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Rewriting History: O. M. Ungers' Radical Visions for Future Cities

Issue 12 of *HPA Histories of Postwar Architecture* on the topic of *Envisioning Tomorrow's Cities: O. M. Ungers' Urban Reflections* poses the question of the innovative power of German architect O. M. Ungers (1926-2007) in the 21st century. The question concerns the significance of Ungers' theory and practice under the changing conditions of climate-friendly development, the remodelling

Fig. 1

Bebauungsvariationen,
O.M. Ungers,
"Gutachten Ruhwald",
*Veröffentlichungen zur
Architektur*, no. 9 (August
1967).



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of the city, the problems of dealing with natural resources, global warming and changing models of living in general. The need to rethink the conception of architecture and the city calls for a review of possible orientation and especially for theoretical models as a basis for current practice.

To this end this issue of HPA proposes to turn once again to the work of Ungers and to investigate the visionary and experimental aspects that are hidden in his work and went unnoticed so far. The question is whether and how Ungers can serve as a starting point for new models and visions of the city of tomorrow. We asked our authors to unearth and bring to light those new aspects in the work of Ungers, that may serve as key concepts for the solutions in the current crises of the city.

We believe that Ungers' radical vision of future cities far exceeded the rational approach to form, morphology and urban transformation to which his work is too often reduced, despite his multifarious activities as a visionary architect, farsighted planner and scrupulous intellectual. Can Ungers' radicality be fruitful to the solution of today's problems?

The question is whether and how we can learn from Ungers today, how relevant is Ungers today, a good fifty years after the publication of *The City in the City: Berlin Green Archipelago*, the most original among the many groundbreaking investigations that Ungers undertook. When Ungers and his collaborators published this booklet, Berlin was a western outpost behind the Iron Curtain or an island in the archipelago of Soviet-dominated Eastern Bloc states. Berlin was still marked in an extreme way by the destruction of the war, it was economically marginalised, whereas it had previously been the largest industrial city in Europe.

Ungers' original contribution to the practice and theory of architecture of his time was that he made this very city the testing ground for his visions of the new city. Written as a memorandum for the Internationale Building Exhibition (IBA), that took place in Berlin 1987, it contains eleven theses on Berlin. In this text, one can read the essential differences between Ungers' vision and what is practised; Ungers speaks of context and talks about the poeticization of place and has tried to explain what he means. The idea is to develop the new plans and projects from what exists, from what Ungers calls "ontological". He is of the opinion that reality is as it appears and cannot be derived solely from historical examples, such as a loss or any utopia. At first everything appears destroyed and disconnected, so much so that it would almost be better to demolish everything because in reality there is no longer any internal connection, but a new reality can be created that re-establishes a new connection.

This is what Ungers means by an ontological design approach, he believes that a dialectical model can be viable: the dialectic between the new and the old, between the most diverse things, presenting the ruptures and inconsistencies with such severity that the elements of the city emerge more clearly. For Ungers, it is through this variety that greater richness is achieved in the city.

Let us take another look at Ungers, in the spirit of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the classic of world literature, to whom Ungers repeatedly referred: "That world history must be rewritten from time to time, there can be no doubt in our day. Such a necessity arises, however, not because much that has happened has been rediscovered, but because new views are given, because the contemporary of a progressing time is led to standpoints from which the past can be surveyed and judged in a new way."

Goethe is saying nothing more clearly here than that we must look back at history again and again and form our own picture of past facts. Not because new material has emerged or been discovered in the archives, but because our point of view has changed. It is enough that we look at history with different eyes from a new point of view and perhaps recognise things that we were blind to before, for which we previously had no concept or awareness. It is only the changed point of view that allows us to recognise the new in the old and that places current practice in a line of tradition.

For Ungers, the task of urban development is to finally understand the complementary character as the character of the city and to bring together the different ideas of the city into a common whole. The complementarity of different city models is already history, Berlin as a whole being the best example. The concept of the 'city within a city' actually emerged in Berlin from the study of historical development, Berlin was examined by Ungers according to various historical phases, from the beginnings of the two twin cities Berlin and Cölln, from the medieval and commercial city to the inner city of today. In Berlin, an association of cities was already established in the mid-18th century and this development continued. All of this overlapped over 700 years, and today there are traces and remains of all the great urban projects that could never really have been realised.

For Ungers, the thesis was always the ideal concept of the city, and the reality was always an antithesis that refuted this thesis: this is how the city has developed during centuries. Ungers said: You can see this very clearly in Berlin, and this is also what makes Berlin so fascinating. And if the city's storyline is written like this, then I see it as proof of my model of discontinuity. Moreover, the city proved that any totalitarian, exclusivist and exclusionary system was and is unsustainable.

