

Informed-Form and the City: The Work of Simon Ungers

MATTHIAS ALTWICKER
New York Institute of Technology

Over the final fifteen years of his life Simon Ungers constructed two buildings that in both their clarity and their wide dissemination through the media became memorable and iconic. These two works, however, were a very small part of the architectural investigations that occupied him during this time. The bulk of these investigations were undertaken through competition entries, urban design workshops, and realized installation and exhibition work. This variety of scales and modes of investigation generated a unique methodology to approaching site and form in relationship with temporal influences, and the universal comprehension thereof. In this sense, the methodology directly offers an approach to operating within the urban context. A city, understood as a constructed document of human thought and experience, becomes a place where a continuity of thought, and the universal potential of those thoughts, can be made real and given form. The results of these studies formed the methodological basis that was advanced during the final six years of his life, realized exclusively through a series of exhibits and publications of theoretical architectural proposals.

Method

One must first see this method, however, as derived from the inherently temporary nature of installation art and exhibition architecture. The installation or exhibit will, in most instances, be removed and forgotten. Any way in which an integrated installation allows the viewer a new understanding of the space is thus a temporary condition. Conversely, as

Daniel Buren comments in "The Function of the Museum": "we can declare that the museum makes its mark (physical and moral) on everything that is exhibited in it, in a deep and indelible way. It does this all the more easily since everything that the Museum shows is only considered and produced in view of being set in it. Every work of art already bears, implicitly or not, the trace of a gesture, an image, a portrait, a period, a history, an idea...and is subsequently preserved by the Museum"¹

In the case of much of Ungers' installation work, the form and strategy was created out of understanding precisely this reciprocal relationship - not simply having the space contain the installation but rather using the space as informing the installation. It follows that there are two critical moments in the installation process. The first is where the installation, brought into the space as an abstract spatial-formal concept, is developed in terms of scale and clarity of concept in relationship to the conditions of the space. The second occurs when the installation is documented and removed, leaving only a transformation of the initial. "An architect's melancholy, then, is a way of working with and working through this absence"² wrote Henry Urbach in his introduction to the Ungers monograph published in 1997, and for Ungers this absence becomes an inspirational method.

Ungers circumnavigates the temporary nature of the installation by using it as an exercise to directly address the alteration of generic spatial-formal concepts that can subsequently

be developed further in the architectural realm. If one considers the building site (like the installation space) to be in existence before the building, and if one considers *the building site* to be necessary for the existence of the building, then it follows that the construction of a building on the site must reflect the temporal conditions of (1) before the building, (2) with the building, and (3) after the building. The building can no longer be understood as an intervention but instead as physically and historically integral to the site. It is this conception of space and form, reflecting simultaneously three temporal conditions, that generates a profound transformation of both the preexisting physical context and the preconceived spatial-formal concept. In the case of a permanent building in an urban context, the result is what I term the *informed-form*, a seemingly inevitable result of absorbed information that allows the form to simultaneously become historical fact, while imparting meaning derived from an unseen temporal condition.

Informed-form

The first evidence of this research, similar more in the process of development than in the resulting forms, appears in three projects developed between 1994-5: an installation entitled "Line, Plane, Volume" (Sandra Gering

Gallery, 1994) (Fig. 1), an urban design proposal for Chemnitz, Germany (Institute for Advanced Architectural Studies Urban Design Forum, 1995) (Fig. 2), and a competition entry for the Prado Museum extension (1995). (also Fig. 2).

The starting point for "Line, Plane, Volume" is a reinterpretation of basic geometric principles occurring throughout the context of the gallery space. Each piece of the work finds a place in the gallery to exist, so that it is first *the concept* of line, plane, volume and second *the gallery space itself* that relates the parts to one another rather than a simple geometric progression. The subtitle of the work, "Intensity, Asperity, Density", implies a second transformation based on qualities applied to these three geometric conditions. The line (Intensity), a 14' high neon tube, is a bright light set at the artificially lit entry to the gallery, while the plane (Asperity), a roughly painted grey rectangle, matches itself precisely to the 14'x21' gallery wall, while a 4' cube (Density), formed by stacked plywood panels, sits at the naturally lit west end of the gallery. The material choice of each element carries with it the implication of dynamics of movement between the geometrical tenets of the three elements within the gallery space. The line becomes the rotational axis of the

