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OMA as tribute to OMU: exploring resonances in the work of Koolhaas and Ungers

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OMA as tribute to OMU: exploring resonances in the work of Koolhaas and Ungers

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This article explores the resonance between the work of Rem Koolhaas and that of Oswald Mathias Ungers. It has been suggested that the roots of OMA lie in Berlin, which this article expands upon. The ideas of Koolhaas and Ungers exhibit important parallels throughout the period from 1968–1978, when Koolhaas was a student and later a colleague of O.M. Ungers, beginning with Koolhaas's admission to Cornell in the Autumn of 1972. This period was a formative period in the work of Koolhaas, where many of his ideas on architecture and its relationship to the city took shape. Exploring a number of ideas and projects in the period from 1968–1978 (from his studies at the Architectural Association through to his time working with Ungers), this article argues that, contrary to popular belief, the formal tools of architecture play a central role in the work of Koolhaas.

Introduction

In *Architecture 2000 and Beyond*, Charles Jencks positions Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas on two sides of a large white gap (Fig. 1). Whilst Ungers is embedded between words such as 'the city', 'rationalism', 'post-modern classicism', all categorised under 'post modern', Koolhaas is settled among 'generic architecture', 'post-humanism' and categorised under 'deconstruction'. Although there are clearly differences between them, the two architects also share much more than a period of time on opposite sides of a gap. In fact, Fritz Neumeyer has suggested that the roots of OMA lie in Berlin.[1] Although Neumeyer refers in particular to the presence of Berlin in the early work of OMA, beginning with Koolhaas's student project 'The Berlin Wall as Architecture', the role of Ungers as mentor and colleague should not be neglected. Koolhaas's first encounter with the work of Ungers was through the publication of the studios directed by Ungers at the TU Berlin, which approached the city of Berlin systematically through design projects.[2] Koolhaas's

interest eventually led to his admission to Cornell in the Autumn of 1972, in order to study with Ungers.

The position Jencks allots the two architects seems to be based more on their writings and affinities than on their architecture. It follows a common perception of Koolhaas, in which the design is treated as the result of programming and scenarios rather than of an interest in the architectural object. In contrast, Ungers is embedded among colleagues with a deep interest in the formal language of architecture. This categorisation belies a specific resonance between the work of Koolhaas and Ungers that centres on the importance of giving form to their ideas.[3] What the diagram does reveal, however, is the difficulty in assessing the work of Koolhaas and OMA. Should we focus on the writings of Koolhaas, and his sound-bite statements on architecture, such as 'no money no details'? Should we turn to the analyses that result from his teaching, such as the shopping guide and the studies of Lagos? Should we instead examine the buildings themselves, ignoring the declarations that accompany them? Is Koolhaas

Figure 1. Charles
Jencks, diagram:
'Evolutionary tree 2000'
(excerpt from the
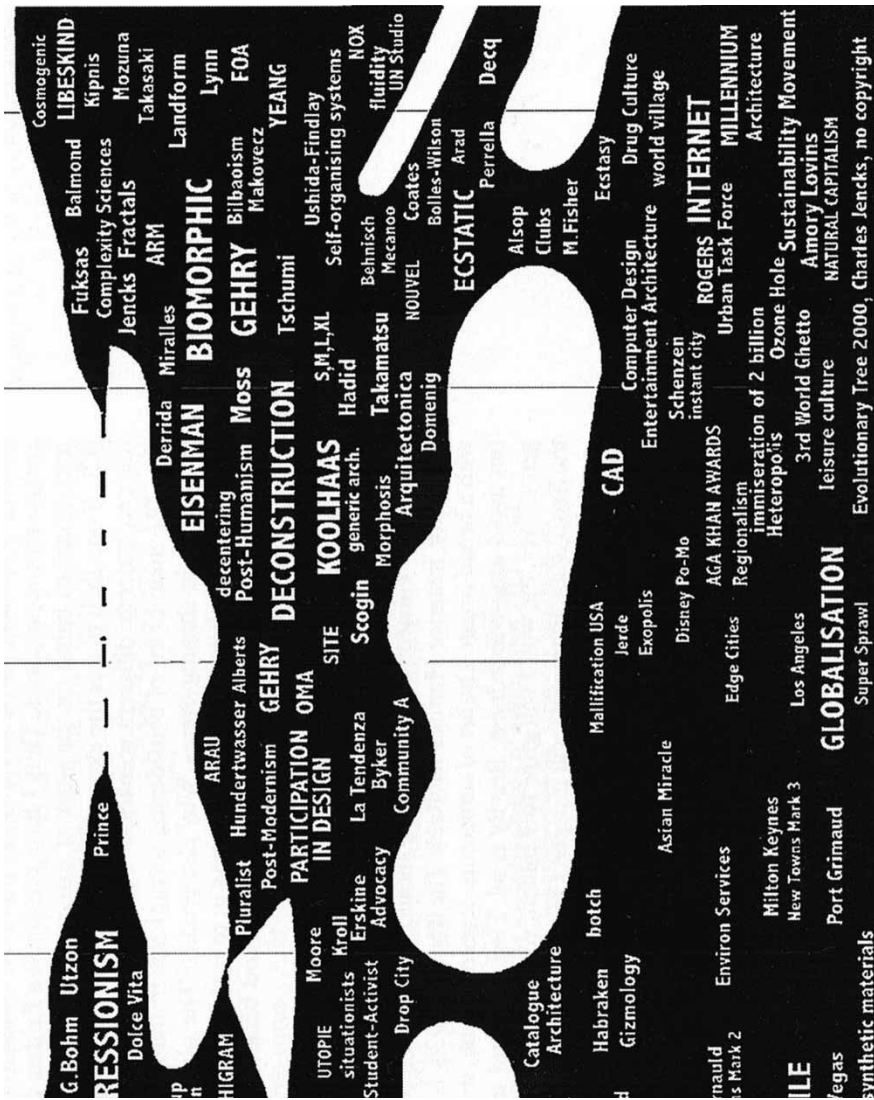diagram in *Architecture
2000 and Beyond*, p. 5).
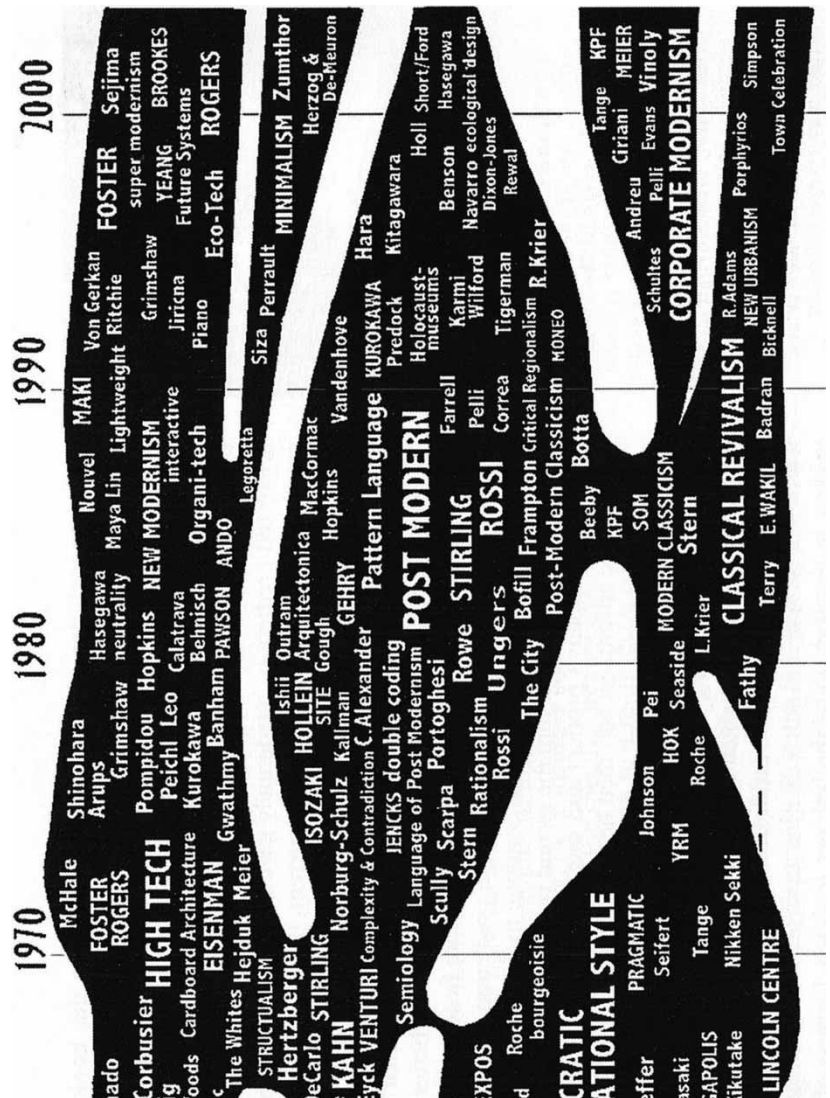
Figure 1. (Continued.)

