

Oswald Mathias Ungers at Belvederestrasse: Self-portrait in the Studio

By Martina D'Alessandro *

Planning implies a double register of actions. On the one hand the architect establishes a dialogue with the reality, performing a maieutic action that allows him to arrive to an epiphany concerning the context's deepest meanings. On the other hand, the obstetrical role of the architect is propaedeutic to the creative act of designing that, in the poietic impetus, pushes the architect towards the definition of a dynamic continuum of renewed principles. In the tension between maieutic and poietic, between autonomy and heteronomy of the architectural discipline, the nature of architecture is rooted. Working with the interdisciplinary dimension of architecture corresponds to the opportunity of drawing a cultural self-portrait, of which it is possible to decrypt the traits through the patient scanning of images, photographs, objects collected in the memorabilia. Individuals like Oswald Mathias Ungers (1926-2007) express, in an extraordinarily clear and fascinating way, the attitude of working within architecture through other disciplines. OMU arrives on the scene of architectural culture not only for his works and his theoretical contributions, but also for the importance of his art and rare books private collection. The collected artworks are matrixes at the basis of his architectures, they reflect his ideas through the free tools of art. Ungers' studiolo, built in his house in Belvederestrasse in Cologne, assumes the value of a place of retreat in an ideal and inscrutable spot, in which Ungers can study his art collection and reflect on the cultural matrixes of his architecture. The thesis that this essay wants to explore is the relationship between OMU's architecture and the system of references to the sister arts of architecture, considering the Kubus-Haus as a paradigm of this interdisciplinary interweaving based on suggestions, analogies, similarities, connections and overlaps, that have created a general and complicated system akin to a palimpsest.

Introduction

In architecture the act of *designing* is the projection of rational and inventive capacity on reality, it is the synthesis of a cognitive process that comprehends references, experiences, personal memories and collective history in a future-oriented continuous progress and creative action. Planning implies a double register of actions. Architect establishes a dialogue with the reality, performing a maieutic action that allows him to arrive to an epiphany concerning the context's deepest meanings. This maieutic attitude presupposes the acknowledgement of a reality, consisting of objects, places, traditions, histories and experiences, with whom it is necessary to establish a dialogue and from which it is possible to extrapolate principles, references and meanings. The obstetrical role of the architect is

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propaedeutic to the creative act of designing that, in the poietic impetus, pushes the architect towards a future time and defines his intent to establish a dynamic *continuum* of renewed principles. Architect's nature, which is bipolar in some way, is rooted in the tension between maieutic and poietic, between past and future. The architect is focused on acting as keeper of values of the past while he tries to become the engine of change, projected towards the future. If it is hard to ignore history, it is unavoidable to interpretate it. Architects and theorists have always dealt with the relationship between history and project, which is the guiding principle of the artistic and architectonic discipline. Geometries, that have defined hierarchical relationships between these two parts, have been articulated over time, sometimes they have delineated the project's dependence on the historical experience, other times they have been focused on the quest for a formal and linguistic outcome of a new architecture which apparently seems to be detached from history. The point of view on the actual situation, on the architectural design, intended as a leap into the past, through the present and with a future perspective, depends on the way history is interpreted. Personal and collective dimensions, individual memories and historical awareness are intertwined in the architectural design, in a complex and articulated set of relations. When facing a project, the architect does not limit himself to the knowledge of the history and the place he is working on. He is called to work on reality using personal and individual tools and interpretations. As John Berger says, the way we see the world is influenced by what we know or believe.¹

Since his education, every architect should build his own personal and intimate *toolbox*, provided with all the useful tools to read and interpretate the reality, both physical and conceptual, both present and future, following many cultural and compositional principles. Building such an archive of *memorabilia* means defining the genetic material of one's own thinking, as the foundation of a new and necessary system that does not erase what was before it but, indeed, it draws the continuity with the past, which dwells in every new mark. This genetic structure represents the narrative of choices and the genesis of thoughts that guide knowledge, starting from what we have decided to include or exclude from our own cultural system.

It is an open and variable archive, which is fluid in its inclusiveness towards different memories and dissimilar selection criteria that build it up over time. Building an archive of memories is, first of all, a selective and critical act. Every individual, and every architect, chooses what is carrier of primary meaning, separating what is to keep in mind from what is necessarily to forget. Immediately after that, the theme of conservation is the one to discuss. The chosen element is detached, suspended and isolated from its original space and timeframe, in order to assume the role of witness of a value, that is worthy to be led in a future time and space. The selective and conservative action transforms the object into a find, a relic, giving it a surplus of meanings compared to the original semantic ordering.

1. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 10.

Working with memory corresponds to the opportunity of drawing a cultural self-portrait, of which it is possible to decrypt the traits through the patient scanning of images, photographs, objects collected in the *memorabilia*. For some architects, places of the memory are actual spaces where they can nourish their knowledge and they can generate architecture. Individuals like Oswald Mathias Ungers (1926-2007) express this attitude to work with memory in a remarkably clear and fascinating way. Oswald Mathias Ungers arrives on the scene of architectural culture not only for his works and his relevant theoretical contributions, but also for the importance and the peculiarity of his art and rare books private collection, still relatively unknown to reviewers. The collected artworks are matrixes at the basis of his architectures, they reflect and depict his ideas through the free tools of art.² Ungers' *studiolo*, built (1989-90) in his house in Belvederestrasse (1958-59) in Cologne, assumes the value of a place of retreat in an ideal and inscrutable spot, in which Ungers can study his art collection and reflect on the cultural matrixes of his architecture.³ The cube-library changes the antiquarian attitude of the *amateur*, the connoisseur that collects documents, into the construction of an actual *theatrum memoriae*. This strongroom of memory and ideas is held by two fundamental principles: the first one is a systematic-encyclopaedic vision of architectural facts that is increasingly extending to universal dimensions whilst the second one is the tenaciously pursued will to reactivate and give life to the whole corpus through a hermeneutical device. This process is made possible by a radical use of the analogy.⁴

Through heteronyms use of memory, the architect builds his own self-portrait just talking about other people that influenced him: masters, philosophers, painters, sculptors, photographers, directors. Passions, encounters and clashes have had their influence on the architect's training and have nourished, yesterday and today, his architecture in many different ways. Images, books, principles, relics create an accurate and intimate auto-heterography,⁵ a personal and private laboratory where the mind is fed and architecture is generated. Among the meshes of correspondences that, in a delicate balance that is neither immediate nor easy to read, bring together the more rational components of the author's research into form and the emotional and metaphysical aspects of the works of art he collects, a harmony emerges between art-space-idea, between reason and imagination. Ungers is not only familiar with some contemporary artistic experiments, but also shares the theoretical conceptions from which they derive. He constructs a process of gradual refinement of ideas in spaces and forms in which art is an *active* component. This point of tangency

2. The conquest of space, the way of modelling the space through the shape represents the point of contact between collected artworks by Ungers and his architectures. The evidence of the strong figurative, compositional and theoretical relation between art and architecture is clear in the analogies between Ungers' design researches and artistic paths of the main exponents of conceptual art, such as Gerhard Merz (1947), Donald Judd (1928-94), Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) and Gerhard Richter (1932).

3. Jasper Cepl, *Oswald Mathias Ungers. Eine intellektuelle Biographie* (Colonia: Walther König, 2007), 470-472.

4. Pierluigi Nicolini, "Forza della Prussia!" *Domus*, no. 670 (March 1986): 10.

5. It refers to the reading of Giorgio Agamben, *Autoritratto nello Studio* (Milano: Edizioni Nottetempo, 2017).

identifies an *interstitial space*⁶ that puts two distinct dimensions into dialogue according to spatial overlaps and visual connections in a general and stratified system of relations. The thesis I intend to explore is that the relationship between art and architecture is positive and creative, in which the artistic element, while not representing the unique and necessary component for understanding architectural spaces, expresses a system of connections that refers to spiritual values, to other dimensions, complementary in the complex path that leads to the architectural project.

This investigation is focused on identifying certain points of contact between these two worlds, heteronomies and design, taking as its starting point the design for the Kubus-Haus library in Cologne. This building, thanks to its character and conformation, provides an opportunity to identify the relationships that link the genesis of Ungers' architecture to the system of heteronyms that the author keeps in the building. The presence of the books that OMU surrounded himself with, first editions and the incunabula of architectural theory, created an atmosphere that both inspires and demands⁷ (Figure 1).

As Giorgio Agamben writes, "in the disorder of the sheets and books opened or piled up one on top of the other, in the disarranged postures of the brushes, colours and canvases leaning against the wall, the studio preserves the minutiae of creation, records the traces of the laborious process that leads from power to action, from the writing hand to the written sheet, from the palette to the canvas. The studio is the image of power - the power of writing for the writer, the power of painting or sculpting for the painter or sculptor."⁸ Trying to describe Ungers' studio therefore means trying to describe the modes and forms of his own poiesis.

6. The term "interstitial space" alludes to that limbo-space which describes the system of relations of passage from one dimension, that of architecture, to another, that of art, trying to indicate an appropriate translation of the meaning of the German word "Zwischenräume".

7. Cepl, "Ungers and His Books. The Library as a Collection of Ideas," in *O. M. Ungers. Cosmos of Architecture* (ed.) Andres Lepik (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 34.