It is in this regard that the work of Ungers constitutes an inexhaustible source of research and inspiration. Much of it has not yet been seen, explored and individuated. As it was Ungers' lifelong desire to catalogue and address all the possibilities of action in the field of the transformation of the built environment, whether it is landscape, public space, or a simple dwelling.

Hence, it is the duty of the later generations to look at Ungers' work with new eyes sharpened by the current cultural and architectural conditions. With Le Corbusier, we can say that we see differently and see other things than the generations before us. *Eyes that cannot see...* is one of the chapters in

Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* from 1923. This was Le Corbusier's reproach and at the same time invitation to architects to finally look at their time and history with open eyes.

But when we ask the question of Ungers' topicality today, we have to go one level deeper. A far more important question arises: to what extent is Ungers classic today – his theory, his experiments and his architecture. The term classical means precisely the opposite of outdated. Classicism refers to that which comes from the past but is still valid, which still concerns us today, with which we are still connected today, which is still part of our convictions and our practices, even though its origins lie in the past. Is Ungers a classic in this sense and in what sense and in what aspects is he still relevant today?

Ungers always had a sense for the clash of the classical and the contemporary, the eternally valid and the ephemeral. This is what characterises his modernity. He had a sense that the past forms the necessary substrate on which the transformations can take place in each generation. With Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, to whom Aldo Rossi repeatedly referred for his theory of permanence, one can state: Fortunately, the past never completely dies for man. He can forget it, but he always carries it within him. For at every epoch, he is only the product and the summary of all previous epochs. When he explores his soul, he can distinguish these different epochs by what they have left behind in him.

Fustel de Coulanges recognised the survival of past rites in the profane practices of subsequent generations. It can be added that this also applies to architecture. For this Rossi coined the term permanence. Permanence does not mean that everything has to live on and continue to exist physically; it often lives and works underground, invisible and hidden, but perhaps all the more effectively. Following on from this, the question of Ungers' continued existence arises in current debates on the practice and theory of architecture.

For this purpose, we have suggested the following binomials, that may offer new ways of looking at Ungers: utopia - dystopia, ecology - biodiversity, rhetoric - humanism, universality - Eurocentrism, morphology - transformation, post-modernism - posthumanism. The aim here was to provide key terms, that from today's point of view, offer ways to investigate Ungers' ideas of the city. The purpose is to define a range of possible cityscapes, helpful to establish a series of theoretical references and scenarios. The intention is not to celebrate a remote past in a rhetorical way, but to turn our attention to a design methodology based on an organic idea of the city.

The question is therefore to what extent Ungers is the basis for current architectural practice in an age that is now too quickly referred to as the Anthropocene. And conversely, today's point of view opens up a new perspective on Ungers, his theory and his practice. What are the aspects of Ungers that, in the spirit of Goethe and Fustel de Coulanges, could not be seen before, but which can be recognised today, if we look back to the second half of the 20th century from our current point of view and, with new eyes and a new sensibility, can recognise

things in Ungers that always existed there, but which are only now unfolding their relevance and topicality.

Ungers' text *The Urban Islands in the Ocean of the Metropolis. The new Berlin (xy): The pluralistic concept of the complementary 'urban archipelago' – planning for the future on historical soil*, here translated into English for the first time, is an essential point of reflection testifying to an idea of the city based on history in constant evolution, where fragments can find new meaning and where the rhetoric of urban repair, based on the prevailing idea of the city through block development, is strongly criticised. For Ungers, building on the edge of a block is only a certain idea of the city, after all, there were many other concepts, the garden city for example or Scharoun's utopian dream of Arcadia, and all these different ideas have the right to co-exist, they are complementary. The task of urban development for Ungers is to finally understand the complementary character as the essential feature of the city and to bring the different ideas of the city together into a common whole.

Ungers dwells on the fact that in urban planning, people had long been looking for ideas that would 'order' and 'unify' the city: 'These were the terms that were used: a terrible thought today. The city is not a village; only the village seeks unity, uniformity. The city, on the other hand, must be incoherent, discontinuous: this means something more than not having continuity'.

This concept of discontinuity, or rather *experimentation*, is well represented by the texts selected for this issue of the HPA journal, which through their variety illustrate, even if only partially, a universe of experimentation and research.

André Bideau essay *Shifting Agency in Berlin: a Critical Decade* represents an important synthesis of the experiments conducted by Ungers in Berlin, a city that served as a model for new themes at a time when the expressions and demands of social groups were appearing in the urban sphere. The experiences conducted by Ungers at TU Berlin and later at the Cornell Summer Academy highlight how the American experience was able to provide a new interpretation of the fragmented Berlin where the two Summer Academies organized by Ungers and his colleagues at Cornell University offered a lens for observing how external forces condition the knowledge gained by architects.