an architect, or has he continued his early career of writing scenarios, merely shifting his focus from storyboards to buildings? An informative period is to be found early in his career, when he was in close contact with Ungers. Examining the work of Koolhaas from 1968–1978, and tracing the parallel and converging trajectory of Ungers at this same time, may help illustrate the interest of Koolhaas in how his ideas take shape in projects and buildings.

Preludes (1968–1972)

Rem Koolhaas began studying architecture in the legendary year of 1968. At the Architectural Association (AA) in London, he encountered the quintessential 1960s' culture of 'rice-cooking hippies' who believed it was more important to 'free your mind' than to learn drafting techniques. Where Koolhaas had hoped to learn a craft, he instead found himself in a school where the student-teacher relationship was ostensibly one of equality. As Koolhaas would later say, this environment was perhaps more fruitful for him than he could have imagined, since it forced him to be extremely clear about what he expected from architecture *in opposition* to the dominant mode of thought at the AA.[4]

In the summer of 1971, he visited Berlin as part of his studies at the AA. One of the few traditional elements of the programme, the 'Summer Study' was intended to be a documentation of an existing architectural object. Rather than investigate the more typical architectural or arcadian project, Koolhaas took a trip to Berlin to examine the wall separating East from West, by then already ten years old. Although he appeared to stray from the assignment

with his unconventional choice of object, his examination of it was precisely what was required: a carefully articulated analysis of the wall as architecture. Reflecting on the architectural presence of the wall and speculating on its formation in a retrospective text from 1993, he questioned the direct correlation between architectural form and its significance. His choice of project and subsequent interpretation prefigure many of the questions he later struggles with. In his recollection, it confronted him with the question of architectural form versus the event, with an heroic scale, with the tension between its totality and the separate elements that created it, with the various disguises along its length from intensely symbolic to 'casual, banal', with the lively character of an object without programme. In his own words, it confronted him with 'architecture's true nature', which he defines in a series of five 'reverse epiphanies', which it is tempting to consider as a counterpoint to Le Corbusier's five points towards a new architecture.[5]

Rather than Le Corbusier's description of 'architectural facts that imply a new kind of building' (which could then lead to new forms of dwelling), the statements on the Berlin wall reveal the limits of what architecture can achieve coupled with a sensitivity to the pure fact of its presence. First, he concluded that architecture was inevitably more about separation and exclusion than about the liberation he was taught. Architecture certainly had power, but contrary to what his teachers believed, it was not a power of political and social emancipation.[6] Next, in a series of four revisions of accepted truths in architecture, he concluded that the beauty of the wall was proportional to its horror;

Figure 2. Rem
Koolhaas, The Berlin
wall as architecture
('Field Trip', *SMLXL*,
p. 223).

that there was no causal relationship between form
and meaning; that importance and mass could not
be equated; and that the wall represented an under-
lying 'essential' modern project that was neverthe-
less expressed in infinite, often contradictory,
deformations.[7]

The accompanying photographs support the
tension between programme and form, and demon-
strate architecture as simultaneously impotent and
omnipotent. Some images show everyday life
somehow defying the wall, where a bride and her
groom look over the concrete blocks and through
the barbed wire to see people waving to them
(family left behind? friends?). Or the passing of an
object (a bag?) between the chain-link fence and

the barbed wire (Figs. 2, 3). Other images are
more ominous, with antitank crosses in the fore-
ground, and just the lower bodies of two soldiers
marching in the background — the glint of their
guns still visible; yet here, the crosses become aes-
thetic (Koolhaas describes them as 'an endless line
of Sol LeWitt structures'), a compositional element
that expresses the ambivalence written out in the
text (Fig. 4). The series of photographs, as a story-
board of events along the wall, already hints at the
later introduction of the *scenario* as a guiding
force in creating architecture (Figs. 5, 6).

The text on the Berlin wall reflects a number of
issues that have remained central throughout his
work. The optimism of the 1960s about architecture

Figure 3. Rem
Koolhaas, The Berlin
wall as architecture
('Field Trip', *SMLXL*,
p. 223).

'seemed feeble rhetorical play. It evaporated on the spot', manifesting the powerlessness of architecture. The wall as absence demonstrated the power of nothingness, which could incorporate more than any object ever could: 'in architecture — absence would always win in a contest with presence'. And perhaps the most fundamental: the tension between the appearance of the wall and the message it was communicating, why he 'would never again believe in form as a vessel for meaning'. The project, when presented at the AA, raised some questions, not the least of which was posed by Alvin Boyarsky: 'Where do you go from here?'[8] The answer, oddly, was a departure for

Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, to study with Ungers. If Koolhaas's belief in the connection between form and meaning were irrevocably severed, then at the very least he must have been determined to explore this disconnection.

Oswald Mathias Ungers had been exploring the problem of form and composition in architecture since at least 1963, when his publication 'Die Stadt als Kunstwerk' drew parallels between the rules of composition in architecture and in urban design. The article is an early manifestation of his steadily increasing interest in morphology.[9] This interest stood in opposition to many of his colleagues, particularly those of Team X, who were deeply

Figure 4. Rem
Koolhaas, The Berlin
wall as architecture
('Field Trip', *SMLXL*,
p. 224: copyright Rem
Koolhaas, 1972).

engaged with the political ramifications of architecture. In contrast, Ungers refused to entertain the idea that architecture as such could be political. His work resonated more with the ideas of Aldo Rossi than with those of Team X.[10] Just before Koolhaas began studying architecture in 1968, Ungers was still lecturing on the rich array of building forms and types in architectural history to his students at the TU Berlin.[11] At the time, the students were arguing in the halls about reconfiguring the structure of the university, while Ungers was trying to teach them the foundations of their discipline. In 1967, during a conference on architectural theory that Ungers had organised, students protested about

the studies of architecture with signs stating 'Alle Häuser sind schön, hört auf zu bauen!'[12] In 1968, while Koolhaas was suffering through the abstract musings of his teachers at the AA, Ungers moved to the United States, escaping the increasingly aggressive political activism of the students.[13] In the September of 1972, Koolhaas was to make a similar move: fleeing his final studio at the AA with Peter Cook, he went to study with Ungers at Cornell. The inverted trajectories of Koolhaas, as a student wanting to be taught a discipline in an activist environment, and Ungers, as a teacher trying to impart knowledge to his students interested only in social upheaval, converged in Ithaca, New York.