8. Agamben, *Autoritratto nello studio*, 13. Our translation. Original text: "Nel disordine dei fogli e dei libri aperti o ammassati l'uno sull'altro, nelle posture scomposte dei pennelli, dei colori e delle tele appoggiate al muro, lo studio conserva le minute della creazione, registra le tracce del laborioso processo che porta dalla potenza all'atto, dalla mano che scrive al foglio scritto, dalla tavolozza alla tela. Lo studio è l'immagine della potenza - della potenza di scrivere per lo scrittore, della potenza di dipingere o scolpire per il pittore o lo scultore".



Figure 1. *Library Cube, View from the Corner of Quadrather Straße, 1989*
Source: Martin Kieren, *Oswald Mathias Ungers*, 1997.

Literature Review

Architectural critics have taken an ever-increasing interest in Ungers' work, be it in stone or in words, over the last decades, exploring its value from many different perspectives. There are numerous publications dealing with Ungers' architecture, both in Germany and worldwide. They are primarily aimed at the investigation of the architect Ungers, studied through monographs, monographic publications on specific built projects and critical essays published in the most important European specialist magazines commenting on the broad spectrum of buildings designed by the architect. The themes explored in this research touch on the entirety of the topics on which OMU's architectural poetics is built. His cultural and architectural training, his reflections on the city and urban design, the theoretical structure of his architecture, as well as its content, form and language are the aspects through which critics have broken down, analysed and interpreted Ungers' research on architecture.⁹

The relationship between art and architecture in the work of Ungers is investigated through contributions concerning the character of Ungers' private collection of artworks and rare books, including the essay *Eine Privatbibliothek in Köln- Müngersdorf*¹⁰ (1991), *The Visit to the Architect's House*¹¹ (2006), *Ungers and His Books*¹² (2006), *The Collection of Architectural Models*¹³ (2006) and the catalogue *O. M. Ungers. Kosmos der Architektur*¹⁴ (2006) in which all the works of art from the Ungers collection are shown on the occasion of the retrospective exhibition of the master's work held at the Neue National Galerie in Berlin in 2006.

A series of publications explored the theme of collaboration between architect and artists in the composition of architectural projects, such as the catalogue *Oswald Mathias Ungers, Gerhard Richter, Sol LeWitt*¹⁵ (1991) on the Hypo-Bank project in Düsseldorf (1988), the essay *Dach des Wissens*¹⁶ (1992) on the Badische

9. Jasper Cepl's biography not only accomplishes the enormous feat of completing the bibliography on the author, but also reveals another important point of view from which to view the figure of Ungers. Jasper Cepl, *Oswald Mathias Ungers. Eine intellektuelle Biographi*, 2007.

10. Werner Strodthoff, "Eine Privatbibliothek in Köln-Müngersdorf," *Bauwelt*, no. 16 (1991): 830-833.

11. Stephanie Tasch, "The Visit to the Architect's House. The Art Collection of Oswald Mathias Ungers," in *O. M. Ungers. Cosmos of Architecture*, 18-29.

12. Cepl, "Ungers and His Books," 30-39.

13. Oliver Elser, "The Collection of Architectural Models, Based on His Own and Historical Designs," in *O. M. Ungers. Cosmos of Architecture*, 40-53.

14. Ungers Archive für Architekturwissenschaft, *O. M. Ungers. Kosmos der Architektur* (Düsseldorf: Die Qualitaner, 2006).

15. Katharina Hegewisch, *Oswald Mathias Ungers, Gerhard Richter, Sol LeWitt* (Düsseldorf: Hypobank, 1991).

16. Noemi Smolik, "Dach des Wissens," in *Die Badische Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe. Eine Projekt der Staatlichen Hochbauverwaltung*, ed. Finanzministerium Baden-Württemberg (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1992), 52-61.

Landesbibliothek in Karlsruhe (1980-1991) and the essay *Kunst*¹⁷ (1995) on the project for the German Ambassador's Residence in Washington D.C. (1982-1995).

A recent contribution on this aspect is Martin Kieren's essay, *Konstellationen-Monologe*¹⁸ (2009), in which he makes an interesting reflection on the surrealist component of Ungers' work.¹⁹

Studiolo

Kubus-Haus has been realized as an extension of his home-studio in Belverderstrasse in Cologne, which was built during the 1950s.

At first there was no library in Ungers' house. The books were stacked in a corner of the living room. His collection grew only gradually, especially during his time as professor in Berlin and Cornell. The books, and works of art, received their own room only after Ungers had returned from the USA, when the two bachelor apartments in the house were converted. The two rooms of the upper apartment were turned into a library room; the lower apartment became the studio²⁰ (Figure 2).

Later, Ungers would build his own library (1989-90). As Cepl wrote, "the villa was transformed into a small city within the city, surrounded by walls – in a way, it became a small Villa Adriana."²¹

Reading the famous essay that Ungers wrote in 1979, which anticipated the Kubus-Haus project by a decade, it is possible to trace the author's self-heterographical intentions, which are at the basis of the library project. "Hadrian's villa is the first evidence of an architecture of memory, collecting set-pieces from history, that had left traces in his mind, juxtaposing temples and canals from Egypt, caryatids from Greece, and places described in myths and sagas. The central place of the villa is the library, Hadrian's retreat, a place filled with the 'knowledge of antiquity'. The villa reassembles the idea of an ideal city, a humanist city, a place for the arts and sciences, a miniaturized Universe, where humanist ideals are gathered in a 'classical' environment. In the same sense as the villa relates to events of the past it acts as a model for the future – not as a purist statement or a homogeneous system – but as a place filled with memories of the collective, as an

17. Sophia Ungers, "Kunst/Art," in *Deutsche Botschaft Washington, Neubau der Residenz-German embassy Washington, the new residence* (ed.) Oswald Mathias Ungers (Stuttgart: Gerd Hatje, 1995), 41-55.

18. Martin Kieren, "Konstellationen-Monologe. O. M. Ungers rationale Versuche, falschen Problemstellungen aus dem Weg zu gehen/Confirgurazioni-Monologhi. Tentativi razionali di O. M. Ungers per evitare una formulazione sbagliata dei problemi," in *Die Idee der Stadt/L'idea della città* (ed.) Uwe Schröder (Tübingen-Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 2009), 14-53.

19. On the relationship between art and architecture in Ungers' work, the author has published several contributions, including Martina D'Alessandro, "O.M.Ungers: la sinestesia tra arte e architettura. Il progetto per le Kaiserthermen di Trier," in *Il progetto di architettura fra didattica e ricerca* (ed.) Claudio D'Amato (Bari: Polibapress/Arti grafiche Favia, 2011), 361-370; Martina D'Alessandro, "Architettura come opera d'arte. Arte e architettura nell'opera di Oswald Mathias Ungers," in *OMU/AR. Un laboratorio didattico* (ed.) Annalisa Trentin (Bologne: Clueb, 2010), 82-89.

20. Cepl, "Ungers and His Books," 34.

21. Cepl, "Ungers and His Books," 34.

object full of secrets and surprises, a “monumentum memoriam”, as in the Latin sense of the word “moneo”, meaning to “remember”²² (Figure 3).

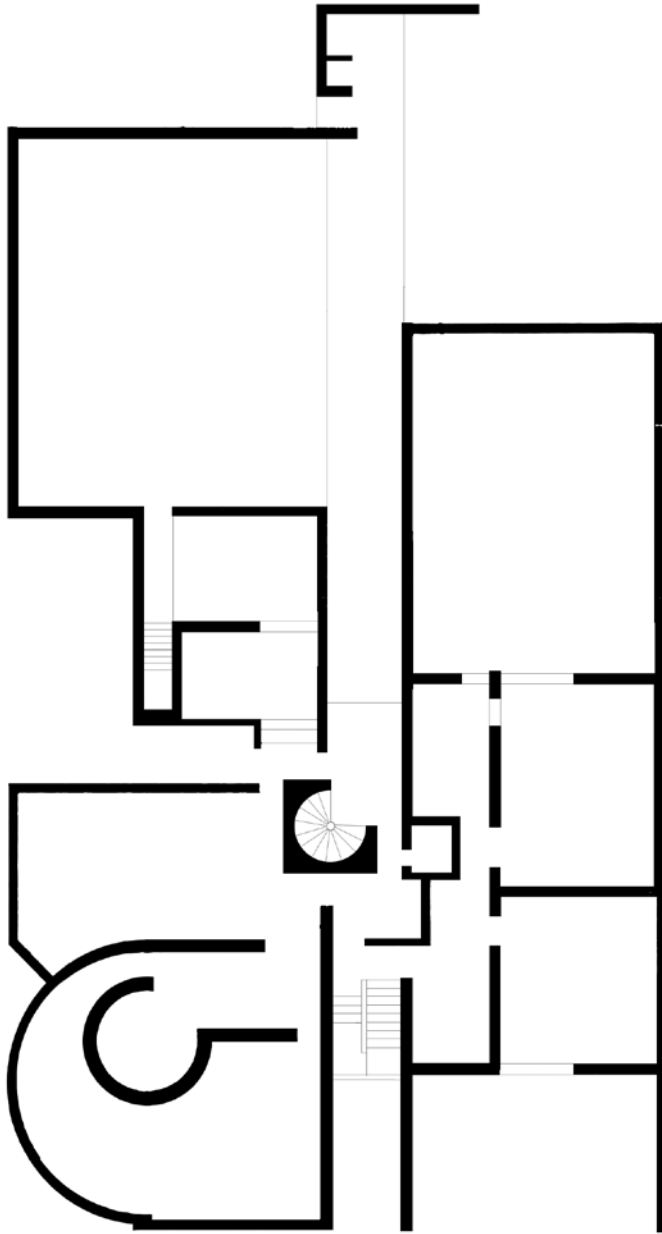


Figure 2. *Belvederestrasse Home Plan, Before the Intervention, until 1989*

Source: Martina D'Alessandro, 2021.

