

Grünzug Süd: An Urban Design Manifesto

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1966 saw the publication of some vastly influential books, but also projects that exemplified how “research by design” can develop a new understanding of architecture and the city. The concept for the urban planning competition of Grünzug Süd in Cologne, Germany, by Oswald Mathias Ungers (1926–2007) presents such a canonical project. It is among the great achievements of that *annus mirabilis*.

Grünzug Süd is of particular importance to Ungers’s early body of work: it was a breakthrough in his understanding of urban design. Ungers began work on the project in 1962 as a young architect, at a time he was mainly preoccupied with housing projects. It took him, however, until 1966 to fully develop Grünzug Süd into a new urban design approach. By then a mature and recognized architect, he had just turned forty and become a professor at the Technische Universität Berlin (in 1963). The latter undoubtedly forced him to clarify his ideas, as he now had to explain what he did and find ways to teach what he knew. Indeed, Grünzug Süd – a project never built – remains one of Ungers’s most didactic designs. Yet, surprisingly little is known about this project beyond a widely published axonometric of his masterplan, a diagram, based on a top view of the model, classifying each sector according to its urban block typologies and architectural elements (combined here in fig.1), and a collage juxtaposing these to photographs of urban fragments around the site, implying their contextual integration (fig. 2).¹ We will in the following discuss how Grünzug Süd evolved and became seminal to Ungers’s urban thinking.²

The history of the project began in late 1962, when the city of Cologne announced an ideas competition to develop the concept of “living in the green” for a planned federal garden exhibition (*Bundesgartenschau*) in 1971.³ Entries were due on 1 April 1963 and the first prize

¹ Ungers’s manifesto-like “Erläuterungen zum Projekt Grünzug-Süd in Köln” were first published in *Neue Landschaft*, 11.4 (April 1966), 192, in: Oswald Mathias Ungers: “Gesichtspunkte der Planung beim Wohnungsbau”, *ibid*, 189–194. Ungers included a facsimile of the text from *Neue Landschaft* in a documentation of the “Team X Treffen in Berlin”, self-published by his chair at the TU Berlin as *Veröffentlichungen zur Architektur*, no. 3 (June 1966). This publication also included the masterplan classifying the different sectors. In May, *Casabella* published a selection of the images of the site juxtaposed with Unger’s interventions in: Luigi Biscogli “Germania di oggi: O.M. Ungers”, in *Casabella*, no. 305 (May 1966), 36–59. The most comprehensive set of these juxtapositions was published in: *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, 71.7 (July 1966), 580–1, as part of “Oswald Mathias Ungers – ein Beitrag zur Architektur”, 579–585 (579–582).

² We examined Grünzug Süd during an AA Visiting School at the Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft in Cologne in the summer of 2015. The Visiting School was directed by Jasper Cepl and Sam Jacoby, Valerio Massaro and Mee Hyun Lee were participants assigned to the study of the project.

³ See Joachim Bauer, “Grünzug Süd”, in Werner Adams and Joachim Bauer, eds., *Vom Botanischen Garten zum Großstadtgrün: 200 Jahre Kölner Grün* (Cologne: J. P. Bachem, 2001), 247–50.

was awarded to a group of students. Ungers came only second. His competition entry prepared with Karl Lothar Dietzsch, was essentially a variation of the proposal for a housing competition for the “Neue Stadt”, a new town in the north of Cologne, which Ungers had won in spring 1962, and the design for Märkisches Viertel in Berlin, another housing project from late 1962. The three projects developed a similar abstract typological design solution that could be repeated at different scales while serving imagined communal activities. It derived from a compositional, formal problem of clustering freestanding “private” volumes to create a partially enclosed shared “public” space. At the scale of the unit, this central space was a living room surrounded by bedrooms and service spaces, and at the larger block and urban scales a courtyard or urban square delimited by housing towers. As Ungers wrote in 1963, anticipating Aldo Rossi’s seminal book of 1966: “Architecture and the directly related discipline of city building contain their own formal laws, which are grounded in the essence of form. This essence is independent of all functional determination and exists on the strength of its own compositional force as a permanent principle in all epochs and cultures.”⁴ Accordingly, Ungers concluded that the city had to be considered as “a work of art”.

This formal approach to urban design clearly owed to an experience of architecture at a small scale. Ungers’s own house in Cologne (1958–9) had been an early experiment to instil spatial order by giving coherence to its surroundings, altering their perception without physically changing them. In a manifesto written with Reinhard Gieselmann in 1960, Ungers had further called for an “exaltation of place” (*Überhöhung des Ortes*), claiming that: “Architecture is a vital penetration of a multi-layered, mysterious, evolved and moulded reality. Its creative mission: the manifestation of the building task, integration into the existing, introduction of focal points and an exaltation of place. Again and again it demands recognition of the genius loci out of which it grows.”⁵ The approach of transforming and enforcing the fragmented ideas found in reality as outlined here, finally culminated in the project for Grünzug Süd, making him reconsider his idea of urban design.

