Chapter 1. The 1970s: Reclaiming Autonomy for the *Fait Social*

> To me, it is ironic that the – I would almost use the word innocent – core of our activity – to reinvent a plausible relationship between the formal and the social – is so invisible behind the assumption of our cynicism, my alleged lack of criticality, our apparently never-ending surrender. . .[1]
> *Rem Koolhaas*

In a conversation with Sarah Whiting in 1999, Rem Koolhaas reflects not only on the work of OMA but on its critical and public reception. His reference to the 'almost innocent' core of the office's work suggests a hesitation to align architecture with innocence, signalling his awareness of twentieth-century history. Yet he also spins the conversation, accusing his critics of projecting their own assumptions on the work. Typical of Koolhaas, this small sentence is dense with issues facing contemporary architecture, drawing lines from the individual projects of the firm to broad cultural themes. Recuperating the position of the architect in this era of late capitalism (and its seemingly potential demise?), necessitates a reclaiming of architecture as a field of future promise while simultaneously acknowledging its limitations. Current architecture is marked by the historical trajectory of high-profile architecture from the 1970s, when OMA was founded, to today. In retrospect, the references to 'innocent activity' and 'lack of criticality' are significant. The 'innocent' optimism of architecture has, over the course of the twentieth century, led to untenable arrogance and totalitarianism in the form of Utopian proposals. A rising self-awareness of this hubris marks the second half of the twentieth century, yet this does not seem to have diminished

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the attraction of overstated social influence. Koolhaas's insertion of 'almost' reflects a postmodern sensibility that is aware of the critical fault lines in a comment such as this, yet underneath, his interests in the social ramifications of architectural gestures ring through. The reference to 'criticality' frames this comment within the legacy of the 1960s discourse on the critical role of architecture, against which the early works of the 1970s are positioned.[2] The intricacies within this self-reflexive positioning of OMA will be unravelled in further detail, but first we need to rewind to nearly 20 years earlier, to the Venice Architecture Biennale of 1980 entitled 'The Presence of the Past', which included contributions by both OMA and Oswald Mathias Ungers.

In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, Ungers emphatically dismissed social concerns as a driving force in architectural design, arguing that other considerations are required to produce a building of lasting architectural significance. He made particular note of the contingency of behaviour and public opinion:

> It is equally difficult to derive a formal structural project from mere social conditions, since one cannot trust sufficiently either in the behaviour and habits of a single person's life or in the general public's feelings. In most cases people's good sense has turned out to be a failure as an artistic metre. Social factors naturally influence architecture, but careful analysis of people's habits and customs does not necessarily lead to the choice of an architectural form as well.[3]

With this statement, he goes against the grain of dominant themes and approaches in the 1960s, which increasingly focused on vernacular architecture as an expression of 'people's good sense' and resisted approaches that incorporated an obvious formalism.

The statements by Koolhaas and Ungers, made nearly 20 years apart, emphasize the distinction between the social content and the formal expression of architecture. While the social context and the material form of the resulting building are understood to have a relation, they are neither derivative nor directly correlated. Both positions, the desire to reinvent a plausible relation between the formal and the social (implying if not the absence of such a relationship, at least its troubled nature), and the absolute denial of utilizing the social as foundation for architectural form, rise to prominence in the 1970s. This decade was marked by the failure of the social agenda of the 1960s to produce a lasting transformation in the discipline of architecture. Additionally, the perception of architecture as the repository of

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a materialized collective history, identity and desire drove a turn towards the language of architecture and symbolic form in the 1970s. In their approach, and particularly their shared concern for architecture's formal qualities, Ungers and Koolhaas stand testimony to their time and their generation – seeking a more balanced relation between the emancipatory role attributed to architecture in the twentieth century, and the formal traditions and expertise embodied within its material objects. In this transformative period, the specific oeuvres of Ungers and Koolhaas illuminate a timeless issue that continues to be relevant today: the role of the architect, and the influence of architecture on the various domains of (urban) life. While their work engages with this question in different manners – if only in the obliqueness of Koolhaas's literary approach versus the directness of Ungers's didactic writings – a resonance between their interests became clear in the mid-1970s, coalescing around a shared interest in the European metropolis. Moreover, their paths crossed at a number of crucial junctions in the architecture debates of the 1970s, particularly in the United States, and mainly connected to the Cornell School of Architecture and the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies.

It has often been suggested that Koolhaas relegates architectural form to a secondary status, or that he almost 'forgets' to address it. With the overwhelming attention to cultural issues and the city in particularly the writings of Koolhaas (and by extension those of OMA), it is easy to overlook the importance of the material object. Yet the many design proposals and the notes made on project documentation – even as a design goes to construction – belie this interpretation. At the same time, while Ungers may be more directly focused on architecture both as a discipline and as built form, his work is at times so directed at idealizations that the finalized project seems almost secondary. Nevertheless, the resulting materialization of ideas is crucial to the work of both architects. Their ideas must be understood in relation to their built work – and the houses show precisely this painstaking attention to detail in giving form to abstract ideas. The very notion that Koolhaas might forget about form rests on the misconception that being interested in the formal qualities of architecture amounts to being knowledgeable about or reverential towards the tradition of architecture or its exemplars. Although Koolhaas consciously departs from tradition, in writing as well as building, sometimes even going so far as to suggest a disregard for the tools of architecture, this is not the same as being uninterested in the material articulation of his ideas.[4] I argue here that it is precisely because of

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the historical legacy of architecture as a social agent, from the late nineteenth century to its optimistic portrayal in the 1960s, that the particular position of Koolhaas towards formal autonomy and social agency has remained less visible. Moreover, I argue that the explicit self-positioning of Ungers reveals implicit ramifications in the ideas of Koolhaas, which may be understood as reconceptualizing architecture's social effect *through* its material presence.

Facing Crisis: Rethinking the Agency of Architecture in the 1970s

This tension between the social dimension of architecture and its formal language shaped the work of the 1970s, which was marked by the disillusionment that followed the heady optimism of the 1960s. One prominent response to the failure of architecture to radically change society was to retreat into a more self-contained discourse of architecture.[5] In the work of Peter Eisenman, for example, the autonomy of architecture gained an increasingly prominent role, beginning with his 1963 dissertation on the formal foundations of modern architecture.[6] In 1969, Manfredo Tafuri argued that architecture was in essence already compromised by virtue of being an integral part of the power structure of the capitalist system.[7] This led some to conclude that architecture had no other recourse than to engage primarily with the internal logic of the discipline. These two figures are simply examples of a broader turn in art and architecture criticism. In 1960, art critic Clement Greenberg had already drawn attention to the importance of the canvas and the brush strokes for the evaluation of artistic quality.[8] As early as the 1950s, Colin Rowe and John Hejduk, among others, were already experimenting with a didactic programme that encouraged students to explore an architectural problem primarily through formal and compositional elements of architecture, exemplified in John Hejduk's nine-square-grid problem.[9] Time and again, the reflections in this period run in opposition to the understanding of architecture as anchored in the social that had been foregrounded throughout the 1960s.[10]

Throughout the architecture discourse of the twentieth century, this spectrum from social field to architectural presence has been situated as an opposing choice: one cannot be a formalist and be political at the same time.[11] Yet in the period between 1966 and 1978, the contours began to appear of a less definitive position, a mode in which we might begin to conceive of multiplicities that presume influence without direct correlation. It might

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open up the potential of thinking carefully about form, shape, symbols, and yet being conscious of the social fabric within which these aesthetic concerns are sited. This may be seen as the advent of postmodernity, yet it might also be seen as simply a recalibration of modernity in order to accommodate the complexity we are by now so familiar with.[12] Without a doubt, the limitations of ideals and social agency became increasingly prominent in the post-war years. Colin Rowe took note of the constrictive features of Utopian thought in 1959, nevertheless concluding that 'as a reference (present even in Popper), as a heuristic device, as an imperfect image of the good society, Utopia will persist – but should persist as possible social metaphor rather than probable social prescription'.[13] In some ways, this fits well with the recalibration of architecture's role – while the 1970s may have seemed rather bleak after the bubbly high hopes of the 1960s, the changing positions in the architecture debate also provided space for rethinking what architecture should do if it was not only an emancipatory gesture. Rowe would later be highly influential in reclaiming the importance of the formal in urbanism, both in his teaching and his writings, most notably in *Collage City*.[14]

