

# 1 Contaminations between Architecture and Art. Oswald 2 Mathias Ungers and Artistic Collaborations

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

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18 **Keywords:** *Oswald Mathias Ungers; Art; Architecture; Collaboration;*  
19 *Collection.*

## 20 21 22 **Introduction**

23  
24 The dialogue between art and architecture in the work of Oswald Mathias  
25 Ungers' (Kaisersesch, 12th July 1926 - Cologne, 30th September 2007)  
26 investigated in this contribution is founded in a space delineated by antinomial  
27 contrasts and formal and conceptual assonances. Exploring this dialogue, we can  
28 see how the dimensions of architecture and art intertwine, sway or chase each  
29 other on parallel lines, establishing a close relationship between distinct spheres  
30 in an ideal metaphorical sphere that unites the two systems.

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

40 There are many examples that support the hypothesis that in Ungers'  
41 buildings, the symbiosis with different artists represents an intrinsic value of the  
42 project, demonstrating how this intertwining of space and artwork is a  
43 fundamental instance in Ungers' design method, investigated and experimented  
44 with continuity from the projects of the 1980s to the last building constructed in  
45 2007.

46 The opportunity to read Oswald Mathias Ungers' (Kaisersesch, 12th July  
47 1926 - Cologne, 30th September 2007) work by combining art and architecture

1 is nourished by two motivations. First of all, the affinities between art and  
 2 architecture are an interesting point of view to contextualize Ungers in the  
 3 contemporary cultural panorama. As critics have often underlined, Ungers  
 4 appears like an isolated figure in the German cultural and architectural system.  
 5 His dialogues and comparisons have as protagonists his collection of rare books  
 6 and his maquette of timeless architecture. This *voluntary* solitude is interrupted  
 7 in the case of due relationships in art. Even if it is not immediately recognizable,  
 8 through art he establishes fruitful bonds with the contemporary cultural debate  
 9 of the artistic environment. On the other hand, Ungers looks curiously at art  
 10 world, interpreting it as a complementar element of his architecture world. Art  
 11 is a virtual dimension for his *experimentation* in architecture.

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

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## 26 **The Art Collection**

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28 Oswald Mathias Ungers' intellectual interest in art is tangible considering  
 29 his art collection, started in the early 1950s and mainly kept in the  
 30 Belvederestrasse Library in Cologne (1989) (Figure 1). The peculiarity of the  
 31 elements makes the collection more similar to a treasure of images and ideas  
 32 than to a systematic collection of a scientific nature: it is a journey, an  
 33 exploration of architecture through arts. The collection is not only an attempt to  
 34 bring together series of heterogeneous works, but above all it is the desire to  
 35 build a *library* of artworks and an absolutely personal and private laboratory in  
 36 which experience art and generate architecture. The relationship between  
 37 architectural works and Ungers' collection feeds on analogies, similarities,  
 38 connections and overlaps, configuring a complex system<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>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

1 The delicate balance between the more rational components of OMU research  
 2 on the form and the emotional and metaphysical aspects of his artworks collection,  
 3 above all contemporary art, show art-space-idea harmony between reason and  
 4 imagination. However, Ungers not only knows some artistic currents, but also  
 5 shares thier theoretical conceptions. He constructs a process of gradual refinement  
 6 of ideas into spaces and forms where art is one active component: the collected  
 7 works are the basis of his architectures, they reflect his ideas that are represent  
 8 through the free tools of art<sup>2</sup>.

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

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

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

31 The abstractions merge with the same images and with the same systems, the  
 32 boundaries disappear, become confused, the window becomes an image, the surface  
 33 becomes an abstract composition and the monochrome becomes the homogeneity  
 34 of the materials”<sup>4</sup>. The goal is the unity of conception because art and architecture  
 35 need each other: they have common roots and separating them would mean

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evident to him to give up on captions and explanations, proposing the reading of this assonances in an illustrated *manifesto*.

<sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>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*.

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

1 destroying their value. The art system is also the architecture system. "It can also be  
2 said that without composition there is no architecture. Architecture is composition"<sup>5</sup>.  
3 By composition we mean a superordinate category, a primary creative ability that  
4 forms the basis of every creative moment.

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



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<sup>5</sup>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 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.

1 The concept of composition explains the way in which artwork and  
 2 architecture come together. It is evident that the closeness between art and  
 3 architecture is reflected in Ungers' interest in the theoretical and compositional  
 4 issues of art<sup>6</sup>. The text by Adolf von Hildebrand, *The problem of form in*  
 5 *figurative art*, well known to Ungers, focuses attention on the *architectural*  
 6 *configuration of artwork* to investigate and develop problems related to form<sup>7</sup>.  
 7 Just as for Ungers architecture is composition, for Hildebrand the work of art is  
 8 the result of a composition: the world is something stratified, composed by  
 9 homogeneous elements for function and cognitive activity.