⁴ O. M. Ungers, “The City as a Work of Art” (1963), in J. Ockman, ed., *Architecture Culture, 1943–1968: A Documentary Anthology* (New York: Columbia Books of Architecture/Rizzoli, 1993), 361–4.

⁵ Reinhard Gieselmann and Oswald Mathias Ungers, “Towards a New Architecture (1960)”, in Ulrich Conrads, ed., *Programmes and Manifestoes on 20th Century Architecture* (London: Lund Humphries, 1970), 165–6. Translation revised by the authors.

As Neue Stadt and Märkisches Viertel had been urban extensions with unremarkable urban context, they permitted the proposals to generate their own ideal structure and community. While Ungers had initially followed the same approach for Grünzug Süd, reworking his design he realized that he had to meaningfully engage with the existing urban fabric and communities around the site, finally arriving at the refined urban concepts the project is known for today.⁶ For the first time, Ungers began to fully study the problems and potentials of an urban scale.

With a site stretching over two kilometres, Grünzug Süd was a strategic radial connection between the inner and outer greenbelts of Cologne (fig. 4). The project had to deal with a planned new highway and the regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods surrounding the park. Unlike the competition proposal, the subsequent redesigns experimented with ideas of urban form and urban block. Merely experiencing the place would no longer suffice and a more strategic urban approach was needed. One capable of providing differentiated design solutions to the vast urban plan.

The project gained new momentum with Franz Oswald, a graduate of the ETH Zurich who had started to work for Ungers in 1963. Awarded a fellowship of his *alma mater*, he left the office to spend some time in Rome in 1964. On his return to Ungers, he brought back with him new inspiration.⁷ Oswald started to comprehensively redesign the proposal for Grünzug Süd. The dates on drawings in the Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft, some of which are over 2 metres long, confirm that a series of radically different design options were considered in the period spanning from November 1964 to January 1965. Initialled F. O. for Franz Oswald, these studies discard the previous unitary tower clusters, instead featuring a series of differentiated urban blocks that clarify the threshold between city and park. They establish a legible relationship with adjacent urban fabric, in a clear attempt to give new meaning and order to existing fragmented areas. Common to these studies is the urban block – the urban and not the architectural scale – as the central focus of design and predominant means to connect the proposal to its various contexts and edges. Comparable to preliminary design studies for student housing at the University of Technology Twente in Enschede (1964) or the analysis of the museum genre in the so-called Berlin Lectures (1964–65) by

⁶ We have not been able to clarify why Ungers continued to work on his proposal. He possibly expected to be given at least a share of the building commissions that were to follow once the urban design had been decided.

⁷ Franz Oswald in a conversation with Jasper Cepl on 28.8.2015.

Ungers, the architectural elements in Grünzug Süd are abstracted, classified, analyzed and transformed into spatial typologies that form a full morphological range of urban blocks. Thus, this attempt to synthesize architectural and urban elements is also an attempt to define all complementary configurations contained in an imagined encyclopaedia of forms. But, importantly, unlike the Enschede housing project, these typologies and morphologies are specific responses to concrete “as found” realities. Ungers juxtaposed photographs of the site and of his proposal model to demonstrate his new approach: to show how existing situations are reinterpreted to create new urban spaces (fig. 2).

In the most detailed designs, dating from 1964 to 1966, a rich mix of housing and plan typologies emerge: slab blocks, courtyard houses, row houses and high-rises. There is also a systematic classification of formal urban blocks, building-streets and wall typologies. In addition, the relationship to the ground and park fundamentally changes.⁸ Whereas many of Ungers’s earlier projects made use of a unitary design and represented an idealized morphological transformation, the actual site conditions forced Ungers to rethink his strategy. The latent idea of sectors with different spatial, social and economic properties in Grünzug Süd became finally fully realized through contextually reasoned typological and morphological responses. The five distinct sectors found in the final published design, deploy a series of approaches that define a diverse range of urban design strategies: mending fragments by completing large found urban elements, the individual building as the basic unit of an urban wall, street and block, the public forum, the chain of high-rises, the gate as a landmark formed by twin towers, or the idea of DIY architecture in live-work row housing that allows for self-building and experimentation. To make this possible, a new analysis capable of systematically identifying and classifying the “thematic” characteristics of urban areas and their boundaries was required, the establishing of design criteria capable of creating a new order and areas to which this could be applied to. In other words, this required a “research by design” that could methodically develop rational design. In April 1966, Ungers would provide a rationale of the general insight he had won designing the project:

Spatial, structural and motific particulars, themes, as found on site are adopted and made legible by the new development.