While the cracks that began to manifest fully in the 1970s were in some seminal form already present in the 1960s, in hindsight the 1970s were a pressure cooker, showing the crisis of the social in architecture in stark detail. In the face of an economic recession on the heels of the 1973 oil crisis, building commissions steadily declined and much of the architectural production turned to speculations and dream images – not of the shining future just around the corner, but rather of the unseen implications of a society in crisis. Early projects and fictions by OMA such as the Welfare Palace Hotel (1976) and The Story of the Pool (1977) show this type of speculation, seeking a role for architectural imagery as polemic and as a collective subconscious.[15] In hindsight, these early projects explored the less acknowledged aspects of modernity from the seductive to the intimidating, and instigated a new approach that not only basked in image culture, but perhaps even prefigured an irrelevance of architecture as material reality. At the same time, even within the complexity of today's profession, the desire remains to provide significance to the built environment beyond the immediate needs of the client. In today's discourse, this shows in the attempt to define architecture between its dependency on many distinct factors, ranging from urban regulations and policies to the quality of contractors and the engagement of its clients, and its autonomous production of future scenarios, in which current realities find speculative formal expressions for how we wish to live.[16]

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In this recent history there are clues to the state of architecture today, and the personal trajectories – accidental or not – of Ungers and Koolhaas form a striking pair, crossing the Atlantic in both directions within a relatively short time. In the case of Ungers, one might argue that it was not just the mere coincidence of an invitation to come to Cornell, extended by Colin Rowe. His readiness to accept was also related to the context of university life at the time: while Ungers was trying to teach his students the deeply rooted cultural and historical values embodied in architecture, his students were preoccupied with the general sense of resistance spreading through universities, and questioned all teaching that seemed to align with the establishment. As the student uprisings reached Berlin, Ungers packed up his family to resettle in Ithaca. Immediate triggers for this emigration were the turmoil at his architecture theory conference of 1967, and possibly also the June 1967 shooting of student Benno Ohnesorg by the police, who were trying to contain student unrest.[17] To Ungers, the further radicalization of the student movement may have signalled the moment to emigrate, as he had a difficult time connecting to a student debate that was turning to wide-ranging discussions of politics, while he continued to express the steadfast conviction that architecture was formative of culture, and thereby important in its own right.

Koolhaas enrolled at Cornell in the fall of 1972, having acquired a Harkness Fellowship for this course of study. In his application he made particular note of the presence of Ungers and Rowe at Cornell. Referring to a graduate course in Urban Design, Koolhaas wrote: 'The attraction of that course would be the active presence of Prof. O.M. Ungers, whose work in Urbanism at Berlin University I have found very sympathetic and highly relevant. Secondly, Prof. Colin Rowe is regarded very highly as a historian and theoretician of recent and historical architecture with special emphasis on Urban Design.'[18] Ungers had come to Cornell from the TU Berlin in 1968 at the instigation of Rowe, who later regretted his invitation.[19] The animosity between Rowe and Ungers seems rather surprising in light of the similarities of their interests and ideas, in particular on the existing city, which led to Rowe's invitation in the first place. However, it appears that the architecture department at Cornell was too compact to accommodate their outspoken and often clashing personalities.[20] Koolhaas had been following a course of study at the Architectural Association in London since 1968, and proposed to spend a year at Cornell towards his final degree at the AA. He had stumbled across the work of Ungers through *Veröffentlichungen zur Architektur*.[21] His transfer to Cornell was informed by an

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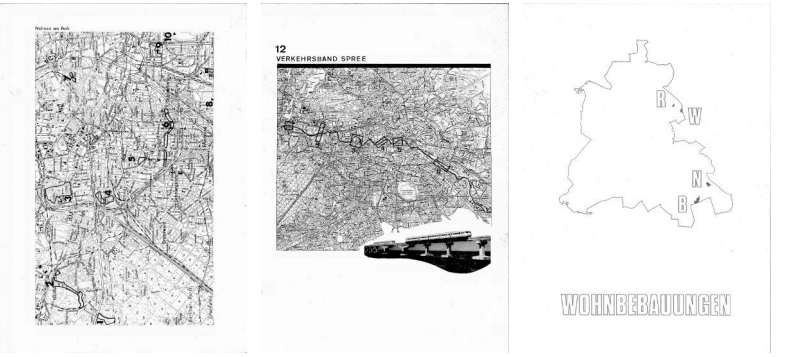
irritation towards overly 'social' architecture, such as manifest in the Dutch architecture discourse (which was formally unsophisticated in the opinion of Koolhaas), as well as the 'rice-cooking hippies' at the AA.[22] Koolhaas's interests ran to Soviet Constructivism and the outspoken architecture of Superstudio. Koolhaas found his space to think, write and design in the relative calm of Ithaca, where at least some questions of form were being made explicit in the work of Ungers and his colleague Colin Rowe.

Fig. 1.1: publication series Veröffentlichungen zur Architektur, issues 10, 12 and 19



Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft

The work Koolhaas produced in resistance to his tutors at the AA, and later under the collegial tutelage of Ungers demonstrates precisely this complex need for formal production that is nevertheless also informed by the less tangible conditions surrounding each project. The difficulty in the ideological positions in the late 1960s caused an increasing rift between the formal and the programmatic in architecture. This radical distinction between the social and the formal was particularly strong in the Netherlands, where ideological battle lines were drawn in the discourse of Team 10, in the professional journals, and at Delft University of Technology, not least by Aldo van Eyck.[23] In the Netherlands this resulted in a strong focus on social programming, not only in the work of Van Eyck but also his younger acolytes, most notably Herman Hertzberger. In America, the highly autonomous architecture of Eisenman defined a different response by abstracting external influences in favour of a focus on the formal logic of architecture. While Koolhaas was explicitly sceptical of the revolutionary potential claimed for architecture in

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the 1960s, he remained interested in the social implications of architecture, referring to the work of the Soviet Constructivists as a touchstone for revolutionary projects with a clear formal dimension. Similarly, Ungers flatly refused a purely social agency of architecture, but his focus on the intrinsic qualities of architecture also extended to social and historical factors as formative of the life within.

It is against these shifting contexts of Europe and the United States that the resonance between Koolhaas and Ungers becomes clear. Indeed, one can argue that their migrations not only contributed to their personal affinity, but were a crucial component in their critical position on both social revolution and radical autonomy. In this particular aspect of the debate, the European-American axis holds a specific importance.[24] Even the student unrest of the period was distinctive – the European ones more aligned with the working class, the American ones set out along racial distinctions and anti-war demonstrations.[25] From the culture analysis of Adorno, in which Hollywood films epitomized an affirmative cultural position, to the transatlantic wanderings of modernism, poststructuralist thought and postmodernism, the intricate relationship between formal and political ideologies has been tinged with specific positions depending on which side of the Atlantic they resided.[26] This makes the traveling trajectories of Koolhaas and Ungers of particular interest, with perhaps still a speculative line to be drawn towards the developing economies that held Koolhaas's interest in the early years of the twenty-first century, such as Lagos, Nigeria. In America, it is the freedom from politically entrenched positions and the social engineering of high modernism that led to the cynicism of late deconstructivism, but also allowed for the sheer joy of California modernism. In Europe, the politically laden ideas of architecture have at times encouraged a questionably anti-aesthetic participatory planning, yet have also led to more care in the design of public spaces, particularly in countries with a strong welfare state.[27] The distinct sociopolitical histories of architecture in Europe and North America reveal differences in the treatment of architecture at the crucial junction between modernity and postmodernity. In this light, it becomes evident that Mary McLeod's precise and careful analysis of the interrelation of form and politics in the late 1980s is focused more on the carefree formal allusions of American postmodernism. Although she makes distinct note of the complexity of the relation between form and politics, she emphasizes the overestimation of form to the detriment of a social conscience. When viewed from the perspective of the exaggerated social conscience of European architecture,

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one might equally read in it the unexpected effects (and thus importance) of the formal explorations of architecture.[28] As such, the urban ideas of Koolhaas and Ungers can hardly be understood without the underlayment of American urbanization and its toned-down political consciousness.[29] Interestingly, as such the work also shows the complexity of the relations it argues: the influence of the sociocultural context from Europe to the United States becomes manifest in new perceptions of the city.

In 1975, Denise Scott Brown already signalled this reductive duality in the architecture debate and tried to correct it with a reference to the multiple factors that influence architecture. She suggests that social concern and formalist analyses should be perceived as elements within the larger domain of architecture. She identifies the opposition between the two as coinciding with the rise of the Modern Movement. 'Persons concerned with the analysis of form were *ipso facto* irresponsible toward the other aspects of architecture and particularly toward the social duties of architecture.'[30] Instead, she notes that issues of social concern and of form are simply variables, which can be isolated for the purposes of analysis and research, but both still pertain to the architectural project at hand and must be resynthesized for the purposes of design. It is in this process of synthesis that Scott Brown situates the primary responsibility of the architect: 'Allegations of social and architectural irresponsibility can, indeed, be made if the architect does not resynthesize all factors to the greatest extent possible in design.'[31]

All in all, the balancing act between social awareness and architectural articulation entered a new phase in the 1970s. This found particularly fertile ground in America. The introduction to *Five Architects* documents this perceptible shift away from social concern:

> But the concern for reform has flavored all discussion and criticism of anything that claims to be architecture first and social reform second. That architecture is the least likely instrument with which to accomplish the revolution has not yet been noticed by the younger Europeans, and in America is a fact like a convenient stone wall against which architectural journalism can bang heads. An alternative to political romance is to be an architect, for those who actually have the necessary talent for architecture. The young men represented here have that talent (along with a social conscience and a considerable awareness of what is going on in the world around them) and their work makes a modest claim: it is only architecture,

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> not the salvation of man and the redemption of the earth. For those who like architecture that is no mean thing.[32]

This was received as radical at the time: to be 'only' architecture. We may do well to wonder why this was so radical – and the answer must address the continual expansion of the agency and responsibility of architecture over the course of the twentieth century, until it indeed was seen as the 'redemption of the earth'. The inescapability of architecture as a large part of the everyday environment may well require more attention and care, but it does not necessarily mean that architecture is omnipotent in the way early twentieth-century architects seemed to suggest.

One of the challenges that architecture faced in the 1970s was how to reclaim agency for the discipline without assuming that it could impact and transform *all* domains of life. Focusing on 'only' architecture provided the opportunity to explore architecture's particular internal language – typological variations, morphological studies, analyses of composition – and to suggest that spatial quality itself was a worthy aim. The modernist tendency towards novelty and innovation in architecture was countered with historical precedent and the study of its logical underpinnings in order to provide legitimacy, as for example in Rowe's comparison of the proportional systems of Renaissance and modernist architecture.[33] With the publication of *Delirious New York* in 1978, Koolhaas contributed a new approach to autonomy with his fictional manifesto that described the logic of Manhattan. In this book, he took on the existing urban fabric and described its architecture with a non-traditional vocabulary, using metaphors and ideas rather than architecturally descriptive words.[34] In the same year, Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's *Collage City* made use of historical precedents and compositional approaches to counteract totalizing urban strategies, instead providing a structure for multiple Utopian projects.[35]

Forming the Social in the Twentieth Century

While the architecture debate and work of the 1970s puts the contrast between formal exploration and social engagement into stark contrast, the story of twentieth-century architecture as a whole shows an increasing belief in the ability of architecture to transform everyday life, until at least the late 1960s. This history of architecture as a primarily social construct finds a starting

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point in the Utopian writings and experiments of the nineteenth century, such as the overbearing morality of John Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and early industrial towns such as Robert Owen's New Lanark Mills (1825). This optimistic and paternalistic approach expands in the early twentieth century to enlighten the masses, and as it began to celebrate what Koolhaas would later call the 'terrifying beauty of the twentieth century', it became (at least in its own perception) an inescapable saviour, leading the way to a life more in tune with the inevitable spread of modernity. A substantial part of the narrative of the twentieth century, whether it concerns the experiments of Soviet Constructivist architecture, of the Bauhaus or the CIAM and Team 10, revolves around recasting architecture as an agent of social transformation. Ironically, precisely through its self-proclaimed importance, the discipline may now have fallen prey to both a diminished agency and an increased culpability – an unfortunate combination for the public image of the discipline as a whole. The historical trajectory preceding this ultimate downfall, however, contains possible avenues of escape, if only by virtue of a more careful reading.

Underlying the opposition between the autonomy of architecture and its status as *fait social* is the relation between form and its (social) content. Until the twentieth century, the strength of tradition was solid enough that social content was seen as having a naturalized relation with form. Questions of social transformation and morality were at times present but less explicit until the nineteenth century, when Augustus Welby Pugin argued a direct correlation between architecture and moral guidance in his book *Contrasts*.[36] It is in the tradition of Utopian plans and social progressives such as Owen, Fourier and the like, that architectural form gains a strong connection to the social content it is meant to imbue. As delicate a field as this is to explore, it remains nearly irresistible to many architects. The notion of having a profound impact not only on the manner in which everyday habits take shape, but also on the very social being of its inhabitants, is heady. Koolhaas finds it a seductive thought, as is not only evidenced by his deep-seated interest in the Soviet Constructivists, but also in his repeatedly outspoken desire to transform life through architecture. However, his wish to influence seems tempered by an acknowledgment of the inadequacy of architecture, while Ungers's refusal of influence beyond the aesthetic seems to build on a general human interest.

At heart, one of the concerns revolves around the role of architecture as cultural production: does it engender social transformation quietly, as a

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slow cultural initiator that secretly inserts new insights, or is it an agent of revolution, following Le Corbusier's statement of 1923? Or is architecture limited to the replication of the social order by virtue of its ties to capital and power? These questions go to the heart of what architecture is, and the role of the architect within society. The twentieth century holds a unique position in this debate. It is in the twentieth century that three main themes, 'pure' art as opposed to applied art, Utopian plans aimed at social transformation, and the relation between autonomy and engagement take centre stage. In 1980, Ungers brings forward the longstanding historical discussion on architecture as the art of building that sits between the symbolic content of pure art, and the functional requirements of the applied arts.[37] Framing the question of autonomy in architecture within the categories of functional design and aesthetic expression, his ideas not only explicitly build on the work of Kant, but also pay tribute to the distinctions between pure aesthetics and architectural aesthetics made by Sörgel at the beginning of the twentieth century.[38]

The work of Koolhaas and Ungers – whether in writing, drawing or building – addresses a longstanding polemic in architecture, revolving around its status as pure or applied art, or as artistic or technical discipline. This came to a particular convergence in the twentieth century, where its functional imperatives (its nature as applied art) were elevated to a status of essential qualities. The famous notion of 'form follows function' became a manner of transforming architecture into a vanguard venture, running out ahead of the troops to lead the way to a brave new world. While the relationship between the social and the formal is seemingly inevitable, there have been moments in history when it has been particularly central to the (self-)perception of architecture. This is visible in a variety of nineteenth-century Utopian projects such as Charles Fourier's *phalanstère*, Robert Owens' New Lanark Mills, and Ebenezer Howard's Garden City, as well as early twentieth-century experiments such as the ambitious projects of the Soviet Constructivists, a long-time favourite of Koolhaas's. Within this, the twentieth century is marked by an increasingly instrumental view of architecture as a means of societal revolution, followed by a distinctive retreat from this instrumental view in the late 1970s.

Modernist architecture holds a special position in this question of social agency and formal expression. Based on a relatively circumscribed connection between physical space and its impact on life – deriving from nineteenth-century Utopian projects – the visions of the future involved in

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high modernism included a formal specificity of the future that was deemed to encourage a progressive mode of living. This approach remained embedded in many architecture practices throughout the twentieth century, including that of OMA, which Kim Dovey and Scott Dickson note as having the 'early modernist imperative toward an architecture that would remake the habitat and habitus of everyday life'.[39] Modernism shared with the early avant-gardes a desire to influence all spheres of life, although it tended to operate more within (aesthetic) convention and typically presented itself as an end condition.[40] The optimism of the 1960s and its aftermath also form a key moment in this timeline, when the happy ideals of the generation of 1968 seemed to flounder in the face of cultural disillusion and economic crisis. The perceived agency of architecture in social transformation thus seems a particularly modern phenomenon, or at least to hold exaggerated significance in most of the twentieth century. While the relation between the material object and its social influence has often remained implicit, it underpins many considerations of architecture. Vitruvius, for example, provides a self-evident guide for spatial needs in accordance with the social role and standing of the patron, while Ruskin's Lamps of Truth and Life draw direct analogies between social habits and architectural expression.[41] All the same, the very beginning of the twentieth century does seem particularly alert to the transformative potential of spatial composition and aesthetic expression.[42] The 1960s, while undermining many of the aesthetic notions of high modernism, maintained a reasonably steadfast belief in the social engagement of architecture, conceiving of near-future worlds in which societal reconfigurations would be pre-empted or triggered by new spatial forms.

There is an intimate relation between the idealized construction of form and the social construction of Utopia.[43] Especially the abstraction of the modern city has seemed to elude specific contexts of time and space, and thereby remain solidly entrenched in the discourse of social agency in architecture. The idealization of form and its presumed correlation to social virtue, however, has a long history, with particular prominence in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. According to Rowe, this begins to become problematic with Romanticism, due to its emphasis on the subjective and the individual, which leads to the dissipation of a shared social fabric. Yet one might wonder whether Romanticism attempts to continue the undertones of Utopia in a different form. Certainly one might suggest that the undertones of Utopianism are present throughout many documents that simultaneously breathe the romantic subjectivity of individualism, *Delirious*

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New York not least among them. Koolhaas's turn to the surreal may be delving into subjective experiences, but it seems at the same time to presume a shared understanding of symbolic content, thereby restructuring the very concept of Utopia.

The problem of what architecture *is* and what it *does* sits at the centre of the twentieth-century self-image of the architect. With Le Corbusier as a prominent figurehead in proclaiming the revolutionary qualities of architecture ('Architecture or revolution? Revolution can be avoided'), a large number of architects have found themselves becoming social workers with bricks and mortar as their primary tools. The countermovement turns to pure formalism, disavowing any impact of architecture on everyday life and allowing some architects to show a complete disregard for the environment designed for real inhabitants. Neither position in the extreme – the architect as social revolutionary or the architect as creative artist – does justice to the breadth and complexity of the field and the profession. The everyday practice of architecture cannot be subsumed in the mythology put forward in the discourse, and yet the singular authority of the architect remains a powerful narrative within the discourse. This is built in part on the many facets of life meant to be gathered within the space of architecture and the city, which may easily lead to overstating the influence of the architect. While architectural projects and urban designs can provide a frame for the life within – and perhaps even inform social habits through their spatial interventions – the mythical dimensions of twentieth-century rhetoric in architecture do not do justice to the multifaceted, long-term reality of architecture as a changing profession.[44]

It is in this context of rethinking the limits of architecture's agency that a number of similarities in the ideas of Koolhaas and Ungers become notable. What sets their work apart is the renewed relevance of these ideas in the contemporary city. As early as the 1970s, they shared a willingness to look at the existing urban fabric in a different manner, using a specifically architectural approach to reconceptualize the issues of the city. They both proposed ideas that addressed the tenuous yet still extant relationship between form and meaning, such as *Grossform* and 'Bigness'. These two notions rethink the role of architecture in relation to the city, while the *Stadt in der Stadt* already incorporates the shrinking city in its urban principles. In each case, the metropolitan field is the primary focus, in which the complexity of architecture and urbanism is prominent. As such, their ideas take shape in a fundamentally heterogeneous field, determined by not only

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the social domain, but also the everyday labyrinth of regulations and bodies of bureaucratic intervention, as well as the many different perspectives manifest in the city. In this sense, Koolhaas and Ungers early on begin to grapple with conditions of postmodernity such as discontinuity and heterogeneity, although the notions they launch to address these conditions typically derive from reflections on architecture and the city. The notion of a plausible relation between the formal and the social allows for the potential to address new conditions such as the increasing heterogeneity of the city through the material realizations of architecture and urban design, without presupposing that a project is either universal or permanent.

In their approach, and the concern for architecture's formal significance in particular, they signal their time and their generation.[45] Their nearly 20-year age difference is somehow effaced by a shared distaste for the underestimation of the power of architecture, which they saw in the student movements and in many of the teaching staff at the AA. Their time was situated uncomfortably between the failure of social ideals and an uncertain future. After the demise of the 1960s came the gold crisis (1971), the Club of Rome report (1972), and the oil crisis (1973). The economic downturn in the United States in the wake of the oil crisis in particular had far-reaching effects on the profession of architecture and on the construction industry, with staff being cut by 30 to 50 per cent in architecture firms by the late 1970s.[46] Yet Koolhaas and Ungers, as many of their colleagues, remained convinced of the significance of architecture in everyday life. Their high hopes are perhaps characteristic of the twentieth century in general (beginning in the late nineteenth century), when architecture became seen as a means for social improvement and less as an aesthetic expression of the existing social order.[47] At the same time, their ideas from the late 1960s on also addressed the increasingly complex conditions that came with the rise of postmodernity – a more fluid and fragmented social field, the loss of an overarching narrative, the rise of the digital age (or in the early days the 'network society'), and the loss of a traditional sense of *Gemeinschaft*.

Constructing a Contingent Autonomy: From Oppositions to Multiplicities

Perhaps the most fundamental intervention that can be attributed to Ungers and Koolhaas is a recalibrated awareness of the ambiguity of architecture.

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Flying in the face of 1960s discourse that, for all its self-proclaimed openness, followed the constrictive logic of Utopia, Ungers and Koolhaas introduced alternative interpretations that appealed to both the classical tradition of edification, tradition and precedent (Ungers), and to the modern legacy of 'terrifying beauty', social transformation and multiplicity (Koolhaas).

Koolhaas's last project at the Architectural Association in 1972, 'Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture' plays out this dilemma between social engagement and brute form.[48] In the context of the AA it was a more or less direct confrontation with the dominant culture. Zenghelis, his tutor, was perhaps more forgiving of the severe references incorporated in Exodus, but many of the teachers and students at the AA appeared to be more inclined towards architecture with an explicit social agenda. The Exodus project undermines the conventional use of political references by using images that are targeted at achieving freedom through surrender. The Berlin watchtowers and uniformed guards require the new inhabitants to surrender to the conditions of the project, brute form that is beyond good or evil. The naked entry into paradise – or hell as it may be – and the implied rebirth into an environment of architectural domination all suggest a surrendering to the terrifying beauty of the twentieth century. It is a complete reversal of the comforting notions of 'I'm OK – You're OK' of the 1960s scene at the AA.[49] Ironically, in the retrospective gaze of Koolhaas, Peter Cook seems to have been one of the most difficult tutors to convince of the value of this monumental intervention, while the influence of Archigram is often seen as introducing a structural mode of irreverence. Perhaps not quite aligned with the hippies in their love for consumer culture, the members of Archigram showed a strong distaste for authority in their work, which perhaps explains their resistance to the totalitarian designs of Superstudio. Nevertheless, these seemingly open approaches of the 1960s generation are also dogmatic in their demand that everyone conform to the logic of this apparent flexibility.[50] The Exodus project inverts this principle, offering a conscious intervention of highly formal architecture – the references formed by Superstudio and Soviet Constructivism, where formal and aesthetic experiment were part of the forward-looking approaches. Yet they are also imbued with the idea that sociopolitical progress can be configured by the spatial form they are given. The programmatic compositions of the Constructivists, reminiscent also of the phalansteries of the nineteenth century, reorganize collective life by reorganizing the family and elements of what is otherwise considered the private domain. Rather than the nuclear family as the basic cell of society,

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the individual elements of the family are reorganized. Women are set to work, their reproductive functions a necessary element but not the focus of their being, and children are put together to be raised by specifically allotted domestics.

Fig. 1.2:. R. Koolhaas, Exodus project, 1972, reception area

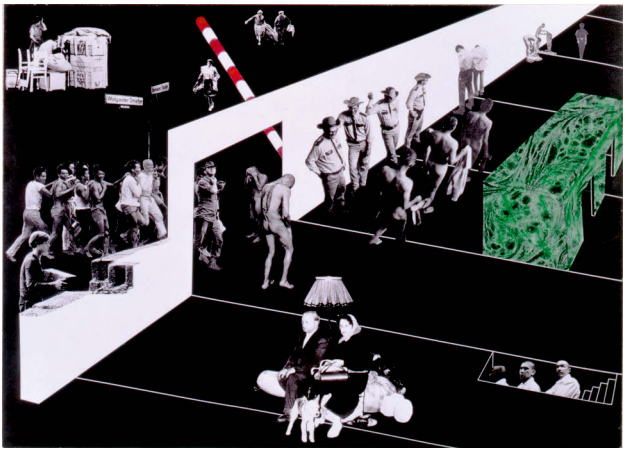

Image Courtesy of OMA

The Exodus project thus embodies ambiguity: architecture is something to surrender to, but willingly so. It is breathtakingly important, which is why the project also provides the banal allotments as an escape. It resonates with the impact of the social condensor, with overtones of reconfiguring the social habitus in its formal severity. The project includes a series of pure forms that might even call to mind some of Ungers's projects. The squares that make up the baths, for example, might easily be situated in the Hotel Berlin, if the film stills were absent and it was pure form. At the same time, the provocative narrative that accompanies the project is at odds with the more rational and architectural descriptions that Ungers provides in his work.

It is only if we see the relation between the formal and the social as founded on opposition that these ambiguities become problematic. The oppositional narrative that has been construed over the course of the twentieth century has become unforgiving. Every formal gesture without immediate social referent correlates to a suspect motivation, while every

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Fig. 1.3: R. Koolhaas, Exodus project, 1972, baths

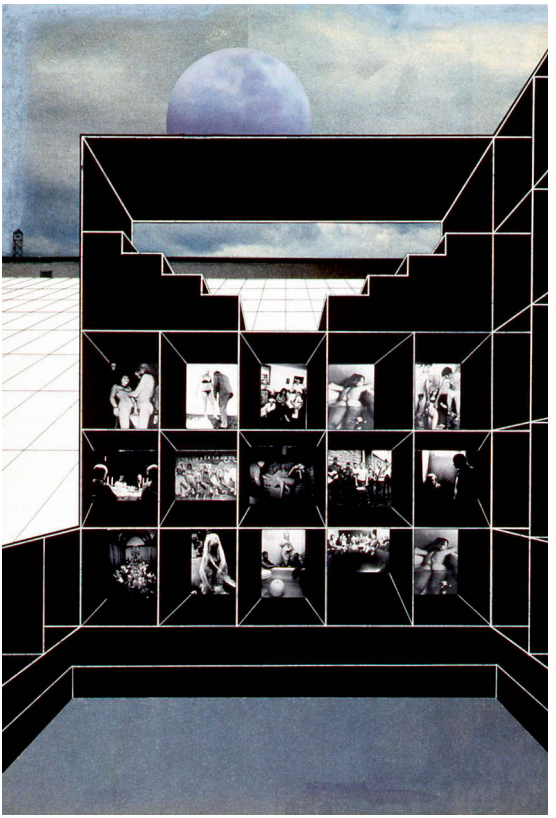

Image Courtesy of OMA

explicit social gesture is construed as a sign of architectural inadequacy. Dovey and Dickson suggest that the potentially most transformative moment of Koolhaas's work lies in the transformation of architecture from a more or less linear narrative to architecture as a 'field' implying freedom of choice in the use and appropriation of space.[51] The habitat is less definitive of the *habitus* within it, as will be discussed further in Chapter 3, which examines a number of houses by Ungers and Koolhaas. This freedom in shaping the habitus is a liability within a discourse focused on transformative qualities of

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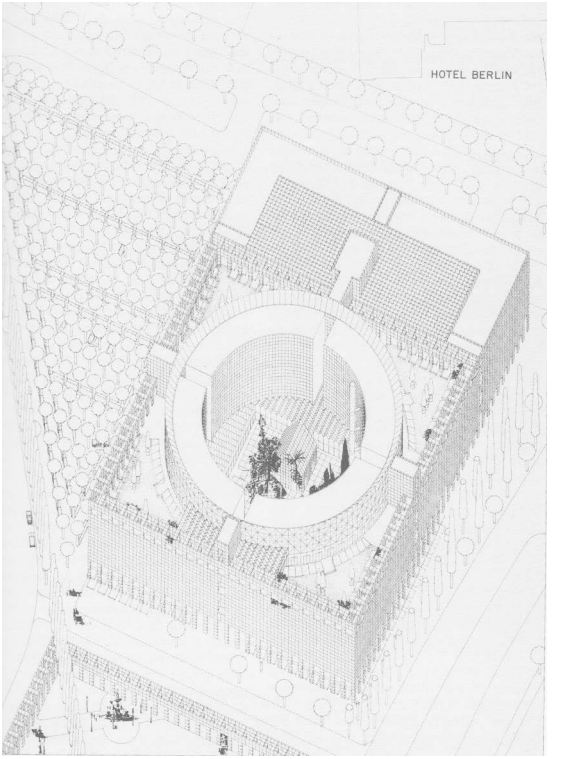
Fig. 1.4: O.M. Ungers, Hotel Berlin, Lützowplatz competition, 1977



Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft

architecture: because OMA is perceived as not shaping the habitus, there is a kneejerk perception of the firm as cynical and uncritical. This follows in part from the Dutch architecture discourse, from the dominance of Team 10 and Van Eyck, with very particular views on the responsibility of the architect.[52] This criticism deserves some rethinking, as it rests on the notion that there are singular directions in which architecture can engage the inhabitant, indeed that architecture can perform a vanguard social function.

In this notion of architecture as a 'field' with freedom of choice, the failure of architecture as social reform does not correspond directly to

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a lack of influence. The work of Koolhaas and Ungers is in some ways incommensurate with their time. They both seem acutely aware of the failure of architecture as a social agent, perhaps more so than their immediate contemporaries. In the case of Ungers, this involved a turn to historical conditions and timeless considerations, for example by introducing *Grossform* as a formal notion at the Team 10 meetings, or by taking into account the city developments, while in the case of Koolhaas it was perhaps more apparent in his interest in alternative topics and narratives, whether it was the Berlin Wall as architecture, or the spatial qualities of Rockefeller Center. At the same time, neither architect seems to suggest that architecture has no influence whatsoever.

The problem with the discourse is that it presents as a choice what is in reality a spectrum, or even a field of relations between 'purely' architectural concerns (composition, order, symmetry, material) and the sociocultural fabric they engage with. Moreover, the evident confusion between political action and the agency of architecture as a legacy of the 1960s has made it difficult to see the more subtle modulations of sociological concerns, which are transmitted through and transformed by cultural expressions.[53] The strong ties between political action and the formal articulation of architecture have clouded the view of the specificity of each project. The pronounced disillusionment of the late 1970s resulted in two high-profile responses: an interest in tradition and in autonomy. The turn to the traditional underestimates the influence of innovation, while the turn to autonomy does the same for long-term cultural impact. The continued search for a Utopian impetus shows more of a nostalgic desire for clean ways forward than a sensitivity to the complex field in which architecture navigates. The vastness of a globalized world, with an abstract 'system' that leaves its inhabitants at a loss, is nevertheless counterbalanced by small pockets of community. There is a conceptual space residing in the various scales of the environment where architecture can make a difference, or so some of the projects suggest.

Nevertheless, while architecture has a social impact, architecture's right to an autonomous language is a manner of resisting the external constraints of architecture being made into its theme and content. In his essay for the 1980 Venice Biennale, Ungers refers to ecological, sociological and technological functions that take over the proper functions of architecture.[54] This begs the question: What then is the proper content of architecture? In essence, it is this complicated reconstruction of architectural content that Koolhaas and Ungers bring to the table in the 1970s, as do the New York Five and the Texas Rangers

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with their explorations of grids, forms and compositions. What they share is a focus on identifying the most salient features of architectural design. Various hints are present throughout the writings and projects of Ungers, showing what he deems the appropriate internal content of architecture. It is elaborated through formal reiterations of ideal proportions, such as his beloved square, and it is an explicitly legible, clearly categorized series of alternatives. As such, architecture does not comprise a single perfect solution, but must go through multiple iterations to show the breadth of possibilities, as long as the overall sense of logical patterns and forms remains tangible. Architecture contains an appeal to the ideal and transcends the merely rational satisfaction of existing requirements. The Biennale essay shows the complexity with which Ungers addresses the question of the social content of architecture and the autonomy of the discipline.[55] Although he concedes that social factors influence architecture, the role he attributes to architecture can only be fulfilled if it transcends the everyday social content.[56] Koolhaas similarly attributes a transcendent role to architecture, but his is filled with the provocative speculations of the unconscious. It should be noted here that the richness of his conceptual approach at the time might have been easily overlooked, were it not for the drawings by Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis that accompanied some of the most important articles. *The City of the Captive Globe* (Zenghelis) and the *Flagrant Délit* (Vriesendorp), embody precisely this embrace of the surreal within everyday reality.

This is one of the great differences between Ungers and Koolhaas: while Koolhaas is fascinated by surrealism, Ungers seeks the logic of architecture within the rational. While Koolhaas easily allows for the unexpected wanderings of the surrealist mind, even the spiritual content of Ungers's architecture is constrained by rationality, anecdotally evident in his incessant use of graph paper for drawing on. Ungers's interpretation of social content is however not a one-to-one translation, but rather a sensibility that appeals to spiritual content – it is no guideline for ethical behaviour, or for architecture that will become more than simply the material form of temporary needs. Ungers notes:

> Over and above the laws of construction, the consideration of human necessities and the effective usefulness is the imperative requirement of formal shape, and this is where the architect's spiritual responsibility resides. The total failure of modern architecture in transmitting the cultural models of

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our times into formal symbols is proof of the lack of spiritual values and contents.[57]

Fig. 1.5: M. Vriesendorp, Flagrant Délit, 1975

courtesy of M. Vriesendorp

As early as 1960, Ungers together with Reinhard Gieselmann presents the idea that form must somehow express a spiritual content.[58] However, the difficulty in this position at the time is due to the apparent arbitrariness of formal and symbolic languages. Recuperating these languages is the project postmodernity set itself, which has not yet been completed: as will be argued in Chapter 4, architecture is currently still aiming at the possibility to discuss form while also acknowledging variations in perception and underlying conceptual frameworks. How do we talk about a shared meaning in form when cultural foundations are so diverse and individuated? One solution is to unravel the logic and history of form in architecture, as Ungers does in his teaching and writing.[59] Another is to embrace the irrational underbelly, as Koolhaas begins to do in *Delirious New York*.

Ungers sees form as one of architecture's central features: 'The communication of ideas and experiences by way of the language of form is one of

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architecture's basic premises.'[60] In this quest for the meaning of form, Ungers is not alone. His position echoes a number of German scholars from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most particularly Sörgel, but it also shares a sensibility to be found in the work of, for example, Joseph Rykwert, who suggests that there are timeless foundations for architectural form. His book *On Adam's House in Paradise* presents the two archetypes of the tent and the cave as the first architectural gestures in history.[61] Against those who find architecture lacking in artistic qualities because it is dependent on external constraints, Ungers argues that it has its own logic that includes these constraints, which sometimes even engender new formal qualities. Referring to its 'true social mission' and its 'humanist responsibility', Ungers puts forward the need for spiritual and cultural content in architectural form. For Ungers, this is a logical conclusion based on his study of architecture history, which is:

> . . . full of examples of social and religious institutions being established in existing spaces . . . of functions other than those originally planned . . . adapting to the predetermined form. The validity of a spatial sequence therefore does not depend solely on its function. The type of building obviously takes precedence over the function. Functions adapt to the building type.[62]

This position shares its premises with Koolhaas's approach to Manhattan in *Delirious New York*. Examining the buildings of Manhattan from the perspective of an architectural novelist constructing a retroactive narrative, Koolhaas tries to isolate significant architectural features that subconsciously stand witness to a cultural logic. One feature that returns throughout the later projects of OMA both as argument and as architectural gesture, is what he identifies as the 'lobotomy' between the façade and the life within, noting that the scale of the modern city has destroyed the possibility of modernist honesty between floor plan and façade: 'Less and less surface has to represent more and more interior activity.'[63] In his appraisal of Rockefeller Center, he then presents 'the Great Lobotomy's indispensable complement: the Vertical Schism, which creates the freedom to stack such disparate activities directly on top of each other without any concern for their symbolic compatibility'.[64] To Koolhaas, this reveals how functional or economic requirements may result in the transformation of formal articulation. This interpretation seems to be presaged by Ungers in his focus on the complex junction of structure and façade in modern architecture, which Kieren identifies as the 'real architectural debate' since the nineteenth century: '[T]he relation between

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the construction technique and the form of the facade and the building as a whole.'[65] If indeed, as Kieren suggests, Semper already identified the basic problem in this relation, then we might conclude that Koolhaas has been reworking this nineteenth-century debate since his identification of the Vertical Schism. Similarly, the 'honesty' put forward by the moderns leads Ungers to turn towards form as a 'whole', and to historical concepts that demonstrate the interconnectedness of architectural form and the construction that enables it.

Delirious New York makes use of the difference in modes of practice and thinking on either side of the Atlantic. Koolhaas perceives a freedom in the creation of Manhattan that he believes would be impossible on the mainland of Europe, yet he also positions himself as the best (or only?) candidate to write the retroactive manifesto that is *Delirious New York*. The apolitical pragmatism of a city produced by capitalist principles expresses itself as a delirium, a plot where the traditional categories of aesthetic value are discarded, but new and exciting modes of building prevail. Koolhaas himself attributes his receptiveness to new perceptions to his own global upbringing (from an early youth in Asia to the years in Europe and North America).[66] As such, he has positioned himself as rethinking his own preconceptions in confrontation with alternate visions. His approach here suggests a *contingent* autonomy of the object – it is a thing unto itself, material and tangible, and therefore open to interpretation from various perspectives, and it also embodies a cultural context, with all of its implied habits and values.

Shaping a Future Beyond Utopia

The significant contribution by these two architects in the early 1970s rests, however, not on their ascertaining of the flaws of socially engaged architecture, but rather on their construction of an autonomy of architecture that does not fully retreat from social concern. In this, Koolhaas, Ungers, and a handful of other architects make the tension between the social and the formal particularly obvious. There is a striking parallel between Denise Scott Brown's complaint that her work on Las Vegas with Robert Venturi was seen as socially irresponsible by virtue of the populist qualities of their topic and their approach of formal analysis, and Koolhaas's comment that the work of OMA is seen as cynical and a-critical. The choice of study objects by Venturi and Scott Brown indeed parallel the choices of Koolhaas, in their 'inappropriateness' to

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the dominant discourse.[67] Koolhaas's study of the Berlin Wall falls into this category, as does his interest in large gestures such as those of Superstudio, which are present in the Exodus project. Similarly, the interest of Ungers in the work of Sörgel and in Gestalt theory runs counter to the programmatic, political and social interests of his colleagues in Team 10.

In an interview, Koolhaas notes an undertone of political issues in the work of Ungers, that nevertheless remains only that: 'And in fact, you reiterate in every work, that there are solutions to these issues on a formal and morphological level, but not on a social one.'[68] In reply, Ungers confirms a position towards that of the autonomy of art and architecture: 'I believe that the social problems of architecture cannot be resolved. We do not have the means to do so. Our tools can only solve architectural problems. In the same manner, art cannot resolve societal issues.' Ungers refuses a social agency for architecture, insofar as it is seen as salvation. Nevertheless, he does see architecture as something that has an effect. In most of his writings, he discusses this as a cultural effect, something that cannot be predetermined but can at most offer an acceptable platform for unexpected life within.

Koolhaas resists this, questioning whether there is not some moral position embedded in the architecture itself. Although Ungers concurs that he has a personal moral principle, he describes it as separate from the architectural. This is to Koolhaas's dismay, in the sense that his hopes for the architectural manifesto seem to remain even today. Alongside his own appeal for an increased realism, remains a hope that his work has an indelible impact on human life, even if only in potential. Ungers seems less ambitious for the particular impact of his own work, yet all the more emphatic about the importance of architecture as part of a general cultural sensibility. This may refuse a moral or social position, but by no means diminishes the importance of each project in the grand historical trajectory of architecture as cultural expression.

In *City Metaphors*, Ungers also suggests that architecture may intimate specific actions, or set certain goals: 'Not the least the model is an intellectual structure setting targets for our creative activities, just like the design of model-buildings, model-cities, model-communities, and other model conditions supposedly are setting directions for subsequent actions.'[69] In other words, the artifact itself embodies an appeal (which may be ignored) more than a command. This echoes the plausibility thesis of the social and the formal: the response to a design is not predetermined, but it may be open to suggestions. Hinting at the expanding agency of things as is currently

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present in contemporary discourses of architecture, art and the humanities, which all show a heightened awareness of non-human agency, the suggestion here is that carefully designed spaces with high-quality materials may suggest more care in interaction, appealing to a sense of gentleness, but they cannot prevent destruction.[70] Designs with evident traces of recycling may appeal to a consciousness of environmental sensitivity or sobriety, but they cannot enforce a culture of recycling. In this sense, our models, our buildings, our ideas set targets, but they do not demand compliance. Moreover, the more complicated culturally embedded symbolism may fade over time, leaving primarily the most obvious aesthetic dimensions of proportion, scale and symmetry to be read in accordance with (or in opposition to) altered connotations. It is here that the 'spiritual content' that Ungers recognizes in architecture ensures the continued relevance of building, transcending the merely functional.

As such, the autonomy that Ungers considers central to design – that architecture *is* – does not imply that architecture *does* nothing. It is by virtue of its intricate and multifaceted being that it does something. Ungers simply acknowledges that this cannot be predicted with accuracy, as the conditions around it shift as well. While in the 1960s these changing conditions led to incorporating flexibility and indeterminacy in the design, Ungers counters this approach, arguing that this leads to meaningless form, which in turn destroys the potential for any significant relation with architecture. In particular, Ungers notes that:

> Function is – in terms of the language of architecture – of secondary importance; it is merely a means to an end and not the end itself. Architecture is highly formulated; it does not have a specified function, which does not mean that it is use-less, but rather that it manifests its true dimension free of external constraints.[71]

Construing a new significance in this age does, however, pose a distinct problem for architecture. While the hope to contribute to a society more amenable to its inhabitants grew, the available vocabulary to do so diminished throughout the 1970s. The increasing complexity and individualization of contemporary society had eaten away at the shared sociocultural symbols that founded earlier art and architecture. These symbols were increasingly replaced with expressions of global culture and a desire to define items structurally rather than through the myriad collections of artifacts that together comprised a coherent set – albeit unwittingly – of longstanding

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cultural production. Altogether, these objects form a fabric that engages with social reality, but they are not sociopolitical phenomena in themselves. More than anything, the architecture debate of the 1970s is in negotiation with its own limitations. The ideas resonating in a project may be transformed or even become obsolete in the face of changing realities. This is one of the reasons that Ungers turns to building types as a fundamental concern of architecture. He holds that type can offer a significance beyond social change, or beyond change in function. These are ideas he explores in his Berlin studios, published in the *Veröffentlichungen zur Architektur*, with topics structured around spatial types and architectural elements, such as squares and streets, motorways and buildings, or firewalls.[72] Architecture is a slow process, particularly in the context of public spaces, which require extensive decision-making processes.[73] While Ungers disavows the social responsibility of architecture beyond the creation of an environment that appeals to a sense of 'good form', Koolhaas periodically reiterates his own interest in 'reshaping society' through architecture: 'Without ever having been communist or knowingly Marxist . . . one influence that certainly led me to architecture was a confrontation with Soviet Constructivism, and with that moment where you could really speculate about how society could be reshaped, architecturally.'[74] Although his ironic and self-critical position precludes his making the same kind of radical statements as his modernist forebears, he is nevertheless enticed by the notion that his building will continue to shape the relations within.

In *Delirious New York*, the section on the Downtown Athletic Club is steeped in Koolhaas's interest in Soviet Constructivism, in the potential to transform life through architectural space, together with a kind of wonder that it exists already in New York, in a most naive, non-Utopian form. Koolhaas repositions the pragmatism of the Downtown Athletic Club as

> . . . the complete conquest – floor by floor – of the Skyscraper by social activity; with the Downtown Athletic Club the American way of life, know-how and initiative definitively overtakes the theoretical lifestyle modifications that the various 20th-century European avant-gardes have been proposing, without ever managing to impose them. In the Downtown Athletic Club the Skyscraper is used as a Constructivist Social Condensor: a machine to generate and intensify desirable forms of human intercourse.[75]

Here, the fascination for the possibility to intervene in and transform the habitus of individuals, in the end transforming society at large, collides with

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a reality that already seems to have transformed these individuals without a predetermined goal.

While Koolhaas has been accused of negating or denying social responsibility, and Ungers has been seen as too rational or heavy-handed, they both seek to recalibrate the role of architecture, and in so doing, realign the public perception of the architect to the value they feel architecture holds. This is connected to the notion of a 'plausible' architecture that is able to express the social in form yet maintains the understanding that it is neither universal nor definitive. Both architects certainly share a strong sense of the discipline – but where Koolhaas tempers his faith in the omnipotence of architecture by at least verbally acknowledging its impotence, Ungers seems to posit social impotence yet offer much stronger cultural significance. For both, there is a belief that architecture has something to contribute to society at large – but while Koolhaas remains fascinated by the hope for full-scale transformation as a potential, if not realistic, ambition, Ungers seems to act within a smaller circle of influence while expanding it to the longer-term cultural horizon. Their respective articulations of a future beyond Utopia both seek a lasting influence, but Koolhaas does so through radical gestures, while Ungers seems to seek timeless forms.

If form is no longer a 'vessel for meaning' – or perhaps the proliferation of various forms has disrupted the well-understood rhetoric of formal communication – then what might the role of form be? Should we re-examine the role of symbolic form in weaving a sense of community, as Alan Colquhoun suggests?[76] This would imply that material form impacts the idea equally to the other way around. As such, addressing architecture as an applied art (which includes, as Ungers notes in reference to Kant, the idea that it is 'impure' or contaminated), would open the door to considering both its internalized, disciplinary language of form and its cultural expression as dependent on external constraints and coincidence.[77]

Given that the projects of architecture as such – whether articulated in drawings, models, or buildings – have both a form and an implicit content (of cultural meaning, aesthetic values, societal preconceptions), the desire to reinvent a plausible relation between the formal and the social is notable for a number of reasons. First, this is not a full-blown dismissal of social concern in favour of 'pure' form. It presupposes the possibility of a relation between a thing and its reception. Second, it implies the recognition of an object as multivalent, as something that can be imbued with different interpretations or modes of significance, depending on context. This implies that the field

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of possible interpretations is also open to transformation, as the object outlasts its original context or intention. Third, it does propose that artificial interpretations may be introduced – hence the potential for reinventing a relationship. Finally, it offers two crucial operations: it intimates the need for specificity (as abstractions remain primarily in the realm of ideas), and it *de facto* engages with history in reclaiming some form of connection between form and content.

This does not make the problem any easier to unravel today. In the 1990s, the notion of 'shaping' arose as a manner to restate the value of architectural expression, without the heavily laden discourse of 'form', which was seen as too deeply entrenched in modernist rhetoric.[78] 'Shaping' appealed to a more value-free, postmodern understanding that allowed for multiple interpretations of an architectural form, which in turn suggested an identifiable building (a 'logo') that still offered a liberating neutrality.[79] This perspective honours Colquhoun's idea of 'figure' as appealing to the social content of form or symbols, but severs them from their determination by (longstanding) convention.[80] The problematic here is that the resulting indiscriminate use in the heyday of postmodernism precludes them from becoming embedded in the social fabric.

What this also suggests is a renewed relationship between form and agency, which is simultaneously altered from correlation to plausibility. Although it is necessary to maintain some type of relationship between the material object that both resides in existing culture and indeed also constructs and alters it, the facility with which one can identify correlative concepts is waning. The backdrops have perhaps become too fragmented, the foreground perhaps too defined by fickle individuality. One approach is to remain tied to the material articulations of reality, taking even the accidental ones at face value. This is one part of Koolhaas's attraction to Salvador Dalí's Paranoid Critical Method.[81] While the consistent questioning that marks the state of paranoia shows a sceptical approach to the perceived inevitabilities of reality, the aim of creating previously unimagined forms contains an equal appeal to a heightened sense of individuality. In so doing, the interests of Koolhaas often circumvent the more obvious elements of social engineering in the work of Le Corbusier, for example. There is a fascination for the underbelly of modernity, and for the sensibility of materials that keeps the architecture tied to a bodily experience rather than the intellectual abstractions more prominent in the writings of Le Corbusier.

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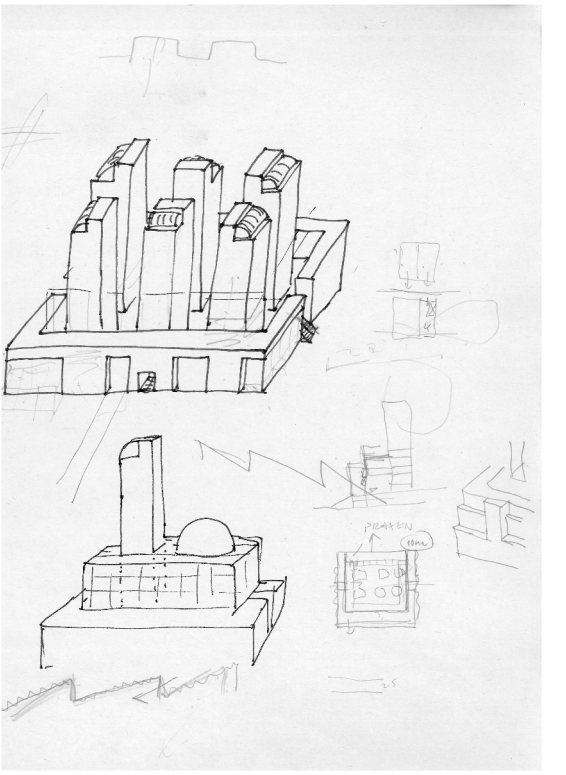
Fig. 1.6: Ideas competition Landwehrkanal-Tiergartenviertel, 1973, sketch by Ungers



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Koolhaas's quality is perhaps also his ability to shift between various perspectives and to include the unexpected, low-culture domains, as well as to compel the client to take a clear position. As such, he already makes use of the logic of 'no-brow', where each cultural artifact is taken for its features as such, and not for its standing in either high or low culture.[82] Ungers's strength is his didactic clarity combined with his demanding ideas; he has no patience for the inadequate while he does appear to have a forgiving sense of what cannot be changed. By placing incommensurate images and references alongside a reality that will inevitably follow a course of its own, this work

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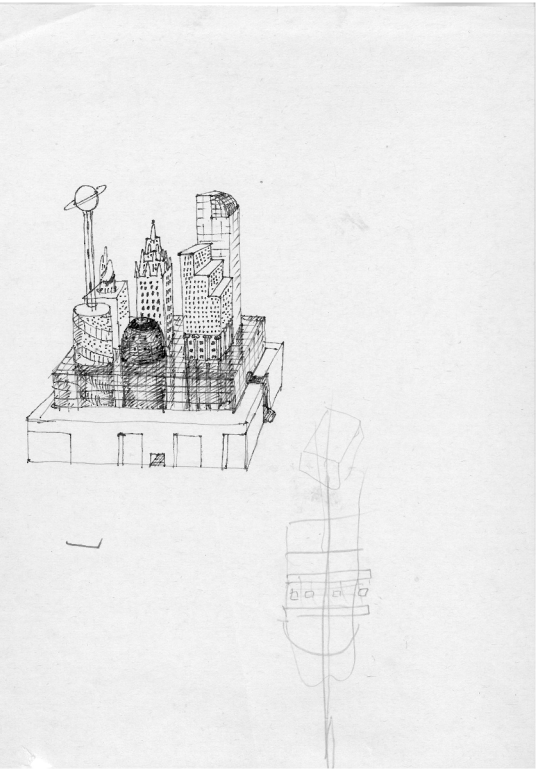
Fig. 1.7: Ideas competition Landwehrkanal-Tiergartenviertel, 1973, sketch by Koolhaas



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tones down the overstated power of architecture to enter into all spheres of life and transform it in its entirety. It retains the evocative power of architecture through a variety of idealized images, yet also calls attention to the fault lines between this ideal and its reality.

Thus the mythologies around architecture are realigned: Ungers carefully explicates them, appealing to the domain of spiritual content, but approaching it in a rationalized manner. He picks apart the elements of architecture in order to excavate the potential for creating a significant space in the city. Koolhaas, on the other hand, uses these mythologies to his advantage,

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oscillating between the relatively dry, factual description of conditions, such as the Generic City or the studies of Lagos, and the provocative speculations on the underlying narratives of form, as in *Delirious New York*, or Bigness. Then perhaps this is what drives the need for a plausible relationship between the social and the formal. The journal *Radical Philosophy* returns to this question in the early years of the twenty-first century, questioning what this relationship might be.[83] A striking reference Koolhaas names here for his work on *Delirious New York* is Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*.[84] The approach taken by Barthes incorporates the meticulous description of situations or objects as well as sociocultural associations and a plausible fiction written on the cultural significance of the objects he describes. This illuminates the synthesis in *Delirious New York* of the quite factual, journalistic descriptions Koolhaas had developed during his time at the *Haagse Post*, and the surreal stories he weaves throughout, which are illustrated by the sensual art of his wife, Madelon Vriesendorp. Here, the social content of the work is present, less as an activist agenda than as offering an imaginary life of objects that reflects the dream images of our culture. In a sense, *Mythologies* clarifies the imaginary life of objects presented in *Delirious New York*. It constructs a new relationship between things and ideas by incorporating Barthes' strategy of context-dependent speech. In other words, these images may carry messages, but the context influences, and is indeed necessary for, the interpretation. This approach maintains a certain fluidity that is absent from the more semiotic constructions underpinning the work of, for example, Peter Eisenman.

The plausible relationship between the social and the formal should then perhaps be seen more as analogous to the *Mythologies* of Barthes, in which the language of cultural expression and social conditions sometimes simply states its meaning, and at other times runs parallel to intention and significance, constructing its own fictions alongside the facts of its existence. Barthes' readings of the signs and symbols of everyday popular culture (Marilyn Monroe), of unexpected sports (wrestling), his understanding of cultural symbols, his excavation of the significance of each piece, of the various elements, all contribute to a 'plausible relation between the formal and the social'. Barthes performs a reading of our culture that not only describes its simple facts, but incorporates the likely dreams and fears attached to them. Koolhaas's statement that he might not have written *Delirious New York* without having read Barthes is perhaps exaggerated (Koolhaas's appetite for interesting thoughts, stories, ideas and objects would no doubt have found other touchstones), but the influence of *Mythologies* is nevertheless

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strong. The similarities between the hidden life of Manhattan skyscrapers and Barthes's *Mythologies* are striking. Whether he is writing about the spectacle of a wrestling match, in which an eternal storyline of Justice is carried out, or about the cultural and psychological implications of laundry detergents, Barthes uncovers the secret life of everyday objects that makes us consider these things in a new manner. Similarly, Koolhaas describes the underlying logic and backgrounds of New York architecture, mining not only the traditional literature of architecture, but also their portrayals on postcards, in literature on urban development and in his own imagination of the stories that construed their histories. Likewise, Barthes focuses on a variety of artifacts in contemporary existence, opening his essay 'Myth Today' with the statement that myth means speech while adding a footnote to explain that many other meanings of myth can be cited against this, but that he has 'tried to define things, not words'.[85]

Is architecture to be held responsible for the activities within? Koolhaas argues that this cannot be true, given that evil takes place in so many different kinds of surroundings.[86] Yet if a system, an environment, can influence pre-existing tendencies, then why should architecture – the total environment – be absolved from any influence whatsoever? The wish for care, for civility, for restraint, for thoughtfulness – what Lampugnani suggests as a 'tolerant normality' present in the built environment – seems to hold out hope simply by virtue of analogy.[87] While it is immediately obvious that beauty and the good are not by necessity correlated, there has been a renewed interest in the appeal that a well-designed object makes to its user or observer. This also suggests the inverse, that a poverty of the built environment provokes a disregard for environment, and as such a disregard for civility.

Yet it is not in the initial intention, but rather in the resulting stories, objects, drawings and buildings that the potential for new insights lies. Kieren sees the tension between idea and reality – the Utopian dimension of Ungers – as central:

> And now, in the 1990s, we see Ungers move down the path towards 'pure form' – towards the provisional completion of an idea which is so autonomous, so absolute, that it is bound to fail when set against reality. This element of utopia is what is so deceiving, yet simultaneously pleasing, about Ungers' work, for ideas are always subversive – once they have been voiced, they can never be silenced: long after their first appearance, they retain the power to enrich the world, to cause unrest.[88]

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This takes note of the material, tangible impact of implicit ideas. Whether they are read in their original intent or not, they may still cause 'unrest'. I would rather suggest that the 'pragmatic' visions of Koolhaas and Ungers function as smaller idealizations – the storytelling and imaginative speculations of Koolhaas, and the didactic expositions and clarifications in Ungers – pushing us to rethink the relation between architecture and the urban. In the urban domain, reality perhaps takes the lead. The city is defined explicitly by its social field, it is a conglomerate of all the complexities that make up the practice of architecture, from regulations and infrastructure to individual spaces and monumental buildings. The ideal cities of the past notwithstanding, the heterogeneous field of the contemporary city is defined more by its multiplicities than by a coherent image or a clear social identity. In contrast, the architecture of the house at times allows the idea to be expressed with more purity and precision by virtue of its limited scale and programme, and the single client involved. These issues take particular shape in two distinct domains of work in both firms – the metropolitan projects, engaging with urban conditions and the social field they are interlaced with, and the more self-contained architecture of the house, in which the limitations of scale allow the full breadth of a concept to be developed unfettered by the inevitable compromise of complex programmes and infrastructures. Finally, in considering the underlying aims of Koolhaas's and Ungers's work, these two types of projects – the urban or metropolitan, and the individual house – might be complemented by examining their writings and their teachings. While the city projects demonstrate their ability to navigate complexity, and the houses provide the strongest material articulation of their ideas, it is in their teaching and writing that a recalibration of the role of the architect and a conviction on the relevance of architectural expertise is to be found.

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