Le Style, c'est l'Homme

A Conversation with Oswald Mathias Ungers

There exist at least two types of libraries: the labyrinth and the catalogue. In the first type knowledge is haphazardly piled up in dusty stacks and worm-eaten archives, seemingly without any system and inaccessible. The visitor browses, discovers a stimulating point of entry, reads a little, turns a page, looks further... Under the influence of chance, inquisitiveness and adventurousness, such a labyrinthine legacy generates knowledge. This type of library makes one think of the labyrinth of wisdom in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, as described by Alinardo, one of the characters in the novel, 'the library is a great labyrinth, the sign of the labyrinth of the world. Once you enter it you never know if you will come out'. But this is not so far from a typical archive in Italy, where new documents are not infrequently dumped to the left of the shelf so that the old ones on the right fall off and become prey to damp and oblivion.

The other type is the systematic catalogue which has already reserved a place in advance for all new acquisitions. The catalogue is impeccable; everything can be found from a chair in front of a card index. Browsing is out of the question, the system obviously does not accommodate surprises. It is the library for people who know what they want, for the rationally ordering mind desiring logic in its quest for More and Better. Such a library, *gründlich und ordentlich,* is especially to be expected in Germany. Oswald Mathias Ungers, president of the Foundation for Architectural Studies that bears his name, is an architect who advocates the second version of the library. Indeed, he presides over a library organised according to these principles and where the first thing one encounters is its hospitable alphabetical arrangement. A second glance reveals his stock of books to be extraordinarily complete. You ask, the library answers. If you know precisely what your questions are, you can come a long way in this environment. Particularly if they are serious questions. But is there something that the library itself is asking?

Ungers' work can easily be characterised in terms of library typology. He is an architect who wants to have control over the situation, to hold in check the concrete facts of context, location and social circumstances, with the absolute, eternal values of the profession. In the course of his career Ungers has steadily worked at building up a monumental body of work, both built and on paper, that for an outsider has a well-nigh monolithic nature. Consistency and severity are his trademarks. The buildings, monuments for an endangered architecture, are solid, permanent, symmetrical and above all very much present as objects. His architecture is professional, conventional and without dissonance, the vocabulary is invariably learned. For the defenders of architecture's self-respect – Aldo Rossi, Giorgio Grassi and Rafael Moneo come to mind – a rationalist and conventional approach like Ungers will be most welcome. With Ungers' talent as a mediator between renewal and tradition, architecture should be safeguarded against its possible dissolution into the general semiotic pandemonium of today.

On the other hand, those who regard architecture as the reflection of culture in stone will not be so happy with the silent archetypes of eternity. Ungers himself is well aware of this dichotomy, as his comment during our discussion shows: 'If you look at my architecture very carefully, it has the idea of fragments and of discontinuity'. Even Ungers, it seems, wants to know about Post-Modernism; but is the interest mutual? Is there still place in the Post-Modern condition for a Platonic notion of architecture? Here speaks a man who focuses attention on the phenomenology of archetypes in the age of their technical reproducibility.

We are here in your new library, in the very serious atmosphere of the Oswald Mathias Ungers Stiftung für Architekturwissenschaft. *Forty centuries of civilization look down on us. What's your relationship with the written word?*

The architect in the Renaissance, like Alberti or Palladio, was *un homme de lettres*, a humanist, a very educated man, who was able to communicate through writing. There is a difference between communicating orally and ordering your thoughts and writing them down in correct grammar. This requires education, exercise and experience. To be an architect was not only to be a craftsman, but also to be a man who was cultivated and who longed for education; not only an education in technology, but also an education in the cultural development of mankind, of human thought. He had to be concerned with philosophy as well as several other disciplines. You find very few people today who have this concept of themselves and the will to become *un homme de lettres*. Usually the architect today is a *doer*.

You are talking about the Renaissance, but in the twenties and thirties many of the leading Modernists wrote well.

Oswald Mathias Ungers
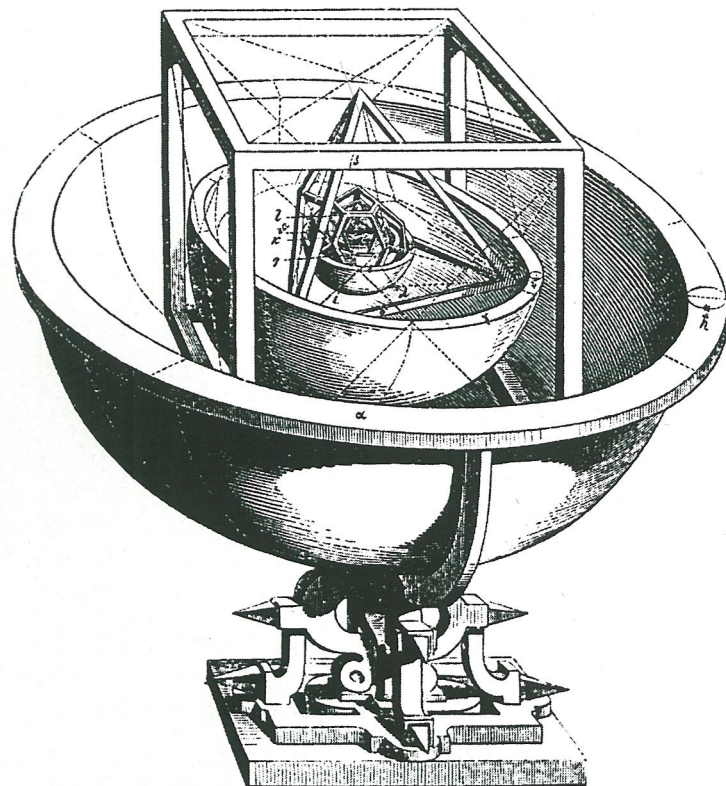
The platonic solids composing the universe, after
Johann Kepler

