

EXPOSED PRÀXIS

DISPLAY

Exposed Pràxis. The Studio and Other Crypto-Exhibitions of Architectural Poetics and Intentions

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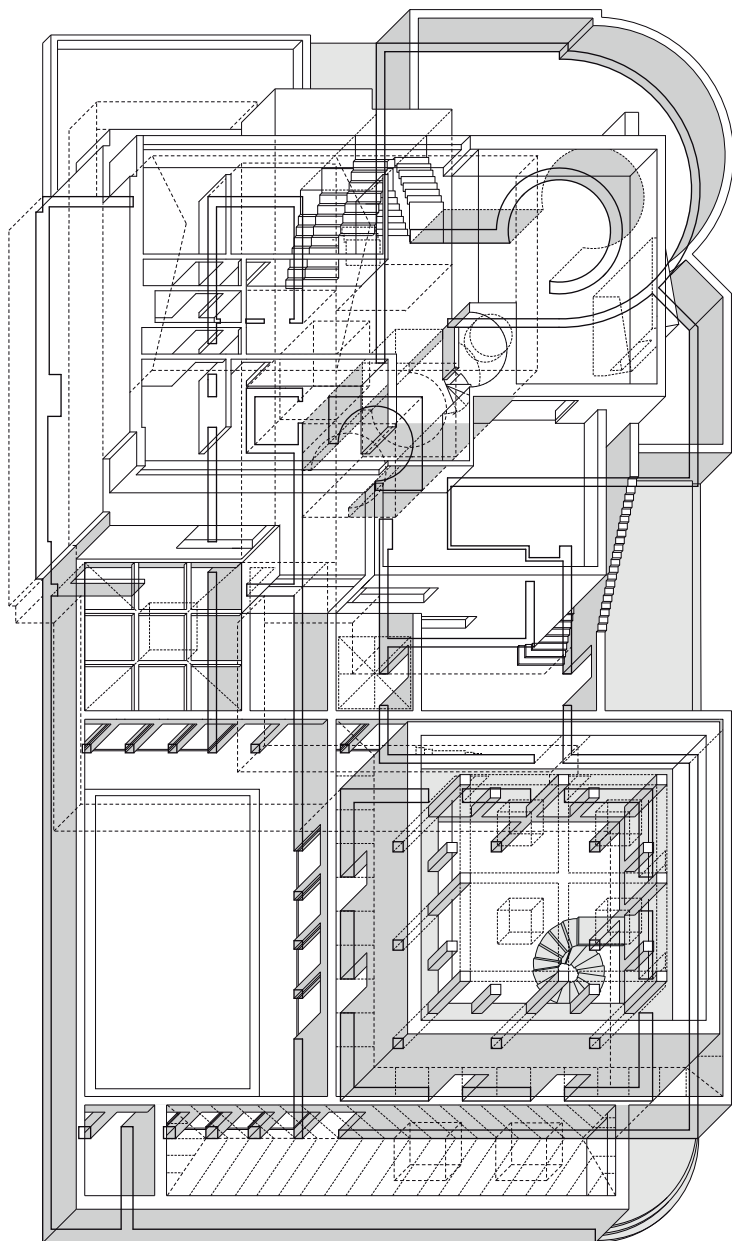
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Oswald Mathias Ungers. House in Belvederestraße

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Annalisa Trentin

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Between 1958 and 1959, Oswald Mathias Ungers designed and built the Belvederestraße house in Cologne-Müngersdorf, which was to be not only a home for himself and his family but also for his professional studio and two small apartments. The corner plot between Quadratherstraße and Belvederestraße presented several particularly restrictive characteristics that influenced the design: the adjacent building was characterised by a pitched roof with a timber tympanum, there was a need to respect the alignment of the façades, the orientation was defined as well as the prescribed height of the eaves and the depth of the construction. The conscious acceptance of all these limitations led to the realization of a strongly articulated house, mainly composed of independent elements. The new construction thus stood alongside the existing buildings, continuing the façade and following the visual image of the street, taking up the shape of the plot with a rounded structure on the corner and standing in continuity with the roof of the adjacent house.

