

Between Visible and Imagined City. Architecture and Ruins in Oswald Mathias Ungers' Work

Martina D'Alessandro

Adjunct Professor, PhD, Department of Architecture, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
martina.dalessandro2@unibo.it

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Introduction

Ungers' dialectical relationship between archaeological ruin and history is investigated through the study of the archaeological museum projects carried out by him in Trier and Cologne, cities strongly characterized by the presence of ancient urban layers. These different projects are all united by the presence of the ancient Roman context vestiges.

During the 1980s and the 1990s, Ungers has explored the theme of excavation cover in a heavily urbanized context, in which he had to deal with the presence of history and the current city configuration. The construction of the new Museum for the *Thermen am Forum* (1988-1996) in Trier offered the opportunity to establish an abstract relationship with the city and the archaeological element. In the 1990s, he designed and built the new headquarters of the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum (1996-2001) in Cologne, where he continued his research on the relationship between ancient and contemporary city through a building that establishes unprecedented spatial relationships with surrounding urban spaces and refers to the Roman city's ruins. Similarly, the competition project for the *Diözesan* Museum (1997) in Cologne developed an architecture of contrasts and dialectical spatialities through which contemporary Cologne could be reordered in conjunction with the Roman city. In 2007, the construction of the entrance building to the *Kaiserthermen* in Trier (2003-2007) was completed: a project where Ungers experiments the theme of limit.

His projects demonstrate how, without rebuilding the ancient spaces, but starting from the architectural analysis of ruins and site, he gives new correspondences to the project and generates original spatial relationships and order. This kind of contribution has restricted the area of investigation to projects that Ungers realized in Trier and Cologne, because they represent a paradigm of themes, principles and relationships that allow us to analyze the design process underlying his work.

Literature Review

In recent decades, architectural criticism has shown an ever-growing interest in Ungers' work, both practical and theoretical, exploring its value from multiple points of view. Publications dealing with projects in archaeological contexts mainly focus on specific aspects, ranging from the relationship between architecture and conservation of archaeological finds to the relationship between architecture and the ancient city. A first approach of recent research about the projects that Ungers carries out in the city of Trier assumes a historical and architectural analysis as a privileged point of view. At the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s, some specific analysis were conducted on *Thermen am Forum* Museum project, including contributions of Heinemann¹

1 Reinhard W. Heinemann, "Die Neugestaltung eines Historischen Stadtplatzes," *Die Alte Stadt* 3 (1992): 223-232.

and Strodtzoff.² On the one hand they have the merit of having brought to light some episodes of the competition, as well as the design and construction story of the building, identifying the main themes with which the architect is confronted in this work. On the other hand they have not traced a contextualization of the work in Ungers' general production. Ungers himself has explained the project and has clarified the design intentions several times, in publications he dedicates to the project, such as the essay *Viehmarktplatz Trier Museum, Trier, West Germany*,³ *Archeology in Treviri: the projects of Oswald Mathias Ungers*⁴ and *Archäologie und Baustelle*.⁵ Some essays and interviews with the author, such as *Dall'imgo al progetto. L'architettura come scoperta archeologica*⁶ and *A proposito dell'idea costruita*,⁷ underline the methodological process on which the project is based, the question of the relationship with the ancient and the translation of the identity of the place into architectural form. On the project for the entrance to the *Kaiserthermen*, contributions about compositional themes are rare. Among these, we recall *Oswald Mathias Ungers*,⁸ *Entreesituation Kaiserthermen Trier*⁹ and the essay *La precisione del pensiero*,¹⁰ which compares the two Ungers's interventions in this city. A further approach of Ungers' works in Trier in recent research is represented by a series of contributions that mainly deal with investigating the author's attitude towards antiquity. This is the case of the essay *Musei sulle rovine*¹¹ and *Treviri: l'urbanistica e l'antica storia della città*,¹² published in Italy, and German contributions *Architektur und Denkmal*¹³ and *Analog zur Antike*,¹⁴ which trace the general lines of Ungers' method of intervention in archaeological contexts. Recent contributions focus on the relationship between architecture and archaeology as an independent theme in author's poetics, including *Oswald Mathias Ungers a Treviri. Due musei*,¹⁵ *Hacer la ciudad/Making the city*,¹⁶ *La città come palinsesto. I progetti di Oswald Mathias Ungers a Treviri*.¹⁷ The paper proposes an innovative point of view compared to printed literature, highlighting Ungers' approach in architectural projects placed in urban archaeological areas, based on a balance between new design issues and dialogues with ruins and architectural history.

2 Werner Strodtzoff, "Thermen Am Forum, Viehmarktplatz, Trier: Neubau zur Konservierung der Archeologischen Funde," in *Centrum: Jahrbuch Architektur und Stadt, 1989-1998* (Braunschweig-Wiesbaden: Friedrich Vieweg & Sohn, 1997-1998), 114-141.