Figure 5. Rem
Koolhaas, The Berlin
wall as architecture
('Field Trip', *SMLXL*,
p. 229: copyright Rem
Koolhaas, 1972).

Early formations (1972)

> In the end it is a pity that in this historical process, everybody has been concentrating on Rem Koolhaas for his smartness and not for his ability as a good architect.
>
> Elia Zenghelis (*Exit Utopia*, p. 262)

Koolhaas became known for his writings before he began to build. The texts have engendered many interpretations, perhaps even more so than his buildings. In some ways the texts might be considered intentionally mystifying, insofar as they offer general thoughts on architecture and the conditions that form it, more than on Koolhaas's intentions in a project. Somehow (because the writings appear more accessible perhaps?) there seems to be an idea that Koolhaas relegates architectural form to a secondary status, that he almost 'forgets' to address it. This idea of 'forgetting' form does in fact derive from some of the well-known texts of Koolhaas such as 'Bigness' and *Delirious New York*.[14] These are texts that explore the various contemporary conditions that surround architecture, that offer conceptual transformations without being explicit about the formal rules of architecture. In the work of Koolhaas, urban *form* becomes urban *condition*. In *Delirious New York*, the city that was built without recourse to (theories of) architecture, can now only be understood through the retroactive manifesto, which reveals the underlying logic of congestion and the vertical schism, to name but two 'conditions'. The

Figure 6. Rem
Koolhaas, The Berlin
wall as architecture
('Field Trip', *SMLXL*,
p. 229: copyright Rem
Koolhaas, 1972).

size, form and typology of the New York block is not
the primary focus, but rather the presence of the grid
as a *strategy* to contain difference, allowing for
variety in the architectural infill. Yet the images
accompanying the book also express a fascination
with the crystallisation of the urban conditions into
concrete and specific architectural forms, as well as
with the explosion of different forms not governed
by architectural coherence (Figs. 7, 8).

To Zenghelis, the explicit preference for concep-
tual underpinnings more than form has everything
to do with Koolhaas's professional background.

As scriptwriter Rem magnified the importance of
the programme in architecture. Already estab-
lished from Modernism's outset in one form,
amplified by Team X in another, the notion of
the plan as scenario became central to the
work of OMA, growing in importance to the
point where it became a bureaucratic tyranny.
In the present predicament — and in retrospect
— it is easy to recognise the shortcoming
involved in neglecting the quintessence of form.
Despite our radical drives we were allergic to
the label of 'formalism' — the most misused,
despotic and callous misrepresentation of
meaning exploited by institutional modernism,
in its calculating and opportunistic abuse of the
'ism' classification.[15]

Figure 7. 'Crude clay
for architects':
rendering by Hugh
Ferriss (as published in:
Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious
New York*, p. 115;
image courtesy
of the Avery Library,
New York – Hugh Ferris
Collection of Drawings).

Yet does this in fact mean that form is forgotten? It would seem that the texts and statements are also misleading. Although the constraints and conditions through which architecture is built do deeply concern Koolhaas, the evidence also seems to indicate that architectural form and composition concern him no less.[16] The carefully selected photographs accompanying his work show an eye for the graphic and compositional quality not only of architecture, but also of objects and events (Figs. 9, 10). His concerns in architectural design are complex, they cannot be captured within a simple scheme of form versus function, nor do his designs represent political or moral ideas in a direct manner. In many cases, the projects are an assemblage of contradictory elements, which are nevertheless carefully orchestrated combinations.

Therefore, despite his own misgivings about addressing the notion of form, the early work of Koolhaas, from his period at the AA in London (1968–1972) through to the completion of *Delirious New York* in 1978, contains an undercurrent of architectural form embedded in an exploration of the urban condition. To reveal this undertone of interest in the formal aspects of architecture, the work of Ungers is helpful, since he explicitly addresses many of the concerns that we can find implicitly present in the work of Koolhaas. Rather
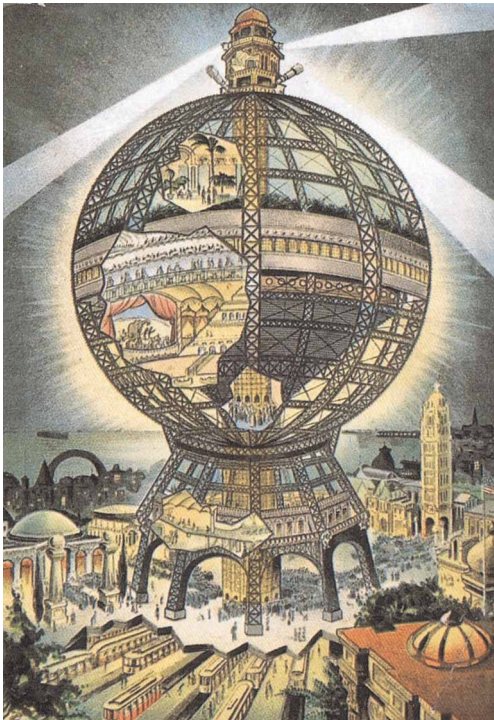
Figure 8. Coney Island
Globe Tower (as
published in: Rem
Koolhaas, *Delirious
New York*, p. 72).

'engaged' architecture of the 1960s did), nor
denies any possibility of social impact for architecture
(as the debates on 'autonomy' centring around the
work of Eisenman did). Instead, both Ungers and
Koolhaas are aware of the societal constraints that
architecture operates within, and both demonstrate
interests in social issues (such as the promise of the
collective, the contemporary condition of the metro-
polis, the simply factual need for housing), yet they
operate within the discipline of architecture and
the tools that are available to it (which here I am,
for the sake of argument, allowing to be encom-
passed under the larger category of 'form'). Regard-
less of personal ideas, they remain aware of the limits
of architecture.[18]

Towards a notion of form (1972–1975)

As noted, insofar as Koolhaas addresses formal
issues in architecture, he typically does so indirectly.
His own writing emphasises the conditions within
which architecture is construed, but many analyses
of his work also focus on the programme, the scen-
ario, the event and the analysis of urban conditions.
While he primarily redirects the reader's gaze to
urban and ephemeral conditions, this does not
reflect a lack of interest in architectural form.
When he is searching for new words, new means
to address architecture, it is not because he is
looking for something formless, but rather that he
is looking for a way to address the forms that are
there but have remained 'unseen' by architecture.
His 'retroactive manifesto', *Delirious New York*,
struggles against the traditional vocabulary of archi-
tecture. It attempts to address New York from a new
perspective, hoping to reveal what is already there.

than obscuring these questions, Ungers addresses
them directly and tries to explore them very specifi-
cally in both text and object. From investigating the
city as a 'work of art' in 1963 to his installation in
the exhibition 'Man transForms' in 1976, Ungers
reflected directly on the techniques and instruments
of architecture itself.[17] In other words: an explora-
tion of the work of Ungers and Koolhaas as comp-
lementary *oeuvres* reveals a position that neither
equates architecture with the political (as the more

Figure 9. 'Reality of the RCA slab' (as published in: Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, p. 232).