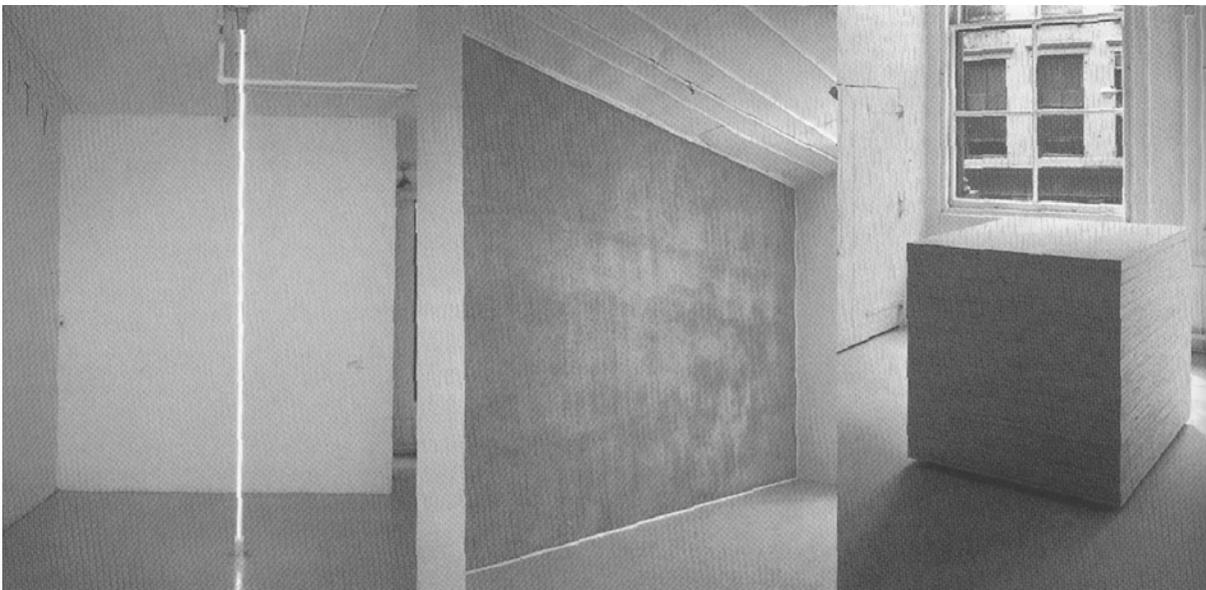


Figure 1. Line, Plane, Volume (Intensity, Asperity, Density)

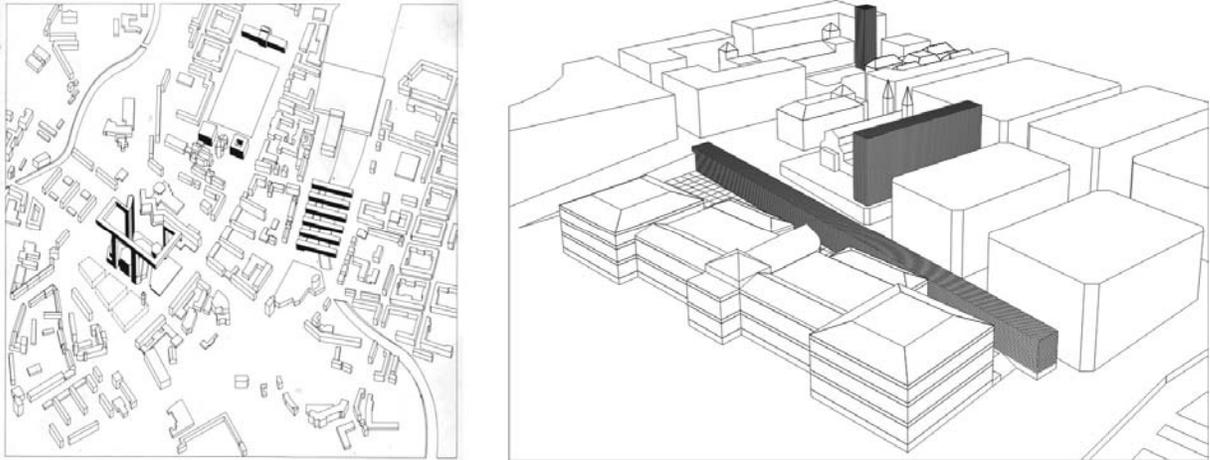


Figure 2. Urban Design - Chemnitz; Prado Museum Extension.

gallery, at once a focal point and a place to move around. The plane, an irregular surface lit both naturally and artificially, is in a state of constant experiential flux. The volume formed through the stacked plywood, articulates the volume through the implied action of layering and, along with the layering inherent in the plywood, as volume and density without mass. In this way the temporal conditions resulting from the experience of the space are also articulations of the gallery space itself in its empty condition.

Commenting on the Urban Design proposal for Chemnitz, Hana Cisar describes a similar process:

"The author frees himself from the past and gives us a historical construction that is not a repetition of what already was but instead a new composition in which elements of the past are inherent."³ In Chemnitz, Ungers' proposal uses three equally-sized sites to create spatial identity within a city lacking precisely such conditions after years of historical transformations. These proposals are understood not as repairing the city but as amplifying latent conditions as a means to rediscovering spatial (and as a result cultural) identity. Balance is returned to the ill-defined 19th century park with a volume of public program to south; the extension of the city, separated from the city core by the rail lines, is tied back to the city by a series of bridge-like masonry volumes; the over-scaled urban plaza created by the East German government is given a superstructural frame as a way to absorb the single skyscraper of

the city as well as to integrate the space into a potentially new identity for the 21st century. Beyond the reorientation according to spatial identity, however, the interventions afford the city inhabitant a viewpoint of the three interventions and their supporting context in a way that was not possible before. The structure that bridges the rail lines places one within this break in the city; the superstructure places one above the city and becomes a floating reconstitution of the monumental space below, allowing us to see the us to see the bridging masonry volumes as a continuous plane of precisely the same size as the park.

Conditional Materiality

Experiential conditions are the generators of the final transformations that will occur to the intervention according to material and structural considerations. In Chemnitz, as with the installation, the physical condition and its conceptual qualities are augmented by the means of realization. The bridge-like volumes over the rail line are rendered as masonry to articulate the idea of the intervention as a layered mass, a piece and extension of the city itself, rather than as the pieces as a bridge condition. Conversely, the superstructure is an articulated steel truss, acting at once vertically and horizontally to frame the conditions described above. Lynette Widder notes that "Ungers has chosen to pursue construction methods which allow an architecture of smooth planes and prismatic volumes to be literally expressive of the

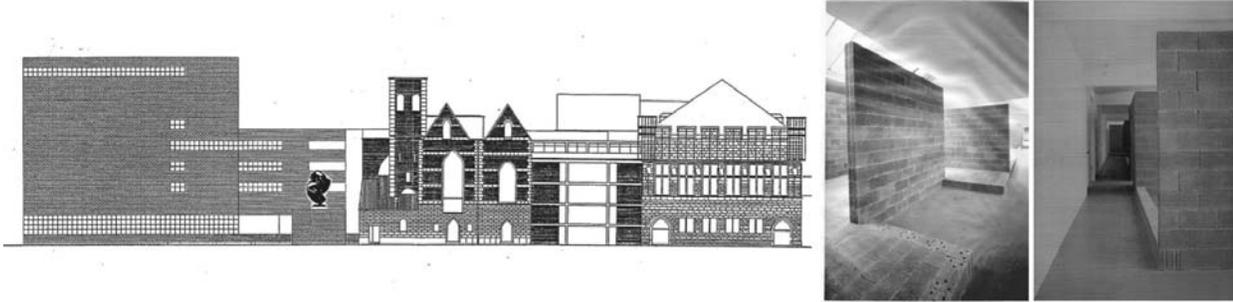


Figure 3. Continuous Constructions – Wallraf-Richartz Museum; Palast der Kuenste Exhibition Architecture.

underlying structural and constructional systems....structure(s) favored by Ungers offer absolute unity between bearing system, massing, spatial quality an architectural expression."⁴ In the Prado Museum Extension, the last of the works in this initial series of investigations, is a clear articulation of this. A dense grid of steel profiles is used to define all volumes of the intervention, visually unifying the dispersed elements within an urban context, while also providing a system for each element to create local variation. In all cases, the constructive approach is to be looked at in two ways. The first is that it is a necessary means to maintain a degree of abstraction and clarity, so that the proposal will transfer its underlying principles unerringly. The second is that there is a correct and natural way for a construction technique or material to be used.

Continuous Constructions

This method of variation within a system is picked up in subsequent projects undertaken in 1996. Two projects in Köln, the competition entry for the Wallraf-Richartz Museum and the Exhibition Architecture for the Palast der Kuenste Gallery (Fig.3), take up this idea and study it at both the scale of the building and the scale of the exhibition. The site for the competition proposal is at the end of a dense city block in the center of Köln; it consists of the remains of a bombed-out church, architectural fragments of the old city, and infill elements made during the postwar reconstruction. Ungers' proposal, an interconnected series of cubic volumes made of simple stone blocks, defines the end of the block to the adjacent urban space and terminates the aggregation of masonry and stone buildings of the existing block. Here, the historical context has been used as a material

system with the new museum volume as the next variation within the system, transforming the irregular and varied block into a clearly identifiable, idealized condition.

These urban studies generate and inspire the exhibition architecture for the Palast der Kuenste. This sequence of rooms, conceived of as a continuous block with a variety of spatial conditions, gives the artists a variety of spatial options in an otherwise nondescript exhibition hall. The exhibition was to be a mixture of selections from the permanent collection and installations done by artists commissioned by the gallery. The continuous temporary construction of the exhibition architecture thus reflects on the Wallraf-Richartz block by compressing its temporality from centuries to weeks. The comprehension of the history of the block, possible only through interaction with the block itself, is replicated in the movement through the gallery, where the complexity of urban conditions – made over time through various actors and various influences – is reconstituted as a means to make the relationships between the installed artworks possible.

Theoretical Typological Proposals

Reading the relationships between the installation work and the architectural proposals as the result of a very particular method becomes a way to formally gauge the responsiveness of pure configurations to real (and often idiosyncratic) sites. Instead of leading to a tension within the interventions between the idealization of site and the idealization of form, it leads the architectural investigations to the internalization, and eventual elimination, of a specific site altogether.

To understand how this is possible, one needs to see the method itself being transformed. Instead of the dialectic between site and concept, the continued transformation develops around a dialectic between spatial-formal condition and functional type. After the completion of the Cube House (Block House) in 2000, Ungers embarked on the development of projects that would only be realized in exhibitions and publications. As the titles of the various exhibitions reinforce, themes of conceptual and formal legibility ("Speaking Architecture", 2000), urban programs ("8 Public Buildings", 2002), and materiality and construction ("Ferrous Forms", 2001) continued to play a vital role in the work. Inherent in the new methodology that developed without pressures of site was the implication that the form and type had already absorbed contextual information and been transformed. It was possible, and perhaps even advantageous, for further investigation and development to occur separate from site. When the opportunity presented itself, these informed-forms could be re-inserted into the city to absorb more information and development.

The categories of functional types investigated are those Villem Flusser discusses as being transformed and no longer recognizable in the contemporary city: "The image of the city that is typical for us looks something like this: houses, commercial private rooms, around a market place, a political public space, and above it all on a hill stands a temple, a theoretical sacred space."⁵ However, he also cautions: "I am convinced that the western city is damned to disappear in the next 100-150 years. Not through suburbanization but through a virtual and transmitted presence."⁶ For Ungers, working on these types is a way to not only recover the identity of the type but to recover the identity of the city through its

construction instead of its reconstruction. His work resists the virtual presence by operating on the city form without the direct influence of a site in the virtual city, instead embodying historical and temporal aspects in the construction of the city form.

Museums

To elaborate on the earlier urban designs, over forty different public building programs were researched in preparation for the exhibitions. The intention of these precisely inflected public building volumes is to begin a dialog with one another and with the inhabitants of the city. The fact that the programs chosen are utilitarian (such as gas stations and office buildings), recreational (stadia and swimming pools) and cultural (museums and libraries) – but not political (such as government buildings) – implies a great deal about his attitude to the conception of public buildings themselves. There was never an intention to create an ideal city through the assembly of these buildings, but instead the idea that each could contribute on its own to the meaningful life within an existing city. Amongst all of the programs investigated, the one with the greatest number of variations was the museum, and this speaks as well to the powerful relationship Ungers envisioned between the art world and the city. As a public building it would physically contribute to the history and continuity of the context (the city itself and its inhabitants) while it would make the same continuity and history possible for the works (and their concepts and opinions) that were exhibited, preserved, and collected in it. People could thus discover the public building as a manifestation not only of the art world but of their world and the city itself.

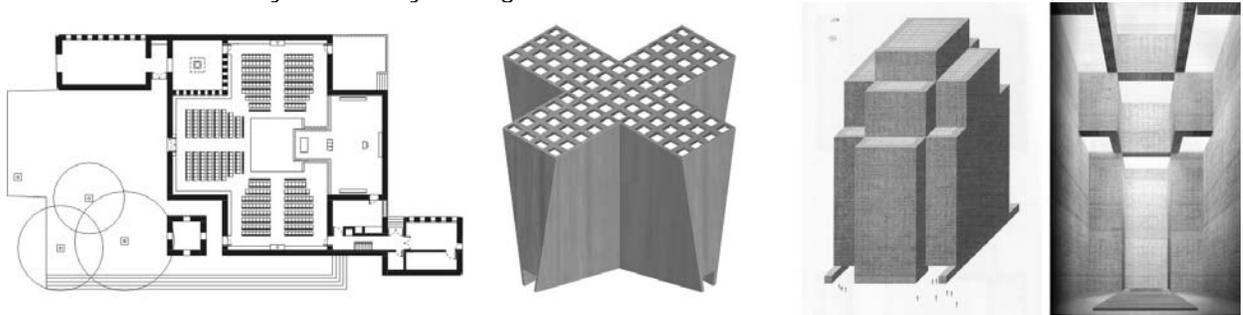


Figure 4. Sacred Spaces – St. Theodor Church; Cathedral; Basilica.

Sacred Spaces

If the museum offered a connection between the art world and the real world in the city, then the sacred space offered the same type of connection, this time between the real world and the personal, inner world. It is a space that virtually eliminates complex programmatic restrictions and instead presents a typology where space, form, and meaning are perhaps most able to be synchronized. These studies began during the 1997 competition entry for the St. Theodor Church in Köln (Fig.4). Here, the Greek cross configuration of the plan absorbs the various irregular external forces of the existing tower, and the priests' quarters. Extruded vertically, the masonry block construction transforms into glass block at various heights as the walls reach the building's roof, creating simultaneously a continuous measure for the wall surface while subtly transforming it from solid to translucent. The subsequent studies culminated in the exhibition "Seven Sacred Spaces" (2003) (Fig. 4) where the same material and construction strategy was used to investigate sacred space at a variety of scales and for a variety of faiths. Between the competition and the exhibition the studies of sacred space were defined by three simple controls – the material, the prescribed architectural sequence of the type, and the nature of the natural light as it related to movement. For the first time Ungers used video in the development of the work; they combined a series of animations with the light and aural qualities of the space to present more directly their atmosphere. Through this process these architectural proposals most directly resembled - in their conception – the installation work of the late 1990's.

Houses

"A house is the most flexible of all programs; its interpretations are virtually limitless. A house is a means of expressing a concept or idea in the most concentrated form...A house is a defining moment for an architect."⁷ Ungers' syllabus for the studio he taught at Harvard University in 1997 highlights his

interest with the house typology – the Cube House was being developed in parallel with the examples above - and outlines its necessity to the research of the public programs. In the same way the installation work could focus the process of formal articulation, the house investigations could focus the study of these configurations to maximize spatial result within minimal dimensions and with minimal means. They offered the possibility to interact with typological site conditions whose extreme conditions (on a cliff, on a mound, etc.) offered new ways to view the use of material and construction systems.

Method - Practice

"The artworld stands to the real world in something like the relationship in which the City of God stands to the Earthly City. Certain objects, like certain individuals, enjoy double citizenship..."⁸ – Arthur Danto

In the exhibition and publication entitled "Autonomy and Dialogue" (2005) - what would become his final presentation of new work - Ungers presented theoretical proposals of all three architectural programs. What the exhibit showed, and what this method offered, is a unique perspective on the creation and transformation of architectural space and form; it also offered Ungers and the works "citizenship" in both the art world and the real world. The implication of this process, for the work as well as the architect, moves beyond the temporal and experiential transformations described above. The method, like the potential of the works themselves, offers a way for the real world to access the inner world of the architect, a way to take the highly personal aspects of his work, his attitudes, and his concepts of the city, and bring them closer to universal understanding and value. Rather than eliminating the personal aspects, it made the results of an internalized process simultaneously highly personal and immediately accessible to all. (Fig. 5)



Figure 5. Tower, Light – Monolith; Urban Design for Bonn

Endnotes

¹ Buren, Daniel: "Function of the Museum," *Artforum*, September 1973.

² Urbach, Henry: Simon Ungers, GG Portfolio, 1998.

³ Cisar, Hana: "Strategien fuer den Oeffentlichen Raum," *Werk Bauen Wohnen*, September 1996.

⁴ Widder, Lynette: Untitled and Unpublished article, July 1998.

⁵ Flusser, Villem: Nachgeschichten, Stefan Bollman Verlag, 1990.

⁶ Flusser, Villem: The End of History, The End of the City?, Picus Verlag, 1992.

⁷ Ungers, Simon: studio syllabus, 1997.

⁸ Danto, Arthur: "The Artworld", *Journal of Philosophy*, 1964.