⁸ It is unclear if this is due to demands by the municipality or a collaboration with landscape architects. Compare Bauer, 247–50.

This contextually derived and determined development attempts to make the heterogeneous existing fabric part of a new, larger order and provides the urban district with its own, to some extent already existing, physiognomy.

Following this generalizable approach, a study and redesign of all existing districts in the urban area of Cologne would become necessary. The aim of the redesign should be recognizing, elaborating and thematically developing the particular social, economic, spatial, structural and functional features that have emerged by chance in individual districts. In this way, each individual district could obtain its adequate expression.

The realization of such a concept demands not only a subtle attention to architectonic elements, but also to contexts, structures and incidents. The Grünzug Süd is an example of an interpretation of one specific site. Other contexts require different solutions. These are, however, solutions that always have regard for the “genius loci”.⁹

Unfortunately, Ungers’s ambitious vision of reordering Cologne remained unfulfilled. In 1966, the city of Cologne abandoned its plans to hold the *Bundesgartenschau* in Grünzug Süd and decided, due to a lack of funding and time, to reuse a site previously developed for this purpose in 1957 along the Rhine. After 1966, Ungers still hoped for a commission for the “centre” of the proposal, but made no more substantial changes to its design. Later metaphorically referred to as the “citadel”, the centre resembled a city in the city and summarized the whole Grünzug Süd project. It represented all the key urban design concepts he had developed based on ideas of typological and morphological transformation and complementarity, and synthesized his four elements of architecture: the plateau, the tower, the wall and the street (fig. 5). He would further develop these themes, anticipated in the preliminary Enschede housing studies, in his competition entry for the 4. Ring in Berlin-Lichterfelde (1975).

If we add to Grünzug Süd a sense of the unfinished and an indulgence in spectacle, we arrive at the concept of Berlin as a “green archipelago”, the joint masterpiece by Ungers and Rem Koolhaas dreamt up in 1977 in a very different context of urban transformation. Perhaps besides Koolhaasian over-the-top narrative additions, this “city in the city” speculation offers little more than what is already present in Grünzug Süd. However, while the project for Berlin

⁹ O. M. Ungers, “Erläuterungen zum Projekt Grünzug-Süd in Köln”, in *Neue Landschaft*, 11.4 (April 1966), 192. Trans. by authors.

remains an unrealizable utopia, the project for Cologne presents a feasible urban strategy. It demonstrates how urban design ideas are found in reality and how to make their reality “visible”. Rather than subordinating reality to idealization, it idealized reality. Grünzug Süd is a plea to recognize and uphold a plurality of urban forms. Not to optimize them functionally, but to enhance their morphological, social and cultural productivity, thus, to broaden our urban experiences, not least in the hope of turning the city into a recognizable work of art. Grünzug Süd is a manifesto for urban design.

Image captions

fig.1: Oswald Mathias Ungers, Grünzug Süd, Cologne, axonometric of the final project, 1966. Redrawn by the authors, with a translation of Ungers’s explanation of its five sectors (originally added to a top view of a masterplan model).