Here too, his encounter with the Berlin wall is visible: approaching it as an object of study, he began to discover *as built reality* the incredible architectural and urban ramifications of an object like the wall. This could not be comfortably analysed within the boundaries of the architectural tradition, but required a different mode of addressing it, like storyboards and collages. Similarly, the New York grid as an ordering mechanism at the scale of the city was revealed by studying the architectural results of an 'accidental' plan.

The confrontation between architecture as idea and as built reality also made him explicitly sceptical of the revolutionary potential claimed for architecture in the 1960s. The difficulty in the ideological positions of the late 1960s caused to some degree a rift between the formal and the programmatic in architecture.[19] This was to give rise to the highly autonomous architecture of Eisenman on the one hand, and the socially programmed architecture of Van Eyck on the other. Koolhaas found his space to think, write and design in the relative calm of

Figure 10. 'Rendezvous
with destiny' (as
published in: Rem
Koolhaas, *Delirious
New York*, p. 142).

Ithaca, where at least some questions of form were being made explicit in the work of Ungers and his colleague Colin Rowe.[20] His ideas on architecture could begin to settle within this sphere of influence of Rowe, Ungers, and perhaps also Eisenman to some degree.[21] The place itself had some influence — there was something about the amnesia of New York, the naïveté of American architecture which was simply built reality without a traditional master plan. This allowed Koolhaas to look for what there already was, to explore the endless potential of the city as it stood. Here, New York represented the result of building without the weight of

the (political) manifestoes being designed in Europe. The various applications of architectural form — composition, detailing, massing, materialisation — were not part of a grand ideology, but instruments to be used. Architecture was something to be made, not thought.

The tension between form and programme remains continually visible, and by making this so explicit, the question of form is often relegated to the background. Although Fritz Neumeyer acknowledges 'the absolute sensual delight' of the work, he simultaneously argues that the significance of the work somehow takes precedence over its physical

Figure 11. Rem
Koolhaas, 'The Baths'
(from: R.L. Koolhaas
and E. Zenghelis with
M. Vriesendorp and
Z. Zenghelis, 'Exodus, or
the voluntary prisoners
of architecture' [project,
1972]: copyright held
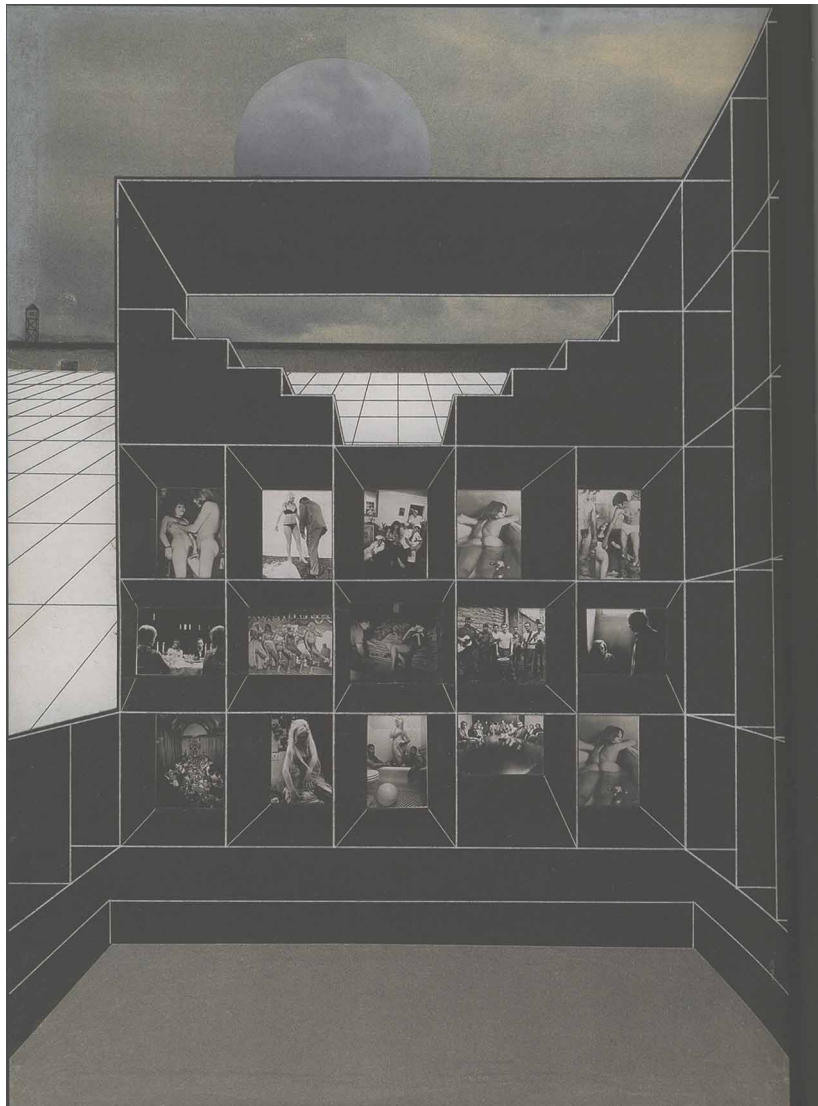by the preceding named
individuals, 1972).

Figure 12. Rem
Koolhaas, 'The
Allotments' (from:
R.L. Koolhaas and
E. Zenghelis with
M. Vriesendorp and
Z. Zenghelis, 'Exodus, or
the voluntary prisoners
of architecture' [project,
1972]: copyright held
by the preceding named
individuals, 1972).

form.[22] In a sense, this indicates a shortcoming in the vocabulary of criticism itself, since the significance seems to derive precisely from the architectural language. It is sensual (thanks to Madelon Vriesendorp's drawings) and brutal (in its employment of such monstrous late-modern archetypes as the Berlin wall). Neumeyer does note that the work of OMA responded to a condition found in Berlin that immediately provokes an understanding of an architectural 'beyond': 'not yet perceived by *aesthetic criteria*, the source of a new art.'[23] He argues that this is an historic change in perspective that was part of the turn to modernity, best visible in the writing that turns to the 'wrong' side of architecture, visible in the work of the engineers more than the architects. Here, a new set of parameters invokes a dramatic shift in architecture — the introduction of concrete, glass curtain walls, spindly steel structures all indicative of a 'new kind of architectural beauty to come'.