3 Oswald Mathias Ungers, "Viehmarktplatz Trier Museum, Trier, West Germany," *GA Document* 23 (1989): 65-67.

4 Oswald Mathias Ungers, "Archeologia a Treviri: i progetti di O. M. Ungers," *Casabella* 558 (1989): 39.

5 Oswald Mathias Ungers, "Archäologie und Baustelle," *Baumeister* 4 (1994): 24-25, 96, 101.

6 Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, "Dall'imgo al progetto. L'architettura come scoperta archeologica," *Domus* 735 (1992): 17-28.

7 Annalisa Trentin, "Oswald Mathias Ungers. A proposito dell'idea costruita. Conversazione con Annalisa Trentin," in *Oswald Mathias Ungers: una scuola* (Milano: Electa, 2004), 52-69.

8 Peter Rumpf, "Oswald Mathias Ungers," *Bauwelt* 40-41, 2007, 8-10.

9 Andres Lepik, "Entree situation Kaiserthermen Trier," in *Deutsches Architekten Jahrbuch*, ed. Peter Cachola Schmal (Frankfurt: DAM Prestel, 2008), 126-131.

10 Walter A. Noebel, "La precisione del pensiero," *Casabella* 763 (2008): 83-93.

11 Maria Clara Ruggieri Tricoli, "Musei sulle rovine: una ricerca parziale," in *Musei sulle rovine. Architettura nel contesto archeologico* (Milano: Lybra Immagine, 2007), 7-10.

12 Karl-August Heise, "Treviri: l'urbanistica e l'antica storia della città. Strutture romane nellacittà del XXI secolo," in *Archeologia urbana e Progetto di architettura*, ed. Maria Margarita Segarra Lagunes (Roma: Gangemi Editore, 2002), 105-118.

13 Oskar Spital-Frenking, "Oswald Mathias Ungers," in *Architektur und Denkmal. Entwicklungen, Positionen, Projekte*, ed. Oskar Spital-Frenking (Leinfelden-Echterdingen: Verlagsanstalt Alexander Koch, 2000), 76-83.

14 Lebendiges Rheinland-Pfalz. "Analog zur Antike. Oswald M. Ungers und Bernhard Korte, Rahmenwerk für die Kaiserthermen in Trier," *Wegweisend auf Geschichte bauen* 11 (2005): 18-21.

15 Martina D'Alessandro, *Oswald Mathias Ungers a Treviri. Due musei* (BUP, Bologna, 2015).

16 Martina D'Alessandro, "Hacer la ciudad/Making the city," in *Arquitectura y Paisaje, transferencias históricas retos contemporáneos*, ed. David Arrendondo Garrido (Abada Editores, 2022), 191-204.

17 Martina D'Alessandro, "La città come palinsesto. I progetti di Oswald Mathias Ungers a Treviri," in *Il disegno delle trasformazioni* (Napoli: Clean, 2011), 1-11.

Architecture and Archaeology

More and more clearly defined, every place of ancient urbanization appears to be simultaneously the site of two cities. The one reveals itself to our gaze clearly, full of reference to the past, home of memory; the other, hidden underground, is the place of our imagination. The seemingly unbridgeable space that separates the visible city from the imagined one is considered by Ungers as a space that must be filled by architectural design.

Working on the ancient often implies that the architect comes across the field of preservation and restoration of ancient works and monuments. Faced with ruins, the architect wonders whether to be limited to a conservative intervention, or to rebuild the image and implement a critical selection of the historical layers handed down over the centuries by establishing a hierarchy of value, according to which to choose what to pass on to the future. Between the nineteenth and the second half of the twentieth century, in Europe and especially in Italy, for historical and cultural reasons, the question of restoration and the attention to the ancient became the subject of a debate of great importance. A series of theories of restoration was developed to define possible directions and approaches towards the protection of historical and ancient heritage. These theories draw the boundaries of the contemporary cultural and international landscape and allow us to determine whether and why Ungers has distanced himself from this debate. As will be seen below, from the study of the projects considered, it emerges that the author's position on the relationship between the ancient and the architectural project is not relying on principles of restoration and conservation.

Ungers' interest in the ancient reveals its importance in relation to the *architectural dimension* of the project. The ancient for Ungers is not a historical document but a *book*, a text in scale one to one on which you can read the history of the city, architecture and man. The ancient takes on a progressive significance: architecture has the task of identifying and revealing a design pretext, an element full of meanings.

Archaeological areas often show themselves as fenced areas, extracted from the rest of the territory, suspended in a timeless dimension. These areas are not habitable, they do not establish social relations or identify identities. The only link they have with the city is history. The central point of this situation is the isolation to which the ruins are subjected. What does it mean to work in archaeological fields if not to work on the tracks: the project has the task of adapting to the pre-existing track, of being composed together with it, of constituting a new event that produces new matrices, which overlap and confront the previous ones. On the ground remains the story of the development and growth of a place, which implies the predominance of the upper layer over the lower layers, and which generates a composite picture. The new intervention is a further sign on an already stratified system: each layer is related to the others, determining a system of interdependence, a balance in which each element has its own role and contributes to the transmission of the global image.

Today's interpretation of an archaeological area is perhaps traceable in the way history is understood: a sequence of events according to a natural process. The architectural project in this context has the task of appropriating the historical concatenations, disassembling and recomposing them, inserting itself within this sequence and generating a new readability of the urban elements: new paths are determined through the architectural project and they allow you to give a different reading of the city.