The house on Belvederestraße is not, however, a construction determined by chance: Ungers aimed to define a new form of settlement, with a construction that was intended to transform the anonymously traditional surroundings – houses with pitched roofs, bow windows, cornices, graduations, accidental divisions of building lots – into an accentuated order, which is centred on itself with great strength and autonomy¹.

What Ungers built, expresses its essence not as a construction-object, as a simple block house, it is not only revealed by its façade, by the external view; only in being inside, in the celebration of living, is the significance of what is facing outwards revealed². “[...] Instead of being in front, being inside”, these are the words Ungers used to explain the spatial value of his architecture.

The location of the plot and the density of the construction of the adjoining houses precluded connecting the living spaces with

1. *Ein Werkstattbericht, Bauten und Projekte von O.M. Ungers*, in “Bauwelt”, n. 8, 22 February 1960, pp. 204-217.

2. U. Conrads, *FOCUS: Oswald Mathias Ungers*, in “Zodiac”, Edizioni di Comunità, n. 9, 1962, pp. 173-181.

the outside. The design therefore focused on minimising the outer space in favour of inner spatial compositions. Spaces are enlarged with inner courtyards and roof terraces, not visible from the outside; narrow and wide, high and low, closed and open spaces are here intertwined. From the outside, this spatial organism appears as a composition of cubic bodies, where the offsets and windows, as negative forms, are of equal importance to the positive bodies.

The detachment from the 'graphic' façade, with its voids, is constantly emphasised. There is no self-explanatory idea in this house, everything is related to the whole body. This multiplicity is also defined by a uniformity of material: red clinker and exposed concrete³. The Belvederestraße house is a massive, bodily architecture; a few years after the realisation of the house, Ungers, during the lecture he gave for his appointment as professor at the TU Berlin, stated that architectural conception revolves around two poles: body and space, that is, the making of spaces and the construction of bodies, which bound spaces; both of these processes are fundamental prerequisites of building. Building requirements may be different, whether we are talking about individual constructions or an entire city, but in any case, body and space always form the basic elements of architectural activity. Space in its formless reality, as a space of overall air, is something immaterial and has no visible expression in itself. A certain spatial form only occurs in the corporal demarcation. In the most general sense, architecture is nothing more than the demarcation of air space, visible from the smallest cell to the most complicated spatial construction⁴.

Some scholars, including Pevsner⁵, harshly criticised the design for the house in Belvederestraße, considering it to be without intellectual discipline and lacking in any connection, confusing

3. *Ein Werkstattbericht, Bauten und Projekte von O.M. Ungers*, op. cit.

4. O. M. Ungers, *Prinzipien der Raumgestaltung, Berufungsvortrag TU Berlin 1963*, in "Arch+", n. 65, October 1982, pp. 41-48.

5. N. Pevsner, *Moderne Architektur und der Historiker, oder die Wiederkehr des Historizismus*, in "db. Deutsche Bauzeitung", n. 10, October 1961, pp. 757-763.

freedom with arbitrariness. Ungers would reply that holding the principle of strict logical order as the only right one corresponds to the rationalistic way of thinking of our century and to an exaggerated aspiration for security, whereas:

The confusion of the impressions of reality, however, and the alarming contradictions of our environment dissolve traditional and classical thinking and feeling. The multiple externalities of individual objects manifest itself in an articulated, multi-layered and eventful architecture. In an architecture, which is in the condition of becoming and which rises, as it were, before our eyes, sketched and fragmented. It represents a process and not a result. Rather than proportion and symmetry, rhythm and movement take over.⁶

The house, that has now become an architectural museum⁷ included in the list of iconic 20th-century houses⁸, continues to transform itself: after the construction of the Kubus library, an addition of the nineties in the garden space to host the architect's extensive collection of volumes, it continues to fulfill different functions and uses, demonstrating its potential to be constantly exemplary and continuously in the making.

In the "Lotus International" article *From the Square to the Cube*⁹, Ungers writes that the brick house from the 1950s, with its plastic movement, and the new radical cube in black stone are connected

6. O. M. Ungers, *Aus einem Vortrag vor dem Akademischen Architektenverein in Hannover*, in "Baukunst und Werkform", Verlag Nürnberger Presse, Nürnberg, XIV, n. 8, August 1961, p. 426.

7. The UAA - Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft with the House in Belvederestraße is member of ICAM The International Confederation of Architectural Museums.

8. The House in Belvederestraße is part of the international network ICONIC HOUSES connecting architecturally significant houses and artists' homes and studios from the 20th-century that are open to the public as house-museum.

9. O. M. Ungers, *From the Square to the Cube. Oswald Mathias Ungers's Home Library*, in "Lotus", n. 72 Architecture of Criticism, 1992.

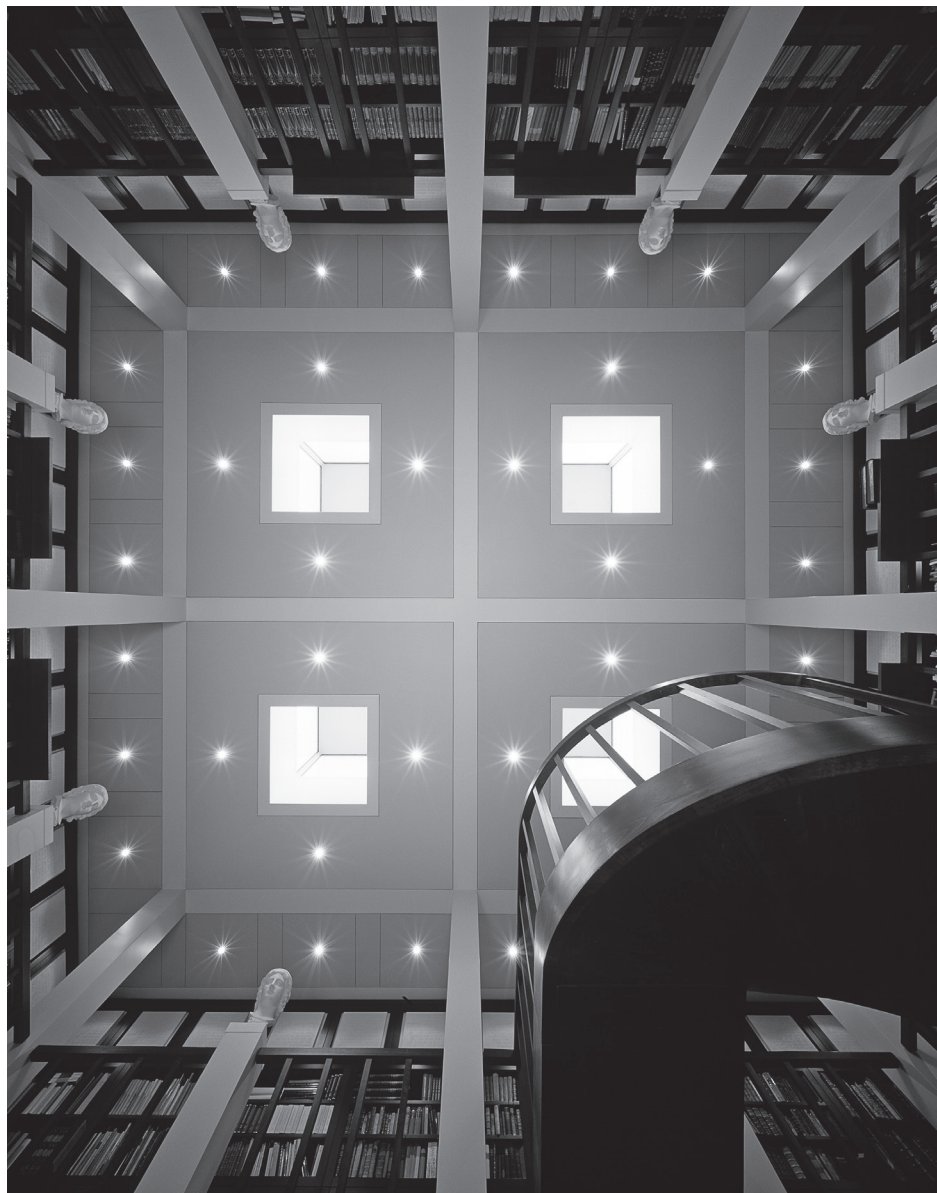
to each other like inhalation and exhalation. They exist together as part of a single process. One is a commentary and completion of the other. Together, the two architectures constitute an architectural microcosm with complex relationships where spaces and bodies complete and contradict each other. Here we find the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*: a system of two buildings serves as a paraphrase of city construction that developed throughout history through a discontinuous growth process, and therefore inherently contradictory, yet going on to constitute the urban unicum, with its axes, its insulae, and its monuments.

We can consider the Kubus library an experiment with different recurring themes in Ungers' work: the building represents the theme of incorporation with a precise reference to an urban structure that can contain buildings and squares within itself, which in turn contain internal courtyards and spaces that articulate into increasingly smaller units. The immediate reference is understood as an expression of the house-within-a-house phenomenon. In this sense, Ungers references history, returning to construction principles, to the archaic hut, to the temple where the sanctuary cell was found in the innermost core, then surrounded by a colonnade which in turn was in a consecrated area defined by external perimeter walls. In Ungers' latest architectures, there is a desire to make evident the elementary concept in a direct reference to Arthur Schopenhauer's (1788-1860) metaphysical idea regarding reality and worldview, the *Weltanschauung* as a will to make visible and evident the profound meaning of things. Architecture is reduced to the mere idea of building, stripped of any adjectives, finding a simplified language to return to the pure essence of geometric form. Ungers seeks to unite in his architecture the primacy of idea with the primacy of form. The Kubus is a library that contains the architectural knowledge of the West: rare books, museum pieces, theories and images of architecture, and is simultaneously an image and reproduction of perfect geometry. A black cube divided into four parts like the Roman castrum and the idea of the city intersected by main road axes, cardo and decumanus. The Kubus contains the stratification of things: in the basement is placed the archive with all of Ungers' writings and

projects, on the courtyard level is the personal study of the architect and his wife Liselotte, onto which four doors open representing the four cardinal points, above which are placed the plans of as many symbolic cities. The walls are marked by the square rhythm of bookcases. Supporting the gallery is a naked skeleton of architecture, a 6 x 6 x 6 metres lattice that takes on universal meanings, a white structural grid repositing the horizontal and vertical lines of universal order. From the gallery, eight identical heads bearing the names of as many Enlightenment figures from the French Revolution guillotined on the same day, work by Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006), look toward the central space. This library contains the idea of architecture according to OMU, that architecture that was reducing itself to pure essence, like Samuel Beckett's last written work: *Quadrat I+II* (1981), where four figures move along imaginary diagonals, from light to dark. James Knowlson writes in *The life of Samuel Beckett*¹⁰ that a non-verbal work for four dancers was the natural development of Beckett's interest in choreography and his radical distrust of language. Beckett indeed spoke of his "difficulty in writing any word now without having the profound impression that it was a lie". Ungers' interest also pushed with Kubus and five years later with the house in 58 Kämpchensweg, toward increasingly radical choices. The forms have become pure volumes of neutral objectivity, defined as non-sentimental, reducing architecture to pure intellectual sign linking architecture to art. An experimentation of sculpture as architecture, in reference to artworks hosted in 60 Belvederestraße, *Lines in four directions* (1982) by Sol Lewitt or *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* (1927) by Piet Mondrian whose words could have been pronounced by Ungers himself: "contemplating, seeing plastically is truly very important: the more we are able to see plastically the immutable, the universal, the more insignificant the mutable and individual becomes for us"¹¹.

10. J. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, Touchstone Books, New York 1997.

11. H. Holtzman, M. S. James, *The New Art, the New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, G.K. Hall & Co, Boston 1986.



The Kubus library.

Photo by Stefan Müller, © UAA Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft.



The atelier's activity in the 1960s.
Photo by Walter Ehmann, © UAA Ungers Archiv für
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The workspace; © UAA Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft.



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