

Contaminations between Architecture and Art: Oswald Mathias Ungers and Artistic Collaborations

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Looking at Oswald Mathias Ungers's work as a system between art and architecture is an opportunity for two different reasons. First of all, the affinity between art and architecture is an interesting point of view for contextualising Ungers's work in the cultural panorama of his time. His voluntary solitude is shattered in his relationship with art, through which he manages to establish fruitful links with the contemporary cultural debate that characterises the artistic environment. On the other hand, Ungers looks at the art world with curious eyes, interpreting it as a complementary element of his work in architecture. This paper seeks to identify one of the common ground between these two worlds, focusing specifically on design work in collaboration with artists. This point of tangency identifies an interstitial space that puts two distinct dimensions into dialogue according to spatial overlaps and visual connections in a stratified system of relationships.

Introduction

The dialogue between art and architecture in the work of Oswald Mathias Ungers' (Kaisersesch, 12th July 1926 - Cologne, 30th September 2007) investigated in this contribution is founded in a space delineated by antinomial contrasts and formal and conceptual assonances. Exploring this dialogue, we can see how the dimensions of architecture and art intertwine, sway or chase each other on parallel lines, establishing a close relationship between distinct spheres in an ideal metaphorical dimension that unites the two systems.

An interesting aspect to be explored in this system of correspondences is the personal relationship that Ungers builds over time with a number of contemporary artists, focusing on the specificity of design action in collaboration with artists. The aim of the joint work between Ungers and the artists is to achieve, through the deepening of a shared interest in certain themes, such as the characterisation of outdoor spaces through installations, the composition of indoor spaces with paintings and sculptures, and the structure of the outdoor space through the design of greenery, a unique conception of space, an architecture understood as a work of art.

There are many examples that support the hypothesis that in Ungers' buildings, the symbiosis with different artists represents an intrinsic value of the project, demonstrating how this intertwining of space and artwork is a fundamental instance in Ungers' design method, investigated and experimented with continuity from the projects of the 1980s to the last building constructed in 2007.

The opportunity to read Oswald Mathias Ungers' work by combining art and architecture is nourished by two motivations. First of all, the affinities between art

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and architecture are an interesting point of view to contextualize Ungers in the contemporary cultural panorama. As critics have often underlined, Ungers appears like an isolated figure in the German cultural and architectural system. His dialogues and comparisons have as protagonists his collection of rare books and his maquette of timeless architecture. This *voluntary* isolation is interrupted by two relationships with art. Even if it is not immediately recognizable, through art he establishes fruitful bonds with the contemporary cultural debate of the artistic environment. On the other hand, Ungers looks curiously the world of art, interpreting it as a complementary element of his architecture world. Art is a virtual dimension for his *experimentation* in architecture.

These thoughts do not intend to outline the internal dynamics between architectural project and work of art but want to open some cultural and architectural considerations on the intricate but fascinating binomial art-architecture in the work of Oswald Mathias Ungers. The ontological value that artworks embody in these buildings is evident. Artworks cannot be considered as mere applications or decorations of space, but rather as precious connection in the concept of composition between art and architecture, between artist and architect. Collaborations between architects and artist define compositional criteria to achieve synergy between architecture and art tools. The close relationship, sometimes also private and personal, between these two complementary figures has determined the coexistence of art and architecture present in the smallest details.

The Art Collection

Oswald Mathias Ungers' intellectual interest in art is tangible considering his art collection, started in the early 1950s and mainly kept in the Belvederestrasse Library in Cologne (1989) (Figure 1). The peculiarity of the elements makes the collection more similar to a treasure of images and ideas than to a systematic collection of a scientific nature: it is a journey, an exploration of architecture through arts. The collection is not only an attempt to bring together series of heterogeneous works, but above all it is the desire to build a *library* of artworks and an absolutely personal and private laboratory in which he experiments with art and generates architecture. The relationship between architectural works and Ungers' collection feeds on analogies, similarities, connections and overlaps, configuring a complex system¹.

1. Ungers deals with the union between architecture and art with great interest throughout his career. This involvement becomes more and more full-bodied and insistent towards the end of the nineties, during which he tries to reconstruct a general framework of his work, in which clarify the links between the art world and his architecture. These were years characterized by great retrospectives. In 1998, his work was exhibited in Vicenza's Basilica, in the following year in the Cultural Center in Dusseldorf and in 2000 in the Cologne exhibition hall. In 2006, took place one of the last and most important retrospectives on Ungers, in which the theme of the affinities between art and architecture assumes a leading role: the correspondences between drawings, models and photographs of his architecture and his collection of figurative art are so evident to him to give up on captions and explanations, proposing the reading of this assonances in an illustrated *manifesto*.



