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ON RADICAL HOUSES

O DOMACH RADYKALNYCH

Abstract

The inspiration for the following considerations is the architectural and theoretical output of Oswald Mathias Ungers, an architect who specifically emphasized the need for order in architecture. Two projects for housing in the city by him have been chosen examples of architecture subjected to strict rules of geometry. Geometry is treated as the force organizing reality. This imaginary, abstract world of Ungers' is materialized in physical structures, and can be considered as proof of long-lasting value of architecture adhering to the stringent rules of composition.

Keywords: O. M. Ungers, abstraction, ordering

Streszczenie

Inspiracją do zawartych w tekście rozważań jest twórczość Oswalda Mathiasa Ungersa, architekta, który szczególnie podkreślał potrzebę poszukiwania porządku w architekturze. Dwa projekty domów w mieście jego autorstwa to przykłady architektury podporządkowanej ścisłym zasadom geometrii. Geometrii traktowanej jako siły porządkującej rzeczywistość. Wyobrażony, abstrakcyjny świat Ungersa zmaterializowany w fizycznych budowlach jest dowodem na nieprzemijalną wartość architektury odwołującej się do rygorystycznych zasad kompozycyjnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Oswald Mathias Ungers, abstrakcja, porządek

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*If you want to express your ideas as clearly as possible,
you have to force it to its limits.¹*

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A city's image is mostly shaped by its housing architecture. Cities are filled with 'residential buildings' in which the aspects of aesthetic nature have been reduced to practical and functional architectural formulas. There are also 'houses' that are shaped as icons, but these are in the minority. Between them there are buildings that defy easy classification; buildings belonging to another order. Seemingly ordinary, under their apparent superficial banality they conceal unusual ideas. Ideas such as those that are neither directly useful nor that can be achieved in the pursuit of a certain stylistic realization, but give meaning to buildings and transform them into works of art. These are houses that are subjected to the control of order and geometric principles.

The inspiration for the following considerations is the architectural and theoretical work of Oswald Mathias Ungers, an architect who particularly emphasized the necessity of rules in architecture. When looking for order in architecture, periods that saw a return to classicism particularly come to mind. Antonio Monestiroli even claimed that classical architecture is seen as the only progressive tendency based on the principles and rules².

O. M. Ungers (1926–2007) was an architect who, unlike many of his contemporaries, never saw the need to disconnect himself from the past. He referred, however, to the history of ideas not to the history of styles. Looking for the basis of his thoughts and creativity in classical sources, he did not repeat certain forms, figures and rigid functional schemes, but focused on the issue of order within architecture. He believed that the opening scene of architecture is emptiness, and architectural intervention that involves structuring this most radical space needs an order³. However, order requires rules. In the art of establishing rules – which in his opinion, architecture precisely is – composition is essential. Composition, which Ungers understood, based on classical rules of: symmetry, proportion, axial arrangement, contrasts⁴. He treated geometry as a force to arrange reality.

Two examples of houses in the city illustrate O. M. Ungers' radical approach to architecture based on these rules. The houses are of different scales and inhabiting types, but they are both united by the manifestation of a common idea. The two houses – multi-family and single-family, show an absolute adherence to the power of geometry. Especially in the case of one of them, according to the initial quote of Ungers, he approached with the ultimate radicalism – i.e. to the absolute reduction of form.

¹ O. M. Ungers, [in:] R. van Toom, O. Bouman, *Le Style, c'est l'Homme – A Conversation with Oswald Mathias Ungers*, [in:] *The Invisible in Architecture*, R. van Toorn (Author, Editor), O. Bouman (Author), Wiley; 1 edition (April 25, 1994), p. 55.

² A. Monestiroli, *Tryglifi i metopa. Dziewięć wykładów o architekturze*, Politechnika Krakowska, 2008, p. 11.

³ M. Kieren, *O. M. Ungers – House in Kämpchensweg*, „Domus” 199 nr 819, p. 44

⁴ O. M. Ungers, *What is architecture?* (1964) [in:] *The Rationalist Reader: Architecture and Rationalism in Western Europe 1920–1949/1960–1990*, A. Peckham, T. Schmiedenknecht (ed.), Routledge 2014, p. 321.

2. IBA BLOCK 1

An example of submitting to the geometry of the cube and square is the *IBA Block 1* in Berlin. This multi-family residential building is one of the projects developed under the IBA (Internationalen Baustellung Berlin) in 1984–1987. It was supposed to restore the former urban character of the area. In redefining the urban meaning, this building-quarter recreated the historical edge of the city between the densely built-up southern part of Friedrichstadt and the Kulturforum area. In 1997–2002, the street was blocked by the monumental complex of *Park Kolonnaden* by Giorgio Grassi, running along the green avenue just off Potsdamer Platz. The work of Ungers was ultimately shifted to ‘the background’.

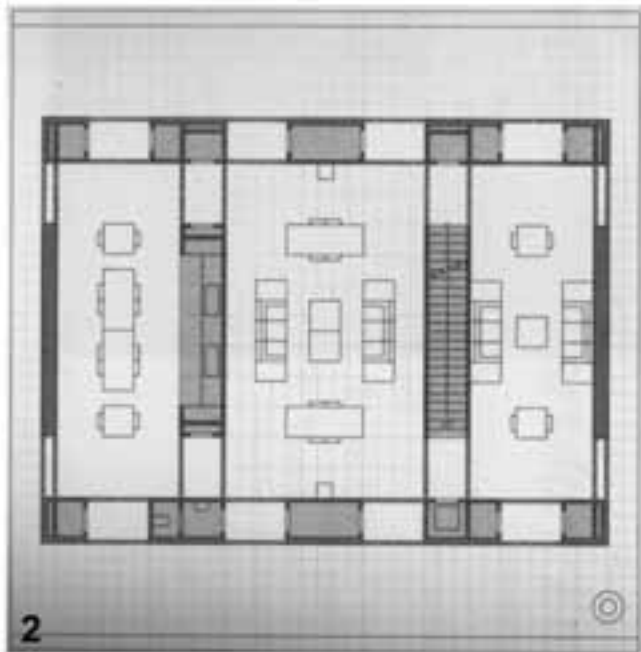
The *IBA Block 1* building is still characterized by the tension between its reduction of modernism and the diversity of postmodernism. This formally extremely simple object combines different typological variations. At first, it is difficult to decide whether to treat it as a stand-alone building or as a quarter building. This ambiguity is caused by its small scale and the fact that, on the one hand, it has been distanced from the adjacent building, and on the other hand, its peripheral form with the internal courtyard. The building, which was created in a relatively small square (for a quarter building) with sides measuring 40 metres, relates to the size and typological solution of the neighbouring old buildings, altering, however, the traditional type of townhouse with a courtyard of a new type. The urban system was supplemented here through the implementation of a square *Block-in-Block* (building in the quarter) but only partially inscribed in the possible edges of the plot-quarter.

Ungers’ creative process was always dominated by the need to give a clean structure to the building, and a square or a cube were his basic means of expression. In *IBA 1* plans, form, structural arrangement, sections, elevations, arrangement of windows, and cladding were subordinated to a modular grid based on the square. The building’s square outline within the plan consists of eight free-standing three-storey ‘houses-towers’, also a square shape themselves, which are regularly composed within the outline of the development. The towers are joined together in one quarter-building on the upper three levels. Between the towers, eight regular gates leading to the inside of the arrangement were left. The theme of the building-gate used here also has its historical roots in this area of the city. It may be questioned if this is solid volume from which the slits have been cut, but the author’s sketches show the original idea of the towers’ composition. A well-known axonometric view especially emphasizes this principle.

The building is a combination of different types of flats. Two-floor apartments found on the two lowest levels have separate, direct entrances from the basement and their independence is reminiscent to that of a one-family house. Apartments on the upper floors are connected by the four common staircases in the corners of the building. Access to apartments on the third floor lead, in turn, to shielded bridge structures suspended in the gate’s arches. This typological and communicational diversity is a consequence of the rigid formal composition of the building.

A semi-public square courtyard, through three-storey passage-gates, is integrated seamlessly with the surrounding area. For spatial diversity, the courtyard is raised above street level. With one solitary tree, the courtyard only seems to symbolize the common space, as it is too open to be a place used by inhabitants for purposes other than communication.

In the perception of the observer who, not having access to the plans and axonometric view, is not aware of all the aspects of composition, the domination of the modular square grid is particularly evident in the consistently regular arrangement of relatively



Ill. 1, Ill.2, *Haus Ungers III*, O. M. Ungers, Cologne, 1996, [source: O.M. Ungers, *Kosmos der Architektur*, A. Lepik (ed.) Berlin 2007]

large, identical square windows. Facade brick, which is a material that naturally requires compositional precision, dark in colour here, is strongly contrasted with the white-framed windows with strongly emphasized divisions. In the archways, where windows are functionally not necessary, they have been replaced with painted white ‘blind’ panels. It is remarkable that Ungers managed to subjugate and inscribe the residential function in such a restrictive composition of plans and elevations. This is undoubtedly an example of a building that does not reveal the effort that has gone into its creation (not in the material sense). This work by Ungers raises many questions. Can he be considered as ‘the master of the square’, or ‘a slave’ to it? Would eventually such a radical submission to geometry in residential architecture become irrational? Does this radical architecture leave some place for individualism for its users? Is there a place for important aspects, such as comfort, privacy, intimacy, safety of residents? Does this architecture acquire some oppressive character?

The answer to these dilemmas may be the controversial statement from Ungers that architecture is a synthesis of geometry and material. The function of the architect is considered secondary, even irrelevant.

3. HAUS UNGERS III

A house in Cologne, named *Haus Ungers III* (1994–1996) was designed and built by the architect himself, for himself. This late work seems to be a distillation of all of his experiences gained over the many years of his work. Ungers “started from the heavy materiality and the asymmetry of his first works, bypassed rationalism and symmetrical abstractions, to arrive finally at absolute purity, in which nothing disturbs the quiet perfection of the Platonic proportion of form”⁵. This house is the result of a confrontation of typology with geometry, history with pure form. A building-manifesto was created, “House Without Qualities” (*Haus ohne Eigenschaften*), an experiment in the reduction of architectural elements, the materialization of his long-standing research on abstraction in architecture. It can be considered as a conceptual model for a house, which has been made real through construction.

We can try to find its prototypes. On the superficial plane of visual representation, it is simple: Palladio’s Villa Badoer, Adolf Loos’ buildings, Mies van der Rohe’s Perls’ House. In an essay devoted to the *Haus Ungers III*, Francesco Dal Co⁶ compared it to the house that the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein designed for his sister in 1926. He emphasized its simplicity and austerity, with particular attention to its measures and proportions. First, however, Dal Co came to the conclusion that Ungers’ house can be linked to the ideas of Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Ungers himself summed it up aptly: “the final confrontation with Schinkel, here in the extremes, presents the pursuit to *coincidentia oppositorum*”⁷ – to the spiritual unity of things in their formal diversity”⁸. Ungers considered the finished work to be a summary of the

⁵ S. Doubilet, D. Boles, *La Casa in Europa Oggi/Tendenze nell’architettura contemporanea*, Rizolli, Milano 1999, p. 109

⁶ F. Dal Co [in:] *O.M. Ungers: Bauen und Projekte 1991–1998*, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalts, Stuttgart 1998, p. 284.

⁷ „A union of opposites” of Nicholas of Cusa from *De docta ignorantia* (On Learned Ignorance) (1440).

⁸ F. Dal Co [in:] *O.M. Ungers: Bauen und Projekte*, *op. cit.*, p. 285.



III. 3. *IBA Block 1*, O. M. Ungers, Berlin, 1998–99, [source: photo A. Mielnik]

III. 4. *IBA Block 1*, O. M. Ungers, Berlin, 1998–99, [source: <http://acidadebranca.tumblr.com/image/3746380961>]

whole spectrum of possibilities. He treated the coexistence of opposites as “the principle that connects [...] creative contradiction and continuity, spontaneity and planning, the accidentence/ coincidence and the established order”⁹. The reconciliation of the contradictions allows one to achieve internal order in the work.

This dialectical principle is the first lesson which Ungers took from the works of Schinkel¹⁰. The second lesson is the belief in the indispensability of an idea. “The style means nothing. It is only an added ornamentation. It is only removable, time-dependent and transient. The idea is everything. It is permanent”¹¹. Without an idea, theme and intellectual concept architecture remains on the surface dependent on the formal ornament. The idea leads architecture through styles and trends of different times. Because of it, the building does not age. The third lesson is the universality of the concept, its flexibility in relation to the needs, place and time. It is a lesson in the transformation of a past thing to a forthcoming one, of existing in the new one¹². The next lesson that mentions Ungers is a need for awareness and the acceptance of history as a living tradition that provides time’s continuum. Without history, architecture remains abstract and theoretical, never reaching its fullness or vitality. History is, however, not understood here as a catalogue of forms, styles, stereotypes and recipes that can be used if needed. The fifth, and final, lesson is the continuation of the principle of unity within diversity and relation to the unity of nature and culture, environment and architecture. The legacy of Schinkel became extremely close to Ungers.

Ungers himself emphasized that the house in Cologne is a further reflection on one of the basic architectural types; the three-part composition of a villa with a central space and two side aisles, a type which turns up in many stylistic variations in the history of building (*lesson 4*). Ungers radicalized the strategies used in these buildings and created the simplest form of interpretation of constantly occurring elements (*lesson 3*). His variant is characterized by the rejection of all unnecessary elements and by not referring in any way to specific historical details. As he summarised, “at the end of a long history full of events, themes, symbols and metaphors, a clean geometric box remains”¹³.

Plastered in white, the two-storey building – a cuboid of 11.7 m x 15.6 m of 7.8 m height (ratio of 3:4:2) – was erected on a white stone basis in the garden of the residential quarter. By creating a base, Ungers celebrates the “house as a pure object”¹⁴, that is limited to the essential elements: walls and windows. Perfectly symmetrical facades are identical, with no differentiation pursued between the front and the back. Even the main entrance is not evident – all the doors-windows are identical; the usual hierarchy is abandoned in favour of abstraction. The house is built without visible details, profiles, framings, attics. The plan’s geometry is not made evident in the elevations in any way. All that remains is a game of lines (walls) and openings (windows), all confined to a rhythmic pattern. A precisely drawn object is created – hard, solid, unadorned, and elementary. “No expression of anything, no synonym for

⁹ O. M. Ungers, *Architektura jako temat*, 1982 [in:] *Teorie i manifesty architektury współczesnej*, p. 117.

¹⁰ Patrz: O. M. Ungers, *Fünf Lehren aus Schinkels Werk* [in:] *O. M. Ungers: Architectur 1951–1990*, Stuttgart 1991.

¹¹ O. M. Ungers, *Fünf Lehren aus Schinkels Werk* [in:] *O. M. Ungers: Architectur 1951–1990*, Stuttgart 1991, p. 235.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 235.

¹³ S. Doubilet; D. Boles, *La Casa...*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

¹⁴ O. M. Ungers, *Aphorismen zum Häuserbauen*, Braunschweig/Wiesbaden und Köln 1999, p. 29, [in:] M. Kieren, *O. M. Ungers – House in Kämpchensweg*, „Domus” 199 nr 819, p. 44.

anything, reduced to the absolute core, as pure and unambiguous as possible. [...] Everything that was intended is made visible, is shown all at once”¹⁵.

The internal spaces have the same degree of clarity. The house reveals a consistent structural logic. The three-part composition house has five rooms (in the basement is a pre-existing pool). On the ground floor, there is a central room of double-height, described by the author as *terrena*, and two rooms located in side-aisles, 3.6 m width and of 3.6 m height, one acting as the kitchen and dining room, and the second as the living room. On the second floor, there are the private apartments of Ungers and his wife in the aisles. Along the eastern and western sides, and between the aisles and the central part, there are one-and-a-half-metre wide ‘service’ walls, accommodating the stairs, an elevator, toilets/bathroom, built-in wardrobes, technical facilities and a kitchen. All the functional divisions have their strong physical representation.

In *Haus Ungers III*, order and form are the most important element, along with its clarity, which results from the use of geometric principles that define all aspects of the building. Based on its strict rules, the rhythm was defined and spatial modules were built. Modules that control elevations and the entire inner composition, especially the central area in the building, which harnesses the spatial energy of the house, pushing up through the two floors, allow the controlling mathematical rhythmic dynamics between the wall elements, door and window openings to be felt. Ungers, celebrating the clear modularity, displayed compasses, scales and proportion lines and number on parts of the wall divisions. “They are the harmonious laws governing the building, which have to some extent been burnt into these spaces or the walls of the house and thereby provide a reference to the thinking that lies behind this house”.¹⁶ Also, geometric, massive furniture specially designed for these spaces is subject to the proportions and modules underlying the design.

Ungers believed that “the house is a living space, laboratory, test and representation of the idea of the world”¹⁷. Ungers’ imaginary world, subordinated to the strict rules of geometry and enclosed in a plain white box, became evidence/confirmation of the presence of modern architecture seeking order and basis within the strict principles of composition. Architects searching for nonfigurative architecture of pure form, determined by its means of mass, geometry and proportion. The extreme synthesis and the reduction of elements show the search for the essence of architecture, which Ungers identified in the strict rules of composition. “I wanted to see how far architecture can be abstract. [...] Therefore, there is a “house without qualities” no ornaments, no details, nor bottom or top. [...] Everything has been subtracted to the absolute core of abstraction. More cannot be done”¹⁸.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

¹⁷ O. M. Ungers [in:] M. Kieren, *Der Architect als Bauherr; Ungers’ eigene Häuser als Ergebnis einer monologischen Kunst*, [in:] O. M. Ungers, *Kosmos der Architektur*, A. Lepik (ed.), Hatje Cantz, Berlin 2007, p. 61.

¹⁸ *Die Rationalisierung des Bestehenden. Oswald Mathias Ungers im Gespräch mit Rem Koolhaas und Hans Ulrich Obrist* (Köln 2004), Handwerkheft IV, D. Eberle (ed.), Departement Architektur, Entwurf III / IV, ETH Zürich, p. 29–38. [in:] http://www.eberle.arch.ethz.ch/cms/uploads/files/publikationen/140409_IV_TEXTE.pdf (access: 27.04.2016) („Ich wollte sehen, inwieweit Architektur in der Lage ist, abstrakt zu sein. [...] Deshalb gibt es am Haus ohne Eigenschaften kein Ornament, keine Details, kein Oben und kein Unten. [...] Alles wurde subtrahiert auf den absoluten Kern der Abstraktion. Weiter geht es nicht mehr.“)

Ungers, during his creative life, dealt with the exploration of abstraction in architecture. With this project he undoubtedly gave the fullest expression of this idea – in its material form. But one day, in conversation with his son, Simon Ungers, he admitted that complete abstraction in architecture is not possible... because of the windowp. 4.

Submission to laws and rules may seem limiting to artistic freedom for many creators. Such a radical submission to the geometry of the composition may be treated as a source of enslavement. However, there are architects, O. M. Ungers among them, who are close to rationalistic trends in architecture and who are willing to undergo the rigors of logic. Paradoxically, they see that in the restrictiveness given by the geometry there is a kind of liberation and a huge potential for shaping the architectural form. The vision of a permanent, universal, absolute order, as opposed to chaos, becomes crucial for them. For those artists, the elementary geometric forms and numerical relationships governing structure become their expression of the manifestation of world order. Ungers justifies the validity of architectural solutions in reference to reason, rationality and logic. He emphasized that “real freedom only exists within reason”¹⁹.

The order of geometry gives the feeling of understanding, control – it introduces harmony in its plurality. Order as a tool can of course also support oppression. Especially in the case of residential architecture, there exists a clear conflict between the universal language of pure, abstract, geometric forms and practical needs – between aesthetics and pragmatism. The true art is to attain a balance in this game, a balance between idealism and reality, between functionalism and formality. How thin is the line between rational and irrational? Undoubtedly, this is architecture that forces one to sacrifice both the creator and the user. “Architecture is engaged in a continual process of dialectical tension between creative willpower and intellectual calculations, conception and functional acceptance, imagination and reality”²⁰. It seems that Ungers pursued the creation of perfect houses, while perfection must contain all the possibilities (*lesson 1*). His architecture is diverse in a very subtle, non-obvious way.

The previously quoted examples of houses would seem to be more abstract models in nature, but have somehow, in a miraculous way, come to existence, all while maintaining the detailed, specific rules of composition. These over-scaled, theoretical models-prototypes thus create a surreal expression. You get the sense that, here, the abstract concept took on a concrete form in the presence of material and construction, with success. These buildings, which can be synthesized as a ‘materialized idea of order’, enter the world of art, since according to the author, “only fine art is the representation of an idea”²¹. They may be considered as evidence that architecture, as with other arts, is capable of transcending the constraints of material necessity²².

¹⁹ O. M. Ungers, [in:] R. van Toom, O. Bouman, *Le Style, c'est l'Homme – A Conversation with Oswald Mathias Ungers*, [in:] *The Invisible in Architecture*, R. van Toorn (Author, Editor), O. Bouman (Author), Wiley; 1 edition (April 25, 1994), p. 61.

²⁰ O. M. Ungers, *Architecture's right to an autonomous language*, [in:] *The Rationalist Reader. Architecture and Rationalism in Western Europe 1920–1949/1960–1990*, A. Peckham, T. Schmiedenknecht (ed.), Routledge 2014, p. 305.

²¹ O. M. Ungers, *What is architecture?*, *op.cit.*, p. 319.

²² O. M. Ungers, *Architecture's right to ...*, *op.cit.*, p. 308.

The *IBA I* and *Haus Ungers III* buildings are not examples of iconic, expressive, extravagant, excessive, exaltation, or technical innovations, nor the kind of building that is adorned with short-lived stylistic architecture. Ungers was against – as he called it – *event architecture*. He wanted to design solid, permanent buildings, meant to look as if they had always stood exactly where they are. He was not that type of inventor, and had no interest in coming up with new shapes. His rationalist commitment to the formal rigor, monument, locus and type reflected a need to establish a more solid basis in the history of architecture. He created an architecture that ‘today and tomorrow’ was supposed to meet the requirements he put ‘yesterday’. He searched for the essence of architecture hidden in timeless, universal, recognizable forms based on solid and clear rules that could bring order to the chaotic urban and architectural context.

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