In her essay *The Possibility of an Island: Cold War Berlin as Charged Void, Landscape, and Mirage* Ioanna Angelidou thematizes *The City in the City: Berlin, the Green Archipelago*, that Ungers together with others authored in 1977, retrospectively from the preservationist interventions in Berlin in the 1980s and 1990s. Angelidou's intention is to sketch an alternative and enriched genealogy of this seminal text. Looking back to the 1970s Angelidou departs from the various attempts to reconstruct Berlin, in East Berlin before 1990 and in the reunified Berlin after 1990. Using the terms fraction, ruin, *spolia*, *lacunae*, and the unfinished, Angelidou reconstructs the key terms that Ungers refers to.

In *Rereading the Ungers: Utopian Realism as a Basis for Contemporary Urban Design* Chiara Ciambellotti provides an overview of the utopian thinking of

Ungers. She demonstrates how Ungers' utopian ideas arose on the one hand from a critique of the architecture practice of his time – particularly the modern capitalist consumer society – and on the other hand from a critical-historical perspective. In Ungers' concept of utopia, an idealistic and an operative dimension overlap. For the questions posed in this issue of HPA, Ungers' definition of utopia as a critical tool is particularly interesting. This distinguishes Ungers' concept of utopia from the utopian thinking of his contemporaries and makes it compatible with today's discussions about the future of the planet. It is commendable that, for the first time, Ciambellotti appropriately honours the role of Liselotte Ungers, who in her book *Die Rückkehr des Roten Mannes - Indianer in den USA* (The Return of the Red Man - Native Americans in the USA) addresses the fate of Native Americans in the context of the utopia of America as the land of freedom.

Simon Ganne and Benjamin Charvardès' contribution locates Ungers' innovative practice in the transition zone between modernism and postmodernism. They particularly emphasise the exchange of ideas between Europe and the USA, on which Ungers developed his experimental urban design. This includes themes such as The Urban Villa, Urban Garden, Großform, Archipel City and City within the City. Ganne and Charvardès pay particular attention to the International Building Exhibition Berlin IBA of 1987, which became a fruitful experiment for the reconstruction of the European city based on Ungers' preliminary work. They show how this can be fruitful for the city of the 21st century.

Michele Caja with the essay *From the Urban Island to the Insula. Morphological Variations around a Theme* considers the experiences in design and theory carried out by Ungers parallel to the idea of the Urban villa and Archipel City archipelago, moving from the idea of the urban island to the scale of the urban block, experimented through different projects, and based on morphological variations. Caja, recalling figures as Rem Koolhaas and Karl Friedrich Schinkel, focuses on the fact that the urban island is slowly transformed into an urban insula, as occurs in the critical reconstruction introduced during the Internationale Building Exhibition (IBA) in Berlin by Kleihues, of which Ungers was one of the main protagonists.

Eva Sollgruber's essay *Oswald Mathias Ungers and the Concept of the Open City: Grünzug Süd and the Beginnings of Ungers' Urban Thinking* introduces us to an urban project that represents a paradigm for explaining some of the essential concepts behind the Green Archipelago idea. The idea of *Großform* and the Planning criteria defined by Ungers help us understand the genesis of the urban projects, especially Grünzug Süd, that were born in a period, the 1960s, where his connection with the members of Team 10 was very strong. More specifically, Sollgruber intends to identify the correlations between Grünzug Süd and the projects created in the same period by Alison and Peter Smithson, thus shedding light on urban planning concepts that are still relevant today.

Closely related to the theme of *Großform*, Orsina Simona Pierini, in her essay *Tiles of space: Typology and Morphology in action Genealogy and legacy of the*

project for the Neue Stadt in Köln by Oswald Matthias Ungers, goes into the specifics of an exemplary project based on the relationship between body and space. Pierini's concern is to situate this project within a broader reflection on the residential unit, highlighting how the compositional principle of volume and space, stems already from some of Le Corbusier's projects and is a widespread theme in the critical reconstruction of the residential housing in postwar architecture. Through Jean Prouvé or Alison and Peter Smithson, but also Hejduk or SANAA, Pierini traces a genealogy that finds full relevance in contemporary design.

In conclusion, Gerardo Brown-Manrique's essay focuses on the third phase of Ungers' work, i.e. the phase after Ungers' return from the USA. At the centre are the morphological transformation processes of the city. Brown-Manrique's essay shows how today's debates about the city of the 21st century can connect to and learn from this part of Ungers' work. This is particularly true with regard to the theme of the collective unconscious, which is once again topical today in the context of debates on the relationship between human and non-human actors. The essay *The Dialectic City*, which Ungers wrote together with Stefan Vieth in 1997, deserves special mention here. For the morphological transformations of this third phase, Brown-Manrique focuses on the projects that Ungers created for the city of Trier. Trier was founded as a Roman city and is therefore particularly interesting for the issue of morphological transformation. In these projects, Ungers shows himself to be an innovator of the idea of urban morphology, which is something that can be taken up again today.