Absolutely. Many architects in the twenties were involved in publishing magazines. You won't find a magazine any more created by architects, like *G* was by Mies van der Rohe and El Lissitzky, or *Veshch/Objet/Gegenstand*, another rare magazine. They were concerned with expressing themselves intellectually. This is rare today. Maybe the process of building is so rapid and the task so huge that you scarcely have time to think. You just *do*. If you are not used to writing all the time, you lose the concentration and the ability to do so. It is difficult to sit down and write an essay when your constant concern is the building process itself and the techniques that go with it.

But as an architect you could say 'I'm speaking a visual language'.

The Germans have a saying for this: 'The artist should make art and not talk or write it.' But all the Renaissance designers, painters and architects, have a written *œuvre*. And look at Malevich, who developed an important theory. It's too limiting thinking that an architect or an artist should not be concerned with intellectual problems or with writing theories. Artists should take the time to reflect on what they are doing. It's not enough to look at whatever trend or *Zeitgeist*-movement might be 'in' or 'out' at the moment. It's necessary that, as an artist, you are concerned with writing something about your method or your theoretical concept.

Are you satisfied with the general reception given to your work, in the magazines, in architectural circles, and so forth?

It might sound a bit arrogant to say it doesn't interest me, but that is the truth. Of course I'm glad when I'm well received, but during my life I've had so many different experiences of not being well received. In Germany my work was criticised more than it was regarded highly or as of special interest. On the one hand I also enjoyed this controversy. If my work is regarded as radical to some extent, it provokes the controversy and therefore is part of it. I even try to strengthen the dispute, because my work benefits more from it than if I were praised as the most interesting and most fantastic architect around. On the other hand ***I have reached a stage that I'm no longer interested in a present-day debate. What I am actually looking for is to achieve an archaic clarity and simplicity in my work.*** But this is not acceptable to the public. They think it's without fantasy, too rigid, too static. They are all wrong, because it's highly dynamic and full of fantasies. It is very diversified, but in a subtle way, not in a way that is obvious to everybody. I'm indeed much concerned with the cube, the grid, the wall, things that are simple but of an archaic simplicity.

You mean the phenomenological value of these elements?

Title page of magazine G, no. 3 (1924)

Yes. These phenomenological elements create the idea of architecture. I'm not interested in dissolving architecture into some kind of transcendental world, or in some kind of transparency which behaves as if architecture as an archaic phenomenon no longer exists. When I'm talking about walls, stairs, doors, cubes, cylinders, volumes and things like that, I'm perfectly aware that this is exactly what the *Zeitgeist* at the moment is trying to neglect. Everybody wants to make the world transparent, very dynamic, walls not existing any more, interior and exterior no longer distinguished. The more architecture becomes literature or media-shows, the more I am moving in the other direction. I want to make clear that architecture consists of those basic elements. *I want to make the wall even stronger, because everybody wants to dissolve it.* I want the volume even more voluminous, to reduce it to the cube, which is *the* volume as such. I know perfectly well that this doesn't reach the front page. They might accept me because I'm known, old enough. They publish my work as well, but simply as a style. It doesn't mean anything to them. I have to live with the fact that I'm 'out'. And I enjoy it, it gives me much more freedom. When you are in, you always have to worry about staying in; it's a very tricky situation. But being free, my walls can become stronger, my volumes can become even more forceful. I don't have to compete with anybody any more, I'm left alone, and I love it. Being out is a beautiful experience, it's fabulous, it's marvellous, it gives me time.

*But why, or for whom, are you actually building?*

For me.

For yourself?

Yes.

You aren't building for the public?

No. Yes! We have to make some distinctions in this statement. Of course, indirectly, I might be doing it for the public. Beethoven wrote his music firstly for himself, because it was the only thing he could do, but the public enjoyed it. It's not a matter of choice. You cannot sit down and say 'I'm doing something for the public'.

But can you articulate your interest in the phenomenological part of architecture in terms of its social meaning?

