:

The pueblo of Taos or as defined by Liselotte Ungers "America's first 'apartment complexes'" © Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft (UAA).

The Wolf Creek colony settlements of the Hutterites © Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft (UAA).

The Love Inn communal living © Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft (UAA).

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