Oswald Mathias Ungers' position regarding the relationship between architecture and ruin is based on the same principles as his vision of the city as a contradictory, dialectical and non-homogeneous system. For Ungers, history and, in particular, the archaeological text are not the only and most relevant element on which attention focuses. The central themes are the process of integration and the approach that brings together different situations, ancient and current, in a general urban project that is able to display the history of the ancient artifact from its



Fig. 1: *Thermen am Forum Museum, Trier 2011*

origins to today's fragmentary reality, exhibiting every step, every change, every variation and transformation of history.¹⁸

It is evident that within a strongly characterized urban context, the building is confronted not only with the needs of protection and preservation of archaeological finds, but also, and in this case especially, with the contemporary city. For Ungers, the fundamental starting point for dealing with the relationship with the ruins is the need to use historical fragments to define a new architectural concept that is not limited to only recording history, but that conforms to a design solution that also considers the current configuration of the city. He says:

"I am an architect. Not a conservator of architectural assets, who focuses only on maintaining what still exists. And not a restorer, who tries only to recover what was once whole. As an architect, I am interested in realizing personal ideas, though inside the historical and architectural context."¹⁹

For the *Thermen am Forum* Museum, the object of the project, namely archaeological excavations, is comparable to a work of art to be displayed in a museum. (Fig. 1) The aim of the author is to construct, through the historical fragments of the city, an image in which it is evident what is the idea and identity of the city of Trier. At the basis of the project, Ungers does not pose a search for aesthetic solutions, but an investigation on essential issues of architecture: the city, history and form. The principle of stratification for Ungers is a palimpsest, a parchment on which texts overlap, are erased and rewritten into each other, building a stratified system of traces. In Trier, Ungers' *modus operandi* mainly follows this principle: he draws a new shape in the traces of an ancient text, which is not traced or mimetically reconstructed, but constitutes the basic structure on which to set up his own autonomous architecture. This is an architecture born from the knowledge of history and the city, which aims to continue its growth through the process of transformation and urban modification. The position that Ungers takes in the architectural project in relation to history clearly distances itself from those design orientations that aim at the integral reconstruction, the mimesis of the ancient in the new, the evocation of ancient spaces.

This attitude, expressed in an extraordinarily clear, almost didactic, way, is confirmed by the author in several projects for museums in an archaeological context. In Cologne, at a short distance from each other, Ungers has the opportunity to experience this vision of architecture as a palimpsest in two buildings, designed immediately after the construction of the Trier Museum: one built, the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum (1996-2000), and one not realized, the *Diözesan* Museum (1997).

The Wallraf-Richartz-Museum²⁰ (Fig. 2, 3, 4) represents a paradigmatic building to reflect on the urban value of design in an urban context strongly characterized by the presence of history and the complexity of the contemporary city. The main theme is the recomposition of the urban image through the definition of the space of the *Rathausplatz* in front of the museum, the definition of the urban block and the relationship with the pre-existing fragments, as the

18 "Ungers' position on the issue of the protection of monuments and the treatment of archaeological finds cannot be isolated from the principles on which his vision of architecture and the city is based. In *The Dialectical City*, which is part of the work *Was ich schon immer sagen wollte über die Stadt, wie man sich seine eigenen Häuser baut, und was andere über mich denken* (Ungers) explains why today an approach based on an ideal and standardized vision of the city is out of date and not feasible. [...] The places and architectures of the modern city have a fragmentary, contradictory and dialectical character and require the antithesis in response to the thesis. This reflection represents a fundamental principle of its architecture. Asked directly on the question of the approach to the historical finding, Ungers indicates as a fundamental starting point the will to use the existing historical elements to arrive at a new architectural concept that is not limited to the recording of history alone, but which may also conform to a project hypothesis or pre-existing situation." (Oskar Spital-Frenking, "Oswald Mathias Ungers," 76, translated by Martina D'Alessandro).

19 Lebendiges Rheinland-Pfalz, "Analog zur Antike," 20.

20 Wallraf-Richartz Museum, *Wallraf-Richartz Museum. Der Neubau Architektur Oswald Mathias Ungers* (Köln: DuMont Buchverlag, 2001).