It can *acquire* a social meaning. First of all you have to do the best you can. This perfectionism is frustrating. But you have to accept it as a basic desire, a basic push to create something perfect and beautiful.
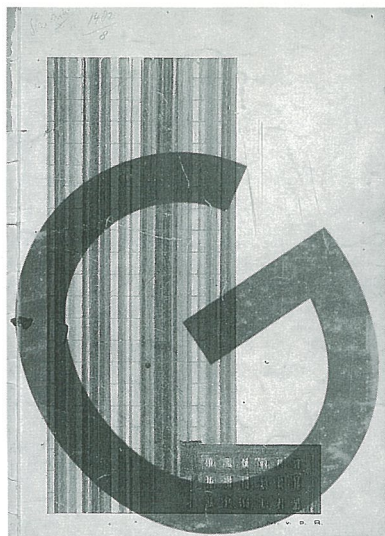
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Judgements are only made by yourself. However, your own possibilities are always too limited to match your expectations. This results in a very personal struggle. What counts is not whether the man next door accepts it or not, but the personal judgement: are you satisfied with your own potential? Is there still enough motivation to do the next thing, even if you continually experience some kind of defeat? If you want to express your idea as clearly as possible, you have to force it to its limits. If some of these ideas become real, visible, readable or touchable and they are enjoyed by the public, then that's fine, but it cannot be the motivation.

Should there be a dialogue between the public and the architect?

There can't be. The process of being creative – I'm a little bit hesitant to use this word but I have to do so – is a dialogue between you and your fantasy, your intellect, your ratio, your mind and your potential. That is the dialogue.

And the context?

Of course you can have conversations. But during the process of creating you cannot have the dialogue, because it's too fragile; it might disappear, or be disturbed before you were even able to formulate it. You rely only on yourself in this process. If you were to start with a dialogue immediately, you would never find it.

*Is there a dialogue afterwards?*

You know Seneca's saying 'I don't need them all. I don't even need a hundred, and not even ten. One would be enough.' If only one would understand what you are trying to do, it's enough. If nobody understands, I might as well talk to my beloved dog Jakob. It is not necessary for culture and art to communicate with everybody. There are a lot of other things that satisfy the general public, that make them wealthy, healthy, and happy. The public is not my concern and it will never be. If, later on, people enjoy looking at and living in my buildings, being stimulated to look at their own potential and fantasies, that would be enough. You can't do more.

Your work, done, as you say, in seclusion, has been published and discussed, and you are a well-known public figure. We now encounter you as a public figure and not as an artist; you create art when we are not here. Are you really interested in influencing this dialogue afterwards, or is that the business of journalists and critics, since you are polite enough to receive them?

I haven't discussed my work in public for almost ten years. I never take part in a discussion, go to a symposium, or to a presentation. It's not that I'm afraid, nor that I don't want to discuss it. But I cannot talk in public about my work, because every discussion or every presentation today unfortunately somehow ends up as a justification. If it comes to the point – and I'm afraid that it mostly does so – that I have to justify my work, since my work is my life, I have to admit that I cannot. The question 'Why did you do this?' is a very personal question. This kind of discussion doesn't lead you anywhere. The communication through a medium, writing, publishing, television, avoids the kind of direct confrontation with the public that asks you to justify your life. The last time I appeared in public, somebody came up after my presentation and asked me to sign a publication of mine. I gave it to him because I didn't want to disappoint him. He went back into the audience, waved his paper, and said 'Look at that important man! Who does he think he is. He signs his own things.' I was so deeply shocked that from that moment on my public appearances stopped. Nobody deserves that. I didn't want to continue that kind of game. I had a second shock some time ago. I *have* to go to presentations of course, when the city planning committee or the board of directors, or whoever, asks me to present the project. This is part of my professional life. To the community of Neuss, a small town north of Cologne, I had to present the project I did for the development of the town, including a few high-rise buildings. There was an audience of 250 outraged citizens; I really felt their hatred. They wanted to destroy me! It was absolutely horrifying, how they were yelling and screaming. I couldn't say a word. They didn't give me *any* chance!

So you can imagine a more positive situation in which you would really like to have a dialogue, but the present situation does not give you the opportunity?

Absolutely. We are living in a society where dialogue becomes more difficult every day. Some have the

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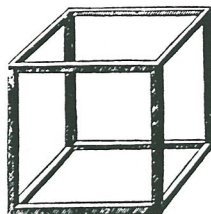
Leonardo da Vinci, platonic solid: cube (6 planes)

Wenzel August Hablik, Der Weg des Genius, 1981

audience on their side and others have not. If you are not going with the mainstream, whatever this mainstream might be, intellectually or on a profane level, you are in a difficult situation. Maybe it is because the media always show violence. If you go one step further they're going to stone you. Let me give you another example. We had the movement of Art for the People (*Die Kunst dem Volke*), which was terrible enough. When the public or, one step further, the 'mob', decides what is art and architecture and what is not, you are completely lost. We can forget about art entirely. The result is folk art and other art will be called corrupt art (*Entartete Kunst*). Who had to leave the country in the thirties? The so-called corrupted artists! Their books were burnt, their pictures were destroyed. The public prohibited architects building. They either had to leave the country or go into personal exile, to hide. Do you really believe the public could do you *any* good?

Do you believe in a democratic system?

Of course I believe in a democratic system, but in one that would secure the right of the individual. The democratic system doesn't mean the great majority. It means the protection of the extreme, of the individual. In such a democratic system I could believe, but I don't believe in the democratic system of the mob. I have never found public situations very friendly. Fortunately I found friends to whom I could talk and whose judgement concerned me. For example, I visited several meetings of Team 10, where some of the leading architects had to present their


Trade Fair Gate House, Frankfurt a/M, 1984

projects to a group of ten or twelve people. I have never seen them so nervous. They even lost their voices while presenting their work. They would have presented it to a thousand people without any problem, but not to ten friends. They knew that their judgement would be honest. It would not be killing, but it would be honest, strong, and such a judgement could hurt personally. I think this is more interesting than the question 'Is your work generally accepted or not?'

So you want to safeguard architecture as a discipline and you want to safeguard the individual within democracy. Let's simulate a controversy between you and your friend Rem Koolhaas, as a meeting between two extreme individuals who respect each other as intellectuals but who detest the mutual ideology.

We have worked together. I regard him highly as an intellectual, as a writer, and as an architect. But he tries to be a 'modern man'. He tries to transform the consumer-attitude into an artistic expression. He will never end this because he is always concerned with updating. There's no stability, no criterion to it. It's like collecting data all the time, you never come to a conclusion. They are already obsolete before you can do so. Koolhaas is creating obsolete architecture. He's surfing on the *Zeitgeist*. You can see it also in the work
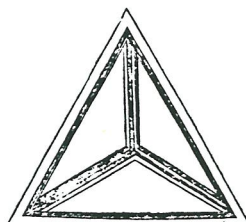

Leonardo da Vinci, pyramid (4 planes)

of Jean Nouvel. Architecture becomes a medium, and the façade is only a screen. I feel like I'm in a different world because I'm struggling with the façade all the time to make some good architecture. But Nouvel tries to let the façade disappear, it doesn't exist any more, it could be anything, a billboard. There's no convention, while *I look for the conventions*. If I am talking about architecture as something more archaic and real, I'm trying to save the phenomenology of architecture. You can see his work in a dialectical relation to Koolhaas. If this kind of dialectical in-out falls back, there might be a possibility of fantasies, a new *ratio*.

From your point of view he's a dialectical opposite. But from his there isn't any opposite, so he cannot see your work as an opposite, because he hasn't such a solid position as you have. For him it is a flux of architecture, a non-identity, you cannot point at.

But he cannot escape. Malevich could not escape either. Every time art tried to escape art, one came up against art. There were many artists who tried to make art which would not fit in museums, which could not be categorised. Warhol's or Beuys' position is similar: they tried to make everything art. They tried to let the convention explode. In the end they couldn't escape it either. It seems that one is caught, like your mind is caught in the human body. It seems that Koolhaas' mind is caught as well. When Taut did his Alpine architecture, in the end everything became transcendental. He then found out that he had reached a stage where he absolutely could not continue. He turned back to something very profane: 'I want to make a
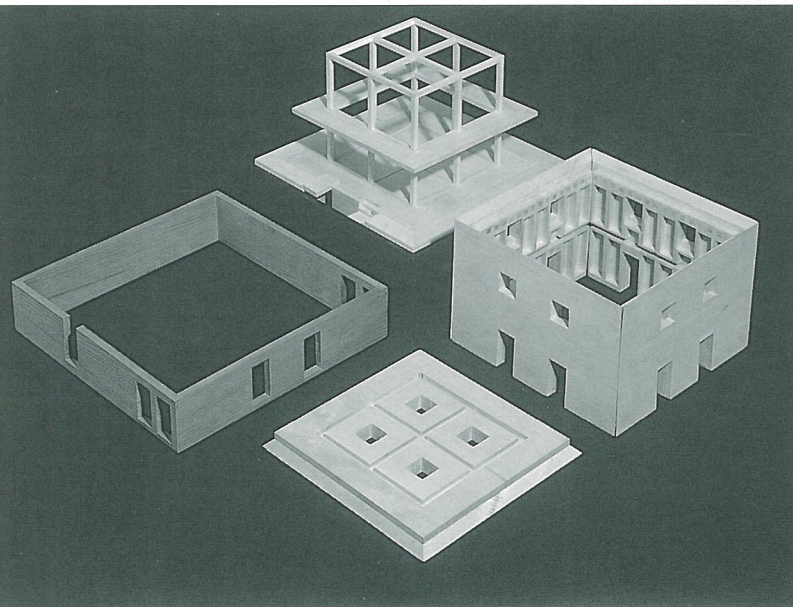
The architect's library, Cologne, 1990

house with a door and four windows and a roof'. Art cannot escape art. And Koolhaas cannot escape architecture. In the end it might be self-deception.

The other possibility is that he will drop architecture as his medium and turn to literature or film.

Yes. If he is really honest about what he is doing, he should turn into a 'Bladerunner', going on in the media, simulating anything. No convention any more. As soon as you talk about architecture you're back again at the wall, the roof, the door, the stairs.

In the meantime his architecture already functions as an expression of this mob society, which he would probably call the fragmented society, and not as a spatial background of a society of autonomous individuals.

I think it is a great illusion. His thoughts are so exclusive. *Bladerunner* is not a movie for the general public either. His architecture is not meant for the general public. Even if he thinks so.

And in what sense is your architecture of public value? Is it, in the end, in the way it meets functional needs?

The function is obvious, but it's not the real thing that concerns us. We are trying to go beyond that. I would enjoy it if my buildings were to change the attitude and character of the people who work or live in them. The bank building in Düsseldorf for example is very attractive. People identify themselves with the building. The special architecture gives them a certain self-consciousness. They even behave differently. The two directors of the building were mainly administrators. Now they have a new identity, they love to show the building, like museum directors. Now what more can I give to the people with my architecture than to turn them into self-conscious individuals, aware and proud.

This must give you an enormous satisfaction; the same criterion is used by Ricardo Bofill in his scheme at Saint Quentin en Yvelines near Versailles. You can give the people a very subliminal sense of self-confidence through a phenomenological approach, or you can give them a clearly defined set of ornaments which refers very directly to the palace and gardens of Versailles, giving them the feeling they live in a palace.

It's not what really matters to me. For myself, as an architect, I made no compromise to satisfy the public. I did *my* architecture, and in this case it was accepted. I didn't try to satisfy this kind of emotional concern. My architectural space and environment, without any compromise, turned out to be highly successful in terms of acceptance by the public.

So even if you want to safeguard architecture as a discipline, there isn't really a schism between your feelings as an architect and those of the people. They can coincide. But what if you are working on a larger scale? Can you work out your metaphors and symbolism on an urban scale?

Of course. I did the Tor house in Frankfurt, which was in the first place a synonym for the Frankfurt fair, being a gate, a metaphor for entrance and open to the outside. Later it became simply a sign for the city of Frankfurt itself, like the cathedral of Cologne or the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. There are certain pieces of architecture that represent entire cities or even regions. This is also a part of the power of architecture. The

Henri Labrouste, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, 1868

kind of metaphor suggested became at the same time a sign. The city exists through these high points or very articulated special environments. The rest is more or less filling in.

Does this description of the supra-public meaning of such a building reflect your former statement on the need to be left alone as an architect and not be involved in all these discussions?

Yes, you have to create the theme or the concept of a building yourself. If it is accepted, that is a lucky circumstance. Identifying with it, saying 'this is our building', is a marvellous kind of public relation. It can also be rejected and labelled in a very negative way. Then it is a stigma instead of a symbol. But that's the risk you have to take.

In your conception of architecture there are not many opportunities to correct yourself. Finished is finished.

Yes, as a Classical architect there is another great risk for me. Designing architecture is always a simulation. You are making models, videos, drawings, perspectives, always simulating on a smaller scale. The reality is only there at the moment when you think it's finished, often ten years after you actually made the design. And then it is irreversible. You have no way of checking your idea or your architectural conception
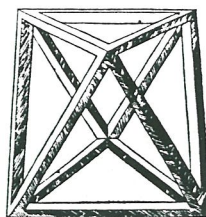
Leonardo da Vinci, octahedron (8 planes)

59

60

The architect's library, Cologne, 1990, columns and bust

beforehand. You avoid this risk if you are an architect for whom it can be anything. But when I walk in, I might see that I failed, or not. Therefore every time I go into a building for the first time when it's finished I go alone.

The architect for whom it could be anything is the one who delivers isotropic space, the maison domino, in which you can change the walls and the façade whenever you like.

There is a kind of human engineering involved which I don't like. This architecture doesn't want to commit itself, it gives you a kind of primary structure and the people do whatever they want to do. It is some kind of manipulation, correction, advice, giving people a stable as if they were guinea-pigs. This kind of guinea-pig-architecture is not my cup of tea.

There seems to be a problematic relationship between you as an 'extreme individual' and your architecture, in which people have to deal with a finished space...

Which hopefully is not going to be changed.

Exactly, because it has its own integrity, ...and on the other hand architects with a less strong personal identity who provide neutral space for people who can use it in their own way.

There are two kinds of architects. One only invents the connection and provides the components. The others, like me, define, and don't care about the connections and the components. There is a beautiful book by Adolf Behne, *Die Wiederkehr der Kunst*, in which he describes the garden sheds (*Gartenhutte)*, the architecture of the people, as the most ingenious, inventive architecture that exists. For Behne we should all forget about the academic conventions of Classical architecture. We should look instead at the development of garden sheds in Berlin. There we would see the real creative force. I think this is naive. A space like the Pantheon would never have been created if we'd left it to this kind of unreflected, spontaneous, creative way of building. Bruno Taut went so far as to distribute his architectural programme in the streets. He wanted to have a school of non-academics, of these spontaneous unknown architects that built God knows what. He wrote a programme called *The Earth, a Good Home (Die Erde, eine gute Wohnung)* in which he describes a society – and this really frightens me – that is not ordered any more by conventions and common codes or the Law but by some curious wise men. Taut invented a whole legal and ethical system. As you know, there are historical parallels. They tried it, but it was a terrible disaster. It was tried in the twentieth century and it was disastrous. I rather prefer a man of reason and not a man of emotions and feelings.

But aren't you inspired looking at El Lissitzky's Prounenraum*, as a motivation to act?*

I'm not interested, nor in Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau.* I was interested in it as a young man. I even wrote a pamphlet about Expressionism in architecture in which I discussed all these issues. I like the idea of abstraction very much, but the *Prounenraum* is romantic nonsense. And I don't like *Merzbau* either. Collecting found objects, putting them together. The *Merz* object grows like a city through the entire house. What do we see now? We see *Merzgebäude* everywhere. Cities growing, all over the place, because nobody risks coming up with a reason to create some kind of order.

Lissitzky and Schwitters offered free space as a stage for real life.

They think that's life, but the Common Code is more life! In another context. That we agree on certain conventions and that I have to control the emotions by *Reason.*

What you actually say is that Schwitters, Lissitzky and Taut all could have known better, even at that particular stage in history. But wasn't there some logic in the fight for freeing space after the battle of styles in the nineteenth century and its horror vacui.

Maybe, but that doesn't serve as an alibi for giving up straight reasoning. The point is one of emotions versus reason. Feeling becomes a cult in which people think everything that is regulated is rigid. I know that the chaos theory tries to rationalise a total freedom. At the same time, this coin has a reverse side: there is complete oppression. You know that complete freedom leads to complete chaos and chaos is more oppressive. Real freedom only exists within reason.

You can see the same distinction in the words Room (Raum) *and Space.* Raum *is a kind of controlled space, in a way, while space implies endlessness. Do you have a personal philosophy about why in one*
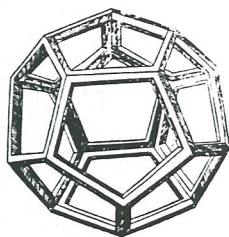
Leonardo da Vinci, dodecahedron (12 planes)

language a term is developed that is more specific than in another language?

Maybe the Germans are more concerned with order. I have always thought of space as a more pragmatic concept. Space is something completely open and *Raum* is something which is defined. I'm very much concerned with *Raum*. My criticism of Modern architecture is that there is no concern about *Raum* any more. Scharoun tried to dissolve the borders. He never wanted a *Raum*, no clear geometry, but a totally loose and open space. He didn't talk about the *Räume* but about the landscapes in his buildings. Mies used translucent material because he didn't want to define *Raum*, he wanted to have space. In the German Pavilion in Barcelona he only defines space but no *Raum*; therefore the slabs don't touch.

You are looking for Raum. *So, you have it conceptualised?*

It is programmatic, but it was programmatic for the late Baroque as well.

But we are aware of space as a concept. I don't think the Baroque architects were. They were aware of space, but the itinerary from the phenomenon to the concept is really one of our century, particularly since Germans like Chmarzov, Hildebrandt and Brinckmann conceptualised Raum. *They invented a whole vocabulary of* Raum, Raumbewußtsein, Raumgestaltung, Raumgefühl, *hundreds of words in which* Raum *figures. From that moment on architects were so aware of the concept of* Raum *that in their designs they tried to apply their concept of* Raum. *So, if you are looking for* Raum, *yours is a very distanced architecture.*

But in the category of *Raum* there might be a metaphysical aspect. Let me give you an example. Recently we have been designing a sphere and a cube as an interior space *(Innenraum)*, in a sequence. The sphere has always been a concern in architecture. The sphere as a *Raum* goes beyond the idea of the usual concept of space. A *Raum* as a sphere, defined as it is, has the idea of the unlimited, the idea of the universal space. In other words it's our intention to create this idea of endlessness through a defined space.

Your endlessness is quite different from the secular endlessness of the isotropic space. Yours is metaphysical, the other is physical.

The interesting thing is to see the cube as the opposite, as the most archaic limitation. It's like a cage. So there are two rules, the cage and the sphere. This goes into the question of the extreme possibilities of creating space. This is my kind of architectural vocabulary. I try to express those two extremes.

Your library is a cube, a cage in your terms. Defined and enclosed as it is, you can imagine the rectangularity and straight lines as suggestions of the conquest of the rest of the universe. Your cube is also a section of a three-dimensional grid.

The cube inside is a scaffold, surrounded by a wall. I try to investigate the dialectical relationship between the inside and the outside. This is a summary of my architectural thinking. The transformation of elements going through several stages is actually what I'm trying to do. You see it in the library, the column painted on the wall; you see the column in light, then the reflection of the column in a mirror. I made a sort of scenario where a world goes from illusion to reality and vice versa. It's the same with the heads of the revolutionaries on the balcony. Twelve revolutionaries, including Robespierre, were beheaded on 28 July 1794. I found them and thought they might be wonderful in a room that stores the basic knowledge of architecture. Usually you would have the philosophers or Gods in such a room. They do also fit architecturally and formally. But in this case there is a content to it, which has to do with the architectural idea of the Pantheon, with the architectural idea of the cube, with the light that's coming from the top. All the other elements have to do with the idea of transformation. There are indeed a lot of architectural conceptual things in it.

To return to the distinction between the sphere and cube: there is an outside to a cube, but do you think there is an outside to a sphere?

The cube is a cage, that's why there is an outside. But the sphere is endless. There is always speculation as to whether there is an outside to the sphere. I think you could conceive it as having no outside, as being endless. You could not conceive the cube as being endless.

The largest sphere is the heavenly dome, which has no outside by nature.

The sphere represents the universe. The sphere could not be labelled as a room any more. It's a universal space, while the cube, the cage, is an enclosed room. Let's check how it sounds. Universal space? That sounds okay, here 'space' is all right. Universal room? That doesn't sound good. A cubical space? That doesn't sound good either, but a cubical room would be okay.

After considering their spaces, we can also look at the shape of your two basic volumes. There is an opposition between the sacred quality of the sphere and the profane quality of the cube. The cube is a section cut out from the universe and made by human hands; the sphere is made by a Supreme Being. Perhaps the modern emphasis on the (white) box and its promise of freeing space is a secular impetus to give man

his own destiny, a stage, neutral and anonymous, for his own life. The lack of any great dome in twentieth-century-Western architecture is another indication.

It's an illusion and I'll give you an example. If you have a free-parking lot, the one who comes first can make any choice. The one who comes last has no choice at all. The let-the-people-do-what-they-want concept that you describe has nothing to do with freedom. This kind of modern architecture is architecture for the one who comes first.

That is an important critique of modern architecture. But isn't there something more to say about it? There must be a connection between the ethical vacuum, after the 'Death of God', and the freeing of physical space. Since you are designing a sphere, what do you think that architecture, as the specialism of creating space, can do to answer this question of the ethical vacuum?

Of course there is a relation between architecture and philosophy. But I don't see philosophy or architecture developing in such an inescapable progressive way. It's true that there are certain priorities of thought, and it seems to be the main direction at present that would fit into a description such as you have given. But it is not exclusive, other spiritual concepts existing simultaneously as well. The development of human culture is no longer so exclusive that you can order it nicely into a series of categories. When a certain way of thinking becomes too exclusive, it provokes the contrary. Should it develop to the extent that all architectural space becomes formalistic, without content, it might be necessary then to bring back content. Anything produced by the human mind is mostly a matter of discovery. I do believe that messages exist all the time, everywhere, and if you have the right receiver, you can hear all of them. This might be a metaphor for the intellectual and artistic fields in architecture. There is too much technological fascination concerning the concept of unlimited space, leading to certain overstatements, or overreactions, which then become absolute.

The question is whether Max Weber's concept of the 'disenchantment of the world' (Entzauberung der Welt), which is the essence of all this, is universal and total, or if it's only one direction in the process of civilisation, with many counterparts.

I think there are many directions, which may be opposed or which may be subdued or enforced. For my personal orientation I need to rely on certain repetitive elements, which become a kind of archetype, let's say *topoi*. These *topoi* can be more or less visible, powerful or dominant. Actually my concern is to look for these *topoi*. It's not because the archaic is so desirable, but it's a search for what is general. This brings me to an architecture which could never be exclusive, because I always have to think of the antithesis. My criticism of Modern high-tech architecture is that it wants to be exclusive. I'm not exclusive, I'm ambivalent, that's the correct word. If you think in a dialectical way, your instruments and your vocabulary broaden enormously. When I'm able to reduce architecture to archetypal *topoi* and I'm able to integrate this in an ordinary environment, as here, in this kind of morphological unity, we'll have something possible for all stages, not only the extremes but also all the forms and structures in between as part of an intellectual concept. And, at the same time, able to realise it in material as well. This is then my kind of universe, an environment of universal context. My house might be a very good illustration because I've been building on to it for more than thirty years and it has become more and more dialectical. It's my own architectural history, started in 1958, which I not only express in words but also try to express in stones and concrete, forms and volumes and material, in actuality.

Is it correct to say that in your work every piece made at a given moment is a Gesamtkunstwerk*, a synthesis? But, in the future, your family house together with your library won't be a* Gesamtkunstwerk *at all, but a kind of open structure consisting of thesis and antithesis.*

Yes, only through a dialectical process, or through discontinuity, can you avoid one-dimensional exclusiveness. A village is one-dimensional because everything is in the same style and the same materials, but a complex environment has many aspects. I'm trying to express the fragmentation in this controversy, thinking of continuity at the same time as fragmentation. This suggests completely my philosophical conception, the morphological idea of pieces and transformation, the idea of pieces and discontinuity and fragments. This is what I'm trying very consciously in my architecture. I'm not trying to create an architecture which is
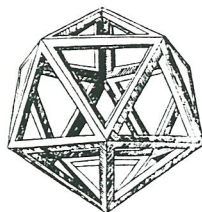
Leonardo da Vinci, icosahedron (20 planes)

64 The architect's house, Cologne, 1959

The architect's house, extension, Cologne, 1990

only this or that. If you look at it very carefully, the idea of fragments and of discontinuity is apparent. Returning to space and room, I would not see them as a dichotomy in the sense of either/or. I can see the concept of space as one legitimate stream in architecture, and I see room as another, and my concern would be to bring these two streams into some concept, either in the way of transformation or in the way of morphological development.

*But you don't want to challenge the categories in themselves?*

Let me show you something. You have a volume here, the enclosed cube, the library. In opposition to this absolutely enclosed space, I wanted to have a space without a roof, open to the sky. That is my garden. If I had not placed the columns in it, it would have been a court, but with the columns it could be that phenomenological room which has no roof, which is endless. This is dialectical design.

All right, but that is an additional system of elements. What I mean is do you challenge the elements in a fundamental sense? Would you ever make an inside as an outside and vice versa?

What I'm doing is not so obvious. Conceptually I'm trying to have those architectural phenomena, space and room, like a city in one place. The experience you get if you walk through is no accident. The order is conceived, there is orientation. I don't want to be labelled a conventional architect. Of course, like everybody, my handwriting has its limitations. **I'm trying to be as complex as possible within those limitations which you cannot escape.**
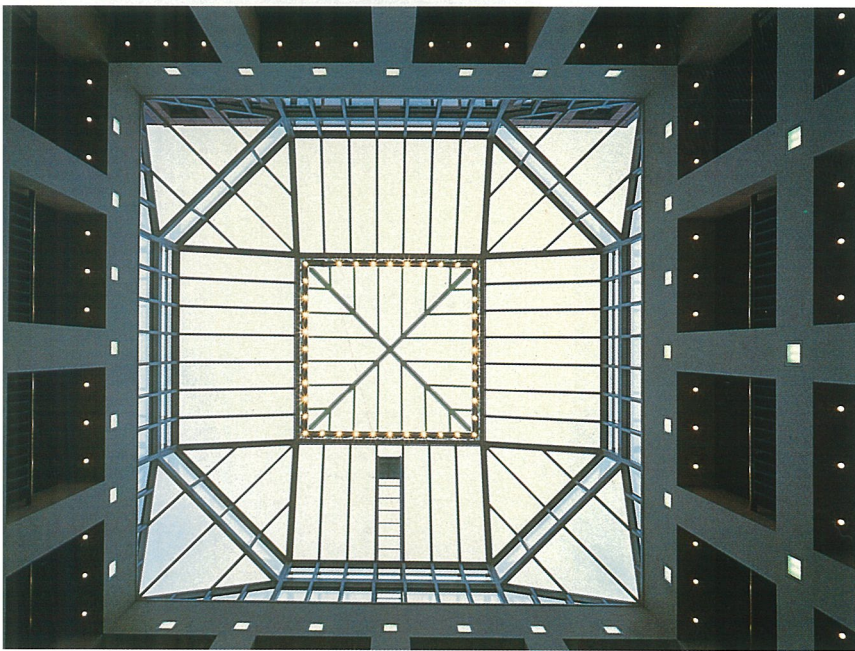

Hypo-Bank, Düsseldorf, 1991
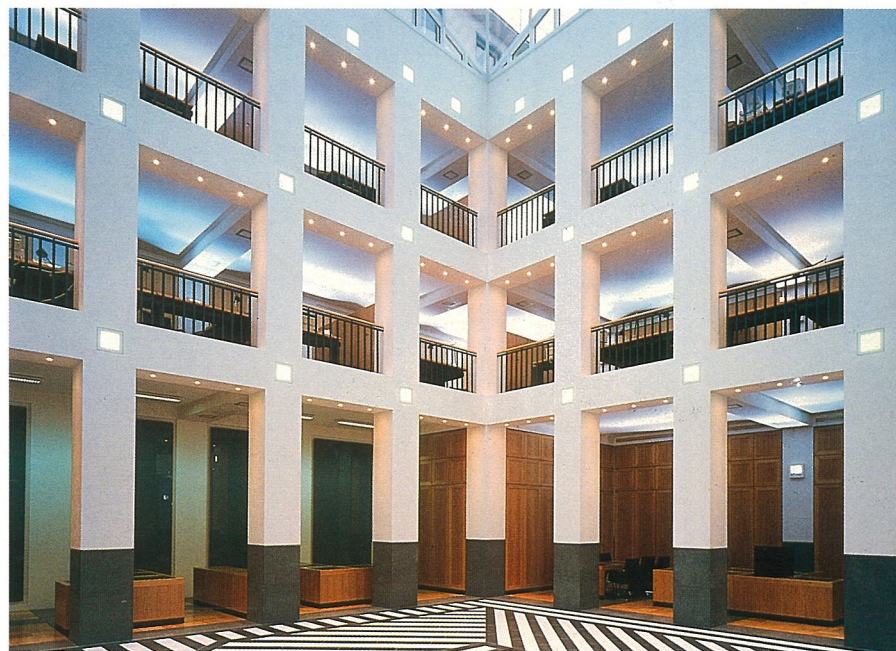
Is this way of building context-bound or programme-bound? Or can you use the same archetypes all over the world?

You have to be very careful that you don't turn them into clichés, which might happen if you don't control your work carefully enough or if your work is going too fast. Architecture as an art is a narrow path; if you take one step too far looking for a metaphor you'll have kitsch. If you take one step too far looking for an archetype you'll have a stereotype. It is a very narrow path and the more you try to define your thoughts the narrower your path will be.
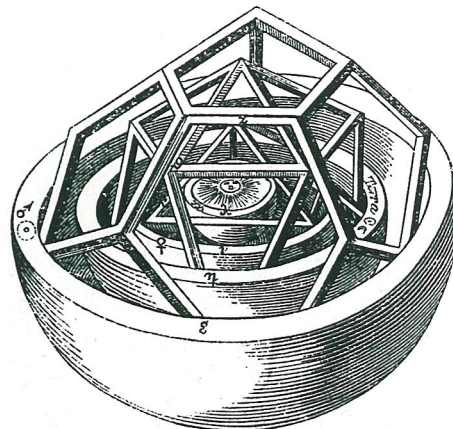
The platonic solids composing the universe, after Johann Kepler (detail)