Figure 13. '1909
theorem': cartoon of
skyscraper (as published
in: Rem Koolhaas,
Delirious New York,
p. 83).
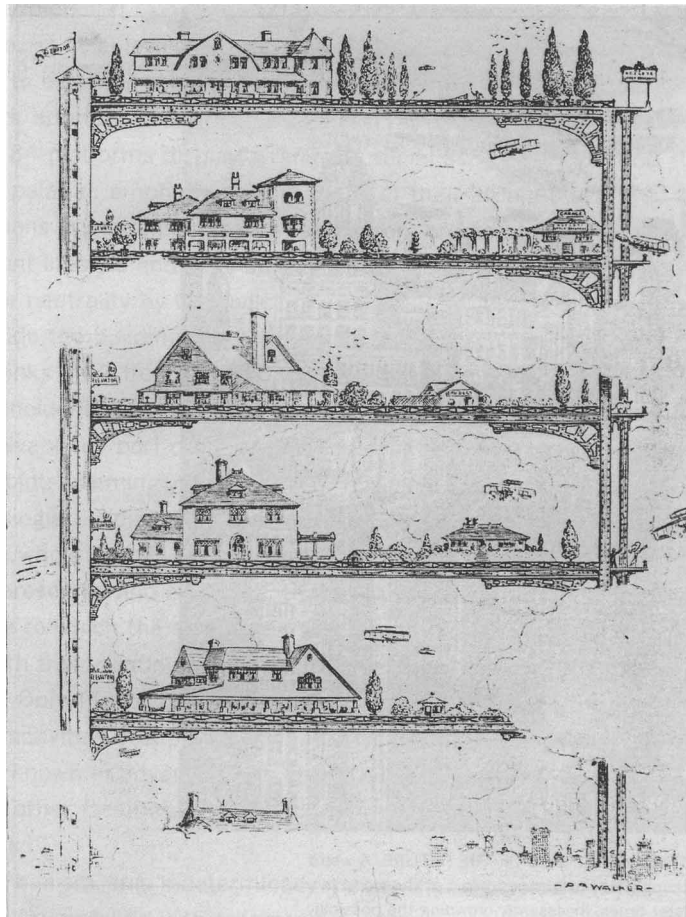
It is this tension that Koolhaas finds himself struggling with. In his ambivalence towards the traditional notions of architectural form, he tried to write a book that does not use any literal architec-

tural criteria, *Delirious New York*. As he states in an interview with Franziska Bollerey: 'And this is why I wrote a book without literal architectural criteria. There is no mention of beautiful, ugly, tall,
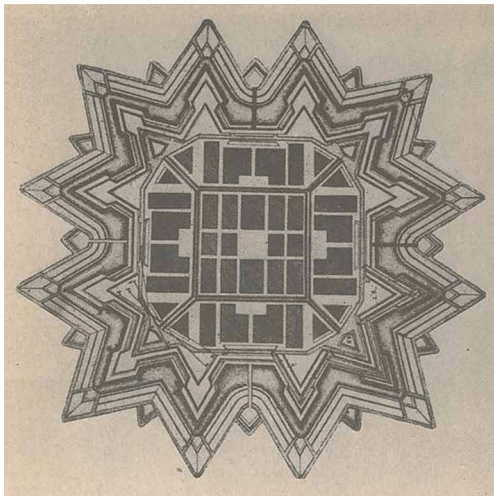
Protection

Schutz

Figure 14. 'Protection' – plan of an ideal city, Georg Rimpler, 1670 (O.M. Ungers, *Morphologie/City Metaphors*, pp. 30–31: image courtesy of Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne).

low, white... Nothing about appearances.'[24] As those before him, he is conscious of a shift, of something that he cannot as yet describe. He concentrates on avoiding traditional descriptions of architecture, on writing a manifesto for something that was built (unreflectively) in accordance with the spirit of its time. It is this aspect of his work that Neumeyer perceives as in accordance with modernity. Koolhaas does indeed turn precisely to the 'wrong side of architecture'. It is, however, not the heroically engineered side of modernity, but a perhaps even more unforgivable side in the wake of the late 1960s: one of hedonism, of mass culture not as cheerful pop but as absolute reality (Figs. 11, 12). In the process, Koolhaas manages to describe the ineffable tensions in such concepts as

the 'lobotomy' and the 'vertical schism', both of which allow the existence of distinct realities and absolute opposites within the same skin (Fig. 13). In the condition of the skyscraper, when the form disengages itself from the programme and manifests itself as an undeniable presence of architecture, it creates a new condition that is strong enough to encompass the complexity of everyday reality.

In the meantime, Ungers had been working along a similar line, but not with formal considerations as an undercurrent or with form as a counterpoint to programme, but rather as a direct line of inquiry in his understanding of architecture. Like Koolhaas, Ungers struggled with the extremely politicised view of architecture on the European mainland in

Figure 15. 'Parallelism'
– urban city for
Magnitogorsk, Mart
Stam, 1929 (O.M.
Ungers, *Morphologie/
City Metaphors*,
pp. 34–35: image
courtesy of Verlag der
Buchhandlung Walther
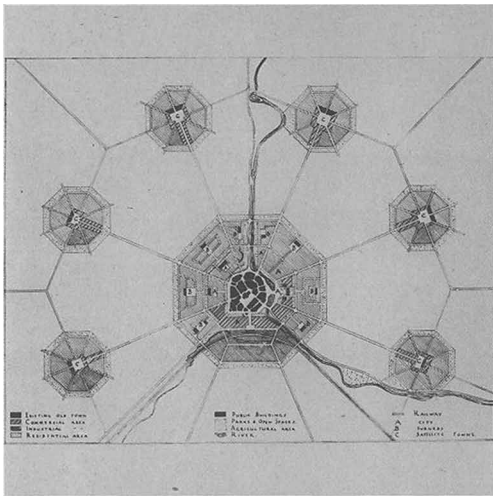König, Cologne).
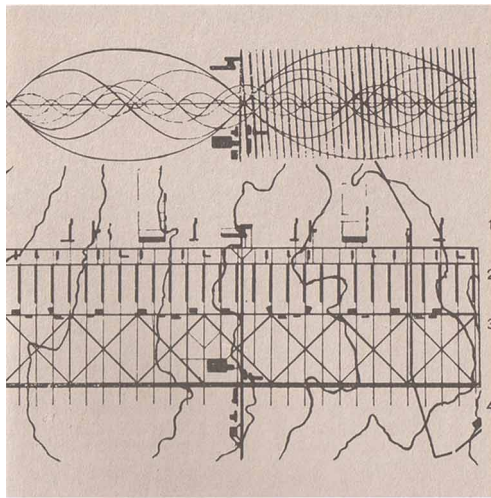
Protection

Parallelismus

the late 1960s. Unlike his students, he believed that building beautiful houses was an important task, and that one must take it seriously as an architect. This does not preclude thinking about more than only architectural questions, but it does indicate the limits of agency available to an architect. In an interview, Koolhaas notes an undertone of political issues in the work of Ungers, that nevertheless remains only that: 'So in fact you also say in every work, that there are formal and morphological solutions for these things, but not social ones.'[25] In reply, Ungers confirms a position towards that of the autonomy of art and architecture: 'I believe that the social problems of architecture cannot be resolved. We do not have the instruments for this. They can only solve architectural problems. In the same way, art cannot solve societal issues.'[26] Koolhaas resists this, questioning whether there is not some moral position embedded in the architecture. Although Ungers concurs that he has a personal moral principle, he describes it as separate from the architectural.

Utilising forms (1976–1978)
Ungers expands upon his interest in morphology and the role of form in his 1982 publication *Morphologie/City Metaphors*. The publication was based on his installation for 'Man TransForms' in 1976 at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York, with an essay that was developed to explore more extensively ideas of image, analogy and metaphor, and their place in human thinking. In the essay

Appendages

Anhanged

Figure 16. 'Appen-
dages' – satellite town,
Unwin 1928 (O.M.
Ungers, *Morphologie/
City Metaphors*,
pp. 56–57: image
courtesy of Verlag der
Buchhandlung Walther
König, Cologne).

he declares that form is necessary to human kind to
bring order to the world, and that to do so he/she
employs imagination together with thought.
Ungers attributes a strong significance to the role
of vision and imagination as the guiding principle
upon which consciousness comprehends the
world. Analysis may be necessary to understand
various parts of our reality, yet to Ungers it is detri-
mental when taken too far, since it tends to also
reduce everything to a chaotic mass where every-
thing is of equal importance. The need for specificity
and distinction is served by the imagination and by
sensuous perception. In other words, Ungers
allows the formal to be more than 'decoration',
and also more than a singular expression of an
underlying idea. He employs the concepts of meta-
phor, analogy, symbols, models to suggest that

there is a space between the intention of the
designer and the reception of the user that is pro-
ductive in itself. It is the gap that Koolhaas sees
in the presence of the Berlin wall, which Ungers
here conceptualises as the very foundation of the
architectural discipline.