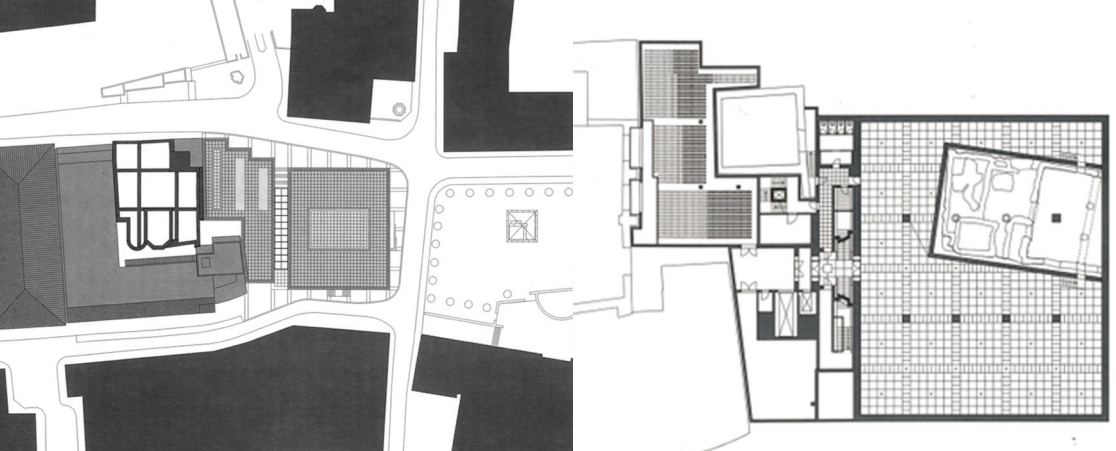


Fig. 2: Cologne and Wallraf-Richartz Museum: between Roman and contemporary city (above left)

Fig. 3: Wallraf-Richartz Museum (above right)

Fig. 4: Oswald Mathias Ungers, Wallraf-Richartz Museum, general plan and archaeological ground (below)

Gürzenich building and the structure of the former Sant Alban's church, damaged by the war. Ungers' work aims to restore form and recognizability of the collective urban memory by inserting an articulated system of architectural elements, autonomous and context-independent. He reinterprets and rewrites the historical text through a new architecture.

The Wallraf-Richartz Museum²¹ in Cologne completes an urban block with a long historical tradition. The area chosen for the construction of the new museum building is a central area of the city. It is located in proximity to the junction of the *cardo* and *decumanus* of the

²¹ The Wallraf-Richartz is one of the oldest and most important museums in Cologne. It was founded at the beginning of the 19th century and has always hosted a very important, extensive and diverse art collection. The building has changed many locations over time. The first building was near a monastery complex in the historical heart of the city. Bombed during the Second World War, the museum was rebuilt on the same site by Rudolf Schwartz. From the mid-1980s the Wallraf-Richartz was moved to the Ludwig Museum near the cathedral. In 1995 the administration decided to separate the collections of the Ludwig Museum and to provide the Wallraf-Richartz with a new independent location. A competition was held in 1996 and Ungers won the first prize.

Roman colony and is close to a number of archaeological sites. The site is part of a system of conspicuous urban spaces along the east-west axis connecting the church of Santa Maria in Kapitol and the Cathedral. The new building is inserted in a complex urban context, in an empty hinge space between three fundamental elements: to the north the Town Hall Square, to the west the urban axis of the *Quatermarkt* and to the south the historic *Gürzenich* block. The *Gürzenich* block contains some of Cologne's most important historical buildings in a limited space. Next to the grandiose representative building of the *Gürzenich*, which closes the southern block, there is the church of Sant Alban, which does not occupy the entire depth of the block but contributes, with its front and bell tower, to the rhythm of the urban façade facing the *Quatermarkt*.

Ungers's main theme is the relationship with the city and the heterogeneous elements of the adjacent complex. Ungers proposes a building that acts as an extension of the block, while maintaining a formal and functional autonomy. The way in which this building stands in the city responds to a compositional layout that is clear and at the same time subtle. The building does not follow the street alignments nor does it assume a single building layout, but weaves a series of relationships with the main buildings around it. Ungers decides to follow the orientation of the church of Sant Alban to which he attaches the new building. All the churches in Cologne have the same orientation and Sant Alban's church is also arranged in an east-west direction. Ungers' building, made up of clearly recognizable parts, strongly denounces that it belongs to the architecture of the block: it adheres to the traces of the church and aligns with them. This is the only alignment of the project with existing buildings. All the other fronts of the building, while defining precise urban spaces, are not aligned with the surrounding city, but remain parallel and orthogonal to the location of the church. The most evident point of this urban composition coincides with the entrance block on the square, which is not harnessed to any kind of contextual geometry or alignment between the façades, which imposes itself as the new urban setting of the square.

Ungers proposes a building that consists of three distinct architectural parts. The first volume is a block building. It has a regular, massive shape and it defines the surrounding urban void. The square in front of it is in fact an elongated square characterized by the imposing town hall building. Ungers contrasts this with a solid yet quiet façade, which relates to its context by virtue of its position and size.²² This block building succeeds in restoring character and proportion to the town hall square. The second block of the building consists of a *poché* volume, formed by three slats of the same size as the church bays. The three volumes are arranged on the ground in a staggered manner so that the size of the new built mass and the dimensional relationship with the church are legible. This slippage of the three prismatic volumes also makes it possible to connect the volume of the museum to the rest of the block. The third and last compositional element is the hinge block between the volume on the square and the connecting element adhering to the church. This hinge is made by a volume that stands out from the rest of the composition: a completely transparent element made of iron and glass, set back from the adjacent volumes on both the east and west sides. This node evokes the memory of an ancient road from the Middle Ages, which Ungers wanted to bring back to life.²³

The main block on the square is defined by the entrance and the ticket and bookshop services on the ground floor, while the museum's exhibition itinerary develops on the upper floors. The three vertical parallelepipeds on the *Quatermarkt* contain all offices the service apparatus, while the glass volume houses the lift system connecting all the floors of the building. As it can be seen from the plan, the block's ground floor emphasizes the urban character of the museum. Ungers does not model this space as a massive basement, closed and introverted, like the rest of the building volume. On the contrary, he designs the urban plane as a large hypostyle hall,

22 Sara Protasoni, "La nuova sede del Wallraf-Richartz-Museum a Colonia," *Casabella* 688 (2001): 19.

23 Rita Capezzuto, "The architecture of silence. A new museum in Cologne shows Oswald Mathias Ungers at his most austere," *Domus* 837 (2001): 78-95.