22. Oswald Mathias Ungers, “The Architecture of Collective Memory,” *Lotus International*, no. 24 (1979): 7.

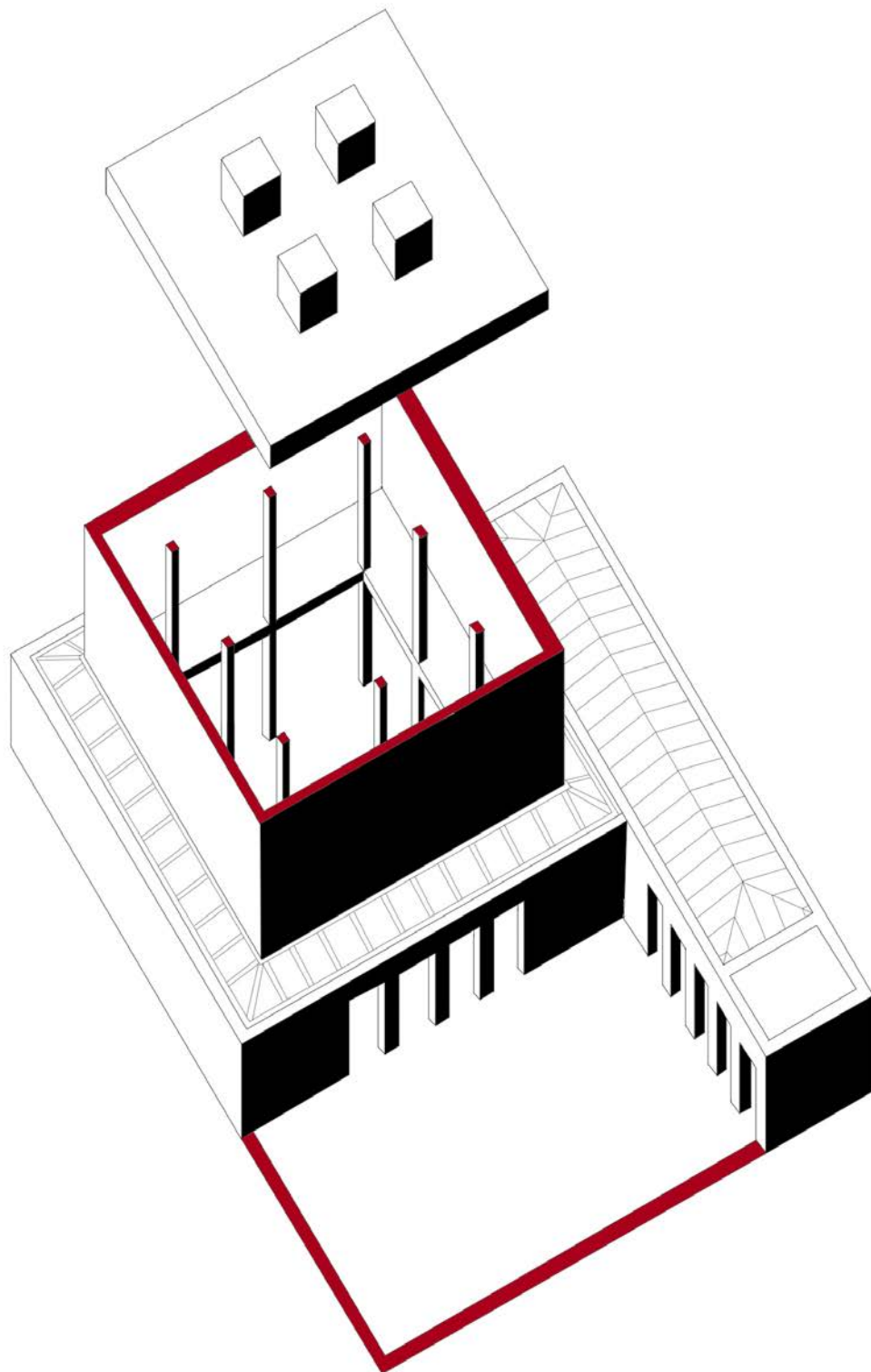


Figure 3. *Kubus-Haus Axonometry*
Source: Martina D'Alessandro, 2021.

When Ungers built its library in 1989, he imagines it as a such a private retreat and reservoir of knowledge, a kind of platonic architecture for his own *theatrum memoriae*. Ungers design a place for his books and art collection and he regards it at the same time as an attempt to gather in it the basic ideas of architecture. The pure volume, which is an abstract and platonic cube, is the space where art and architecture physically coexist and ideally converge. Here we can find the compositional principles that have nourished Ungers' architecture: embedding, transformation and abstraction. In this building art and architecture are two sides of the same Janus coin. The small hearth of the Kubus library in Cologne becomes the theatre of this *interstitial space* between art and architecture: Ungers, by drawing this place, turns the idea of *Zwischenräume* in a built reality.²³

As already mentioned, the library is an extension of the family home. As critics have often pointed out, Ungers establishes a contradictory relationship between the library project and the original structure of the house, following a Cusan *coincidentia oppositorum*.²⁴ Before the extension, the house on Belvederestrasse had a system of gardens and outdoor areas protected by massive brick walls at the rear of the plot. On this sequence of free spaces Ungers inserted a new volume which, though dialectically opposed in form and compositional structure to the existing house, represents a completion defining a heterogeneous but unitary system.

The library is composed of an articulated succession of spaces and volumes. It is often identified with the black cube that occupies the rear of the house. Although the cubic volume is the most massive element of the extension and forms the compositional core of the library, the spatiality of the intervention is composed of a constellation of spaces and volumes. A glance at the architecture of Villa Adriana in Tivoli is evident in this succession of open and built-up spaces.

The compositional structure of the library follows a centripetal and centrifugal approach at the same time: the courtyard with its six columns and the small rectangular volume embraces the central square, completing its overall figure. Similarly, the punctual openings of the square space open up the library to precise framings of the outside space, giving the inner core dynamic and changing spatial depths.

The courtyard outside houses a series of contemporary art installations, including Bruce Nauman²⁵ (1941) and Günther Förg²⁶ (1952-2013), which metaphorically amplify the echo of the collection housed within the library beyond Ungers cosmos (Figure 4). The pavilion next to the black cube, accessible both from the courtyard outside and from inside the library, houses a space dedicated to the models of timeless architecture that Ungers commissioned to the artist Bern Grimm (1962):

23. Oswald Mathias Ungers, "Zwischenräume," in *O. M. Ungers: Zwischenräume* (eds.) Anja Sieber-Albers, and Sophia Ungers (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1999), 7.

24. Ungers often refers in his theoretical work to the texts of German philosophers of the mid-fifteenth century, including Nikolaus von Kues (1401-1464). Ungers refers to this philosopher especially with regard to the theory of *Coincidentium Oppositorum*, the central theme of his work *De docta ignorantia* (1440), in which Nikolaus von Kues develops the notion of convergence and coincidence of opposites, which Ungers takes as the philosophical matrix of his project method.

25. Bruce Nauman, *Square*, 1977/88, steel.

26. Günther Förg, *Ohne Titel*, 1988, bronze.

white plaster models of OMU projects are directly juxtaposed with models of historical buildings that represent Ungers' idea of architecture.²⁷ This room of plaster casts, completely white inside and leaning against the perimeter walls of the house, is configured as a bare space, a background against which to cast the shadows of the models on display. The zenithal light that spreads throughout the space contributes to giving this space a courtly and platonic atmosphere (Figure 5). The nucleus of this miniature city is the block housing the library itself.

Access to the library is only from the inside of the house along a path that tangentially touches one side of the square and aligns the internal path that connects the distribution and ascension system of the house. The volume of the library is a cube. Divided into three levels, the basement houses the bibliography about OMU, with the complete collection of his writings and critical texts on his work. The ground floor houses the library, which is double-heightened up to the roof of the building.

The compositional system responds to a radical application of the principle of incorporation, already experimented by Ungers in other projects such as the Hotel Berlin in Berlin (1977), the German Museum of Architecture in Frankfurt am Main (1979-84), the Solar House (1980) and the Baden Regional Library in Karlsruhe (1980-84) (Figure 6).

As he Ungers wrote in an essay, "The theme of the doll inside the doll or – to put in another way – of the Russian Easter egg, describes a phenomenon that plays a role in other fields as well, in psychology for example, and is in no way limited to architecture. In fact, this concept encompasses many realities and can be seen both from a formal and from a conceptual point of view. Its fascination lies in the observation that it contains an element of continuity whose end cannot be conceived. An object that continues to turn up inside another object describes a sequence which could theoretically carry on indefinitely, a continual process that is no longer intelligible in logical terms."²⁸ In the Kubus-Haus, Ungers applies the incorporation of spaces that are transformed into each other according to an endless continuity, a metaphor for the power of the knowledge that the library contains.

The outer shell is a black, hermetic volume that clings to the boundaries of the house. The few openings Ungers allows are on the inside towards the inner courtyard. No people enter this material shell through doors and passages, no light enters through windows. It is a volume that responds solely to the compositional theme of the building and the three-dimensional dimension of the outer box.