Figure 1. *Oswald Mathias Ungers, Belvederestrasse Library, Cologne*

The delicate balance between the more rational components of OMU research on the form and the emotional and metaphysical aspects of his artworks collection, above all contemporary art, show art-space-idea harmony between reason and imagination. However, Ungers not only knows some artistic currents, but also shares their theoretical conceptions. He constructs a process of gradual refinement of ideas into spaces and forms where art is one active component: the collected works are

the basis of his architectures, they reflect his ideas that are represent through the free tools of art².

This paper wants to deal with the identification of one of the contact point between these two worlds, focusing specifically on the design in collaboration with artists. This point identifies an *interstitial space*³ in which two distinct dimensions dialogue according to spatial overlaps and visual connections in a general and complex stratified system of relationships.

The thesis that we intend to explore is that the relationship between art and architecture is natural, positive and *creative*. The artistic element, while not representing an unique and necessary component in architectural spaces understanding, is complementary in the complex design process and makes explicit a system of relationships that refers to spiritual values and *other* dimensions. Art is part of the composition in synergy with the architectural space.

Contaminations

Regarding the attempt to bring together art and architecture, Ungers explains how a world made of palimpsests sees art and architecture as sustaining and overlap each other: “art lies in architecture and in art there are elements of architecture. Layer by layer they get closer to each other. Among the spaces of architecture, art becomes visible and from art the space of architecture is born [...]. The boundaries between the two things can get confused: roofing, wall, floor disappear and lead through art into new realities, in illusory worlds and spaces.

The abstractions merge with the same images and with the same systems, the boundaries disappear, become confused, the window becomes an image, the surface becomes an abstract composition and the monochrome becomes the homogeneity of the materials”⁴. The goal is the unity of conception because art and architecture need each other: they have common roots and separating them would mean destroying their value. The art system is also the architecture system. “It can also be said that without composition there is no architecture. Architecture is composition”⁵. By composition we mean a superordinate category, a primary creative ability that forms the basis of every creative moment.

2. The conquest of space, the way of shaping space through form represents the living and fruitful point of contact between artworks collected by Ungers and works he built. The demonstration of the strong figurative, compositional and theoretical link between art and architecture is evident in the similarities between Ungers’ researches and artistic paths of the main exponents of conceptual art such as, among others, Gerhard Merz, Donald Judd, Sol Lewitt and Gerhard Richter.

3. The term “interstitial space” alludes to a spatial limbo that describes the relation’s system in passage from the one dimension of architecture to art dimension, trying to indicate an appropriate translation of the meaning of the word German *Zwischenräume*.

4. Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Zwischenräume*, in Anja Sieber-Albers, Sophia Ungers, *O. M. Ungers: Zwischenräume*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Berlin 1999, p.7.

5. As often happens in the work of Ungers, themes of his research are found transversally throughout his work, even at different times. These reflections can be traced back to some interventions that Ungers supported at the Technische Universität of Berlin in the summer semester of 1964. In these years Ungers held some lessons related to the theme of the museum and in the inaugural lesson of his course, he explained the meaning of the word architecture. During this first lesson, Ungers also

The concept of composition explains the way in which artwork and architecture come together. It is evident that the closeness between art and architecture is reflected in Ungers' interest in the theoretical and compositional issues of art⁶. The text by Adolf von Hildebrand, *The problem of form in figurative art*, well known to Ungers, focuses attention on the *architectural configuration of artwork* to investigate and develop problems related to form⁷. Just as for Ungers architecture is composition, for Hildebrand the work of art is the result of a composition: the world is something stratified, composed by homogeneous elements for function and cognitive activity.

The purpose of the joint work between Ungers and artists is to get a unique conception of space and an architecture understood as a work of art. In Ungers' buildings there are many examples that demonstrate how the symbiosis with different artists represents an intrinsic value of the project. This paper only deals with some of these works to investigate some themes of the system of rapport between art and architecture, such as the characterization of external spaces through installations, the composition of internal environments with paintings and sculptures, and the structure of the external space through the greenery.