In the book, as in the exhibition, this idea of the
importance of forms and images is further explored
through juxtapositions of two images and a word,
which create a new whole (Fig. 14). Each group con-
sists of an urban plan as the architectural image; a
reference photograph, which is not part of the orig-
inal design, but an associative image based primarily
on formal similarities; and the word as a description
of the conceptual content (Figs. 15, 16). To Ungers,
this circumscribes a more complex reality than the
typical architectural and urban analyses, which

Figure 17. Kreuzberg as city 'island' (as published in 'Cities within the City', *Lotus*, 19, p. 89: copyright O.M. Ungers; image courtesy of Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft, Cologne).

Luftaufnahme Kreuzberg

Lageplan Kreuzberg
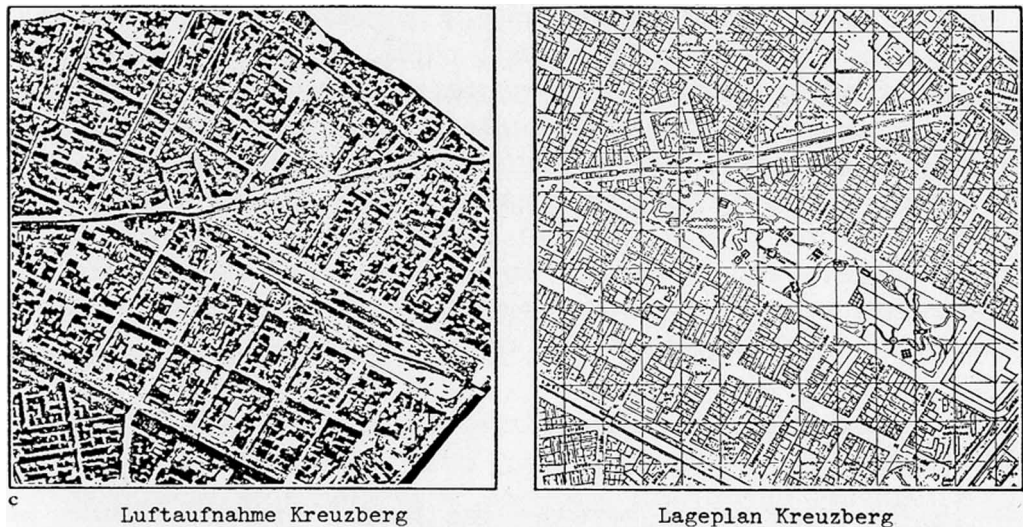
explore the quantitative or functional aspects of planning. Instead, his assemblages describe not only the object (the plan itself), but also 'the conceptual reality — the idea, shown as the plan — the image — the word.'[27]

After the exhibition, this exploration of the role of form in human thinking is set aside. However, aspects of formal coherence and urban morphology do play a small but significant role in the 1977 Berlin summer academy on the 'City within the city'. As a design proposition, the 'City within the city' is not dependent on a single architectural or urban gesture, but rather offers a framework within which differences can exist and be cultivated.[28] Although the project was focused on a broader problematic of urban redevelopment for a shrinking population,

it makes a subtle appeal to architectural form in its selection of the 'islands' of Berlin that would be salvaged. The choice of urban islands is to be guided by the 'degree of clarity and comprehensibility of the existing basic design principles', although these spaces should not be established 'on the basis of a particular taste or aesthetic conceptions'.[29] These comments remain little more than a suggestive distinction between some idea of 'pure form' as valuable and a 'particular taste' which is dismissed. Although these comments are not clarified, the material accompanying thesis 6 does recall the mechanisms of the image groups in *Morphologie/City Metaphors*: in addressing an area of Berlin such as Kreuzberg, a suggestion is made for a reference project, in this case Manhattan, and the 'city island' is given form in
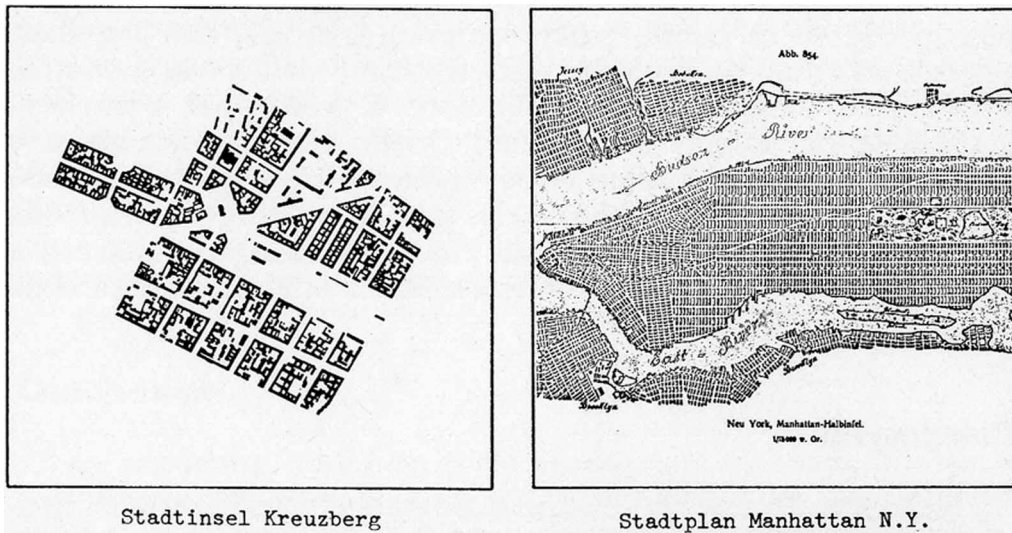
Figure 17. (Continued.)

Stadtinsel Kreuzberg

Stadtplan Manhattan N.Y.

between the plan and the reference project (Fig. 17). The series of images is not as diverse as those published in *Morphologie/City Metaphors*, but it contains a similar mechanism of juxtaposition that appeals to more than the urban plan itself.

Contradictions and oxymorons

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposite ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, as quoted in *Delirious New York*, p. 162.[30]

The acknowledgement and incorporation of contradictions is a theme that runs throughout the work of both Ungers and Koolhaas. In part, this interest in conflicting ideas is a response to an increasingly het-

erogeneous reality that architecture is simply confronted with. Yet both architects not only refer to this as a cornerstone of the metropolitan condition, but also employ a specific concept to harness and utilise these contradictions in their designs. For Koolhaas, it is the oxymoron, while for Ungers, it is the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Ungers borrows the notion of the *coincidentia oppositorum* from the mediaeval philosopher Nicholas of Cusa (Nikolaus von Kues), to identify a 'coincidence of antitheses and not their overcoming'. Recalling the composite images in *Morphologie/City Metaphors*, '[t]hese contradictions do not shut themselves up in their antithetical nature, but are integrated into an all-inclusive image.' To Ungers, this allows a new vision for architecture, one that releases itself from

the obligation of unity. 'A new dimension of thought is opened up if the world is experienced in all its contradictions, that is in all its multiplicity and variety, if it is not forced into the concept of homogeneity that shapes everything to itself.'[31] While his colleagues sketched a world of architectural unity, the *coincidentia oppositorum* gave Ungers a way to conceptualise plurality and use it in a formal sense. In a similar fashion, the oxymoron, as a combination of contradictory words, allows a simultaneous presence of incongruous realities. As an intellectual construction, it allows for the diversity of urban life to flourish within the confines of a specific architectural container.[32] Both concepts situate architecture as a strategic intervention within the plurality of the contemporary city that does not attempt to create a formal unity in order to smooth over contradictions.