27. The models, made by Bernd Grimm and kept in the private library in Belvederestrasse in Cologne, reproduce some of the most important monuments in the history of architecture: Parthenon (447-438 BC), scale 1:50; Mausoleum of Halicarnassus (c. 370-350 BC), scale 1:66; Pantheon (118-128 AD), scale 1:50; Castel del Monte of Frederick II (1240-1250), scale 1:70; Small Temple of San Pietro in Montorio by Donato Bramante (1502), scale 1:15; Newton's Cenotaph by Etienne Louis Boullée (1784), scale 1:400.

28. Oswald Mathias Ungers, "The Doll Within The Doll. Incorporation as an Architectural Theme," *Lotus International*, no. 32 (1982): 15.

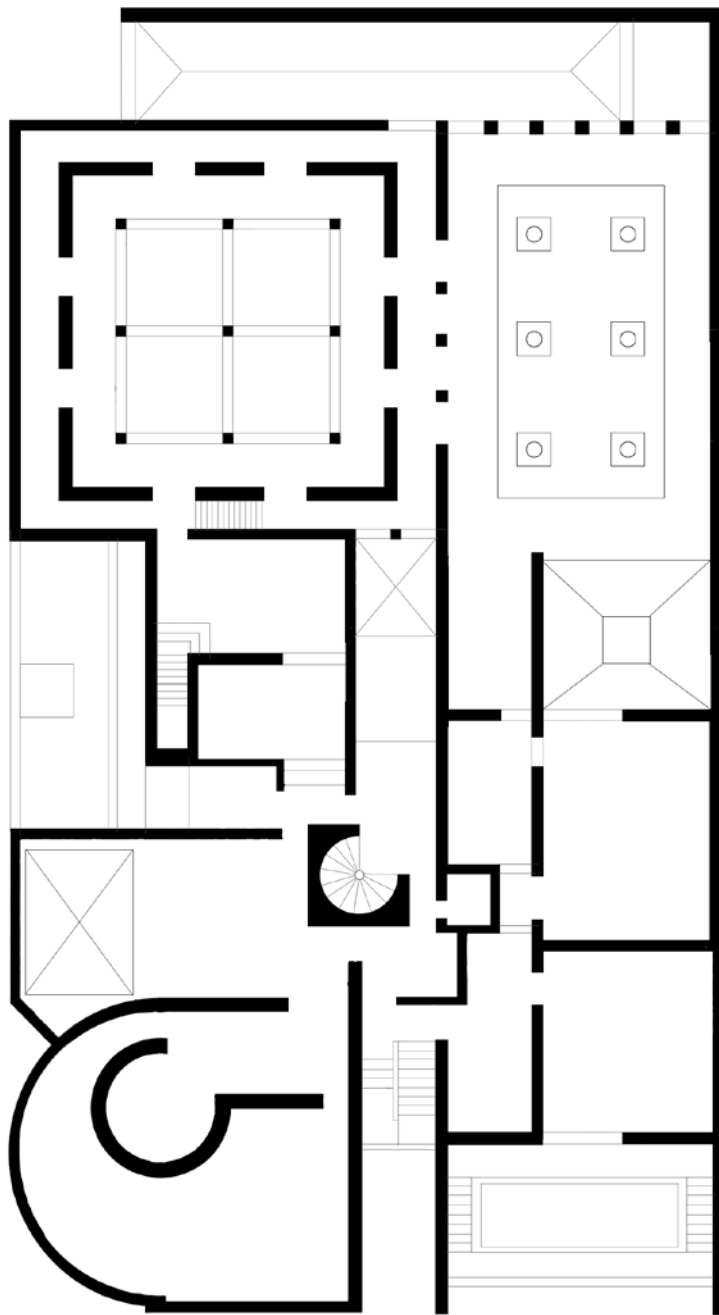


Figure 4. *Kubus-Haus Intervention Plan*
Source: Martina D'Alessandro, 2021.



Figure 5. *Glasshutte Studio Haus Models Room*
Source: Jasper Cepl, Ungers and his books, 2007.

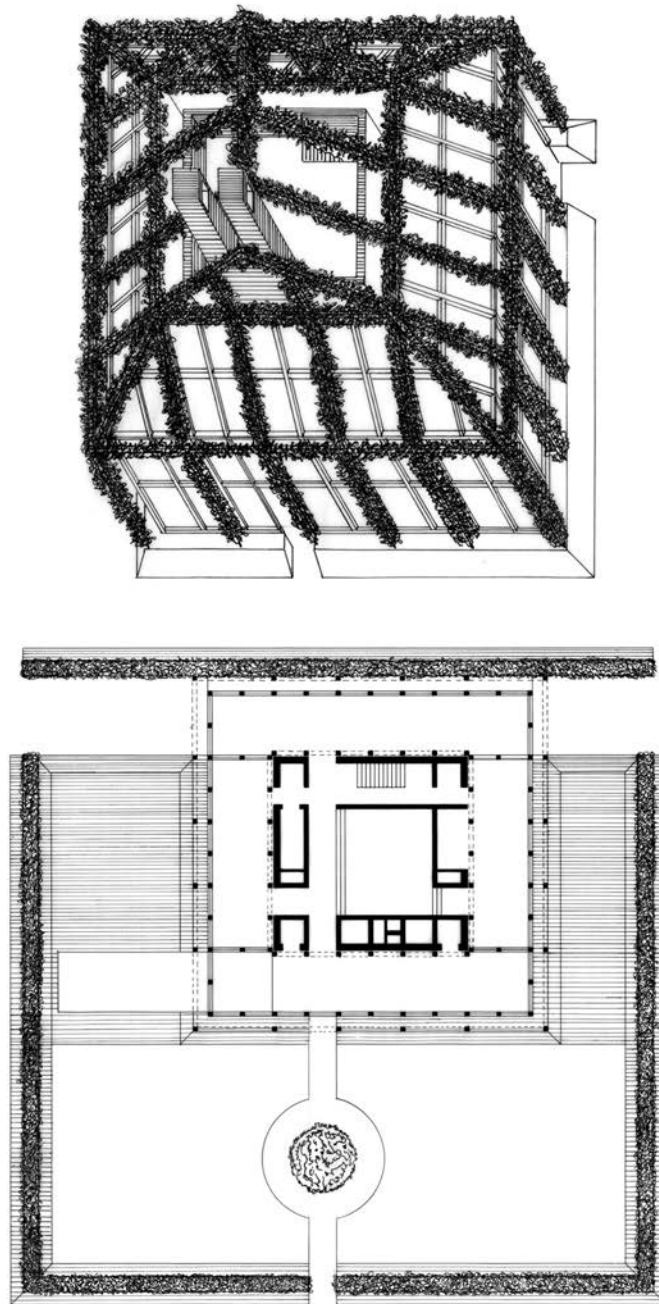


Figure 6. *Solar House: Axonometry, Ground Floor, Cross Section*
 Source: Martina D'Alessandro, 2021.

The next layer contained by the shell is an empty space, a perimeter passage that surrounds the heart of the library on all sides and on which the entry point from the house is placed. This filtering space, zenithally lit by a system of glazed skylights, not only houses the distributive elements, such as the stairs connecting the two levels of the building, but is transformed into a pathway to knowledge through the display of certain elements of the art collection (Figure 7).

The central block and concentric to this system is the library. Developed according to the square proportion both in plan and in section, and lit by four skylights on the roof, it is characterised by three elements: the external structure of dark wooden shelving containing the collection of rare books; the white geometric structure marking the geometric rhythm of the space and marking the upper level of the library; and the circular staircase detached from the structure of the space and positioned in a quadrant of the library. This pressing rhythm of spaces containing other spaces and objects is also underlined by the choice of materials: from the marked materiality of the outer shell to the candid, rigorous elements of the inner structure.

Heteronomies: The Books and Art Collection

Ungers' *studiolo* is a place imbued with something utopian, bringing together different times, places and ideas. It is a place imbued with a love of knowledge. The root meaning "to know" is homonymous with the root meaning "to be born". To know means to be born together, to be generated or regenerated by the thing known.²⁹ Not only in this building, but also throughout the author's entire body of work, architecture is born not only from knowledge but together with it.

The author's heteronymous tension, intellectual in nature as well as compositional, towards the sister arts of architecture is unmistakably demonstrated by Ungers' personal art collection, which he began in the early 1950s with his wife Liselotte (1925-2010). This collection has very special characteristics that make it more like a treasure chest of images, ideas and stimuli than a systematic collection of a scientific nature. It should be interpreted as a journey, an exploration of architecture in the dimensions of architecture's other sister arts. It is an open, constantly evolving collection that can only be fully understood if we accept the contrasts and juxtapositions that feed it and if we take the relationship between art, in this case the arts, and architecture as the key to understanding it. This system of works is not only an attempt to bring together a series of different works, but also and above all represents the author's desire to build a personal and private laboratory in which to experience art and generate architecture. It is to be interpreted as an idea, and the explanation for this idea is to be found in the relationship between the works of art Ungers owns and his architecture, a relationship nourished by analogies, similarities, connections and overlaps, forming a general, complicated system similar to a palimpsest.