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

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

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

30 The same antinomic tension, but between complementary elements, stands  
 31 out the refined intellectuality of the project for Baden's Regional Library in  
 32 Karlsruhe (1980-1984), in which the series of external installations in front of  
 33 the main entrance to the Library transpose the internal meaning of this  
 34 architecture onto a higher semiotic level. The search for historical continuity  
 35 with the *genius loci* takes place through a subtle work of interpretation and

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<sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>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.

1 recomposition of new elements and existing elements in a new morphological  
2 sequence.

3 This can be found also in the series of path's installations: each has its own  
4 symbols and its own principles but they are held together by the theme of the  
5 aggregation of forms in Per Kirkeby's installation and by the geometric structure  
6 in Sol Lewitt's work (Figure 3).

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



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1 This method could be found also in the experiences relating to the  
 2 installation of the exhibition *Sieben Variationen der Raumes über die Sieben*  
 3 *Leuchter der Baukunst von John Ruskin*, held in Cologne in 1985<sup>8</sup>. In this  
 4 exhibition rooms are themed according to the elements that delimit the space,  
 5 through the treatment of horizontal or vertical surfaces, through the  
 6 characterization of corners or through elements that occupy the center of the  
 7 room.

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

16 The structure of space composed through art it can be experienced in  
 17 Ungers' work not only in the definition of character of external or internal spaces,  
 18 of facades<sup>9</sup> or furnishing elements, but also in the relationship between building  
 19 and context, especially in projects that establish a close dialogue between artifice  
 20 and nature.

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

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

36 Nature follows the structure of architecture also in Utscheid, in the Eifel, in the  
 37 park of Ungers' house (1986). Here the house is wrapped in nature that is  
 38 reminiscent of remote silences. An intact nature candidly dominates the

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

<sup>9</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup>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.

1 composition with its stereometric and peremptory mass. The context's landscape  
2 character in which the residence is inserted has been reaffirmed through the  
3 modulation of the grass and the accentuation of its slopes with ascents and  
4 descents, according to a composition that stitches several independent elements  
5 into a single unitary system. The sequence of places of different character and  
6 shape rests on the reassuring texture of the geometric grid of the lawn, linking  
7 the ponds with the small Italian garden, the system of three buildings and the  
8 free spaces of the park (Figure 4).

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



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1 Not far from this private microcosm, the theme of the morphological  
2 sequence was interpreted by Korte in Ungers' latest project for the new entrance  
3 building to the monumental complex of the Kaiserthermen in Trier (2003-2007).  
4 In this Roman city, he measured himself against the value of ancient architecture  
5 through a series of urban projects carried out over a period of about thirty years.  
6 In the new museum of the Thermen am Forum (1988-1996) Ungers experiments  
7 the relationship between compositional nature and art building a glazed  
8 sculptural element in the heart of the historic city center (Figure 5). In the design  
9 for the entrance to the Kaiserthermen, this approach becomes more calibrated,  
10 subtle and evident. The external area organization is the perfect completion of  
11 the new building as well as the remains of the ancient Roman Baths (Figure 6).  
12 The green architecture becomes part of the building and of the ground: the  
13 hedges are real walls that define the internal space with respect to the external  
14 one, to transform themselves into compact blocks that mark and make legible  
15 the original geometries and the traces of the site of the Roman monument. The  
16 morphological variation, which underlies the long brick building, is concluded  
17 and exaggerated through a transformation process which declines the pillars into  
18 fragments of pillars, into trees, flags and bases of ancient columns, transporting  
19 us with the mind from the *Palast Garten* of Trier to the atmosphere of the  
20 Glienicke park.

## 21 22 23 **Conclusion**

24  
25 Ungers finds in this interweaving of close and continuous collaborations  
26 with figures in contemporary art one of the ways in which art and architecture  
27 can be merged into a new unity.

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

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

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



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According to these hypotheses, therefore, Ungers' approach to the art world 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

1 (1928-2007), with his research into form and its variations, exerted a  
2 considerable influence on his works. The correspondences between the works  
3 and the artistic sphere can be traced not only to research into pure geometric  
4 forms and the role of geometry in the composition of spaces and forms, but also,  
5 and above all, to theoretical and methodological affinities between artistic trends  
6 and architectural concepts.

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



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



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