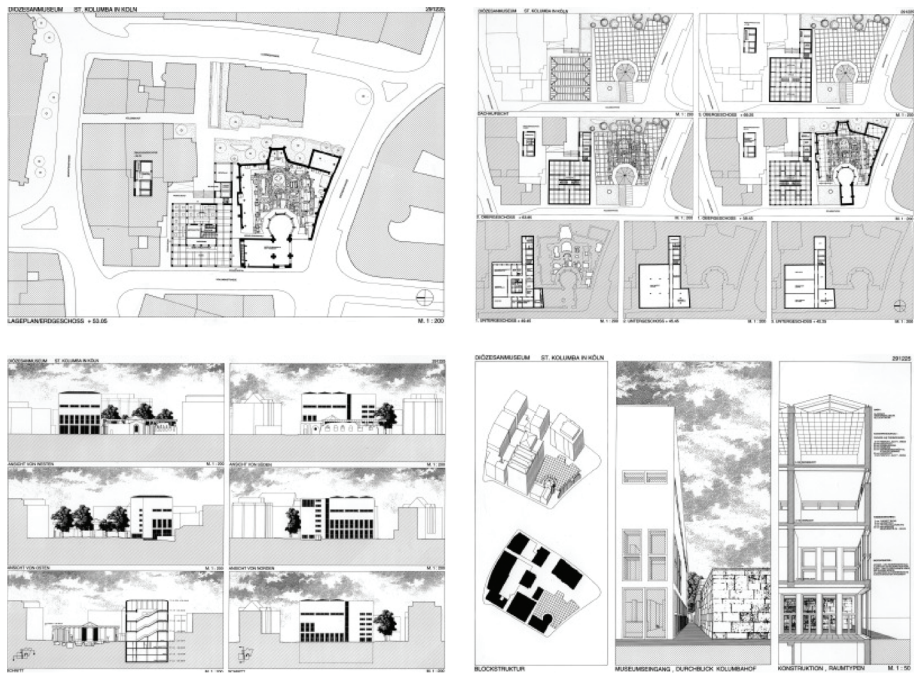


Fig. 5: Oswald Mathias Ungers, Competition proposal for *Diözesan Museum* in Cologne, 1997

a pillared space that welcomes the city inside, defining a covered square as a filter between the square and the art collection. The Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne, as well as the Trier Museum, *assimilates* the history in order to implement a process of unveiling the city.

The following year, Ungers had the opportunity to experiment this vision of architecture as a palimpsest by participating in the competition for the design of the *Diözesan Museum* (1997) (Fig. 5), very close to the site of the Wallraf-Richartz Museum. As stated in the project report, “architecturally, the museum fits perfectly into the logic of the existing buildings, consisting of a fragmented system of isolated architectural elements and bodies and an empty green space.”²⁴ This structure of the urban fabric is interpreted and completed by the project. The museum consists of four architectural elements connected in a composition whose entire system fulcrum is the Kolumba Kappelle: the imposing museum block as an individual architectural element placed in isolation, the administrative structure in the Kolumbahof space, the steel and glass roof over the area of the ruins and the existing Kolumba Kappelle. The four elements form an urban system with intermediate spaces, paths and connecting elements. This project, as well as the *Thermen am Forum* Museum in Trier, presents the themes of coverage, conservation and interpretation of the archaeological excavation in a distinctive urban context. Even in this project proposal, the relationship with the historical material is interpretative: there are no mimesis or philological reconstruction of history, but the author insisted upon the insertion of the archaeological fragment into the image of the city through a dialectical urban relationship with the archaeological ruins. The covering of the ruins is not evocative but consists of a circular plate with a steel and glass structure that follows the contours of the old city walls.²⁵ Ungers’ project is not based on

24 Oswald Mathias Ungers, “Erläuterungsbericht,” report for the competition for the *Diözesan Museum* in Cologne. Typewritten text in the Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft, Belvederestrasse, Cologne. Translation by the author.