For both Koolhaas and Ungers, the texts and the projects offer different ways of exploring their ideas. The form they give their buildings cannot be examined as completely separate from the 'expression of a spiritual content' (to recall Ungers's early definition of form), yet it is also not a direct extrapolation of their ideas. Conversely, the texts are not simply explanations of the projects, but form a parallel trajectory of intellectual exploration. In text, Ungers explores specific issues of architectural form such as proportion and order.[33] Yet he also experiments with visual metaphors and analogies in *Morphologie/City Metaphors* by creating composite images that explore the role of form in the conceptual structuring of the world. Koolhaas actively sought a new vocabulary to interpret an existing city in *Delirious New York*, while he also

employs techniques such as the storyboard to compose specific visualisations of the potential realities of architecture.

The projects of OMA tend to call attention to oppositions rather than subdue them.[34] The role of form in the work of OMA is not about the autonomy of form as an experimental drive within the limits of the discipline, taking no account of possible external realities. Rather, as Neumeyer notes, it uses an 'aggregation of metropolitan life in ever-changing configurations . . . with a daring programme in a conventional (even boring) architecture'. This metropolitan condition then breathes new life into architecture. In the context of the late 1960s, Ungers and Koolhaas counter the dominant debate by utilising conflicting ideas. Rather than extrapolate the political directly into their architecture and give it a physical form, they explored the formal autonomy of architecture while attempting to understand its cultural ramifications in the meantime.

This is also where we find a distinction between Koolhaas and his former partner Elia Zenghelis. 'He distances himself from the proliferation of metaphors in Exodus, when it should really have been concerned with pure architecture and its autonomy. Koolhaas does not fully subscribe to this; for him, there is a kind of social programme underlying Exodus: "At the very least, there is a sort of overwrought insistence on collectivity"', which seems to derive from his admiration of Soviet constructivist projects.[35] Zenghelis, in the end, does retreat further into a notion of autonomy, holding the conviction that the only way forward for architecture is to focus on form, which in this case seems to be primarily visual in that it should undergo an

'iconographic re-articulation'. Koolhaas, on the other hand, by maintaining and cultivating the oppositions he sees as part of the metropolitan condition, creates architectural strategies that remain flexible throughout urban transformations. His use of the oxymoron as a design tool — the clash of inherent contradictions — clears out a space of architectural specificity that stands its ground because it does not offer a direct link between form and meaning.

To return to an earlier thought then: 'I would never again believe in form as the primary vessel of meaning'. This statement does not allude to the problem of form as a 'vessel for meaning', as much as it dismisses the simplicity with which Koolhaas's architectural education equates specific forms with specific (political and social) consequences. Instead, he implies that the systematic exploration of various architectural forms is necessary to understand the contemporary metropolis. The Office for Metropolitan Architecture finds its metropolitan character in the presence of opposing 'realities', and uses architectural specificity in order to encourage the multiplicity of urban forms. The freedom implied in the ideas of the *contradictio in oppositorum* and the oxymoron, becomes a tool in which formally antithetical spaces are driven to the extreme. The manner in which the two architects employ these concepts does differ slightly: where Ungers uses the *contradictio in oppositorum* on a primarily formal level (almost as a compositional technique) it becomes more of a strategic condition for Koolhaas — the oxymoron allows him a freedom of design by creating a framework rather than a specific formal 'style'. The main distinction between Koolhaas and Ungers is in their final treatment of the conflicting realities they attempt to house within their designs. Koolhaas more readily accepts the beauty of reality 'as is', while Ungers still tries to unveil the potential beauty he sees in it.[36] Yet despite these evident differences in their work, they share a similar interest in the formal tools of architecture and their ability to incorporate and to enhance contradictions, which in turn contributes to the capacity of architecture to remain significant over time.

Notes and references

1. F. Neumeyer, 'OMA's Berlin : The Polemic Island in the City,' *Assemblage*, 11 (1989), pp. 36–52.

2. J. Cepl, *Oswald Mathias Ungers: Eine intellektuelle Biografie* (Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2007). Cepl traces the presence of the *Veröffentlichungen zur Architektur* in London to James Stirling, referring to an earlier publication by Gerhard Spangenberg, 'Oswald Mathias Ungers als Lehrer und Architekt', *Der Architekt*, no. 9 (September, 1987), pp. 417–421. Cepl does note that some accounts suggest that Leon Krier brought them to the attention of Stirling (p. 295, and note 495).

3. In an early manifesto on architecture written together with Reinhard Gieselmann, Ungers calls architectural form 'the expression of spiritual content': O.M. Ungers, R. Gieselmann, 'Towards a New Architecture' (1960), in, Ulrich Conrads, ed., *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1970 [orig., Frankfurt, Verlag Ulstein, 1964]), pp.165–166.

4. 'There is more profit to be had from an education that one does not agree with: it enforces competence. In isolation, you continually need to found and argue your opinions.' ('Man profitiert mehr von einer Unterweisung, mit der man nicht übereinstimmt: Das

zwingt zu tüchtigen Reflexen. Isoliert muß man seine Standpunkte dauernd begründen.') 'Die erschreckende Schönheit des 20. Jahrhunderts,' *Arch+*, 86 (August, 1986), pp. 34–43.

5. As this is a retrospective text, no doubt these five 'reverse epiphanies' have been formulated a little more persuasively in accordance with the ideas that have engaged OMA over the past twenty years. Nevertheless, in earlier comments on the Berlin wall, he also notes the tensions and contradictions along the wall, when he refers to the 'bizarre, spontaneous meaning and credibility that emanate from this place. ... On my walks through Berlin I encountered on the one hand a deeply striking ambiance ... And on the other I discovered many little objects along these neglected "terrains vagues", these unbelievable spaces of freedom, which stood in their places with a great self-evidence.' Rem Koolhaas in conversation with Franziska Bollerey, *Bauwelt*, 17/18 (1987), pp. 627–633.

6. This theme will return in his 1972 project 'Exodus, or the voluntary prisoners of architecture', where a form of Berlin wall encloses those who are 'strong enough' to inhabit his project.

7. 'Field trip, A(A) Memoir', in *SMLXL*, pp. 215–232. The 22 years that passed between the project presentation and the writing of the memoir perhaps explains the misattribution of the publication *Architecture: Action and Plan* to Peter (and Alison) Smithson. In fact, it was written by the other Peter at the AA, Peter Cook.

8. *Ibid.* p. 231

9. 'The City as a Work of Art', excerpt, in, Joan Ockman, ed., *Architecture Culture 1943–1968* (New York, Columbia Books of Architecture / Rizzoli, 1993), pp. 362–364. An important observation is made by Jasper Cepl in his extensive study of Ungers, where he notes that Ungers was so driven to morphology that he in essence considered everything scaleable:

Jasper Cepl, *O.M. Ungers, eine intellektuelle Biografie* (Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2007), p.141. This point forms a crucial distinction from the approach of Koolhaas, and is visible for example in Ungers's competition entry for Roosevelt Island in 1975, which is a miniature Manhattan.