The structure of works, their placement, inside and outside architectures, their definition of space are instances that reflect the conception on which Ungers structure the building. In some cases the selection of works of exhibited art makes explicit the *virtuality* of the project, in a complementary radical vision of space achieved through the free tools of art. In this tension, that makes *opposites coincide*, is clear the meaning of Sol Lewitt's installation that anticipates the entrance to the Family Court in Berlin (1995) (Figure 2).

The idea of geometric order constructed by Lewitt underlines the absolute geometric rationality which ennoble the facade of the building. Two pure sculptural elements, misaligned to the general compositional system of the project, impose themselves as forms generating meaning and are hierarchically superior to the context in which they are inserted.

The same antinomic tension, but between complementary elements, stands out the refined intellectuality of the project for Baden's Regional Library in Karlsruhe

explains the difference between architecture and the simple construction of an object, dealing with the concept of the art of construction, exhaustively expressed only with the German term *Baukunst*. Regarding the difference between architecture and *Baukunst*, it is noted that the art of architecture seeks creative impulses beyond reality and anchors its existence in what transcends reality, while architecture remains attached to reality and receives the decisive impulses from it. With *Baukunst*'s concept, architecture manages to achieve an elevation to the ideal. See Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Architekturlehre. Berliner Vorlesungen 1964-65*, in "Archplus", No. 179, July 2006, pp.13-18.

6. Interest deepened by Ungers through the study of debate in the artistic, philosophical and psychological fields that characterized the European cultural context between the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s. His readings focus particularly on the question of form in art, analyzing its figurative, perceptive and spatial instances.

7. Adolf von Hildebrand, *Il problema della Forma nell'arte*, Aesthetica, Palermo 2001 (edition edited by Andrea Pinotti and Fabrizio Scrivano; or. ed.: *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst*, Heitz, Strasbourg 1893). According to Hildebrand's theory, the work of art assumes its meaning and value only if it succeeds in attributing to its content a superior artistic structure, capable of reworking and transforming the contents and internal elements of the work into a metamorphosis. The construction of the artwork takes place thanks to the construction of relationships and relations between the meanings of the work in a general and unifying totality.

(1980-1984), in which the series of external installations in front of the main entrance to the Library transpose the internal meaning of this architecture onto a higher semiotic level. The search for historical continuity with the *genius loci* takes place through a subtle work of interpretation and recombination of new elements and existing elements in a new morphological sequence.



Figure 2. Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Entrance to the Family Court with Sol Lewitt's installation, Berlin*

This can be found also in the series of path's installations: each has its own symbols and its own principles but they are held together by the theme of the aggregation of

forms in Per Kirkeby's installation and by the geometric structure in Sol Lewitt's work (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Baden's Regional Library with Per Kirkeby's Installation, Karlsruhe*

This method could be found also in the experiences relating to the installation of the exhibition *Sieben Variationen der Raumes über die Sieben Leuchter der Baukunst von John Ruskin*, held in Cologne in 1985⁸. In this exhibition rooms are themed according to the elements that delimit the space, through the treatment of

8. Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Sieben Variationen der Raumes über die Sieben Leuchter der Baukunst von John Ruskin*, Gerd Hatje, Stuttgart 1985.

horizontal or vertical surfaces, through the characterization of corners or through elements that occupy the center of the room.

In one of the *reception hall*, Markus Lüpertz proposes a series of twelve portraits which interpret the spatial conception. This is defined by a repetition of elements on a homogeneous geometry, enhancing the value of the grid as a visual structure. Gerhard Merz inserts two identical *wall paintings* in the entrance *hall*, similar to frescoes: he divides the walls into two equal horizontal bands, colored green and black, reinforcing the closure of the entrance with simple coloured areas, interpreting the entrance and passage area of the residence as a scenographic background.

The structure of space composed through art it can be experienced in Ungers' work not only in the definition of character of external or internal spaces, of facades⁹ or furnishing elements, but also in the relationship between building and context, especially in projects that establish a close dialogue between artifice and nature.

The landscape architect Bernhard Korte, who often collaborates with Ungers for plan open green surfaces, translates Ungers' architectural vision in greenery design. This collaboration brings to mind the combination of Schinkel-Lenné: "Nature follows structure"¹⁰.

On this statement is structured Korte's *Grünen Architektur's* idea: "Green Architecture", not green architecture. The reference to the parks of Stourhead, Stowe and Wörlitz, Sanssouci and Glienicke is clearly translated into the park's idea for the residence of the German Ambassador in Washington D.C., in which could be found the theme of the sequence of different points of view and atmospheres achieve through morphological variation of the *place*. The park communicates its essence to the visitor through a system of paths that follow the land's topography and lead to different places, such as rose gardens, dead ends delimited by hedges and pavilions surrounded by greenery. Their location chases, and sometimes enhances, the geometric rules of the architectural composition and the alignments with the structure of the residence.