25 Ibid.

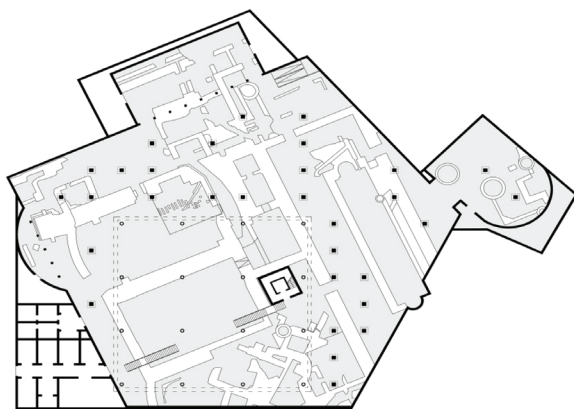


Fig. 6: Trier and *Thermen am Forum* Museum: between Roman and contemporary city (above left)

Fig. 7: *Thermen am Forum* Museum, Trier (above right)

Fig. 8: *Thermen am Forum* Museum: urban and archaeological level (below left and right)

looking for aesthetic solutions but on an investigation of the essential issues of architecture: city, history and form. The principle of stratification for Ungers is the palimpsest again. It is a parchment where layers are superimposed, erased and rewritten over each other to build a stratified system of traces.

In this perspective, the relationship that Ungers' architecture establishes with the archaeological text is exclusively of a hermeneutic and urban type, since the attention is focused on the role that the historical data assumes in the new spatial configuration of the city and not a single finding or an archaeological fragment with historical-artistic value. Because his approach is particularly aware of its context, each design experience in archaeology deals with different themes and situations through specific design solutions.

The Museum for the *Thermen am Forum* in Trier (Fig. 1, 6, 7, 8), like the *Diözesan* Museum in Cologne, develops the relationship between contemporary architecture and ruins through the principle of abstraction as an action to extract history from the urban ground. The process that leads to the discovery of the essence of the project is similar to a process of subtraction, elimination and removal of the elements that confuse and obscure the idea of the project. Here the author's design method approaches the discovery by subtraction that characterized Michelangelo's work. In an interview, Ungers said:

"I was deeply impressed by a visit to Herculaneum. Excavations have brought to light numerous architectural works previously buried at different levels of depth. A mountain of ash holds in itself, hiding mysterious messages: to reveal them to the world you have to remove the layers that now cover them. The most surprising moment was the discovery of an ancient sculpture in a cavity of the mountain. Fantasy creates the image of a hidden underground world, which can only emerge if you remove one by one all the layers that cover it. Michelangelo spoke about it, saying that the sculpture was created by removing layers from the raw stone. It is not an invention and does not come from the outside: it is formed as a removal operation. I try to remove layers to discover the architecture I want. This is the real effort, the effort of designing. [...] What fascinates in this removal process is that you find things that you did not know, you discover things that did not exist before."²⁶

This work of subtraction reveals the true significant nucleus of the work and is implemented in this building through the principle of abstraction. The idea of abstraction is also applied in the relationship between design and archaeological ruin: over layers of the ancient city and over layers of the contemporary city, Ungers overlaps a new autonomous and regular *layer* that, through its geometry, gives identity to parts of the city.²⁷ In the relationship between archaeology and architecture in the contemporary city, abstraction takes on the meaning of *extraction*, that is the process of separating and extracting the object from reality by isolating it from the surrounding context. Ungers *brings out* history, with all its testimonies and stratifications, from the ground of the square. It does this by inserting a glass envelope that extrudes the presence of the archaeological element and brings it from underground to the height of the current city with the twelve meters high excavations' cover. *Extraction* and *abstraction* are therefore the answers to the need of isolating archaeology from the rest of the city, reconstructing at the same time the urban role of historical testimony given by this element of the city's collection, seen as a great museum itself.

From what has emerged so far in this investigation of the relationship between new and old in the project for the *Thermen am Forum* Museum, we note that the relationship between archaeology and design is based on the theory of *coincidentia oppositorum*, according to which different elements can coexist, without necessarily changing each other or integrating. Indeed, their approach, comparison or eventual conflict produces a richer result and attributes a deeper meaning to both elements. In the project, this attitude implies the recognition of the importance of ancient Roman route, made explicit both through the pavement and the possibility of *seeing* the ruins; but Ungers decides not to adapt the composition of the entire project to the Roman layout. The author denounces the presence of the contemporary city and claims its intellectual and design independence with respect to history, rotating²⁸ the building with respect to the ancient city. To make this temporal and compositional gap evident, the project highlights the value of the presence of opposite elements in the development of history: different rotations and directions; mass built on the square and excavation; light and glass above and darkness and total closure below; glass, steel and concrete for the new and red brick of the ancient ruins. This is an interesting approach. It is not an isolated case, determined by the conditions of the specific situation, but it is a method that respects history and archaeology: finding is a fact, an occasion, a catalyst for the redevelopment of a public and collective space in the contemporary city, but not the main character of the urban image.

In the *Thermen am Forum* Museum, the intervention on the ruin takes the form of two design gestures: first, the need to cover and conserve is transformed into the design of a strong and monumental urban sign; and second, the will to define boundaries between the current and the ancient city is implemented through the insertion of a fence that separates excavations from the

26 Lampugnani, "Dall'immagine al progetto. Dall'immagine al progetto. L'architettura come scoperta archeologica," 18.

27 Marco De Michelis, "Architettura artificiale," in *O. M. Ungers 1991-1998*, ed. Oswald Mathias Ungers (Milano: Electa, 1998), 9-18.