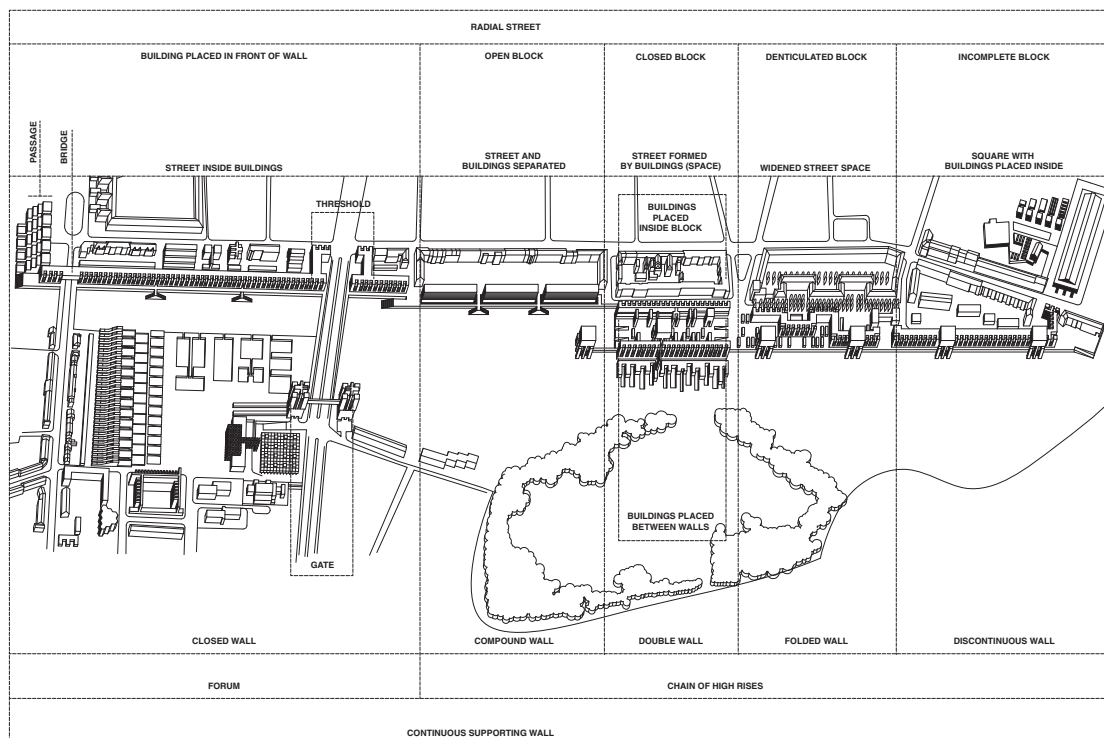


fig. 2: Collage of urban fragments around the site, juxtaposed with Ungers's interventions. Translated and reassembled by the authors based on a double-page spread in *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, 1966.



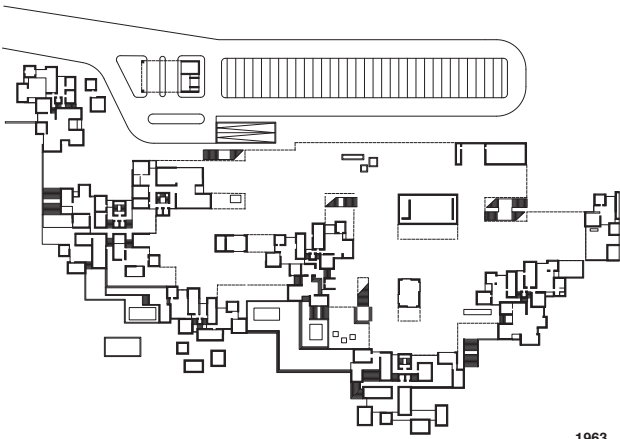
fig. 3: Unpublished view of the model for Grünzug Süd (mainly built by Rob Krier). Courtesy Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft.



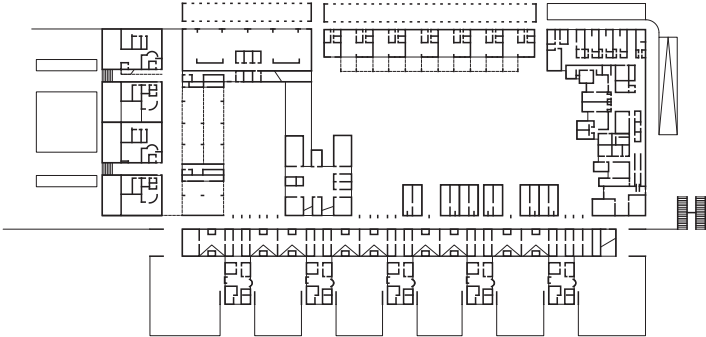
fig. 4: The site of “Grünzug Süd” within the city of Cologne. Diagram drawn by the authors based on Gerhard Curdes and Markus Ulrich, *Die Entwicklung des Kölner Stadtraumes*, Dortmund: Dortmunder Vertrieb für Bau- und Planungsliteratur, 1997. Grünzug Süd is a strategic connection between the inner and outer park rings of Cologne.



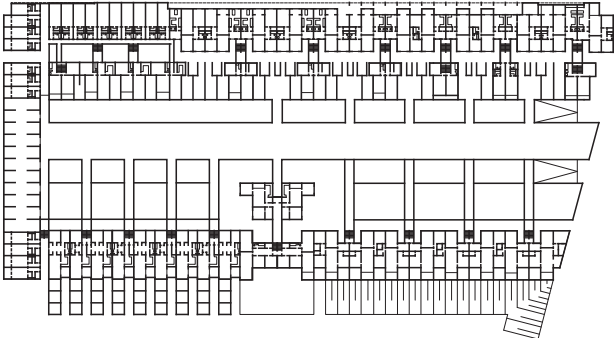
fig. 5: The centre, later called “Zitadelle”, in Ungers’s project for Grünzug Süd. In the first design of 1963, the citadel is formed by a cluster of towers, similar to the Neue Stadt project, with a “plateau” providing public services and amenities. In the 1965 and 1966 versions (worked on by Franz Oswald), the citadel is an enclosed block with mixed apartment typologies. While retaining the central tower and plateau idea, it also develops the theme of wall and street.



1963



1965



1966