Nature follows the structure of architecture also in Utscheid, in the Eifel, in the park of Ungers' house (1986). Here the house is wrapped in nature that is reminiscent of remote silences. An intact nature candidly dominates the composition with its stereometric and peremptory mass. The context's landscape character in which the residence is inserted has been reaffirmed through the modulation of the grass and the accentuation of its slopes with ascents and descents, according to a composition that stitches several independent elements into a single unitary system. The sequence of places of different character and shape rests on the reassuring texture of the geometric grid of the lawn, linking the ponds with the small Italian garden, the system of three buildings and the free spaces of the park (Figure 4).

9. The main facade of the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne (1999-2000) is an example of how artworks enter into symbiosis with architecture through the treatment of the fronts. This is characterized by a predominantly closed stereometric mass and composed by Ian Hamilton Finlay with the inscriptions of names of the main protagonists of the museum's collection artists.

10. Bernhard Korte, *Garten-Garden*, in: *Oswald Mathias Ungers, Deutsche Botschaft Washington, Neubau der Residenz-German embassy Washington, the new residence*, Gerd Hatje, Stuttgart 1995, pp.66-67.



Figure 4. Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Park of Ungers' House* with Bernard Korte, Utscheid

Not far from this private microcosm, the theme of the morphological sequence was interpreted by Korte in Ungers' latest project for the new entrance building to the monumental complex of the Kaiserthermen in Trier (2003-2007). In this Roman city, he measured himself against the value of ancient architecture through a series of urban projects carried out over a period of about thirty years.

In the new museum of the Thermen am Forum (1988-1996) Ungers experiments the relationship between compositional nature and art building a glazed sculptural element in the heart of the historic city center (Figure 5). In the design for the entrance to the Kaiserthermen, this approach becomes more calibrated, subtle and evident.

The external area organization is the perfect completion of the new building as well as the remains of the ancient Roman Baths (Figure 6).



Figure 5. *Oswald Mathias Ungers, Museum Thermen am Forum, Trier*



Figure 6. *Oswald Mathias Ungers, Entrance to the Kaiserthermen, Trier*

The green architecture becomes part of the building and of the ground: the hedges are real walls that define the internal space with respect to the external one, to transform themselves into compact blocks that mark and make legible the original geometries and the traces of the site of the Roman monument. The morphological variation, which underlies the long brick building, is concluded and exaggerated

through a transformation process which declines the pillars into fragments of pillars, into trees, flags and bases of ancient columns, transporting us with the mind from the *Palast Garten* of Trier to the atmosphere of the Glienicke park.

Conclusion

Ungers finds in this interweaving of close and continuous collaborations with figures in contemporary art one of the ways in which art and architecture can be merged into a new unity.

The compositional principles underlying the project's architectural choices, such as the principle of transformation and abstraction, take on unexpected connotations and deeper meanings if seen through the instruments of art. Indeed, precisely by virtue of the fact that works of art, be they paintings or sculptures, express their contents in a freer manner, without regard to questions of function or utility, it allows us to identify a new research angle that reveals correspondences and values other than those already known regarding this theme.

The correspondences between art and architecture traceable in the OMU's work concern different aspects of the project. On the one hand, the interest in ancient and modern art, as evidenced by Ungers' private collection, promotes a series of close collaborations between architect and artists in the design process. On the other hand, it reveals the rich system of fascinations and correspondences, of a formal theoretical and methodological nature, that links Ungers' architecture to some contemporary artistic research. Looking at the author's projects, stripping them of their location, construction elements and architectural characterisations, one discovers the pure formal structure of the works that manifests a closeness to the research on form and space conducted by certain artists whose works are present in the author's personal art collection.

According to these hypotheses, therefore, Ungers' approach to the world of art is not without consequences for his conception of architecture. Above all, the artists he frequented between the 1980s and 1990s, in particular Gerhard Merz (1947) with his investigations into the relationship between architecture and painting and the relationship between space and work of art, and Sol LeWitt (1928-2007), with his research into form and its variations, exerted a considerable influence on his works. The correspondences between the works and the artistic sphere can be traced not only to research into pure geometric forms and the role of geometry in the composition of spaces and forms, but also, and above all, to theoretical and methodological affinities between artistic trends and architectural concepts.

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