28 The axes on which the museum is structured follow a course rotated by 41° with respect to the Roman urban in the north-south direction.

rest of the city and, at the same time, puts them in close relationship through the transparency of the envelope. The museum building is interpreted as a huge display case, magnified to take on an urban dimension, through which the city is able to reveal its history.

The adventure of Ungers in Trier ends with the great monumental complex of the *Kaiserthermen* (Fig. 9, 10, 11). It is an imposing archaeological text, almost bulky in size and spatial articulation. Ungers proposes an intervention that fits into the context as a *recontextualization* of the monument, as a project that helps to make the value of the archaeological complex read and known. The construction of the Imperial Baths of Trier begun under Emperor Constantine the Great in 293 AD and never entered service. The size of the city's second *thermae*, which covers more than three hectares, brings the structure of the *Kaiserthermen* in Trier closer to the famous Baths of Diocletian and Caracalla in Rome.²⁹

The project is designed in a part of the city characterized by a lack of a clear spatial order: the project area consists in the baroque Park, a parking lot and a large green area, similar to a field not cultivated, in which groups of archaeological finds were emerging protected by simple metal fences.³⁰

The project responds to the various questions regarding the preservation of history and at the same time builds an architecture in connection with the ancient. It is expressed through a simple and clear structure: on the long northern axis that connects the empty area of the parking lot and the main path to the Basilica, Ungers has placed an elongated two-story building, which constitutes the border to the North, underlining the traces of the ancient walls of foundation still present. On the western border that stands on the *Weberbachstrasse*, Ungers provides a system of completion of the limit of the ancient Baths through the use of yew hedge. Thus *framed*, the original uncultivated field becomes a work of art to be exhibited and worthy of being visited. The project is sized and positioned in relation to the ancient city and the composition of the baths building: it is superimposed on the northern limit of the baths along the edge of the ancient Roman road in order to recall and redefine the meaning of the road in the Roman city and the construction of the ancient road front. The project coincides both with the first phase of the thermal plant, in which the road consists of a continuous front porch, and with the second conformation, in which the baths are transformed into barracks. The North side is a massive and linear block with a compact structure towards the internal courtyard and an external portico system in relation to the road. The dimensions of the structural mesh on which the whole system is based derive from the remains of Roman walls still existing underground. The module takes the measure of the ancient thermal building but not the structural rhythm of the pillars of the porch; the composition of the project also does not resume the spatial composition of the baths. The new building establishes an urban and dimensional relationship with the ruins, because on the one hand it fits into the seat of the Roman road and returns to its limit, and on the other takes up the Roman measure in plan and section, but imposes, with clarity, an absolute independence and architectural autonomy. The only compositional link is the choice of materials and the construction technique of the typical roman wall covering: the strong planimetric layout and the abstraction of shapes and compositional alternations mean that the choice of materials does not make the project mimetic to the context, but is an even stronger demonstration of the absolute clarity of the project idea. With the brick cladding, the image of the building makes visible the reference to the exposed brick walls of the ancient roman ruins.³¹ For an architecture built directly on the foundations of the ancient structures, the shape of the square and the cube indicate a clear break and an obvious response to the necessary dialogue between the different layers

29 Mary Wightman, *Roman Trier and the Treveri* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971).

30 Lebendiges Rheinland-Pfalz, "Analog zur Antike," 18-21.

31 As Walter A. Noebel points out: "Interestingly, Ungers here does not use brick in purely two-dimensional way and does not even develop it from the structural point of view, but rather highlights the almost decorative homogeneous surface of bricks at the beam-pillar nodes, fully fitting into the tradition of Roman brick masonry." (Noebel, "La precisione del pensiero", 87).