29. Agamben, *Autoritratto nello Studio*, 14-15.

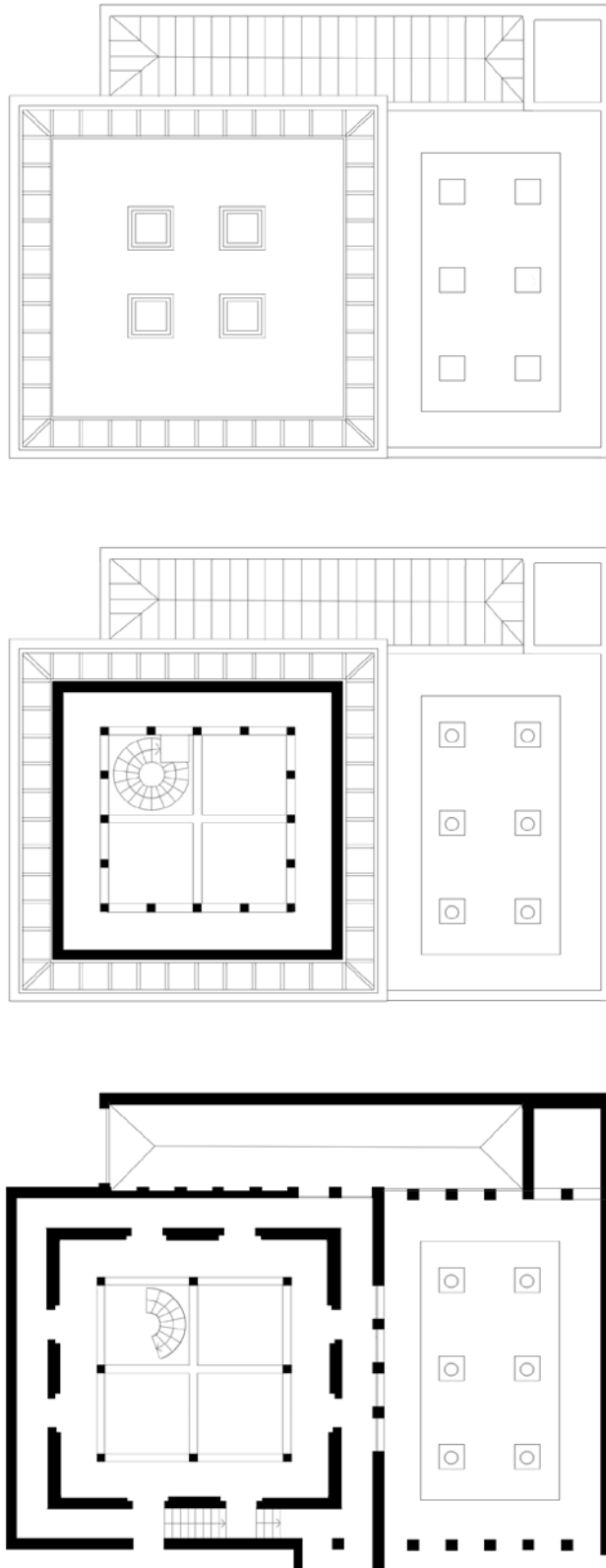


Figure 7. *Kubus-Haus: Plans*
Source: Martina D'Alessandro, 2021.

It is precisely through the study of the elements that make up this collection that it is possible to document the similarities and correspondences between Ungers and art, placing the author's figure in its historical and contemporary context.³⁰ Ungers appears, as critics have often pointed out, to be an isolated figure in the German cultural and architectural system. The dialogues and confrontations that he likes to hold involve his collection of rare books and his models of timeless architecture.³¹ They are correspondences of an intellectual and theoretical nature, absolutely diachronic and diatopic, even though the meetings all take place in the same place, in the geometric heart of his library. However, this voluntary solitude finds a point of exception in his relationship with art, through which Ungers manages to establish a link, even if not immediately legible, between his architecture and the debate that characterises contemporary culture. Ungers thus looks to the art world as an interlocutor interested in the same theoretical themes and compositional issues as contemporary art. The world of art is a complementary element of his work in architecture, a tool for verifying compositional processes and, above all, a virtual dimension for experimenting his visions for architecture, in a world, that of art, which is not bound by reality, its conditions and constraints.

We want to give this thematic collection of works the dual value of a path of exploration and intellectual research and at the same time a conceptual and abstract representation of the collector's own characters, which constitutes the image of the creative process of his making architecture. It can be read as an open structure in continuous evolution, in which there are drawings, paintings by different authors and from different periods, sculptures, photographs, rare books and architectural models. The works of art can be divided into two main sections. One section,

30. Strodthoff, "Eine Privatbibliothek," 831-833.

31. The series of rare books (the library contains about 12,000 volumes) features some of the most important treatises and texts in the history of architecture and art: Leon Battista Alberti, *De re edificatoria libri decem*, Firenze 1485; Luca Pacioli, *Divina proporzione*, Venezia 1509; Vitruvio, *De architettura libri decem*, Fra Giovanni Giocondo, Venezia 1511; Cesare Cesariano, *De Lucio Vitruvio Pollione de Architettura Libri Dece*, Como 1521; Albrecht Dürer, *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion*, Parigi 1532; Andrea Palladio, *I quattro libri dell'architettura*, Venezia 1570; Robert Wood, *Les Ruines de Palmyre*, Londra 1753; Julien David Le Roy, *Les Ruine des plus beaux monumentes de la Grèce*, Parigi 1758; Giovanni Battista e Francesco Piranesi, *Complete Works in 27 Volumes*, Parigi 1800-1807; Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des moeurs et de la législation*, Parigi 1804; James Stuart e Nicholas Revett, *The Antiquities of Athens*, Londra 1808-1822; *Description de l'Égypte*, Parigi 1809-1822; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre*, Tübingen 1810; Philipp Otto Runge, *Farben-Kugel*, Amburgo 1810; *Schinkel's Möbel-Entwürfe*, Ludwig Lohde, Berlino 1835-1837; *De Stijl*, Theo van Doesburg, 1917-1928; Kasimir Malevich, *On new System in Art. Statics and Speed*, Witebsk 1920; Wladimir Jegrafowitsch Tatlin, *Monument of the III. International*, Nikolai Nikolajewitsch Punin, Pietroburgo 1920; *Gegenstand. Internationale Rundschau der Kunst der Gegenwart*, El Lissitzkij, Ilya Ehrenburg, Berlino 1922; *Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar 1919-1923*, Weimar e Monaco 1923; *G. Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Hans Richter, Berlino 1924; *WchUTEMAS, Works of the Faculty of Architecture WchUTEMAS 1920-1927*, Mosca 1927; *bauhaus. Zeitschrift für Gestaltung (1-4)*, Hannes Meyer, Bauhaus Dessau 1929; Walter Gropius, *Bauhausbauten Dessau, Bauhausbücher, vol. 12*, Walter Gropius e László Moholy-Nagy, Monaco 1930; Le Corbusier, *Une Petite Maison*, Girsberger, Zurigo 1954; Le Corbusier, *original drawings de Une Petite Maison*, 1923.

consisting mainly of sculptures and fragments of antique sculptures and paintings by great masters from the 16th-19th centuries, bears witness to the confrontation with ancient art and Italian culture. The other part of the exhibition focuses on the theoretical, intellectual and abstract dimension of modern art from the 1970s to the 1990s. This section also consists mainly of paintings, sculptures and installations. In particular, the sculptures are a predominant component of Ungers' collection. This makes it possible to ascertain the issues that link these works to Ungers' architecture and, consequently, to understand the architect's reasons for forming his collection.³² The sculptures in the collection are by different artists³³ and are characterized by a variety of peculiarities. However, they all testify the closeness of Ungers' architecture to some of its fundamental characteristics, such as the reduction to basic geometric forms, the tension towards pure, abstract and dematerialized form, and the importance of the relationship between idea, space and form in the construction of the work, be it art or architecture. It is precisely by reading the works in their deepest meaning that we can understand the value, the programmatic charge of this collection (Figure 8).

According to these premises, the project for the Kubus library in Cologne may be considered one of the works that best synthesizes the author's architectural poetics, because it is capable of condensing, in a small built space, the entire articulated system of references that nourishes Ungers' way of making and thinking about architecture. In this building it is possible to investigate the dense system of references to the world of art and to the theory of architecture, following their traces not only in the proportions, materials and compositional hierarchies of the spaces, but also physically, among the bookshelves and the works in the art collection. By looking at this project it is therefore possible to recognize the formal and theoretical references on which OMU's work feeds, becoming architecture. The Kubus library is therefore not only a container but also, and perhaps above all, a place of assimilation, where architecture feeds on itself, identifying itself with the cognitive lymph that generates it. What is in fact a self-sustaining element? In the process of nutrition - in all nutrition, spiritual or bodily - there is a threshold where it reverses its direction, turns in on itself. Food can only nourish if, at some point, it is no longer other than us, if we have - as they say - assimilated it; but this means - to exactly the same extent - that we have assimilated ourselves to it.³⁴ The same is true of the light of knowledge in the heart of the Kubus-Haus: heteronomous, it always springs from outside, but the moment comes when inside and outside coincide, we can no longer distinguish between them.

32. Kieren, "Konstellationen – Monologe," 49-54.

33. The sculptural works in Ungers' collection of modern and contemporary art include works by Carl Andre (1935), Donald Judd (1928-94), Sol LeWitt (1928-2007), Richard Long (1945) and Bruce Nauman (1941).

34. Agamben, *Autoritratto nello Studio*, 121-122.



Figure 8. *Haus in Belvederestrasse, Interior Courtyard (1977/88)*

Source: Stephanie Tasch, *A Visit to the Architect's House*, 2007.

Architecture as Art: Toward a New Abstraction

The Kubus-Haus represents a radical experimentation of the principle of abstraction in architecture. *Abstraction* comes from the Latin *ab-straho*, which means *to remove, to detach from*: it indicates the process of subtracting matter to arrive to pure form, detaching from reality to represent the essence of a subject. It is the tendency to translate the concrete multiplicity of reality into symbols, through a necessary selection of objects to be replaced according to an idea, a theory or a vision of the world. Ungers' work focuses on this theme in the final part of his production, from the 1980s to the end of the 1990s, starting with the publication of the essay *The new abstraction* (1983). In this essay, which can be interpreted as a manifesto for a new architecture, the author outlines the principles and characteristics of abstract architecture, understood as the architecture of the idea, of the essence and reason, placing appearances and the functional, economic and technological demands of the project in the background. "The new abstraction in architecture has to do with a rational geometry that includes clear and regular forms both in plan and in elevation. In this context the project is not the result of interpretations of functions and structural conditions but of logical geometric systems, based more on a proportional relationship and on coherent sequences."³⁵ The idea is everything: this sentence is like an arrow pointing straight to the core of the theoretical basis that Ungers has been working on in recent years. It is the definition of a theory according to which architecture is nourished by the *idea* and is a direct and clear expression of the *idea* itself. Architecture must establish a logical and reasonable order that allows all the fragmentary images of history to be related in continuity or discontinuity. It sounds like an axiom. It marks the furrow of the disciplinary field in which rational and transmissible architecture can and must move. It is peremptory and leaves no room for misunderstanding. Architecture must not only respond to needs and necessities but must be an expression of universal ideas. It is based on the knowledge and recognition of the intrinsic elementary principle of things: the idea, the theme, allows us to reach the true substance of architecture, going beyond the surface of things, expressing universal, cultural and spiritual values. The words Ungers often uses in his essays perfectly express his thinking and his way of doing architecture.³⁶

35. Oswald Mathias Ungers, "The New Abstraction," *Architectural Design*, no. 53 (1983): 36-38.

36. All of Ungers' most important theoretical writings of the 1980s focus, from different points of view, on the centrality of the idea in the logical construction of architecture. There are numerous texts by Ungers that deal with these topics. We will refer here to those considered most significant and clear with respect to the concept of *theme and idea* in architecture. Among these, Oswald Mathias Ungers, "Architecture's Right to an Autonomous Language," in *The Presence of the Past. First International Exhibition of Architecture, the Corderia of the Arsenale, La Biennale di Venezia* (Venezia: Edizione La Biennale di Venezia, 1980), 319-324, in which he enunciates the theory of an absolute architecture that, freed from external and ideological conditioning, imposes itself as an autonomous and self-determined thought, that contrasts the mechanical with the poetic, and function with metaphor. Oswald Mathias Ungers, "The New Abstraction," 1983, 36-38, in which Ungers reduces architecture to a limited number of *ideas and themes*, addressed through the application of rigorous geometry. It is from the idea that the architectural form is born, and procedures of

“Every building that does not have itself as its theme is, from the point of view of the spirit, a banality,”³⁷ or “the new abstraction means exactly this: the transformation of ideas and concepts in the course of history. A new abstraction in architecture will revive more concretely fundamental concepts of space [...] which, like a universal order of abstraction, represent a quality of permanence.”³⁸ This type of approach to architecture has led critics to investigate these arguments in depth, denouncing the direct descent of Ungers’ thought with the philosophical heritage of Plato and Aristotle, contextualizing the theoretical figure of Ungers in the broader and more varied German and international cultural panorama as a great theorist of architecture. As already mentioned, the research and tension towards an abstract architecture as an expression of the idea occupies the last phase of Ungers’ activity as architect and theorist. These were the years in which he published some of his most important theoretical contributions on architecture, such as *Architecture’s Right to an Autonomous Language*³⁹ in 1980, *Architecture as Theme*⁴⁰ in 1982 and *The New Abstraction*⁴¹ in 1983. In these writings, each of which deals with specific aspects of the architectural dimension, Ungers’ fundamental question is what is the art of architecture. The buildings he designed and constructed in the second half of the 1980s legibly express how his answer to this question is the search for the archetype, as a principle of order to be translated into form and space in architectural design. For Ungers, architecture starts from the more or less abstract concept of subdividing and ordering objects of different volume and form in space through the process of conceptualization, i.e., the abstraction of images and systems of spatial orders.⁴² In this search for order, the concept of *archetype* assumes for Ungers a primary importance as a synthesis of the meaning of abstraction in architecture. The search for the universally valid and recognized model, the tension towards the achievement of the *Urform* is the foundation on which the projects for Ungers House in the Eifel, Glashütte (1986-1988) and the new Kunsthalle in the Museum Island in Hamburg (1986-1996) are based. The archetypal spatial concepts traceable in these two works constitute the spatial and formal model in which the project identifies new forms and a new architecture. In the same years Ungers designed and built a house for a couple of abstract art collectors, the Jeromin House in Königswinter (1989-1992) (Figure 9). This building marks one of the developmental moments in OMU’s work on the meaning of abstraction in architecture.

metamorphosis and transformation are applied to it, linking the project to history and place. Like Oswald Mathias Ungers, “Five Lessons from Schinkel’s Work,” *The Cornell Journal of Architecture*, no. 1 (1981): 118-119, and Oswald Mathias Ungers, “Architettura come Tema,” *Quaderni di Lotus*, no. 1 (1982).

37. Ungers, “Five Lessons from Schinkel’s Work,” 118-119.

38. Ungers, “The New Abstraction,” 36-38.

39. Ungers, “Architecture’s Right to an Autonomous Language,” 319-324.

40. Oswald Mathias Ungers, “Architettura come Tema,” *Quaderni di Lotus*, no. 1 (1982).

41. Ungers, “The New Abstraction,” 36-38.

42. Cepl, Oswald Mathias Ungers. *Eine intellektuelle Biographie*, 436-469.

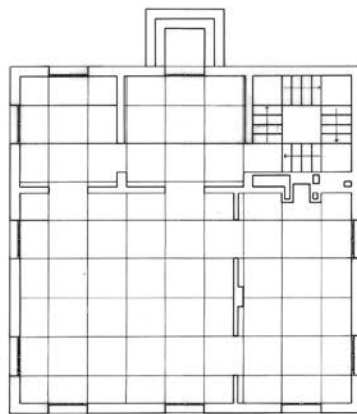
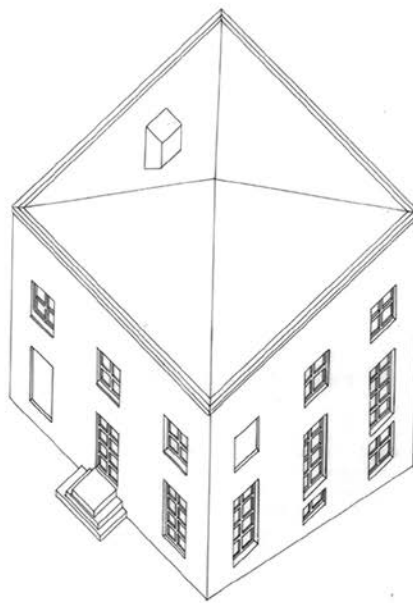


Figure 9. *Jeromin House, Königswinter: Axonometry, Ground Floor, Façade*
Source: Martina D'Alessandro, 2021.

The control of space through the modular grid, the sharper geometry and the simplicity of form and space achieved in this work anticipate the rigour and absoluteness of the author's later buildings. The reworking of the archetype through the control of form and space using the tools of geometry, measurement and proportion clearly expresses Ungers' interest in antiquity and the meaning of Renaissance architecture.

The urban projects for Düsseldorf (1990-1991) and Ungers' third house in Cologne- Kämpchensweg (1994-1996) take this research, conducted both theoretically and practically for over twenty years, to the extreme conclusion of an architecture reduced to form and space, without any narrative expression or descriptive quality. These hermetic architectures, which reveal the absolute idea of space and form, are subjected to a complex process of *reduction* that leads to an abstract outcome so extreme that it is difficult to recognize the idea behind the work.

In the design of the library, the importance of this reasoning in the design process of the building is evident. Ungers succeeds in applying the compositional principle of abstraction in a coherent and absolute manner to all the questions posed by the project. In the densest years of this tension towards abstraction, Ungers designed a building to which one can attribute the theoretical depth of experimentation on certain fundamental questions of Ungers' thought. The experimental character of this architectural episode gives the work unique qualities that are often not repeatable outside the context of the verification in which it was conceived: the particularity of the project theme and the design freedom offered by the opportunity to be his own client have greatly influenced the radicality that characterizes this building. It is among the shelves of his library, among the works in his collection, that Ungers keeps a system of references for understanding the value of this building's work.

According to these hypotheses, the concept of composition is the hinge element that opens the way for dialogue between art and architecture. Composition according to OMU is superordinate as a primary creative capacity and constitutes the basis of all creative capacity. Architecture and composition can be assimilated from a conceptual point of view. According to these premises, architecture can be seen as the mother of all arts and it is also understandable that we talk about architectural structure in music, poetry and also in nature. "It can also be said that without composition there is no architecture. [...] Architecture is composition."⁴³ Art is part of composition, in synergy with the space of architecture. Ungers explains how a world made up of palimpsests sees art and architecture supporting and overlapping each other. "Ideal spaces lie between the layers and overlap. Banal and solemn, idea and nature complement and annihilate each other, in a continuous process of overlapping. [...] Art lies in architecture and elements of architecture are found in art. Layer after layer, one approaches the other. Between the spaces of architecture, art becomes visible and from art comes the space of architecture. The

43. Oswald Mathias Ungers, "Antrittsvorlesung, Sommersemester 1964. Was ist Architektur?" *Archplus*, no. 179 (2006): 13. Our translation. Original text "Man kann also sagen, ohne Komposition gibt es keine Architektur. [...] Architektur ist Komposition".

boundaries between the two can be blurred: roof, wall, floor disappear and lead through art into new realities, illusory worlds and spaces. Abstractions merge with the same images and systems, configurations disappear, become blurred, the window becomes an image, the surface becomes an abstract composition and the monochrome becomes a homogeneity of materials.”⁴⁴ Ungers sees this interweaving as one of the many ways in which art and architecture can merge and unite. Pure forms have the same basic structures through which elective affinities are established between artistic trends and architectural concepts.

What matters to him is the unity of the conception, because art and architecture need each other: they have common roots and to separate them would destroy and annihilate their value. The system of art is also the system of architecture. The connection between architecture and art through the act of composing can be traced back to Ungers’ interest in the theoretical and compositional issues of art, explored through the study of the artistic, philosophical and psychological debate that characterised the European cultural context between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. His readings focus in particular on the question of form in art, analysing its figurative, perceptive and spatial instances. In this context, the work of Adolf von Hildebrand (1847-1921) provides an important and indispensable antecedent for understanding the relationship between art and architecture in Hungarian work. *The problem of form in painting and sculpture*⁴⁵ (1893) is a text that has had a remarkable capacity to penetrate the artistic culture of the 20th century. The text, which constitutes a contribution to the discipline of aesthetics, offers an answer to the question of form and its representation. Hildebrand, through his investigation of the art of sculpture - he himself is a sculptor - focuses on the architectural configuration of the work of art in order to investigate the problems of form. According to his theory, the work of art takes on its meaning only if it succeeds in attributing to its content, understood as an imitation of nature, a superior artistic structure capable of reworking and transforming, in an artistic metamorphosis, the contents of the work. The construction of the work of art thus understood takes place thanks to the construction of relations and relationships between the meanings of the work within a general and unifying totality, identified

44. Ungers, “Zwischenräume,” 7. Our translation. Original text: “Gedankliche Räume liegen zwischen den Schichten auf- und übereinander. Banales und Erhabenes, Idee und Natur ergänzen und löschen sich in einem ständigen Prozeß der Überlagerung. Das eine ist in dem anderen eingelagert. Die Kunst liegt in der Architektur und in der Kunst lagern Elemente der Architektur. Schicht für Schicht nähert sich das eine dem anderen. Zwischen den Räumen der Architektur wird die Kunst sichtbar und aus der Kunst entsteht der Raum der Architektur. In den Zwischenräumen amalgamieren die Begriffe und werden ein und dasselbe. Decke, Wand, Boden lösen sich auf und führen durch die Kunst in neue Wirklichkeiten, in illusionistische Welten und Räume. Abstraktionen verschmelzen zu den gleichen Bildern und Systemen. Die Grenzen verlaufen und werden unscharf. Das Fenster wird zum Bild, die Fläche zur abstrakten Komposition und die Monochromie zur Homogenität der Materialien”.

45. Adolf von Hildebrand. *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture* (New York: G. E. Stechert & co., 1907). The Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft in Cologne preserves Hildebrand’s text in the edition *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* (Strasbourg: Heitz, 1910).

by Hildebrand in the *architectural configuration of the work of art*. “Plastics and painting, in opposition to architecture, have mostly been designated as imitative arts. This designation only expresses the differentiating elements and neglects the common ones. As long as we are dealing with the imitative, in figurative art we find a kind of naturalistic research, to which artistic activity remains bound. In this context, the problems that form poses to the artist are immediately given by nature, dictated by perception. If only these problems are solved, i.e., if the product only exists in this relationship, then it, as a structure in itself, has not yet become an autonomous whole that can assert itself alongside and in front of nature. In order to achieve this, its imitative content must be developed into a higher artistic reason, from a broader point of view, which I would generally designate as architectural, obviously ignoring the current meaning of the word “architecture”. I understand this term only as the construction of a formal totality independent of formal language. A drama, a symphony possess this architecture, this internal construction; they are organic totality of relationships, just like a painting, a statue, even though the various arts live in completely different formal worlds. The problems of form, as they emerge in this architectural configuration of a work of art, are not spontaneous and immediately posed by nature, but are in fact absolutely artistic. The architectural configuration is what makes the artistic research of nature a superior work of art. What we have designated as “imitative” thus represents a world of forms taken from nature itself, which only becomes a true work of art if it is architecturally elaborated. Only in this way do plastic and painting enter the sphere common to all the arts, the world of true art, leaving the world of mere naturalism.”⁴⁶ Just as for Ungers, architecture is composition, so for Hildebrand the work of art is the result of composition: the world is understood as something stratified, composed of elements that are homogeneous in terms of function and cognitive activity. The theory of value is of a formal nature: the work of art is understood as the structure of spatial configuration, as the architecture of the work. This structure is like a spatial scaffolding, present in all the arts. In this conception, the work of art is produced by the coexistence of two different components: firstly, the compositional structure of the work, which is responsible for characterising the specificity of the different arts; secondly, the artistic communication of the work, which is determined by the coexistence of the emotional and rational elements. For Hildebrand, the concept of the unitary image consists in thinking of the work of art as a whole, a consciously calibrated concert of effects selected from all the possibilities and alternatives. The question of the construction of the object, starting from its spatial appearance, is one of the central themes of Hildebrand's theory of art and is also one of the aspects that strongly and explicitly influenced the figurative processes of 20th-century art movements. In particular, this theoretical vision shattered the conception of the figure as a form of representation, and the validity of the mimetic and imitative principle of nature in the work of art collapsed: form was no longer considered as a figure and was reduced to its constitutive structure, its geometry. The artistic experimentation, evident in the

46. Hildebrand, *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture*, 35-36.

works of artists such as Paul Klee (1879-1940), Vasilij Vasil'evič Kandinskij (1866-1944), Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), Vladimir Evgrafovič Tatlin (1885-1953) and El Lissitskiy (1890-1941), is carried out precisely by verifying how elementary geometric figures and colours combine to generate spatial effects: through the composition of form, therefore, space is structured.⁴⁷ Ungers' interest in plastic art is no less strong and no less explicit. Ungers is indifferent to the diversities and specificities of architecture and sculpture, because after all he sees them as two artistic disciplines united in the conception of form, as two arts that pursue the same task and the same objective, namely that of conferring spirituality to a monument: architecture becomes abstract sculpture through geometric purification.⁴⁸

OMU's interest in abstract architecture strikes an ever stronger bond between art and architecture in the author's work.

When he writes: "A new abstraction in architecture will revive more concretely fundamental concepts of space, which have been thought of in all historical periods, such as [...] the square, the circle, the cylinder, the pyramid and the perfect cube, regular volumetric and geometric forms which, like a universal order of abstraction, represent a quality of permanence. And it is not the differentiation of colours and shapes, materials and styles that will be important or significant, nor the abundance of forms, volumes and spaces, but the parsimony and economy of means. The new abstraction should be the representation of the essential."⁴⁹ The reference that these reflections found in the work of the exponents of abstract art in the first half of the century emerges very clearly. In particular, the theoretical and artistic work of Kasimir Malevič (1878-1935) constitutes an indispensable precedent for understanding the author's tension towards abstraction.⁵⁰ The concept of autonomous, anti-figurative, rational and objective art, based on the reduction of form and on the rigid and coercive control of geometry, identifies the sphere of the Russian artist's pictorial experimentation, from which Ungers seems to take the themes on which to base his manifesto towards abstraction. At the beginning of the 20th century, the artistic world witnessed the assumptions that would pave the way for the most radical developments in the field of painting. In this context, the work of Malevič emerges with primary importance. He elaborates an organization of pictorial composition

47. In particular, the connection to Hildebrand's work is evident in Mondrian's art, for whom paintings are true compositions in which the spatial aspect of the composition is the most important element of the work. In the sculptures and installations of Tatlin and Lissitsky, the concept emerges whereby the direct relationship of the work to the space makes it possible to understand the link between the object and its perception.

48. Cepl, *Oswald Mathias Ungers. Eine intellektuelle Biographie*, 509.

49. Ungers, "The New Abstraction," 237.

50. Proof of the closeness of Ungers' and Malevič's thinking is the presence of a series of Malevič's texts in Ungers' private collection, which frame the author's interest in the work of the Russian artist and his contemporaries. Countless artists continued Malevič's experiments in the development of abstract painting in the 20th century. Among them El Lissitsky translated Malevič's geometric compositions into architectural constructions, while Vladimir Tatlin developed Malevič's two-dimensional Suprematist painting into three-dimensional compositions. It is also interesting to note that there are other works of art in Ungers' collection that are rooted in the matrix of Malevič's work, such as Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue*, 1927; Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square: Waiting*, 1962.

that is increasingly reduced through the definition of autonomous elements, in which the object is lost and dissolved. Unique forms that clearly establish the furrow that separates them from traditional painting of pure description of nature. The forms are absolute, totally autonomous and free from any kind of link or relationship with the natural figurative model, aiming to claim their own independent realism. The radical reduction of formal vocabulary exhibited in the canvases of the 1910s explodes in the works shown in exhibition 0.10 (Zero-Ten)⁵¹ in which Malevič for the first time presents his *Black Square*,⁵² which marks the radical shift towards an objective, anti-figurative, autonomous and abstract pictorial experimentation. In this work, form expresses a new, increasingly sublimated sensibility that leads towards a liberation from materiality towards pure sensation. As Malevič wrote in his commentary on this exhibition, Objects have vanished like smoke for a new culture of art and art proceeds towards the autonomy of creation, towards the domination of the forms of nature.⁵³

In this process of liberation and reduction of art and architecture towards the essence, Ungers traces the matrix of pure form and geometry in Malevič's work. The words with which the Russian artist traces the outlines of his new abstract art, Suprematism, seem to outline Ungers' aims in achieving a new abstraction in architecture. "I moved into the zero of forms and went beyond the zero, that is, towards Suprematism, towards the new pictorial realism, towards non-objective creation. [...] The square is not a subconscious form. It is the creation of intuitive reason. It is the face of the new art. The square is a living royal infant. It is the first step of pure creation in art. Before that there were only naive deformities and copies of nature."⁵⁴ In 1989, when Ungers wrote of his cube-library in Cologne, "what in painting was the black square, in my architecture is the black cube,"⁵⁵ he made the reference to Malevič's work unequivocally clear.

Ungers sees in this theoretical and formal interweaving with contemporary art a matrix on which to found a new unity between art and architecture. Looking at the project for his private library, imagining it devoid of any component linked to the place, the construction and the relationship with the existing house, one could see the true and essential formal structure of the work. A regular block, cubic, geometric and compact, containing, in a progression of incorporation, formal structures that are progressively dematerialized and reduced to pure structure, rare books, paintings, sculptures and models. The building, restored to its pure spatial structure, shows a clear closeness to the research on form and space conducted by some of the artists Ungers knows. The correspondences between the work and the artistic sphere can be traced not only to research into pure geometric forms and the role of

51. The exhibition, entitled *Poslednja futurističeskaja vystavka kartin '0.10', or 0.10. The Last Futurist Exhibition*, took place in 1915 in St Petersburg.

52. *Black Square* (1915), oil on canvas, 79.6 x 79.5 cm, kept in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

53. Kasimir Malevič, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu. Novyj živopisnyj realizm*, (Mosca: Mihail Matjušin, 1916), 31.

54. Malevič, *Ot kubizma*, 51-52.

55. Oswald Mathias Ungers, "Aphorisms on Building Houses," *Lotus International*, no. 90 (1996): 8.

geometry in the composition of spaces and shapes, even though these constitute a system of affinities that are evident even on a first analysis of the work, but also, and above all, to theoretical and methodological affinities between artistic trends and architectural concepts.

According to these hypotheses, therefore, Ungers' approach to the world of art is not without consequences for his conception of architecture. The horizons of his architecture broaden and merge with those of art. One of the main aspects of this close dialogue, in the name of an abstract and autonomous art and architecture, is the sharing of a series of artistic, literary⁵⁶ and philosophical references that form the basis of their dialogues. Ungers' interest now opens up to the work of authors such as Gottfried Benn (1886-1956),⁵⁷ Barnett Newman (1905-1970), Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967)⁵⁸ and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). Above all, Paul Valéry's *Eupaline* (1871-1945)⁵⁹ became an important reference for Ungers, rediscovered during his friendship with Gerhard Merz (1947), to the extent that this text would become a daily breviary for Ungers.

Looked at in this way, the studio building, in its rigour and simplicity, reveals the system of correspondences between architectural structure and artistic research into form, the affinity between the tension towards abstract architecture and Ungers' artistic concepts. In this work, the author orchestrates the rigorous control of form with great skill: the use of geometry, the imposition of the rule of reduction of the elements, the characterisation of space, the research into colour, light and proportions are the elements through which the compositional process is implemented. The same compositional criterion of abstraction, which takes shape in the construction of a single space, takes on unexpected meanings when investigated through the tools of art, revealing correspondences and other values. In this work, Ungers embarks on a path of experimentation with the reduction of architecture into body and space. It is precisely in this type of approach to design that the deepest artistic matrices of Ungers' work can be found: the tension towards the most radical, hermetic abstract art, reduced to the composition of the primary elements of geometry, colour and space. In short, the artistic research conducted by Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) between the 1950s and 1960s. For Reinhardt, art represents the essential manifestation of human freedom, as a liberation from subjectivity and the everydayness of life towards purification and individual and autonomous expression. According to the American artist, art enacts the process of purification and liberation towards the absolute through the imposition of rigid rules and coercive discipline, against arbitrariness and subjectivity. Reinhardt's artistic career continues in the progressive simplification of pictorial compositions, in paintings made up of geometric surfaces

56. Including Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), with *A Piece of Monologue* (1980) and *Stirrings Still* (1985).

57. The Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft in Cologne contains the text Gottfried Benn, *Doppelleben. Zwei Selbstdarstellungen* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984).

58. Ungers is the owner of the text Ad Reinhardt, *Schriften und Gespräche* (Monaco: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 1984).

59. Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos or the Architect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932). The Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft in Cologne has the edition *Eupalinos oder über die Architektur. Eingeleitet durch Die Seele und der Tanz* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1927).

of primary colours, such as red, blue and black, until the most extreme reduction of forms and colours in the production of the *Black Paintings* series (1958-1967).

Reinhardt's vision of architecture, a vision in which Ungers finds many characteristic instances of his own thinking, displays great coherence and continuity with the principles on which his art is based. Architecture, like art, is an expression of integrity, symmetry, logic and geometry. Reinhardt's interest in the cultural matrices of the East, in monuments, architecture and artistic research is clearly visible. The words with which the American artist describes the architecture of Angkor express all the interest he has in the process of reducing elements to their essence and purity: "Architecture and Art: The terraced pyramid-temples, cementless, stone on stone by sheer weight and gravity, are unequaled in magnitude and magnificence, greater than anything in Greece and Rome, and infinitely more impressive, lovely, than anything that can be seen in China. No sultan, no mikado, no viceroy of India could offer his guest a comparable spectacle. The temples were heavenly spheres, holy shrines, monasteries, sanctuaries, palaces, fortresses, royal tombs, storehouses, libraries, hospitals, courts of justice. Everything is square, cruciform, unified, absolutely clear. Orderly and balanced and logically symmetrical, it is easily comprehensible, and what may be described as a complete architecture."⁶⁰ Ungers seems to have intertwined and overlapped the artistic paths of Malevich, Reinhardt and Merz, in an attempt to achieve abstract architecture through the noble instruments of art. Ungers wants to measure himself with art, and through art he wants to unite his architecture with abstraction, although he is aware of the limits of this attempt to measure and compare with abstract art, since architecture cannot follow the same path as art can follow in the absence of an object. The radicalism demonstrated by his fellow artists in the field of architecture is unattainable.

Conclusions

Looking at the images describing the interior of the library, one's attention is immediately captured by the multitude of books, models and sculptures. These art objects are *arranged* in the space through the white, static and abstract geometry of the structure and the constant, rhythmic scanning of the dark bookcases. The geometric and architectural order is only manifested in its clarity by the presence of the collected art objects and, vice versa, the miscellany of artworks only takes on the value of a collection if it is harnessed by the architectural geometry that guards it. This biunivocal relationship between collected object and formal structure is based on a complex and dialectic relationship with history that characterises Ungers' architecture and, specifically, the project investigated by this paper. In the resumption and study of philosophical and artistic references, investigated from a formal theoretical and methodological point of view, Ungers sees the possibility of inserting his own work in continuity with history: through the new abstraction, the

60. Ad Reinhardt, *Art as Art* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 222.

history of architecture is developed through the deepening of its fundamental and specific concepts, with the aim of reaching a general and universal vision of ideas. From this type of dialectical approach to the project, carried out on two compositionally different levels, on the one hand the investigation of the archetype of reference and on the other the criteria of abstract geometry on which the project is based, an apparent contradiction emerges. In fact, we can understand both the collection of art and rare books and geometry as two categories that relate to history. While the view of art and theory of architectural thought represents an attempt to identify a translation and operational codification of history in the architectural project, geometry represents an element of total astoricity, in that it seeks a principle of order and rule that aims to isolate architecture from history. We believe that the opposition between these two aspects is precisely the element that characterizes the Ungers way of thinking about architecture and making architecture. For Ungers, architecture must necessarily be born within tradition and history, appropriating and absorbing the permanent components and transmissible aspects of history. Once the project is anchored to tradition, however, it must necessarily find its own space of *inventio*, expressing, through the most rigid and radical geometry, its concept, its deepest vocation.

It seems that in this project Ungers has succeeded in merging knowledge and space, art and architecture, reason and emotion. Ungers in Belvederestrasse seems to have transformed his studio into a small museum in which to lead visitors by the hand through his own cultural DNA, preparatory to a profound understanding of the meanings of his architecture. Ungers in Belvederestrasse thus appears to be an epigone in the literal sense of the word, a being that is generated only from others and never denies this dependence, living in a continuous, happy epigenesis (Figure 10).



Figure 10. *Library Interior*
Source: Casabella 761/762, 2008.

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