10. Rossi introduced the work of Ungers to Italy in *Casabella*, 244 (1960). Ungers organised a Team X meeting in Berlin in 1965, but even then the differences were visible. Ungers's sympathy lay more with the rationalist approach to urban and architectural form that was present in the Italian circles surrounding Rossi. The most dramatic gesture from the side of Team X is represented by Aldo van Eyck's fuming 'Letter to Mathias Ungers from another world', in *Spazio e Società*, 8 (1979), where he declares Ungers as being completely at odds with everything that Team X stands for.

11. The Berlin lectures of 1964–65 were recently published in *Archplus*, 179 (July, 2006). These lectures also illustrate the strong morphological interest of Ungers.

12. See 'Oswald Mathias Ungers im Gespräch mit Rem Koolhaas und Hans Ulrich Obrist,' *Arch+*, 179 (2006), pp. 6–11, and E. Mühlthaler, 'Lernen von O.M. Ungers: Die Berliner Lehrzeit,' in, E. Mühlthaler, ed., *Lernen von OMU*, catalog (Berlin, Arch+ and TU, 2006), p.28.

13. According to Cepl, student unrest was not the sole problem for Ungers at the time, who was feeling increasingly at the mercy of his clients, and the demands placed upon him. However, the last conference Ungers organised at the TU Berlin, *Architekturtheorie* in 1967, ended in student protests and descended into chaos: J. Cepl, *O.M. Ungers, eine intellektuelle Biografie*, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

14. As is discussed later, he wrote *Delirious New York* without using any typical architectural terms – this was an experimental side to the book: the desire, in a sense, to redefine how we speak and think about

architecture. Rem Koolhaas in conversation with Franziska Bollerey, *Bauwelt*, 17/18 (1987), pp. 627–633. 'Bigness' revolves around an urban condition of scale that transcends formal tools, about a condition that creates something new.

15. Elia Zenghelis, in, Martin van Schaik, Otakar Macel, eds, *Exit Utopia: Architectural Provocations 1956–1976* (Munich, Prestel, 2005), p. 261. According to Zenghelis, they both feared the label 'formalism' being applied to their work, with its connotations of a cavalier disregard for reality. Considered in the light of the debate on architectural autonomy, this fear was perhaps somewhat justified.

16. Although he does not offer a precise definition of 'form', he does, for example, state that 'the process of translation from concept to pure form interests us'. Rem Koolhaas in conversation with Franziska Bollerey, *Bauwelt*, *op. cit.*, pp. 627–633.

17. Man transForms, exhibition at Cooper-Hewitt, 1976. Later, Ungers published his installation with an accompanying essay on images and metaphors, as *Morphologie/City Metaphors* (Cologne, Walther König, 1982).

18. 'People can inhabit anything. And they can be miserable in anything and ecstatic in anything. More and more I think architecture has nothing to do with it. Of course that's both liberating and alarming.' (interview, *Wired* magazine, July, 1996): see http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/4.07/koolhaas.html)

19. This was particularly strong in the Netherlands, where ideological battle lines were drawn in the magazines and at the TU Delft, not least by Aldo van Eyck. Perhaps Koolhaas's background made him more aware of the flaws in this ideological rift.

20. Koolhaas remarks that Rowe and Ungers share many of the same ideas, which no doubt they would have contested at the time. Yet this remark may signify a correspondence in their work that is as

yet under-recognised. 'Die erschreckende Schönheit des 20. Jahrhunderts,' *Arch+* 86 (August, 1986), pp. 34–43.

21. Koolhaas worked on the manuscript for *Delirious New York* with a fellowship at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in 1973, where Peter Eisenman was director.

22. F. Neumeyer, 'OMA's Berlin : The Polemic Island in the City,' *op. cit.*, pp. 36–52: quotation from p. 43.

23. *ibid.*, pp. 36–52: quotation from p. 44.

24. 'Und so habe ich ein Buch geschrieben, in dem wortwörtlich architektonische Kriterien fehlen. Kein einziges Mal ist die Rede von schön, häßlich, hoch, niedrig, weiß... Nichts über das Äußere.' Rem Koolhaas in conversation with Franziska Bollerey, *op. cit.*, pp. 627–633: quotation from pp. 628–629. (See also 'Die erschreckende Schönheit des 20. Jahrhunderts,' *op. cit.*, p. 42.)

25. 'Und eigentlich sagen Sie auch in jeder Arbeit, dass es für diese Dinge formal und morphologisch Lösungen gibt, aber nicht sozial.': 'Oswald Mathias Ungers im Gespräch mit Rem Koolhaas und Hans Ulrich Obrist', *Arch+*, 179 (2006), pp. 6–11: quotation, p. 10.

26. *Ibid.:*'Ich bin der Meinung, dass die sozialen Probleme von Architektur nicht gelöst werden können. Wir haben keine Mittel dazu. Sie können architektonische Probleme lösen. Genauso kann Kunst die gesellschaftlichen Fragen nicht lösen.'

27. O.M. Ungers, *Morphologie/City Metaphors*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

28. For a more specific elaboration on the idea of the City within the City, see my article 'The Archipelago City: Piecing together collectivities', *OASE*, 71 (2006), pp. 18–36.

29. 'Cities within the City', thesis 5, in *Lotus*, 19, pp. 82–97.

30. In the original 1963 text 'The Crack-Up', the phrase is actually 'opposed ideas' rather than 'opposite ideas' (*Oxford Book of 20th Century Quotations*, 113:6).

The continuation of the essay seems particularly suitable to the two architects being discussed here: 'One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.'

31. Lotus Documents (Quaderni di Lotus) no. 1, 'Architecture as theme', O.M. Ungers (Milan, Gruppo Editoriale Electa, 1982).

32. This is already intimated in the idea of the 'vertical schism', which depends on architectural specificity to allow for the 'instability of a Skyscraper's definitive composition': R. Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (Rotterdam, 010 publishers, 1994 [orig. 1978]), p. 107.

33. See, for example, O.M. Ungers, 'Ordo, fondo et mesura: The Criteria of Architecture', in, Henry A. Millon, ed., *The Renaissance from Brunelleschi to Michelangelo: The Representation of Architecture* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1994), pp. 307–317.

34. Fritz Neumeyer was attuned to this encompassing ambivalence of the work between pairs of oppositions in his article 'OMA's Berlin', *Assemblage*, 11, noting the references to the 'shocking beauty of the 20th century', the 'minimal architectural interventions' (with reference to Leonidov) combined with the 'absolute sensual delight' in OMA's early projects (p. 43), and that the 1989 Paris world exposition was 'a field of programme . . . realised in its purest form, almost without architectural intervention.'

35. Hilde Heynen, 'The Antinomies of Utopia. Superstudio in context', in, V. Bijvanck, ed., *Superstudio: The Middelburg lectures* (De Vleeshal and Zeeuws Museum, 2005), pp. 61–74.

36. 'Auch wenn sie beide die Realität anerkennen und daraus Kraft schöpfen, ist doch Koolhaas eher bereit, dich dies, so wie sie ist, schön zu sehen, während Ungers immer noch daran liegt, sie nach seinem Bilde umzuformen zu dem, was in ihr steckt': Jasper Cepl, *O.M. Ungers, eine intellektuelle Biografie*, *op. cit.*, p. 347.

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