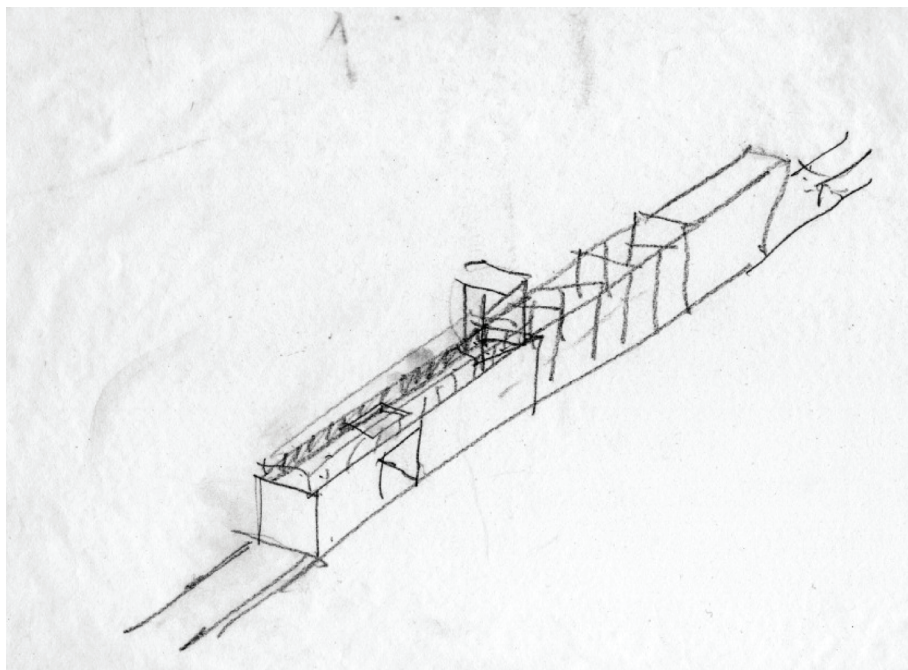
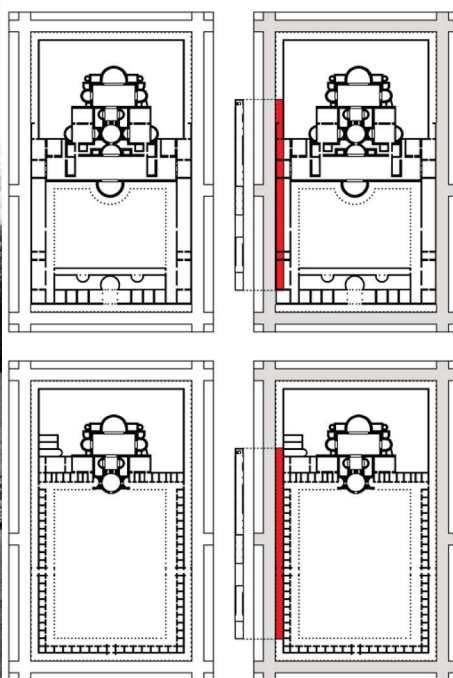


Fig. 9: Oswald Mathias Ungers, sketch for the Entrance to the *Kaiserthermen*, axonometry (above)

Fig. 10: Entrance to the *Kaiserthermen*, Trier, 2011 (below left)

Fig. 11: Entrance to the *Kaiserthermen*: relationship between architecture and archeological ruins (below right)



and fragments that history has deposited on the legacy of the ancient. In a direct dialogue with the open-air ruins, these forms constitute an ordering structure with which Ungers leads the new architecture back to the elementary principles of the ancients, such as symmetry, proportion and harmony, without falling, as it often happens, in the trap of camouflage and formal imitation.³² The elementary module of the project, that is the simple cubic structure of beam and pillar, establishes an interpretative relationship with the archaeological monument to which it refers. The analogy between the current image of the thermal plant is reduced to the pure compositional structure of the building, seen as the permanent framework of architecture and the articulation of a new project based on the imposition of a single simplified element, variously interpreted and transformed.

Conclusion

Oswald Mathias Ungers' buildings designed and built in archaeological areas offer the opportunity to elaborate some reflections on the type of relationship that links his work to history and, in general, on the relationship between his design and antiquity. Ungers' position is based on the interpretation of the city as a palimpsest in which, layer by layer, the structure of the city grows and develops on a complex system of superimpositions and contrasts. In his eyes, the ancient city does not appear as a heritage to preserve in aseptic terms, a fixed reality, *frozen* in its historical dimension, which does not allow any contemporary intervention. For Ungers, historical heritage is not a simple *deposit of remains* but an active component, which suggests and conditions the rules of urban design. It is an objective element, present in space and in memory, which becomes a pretext for a new architecture. According to this conception, the new intervention stands as a sign of an already stratified system: each *surface* relates to the other, determining a dependency system, a balance in which each element has a disproportionate role and contributes to the transmission of the global image. In this relationship with archaeology emerges the author's tendency towards an autonomous architecture, understood as the writing of a text. In this dialectical and contradictory system, which links history and design, tradition and innovation, archaeology and architecture, the presence of the ancient is not the only and most relevant element. Ungers is rather fascinated by the process of integration and juxtaposition which orders the different situations, ancient and current, in a general urban project. The author is not interested in didactically describing, explaining or celebrating the ruin. He *limits* himself in making the ancient artifact visible, so that city and man can read history in its fragmented condition today, exhibiting every passage, every change, every variation. He does not rebuild the archaeological monument, he does not complete it nor does he try to camouflage his architecture among the ancient ruins. He *uses* and interprets historical fragments to define a new architectural concept that conforms to the current configuration of the city: the presence of archaeology becomes the component that triggers the process of transformation of reality in the project. Ungers's attitude towards the architectural project in a historical context, in which the main objective is to find a connection between the present and the past, implies the need to superimpose a new layer, defining an architecture that increases the palimpsest of history. Ungers continues writing the history of the city with the tools of the architect, and not of the archaeologist or restorer, placing his architecture as a connection between the present and the past. Rotations, misalignments and morphological sequences represent, in this context, the autonomy of Ungers' design mark on the palimpsest of history. In this way, the architectural intervention looks like a bridge between the visible and the imagined city.

32 Lepik, "Entreesituation Kaiserthermen Trier," 126-131.

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Fig. 3: Wallraf-Richartz Museum, *Wallraf-Richartz Museum. Der Neubau Architektur Oswald Mathias Ungers* (Köln: DuMont Buchverlag, 2001), 45.

Fig. 4: Ibid., 49.

Fig. 5, 9: © Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft.