

Oswald Mathias Ungers and the “City as a Work of Art”: The Neue Stadt in Cologne, 1961–1966

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Bold plans for Cologne

In 1958, the city of Cologne, Germany, announced ambitious plans for a “new city” to its north. After years of largely makeshift reconstruction, its housing efforts entered a new phase. Cologne’s population had almost recovered to the 770,000 inhabitants it had numbered at the outbreak of World War II,¹ and it seemed the right time for a more coordinated approach. The city finally decided to implement an idea first proposed by Fritz Schumacher in his comprehensive urban modernisation plan for Cologne (1919–1923) following World War I,² which had been further developed by Rudolf Schwarz – Cologne’s post-war chief planner from 1946 to 1952. Schwarz had envisioned the city as a confederation of smaller cities forming a “cluster of stars” (*Sternhaufen*), arranged as a “twin city” (*Doppelstadt*) with two cores (Fig. 1): the old city as a cultural and trading core and a new city to the north to absorb a growing population and new industries.³

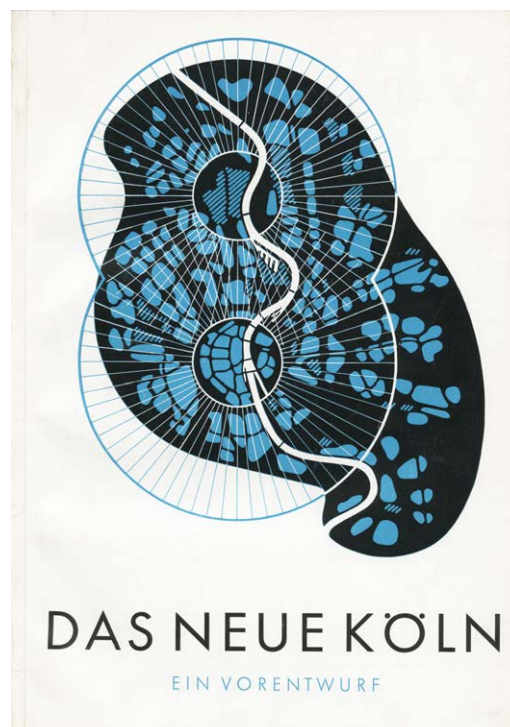


Fig. 1: Cover of *Das Neue Köln: Ein Vorentwurf* (1950). Diagram of Rudolf Schwarz’s vision of Cologne as a city with two centres – the old city in the south and the new city to be built in the north.

¹ Cologne was heavily damaged during World War II, in which an estimated 70 % of the city was destroyed (95 % of the old town). By the end of the war, the city had only about 40,000 inhabitants. But numbers rebounded rapidly. They grew to about 450,000 by the end of 1945 and reached 750,000 in 1958.

² Fritz Schumacher, assisted by Wilhelm Arntz, *Köln. Entwicklungsfragen einer Großstadt*, Cologne 1923. Re. Schumacher’s plans, cf. Hartmut Frank, “The Metropolis as a Comprehensive Work of Art: Fritz Schumacher’s Plan for Cologne, Document of a Forgotten Modernity”, in: Jean Clair (Ed.), *The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis*, exhibition catalogue, Montreal 1991, pp. 321–335.

³ See Rudolf Schwarz, City of Cologne (E d.), *Das neue Köln. Ein Vorentwurf*, Cologne 1950.

To announce the implementation of these plans, the city published the promotional brochure *Eine Neue Stadt in Köln* (trans.: A New City in Cologne, Fig. 2). Presented in April 1958 as a “memorandum”⁴ to raise support and funding for the endeavour, it presented the Neue Stadt as an opportunity to build the kind of modern city one had unavailingly wished for when rebuilding the old one (Fig. 3).⁵ Planned to eventually house up to 100,000, the “new city” was among the boldest urban developments of its time. In April 1964, the district was christened “Chorweiler”, combining the names of two existing places in the vicinity: Chorbusch, a marshy woodland to the north-west of the new settlement, and Weiler, a small village at its southern border.⁶



Fig. 2: Cover of *Eine Neue Stadt in Köln* (1958). A pamphlet published by the City of Cologne to advertise its plan for a new city.

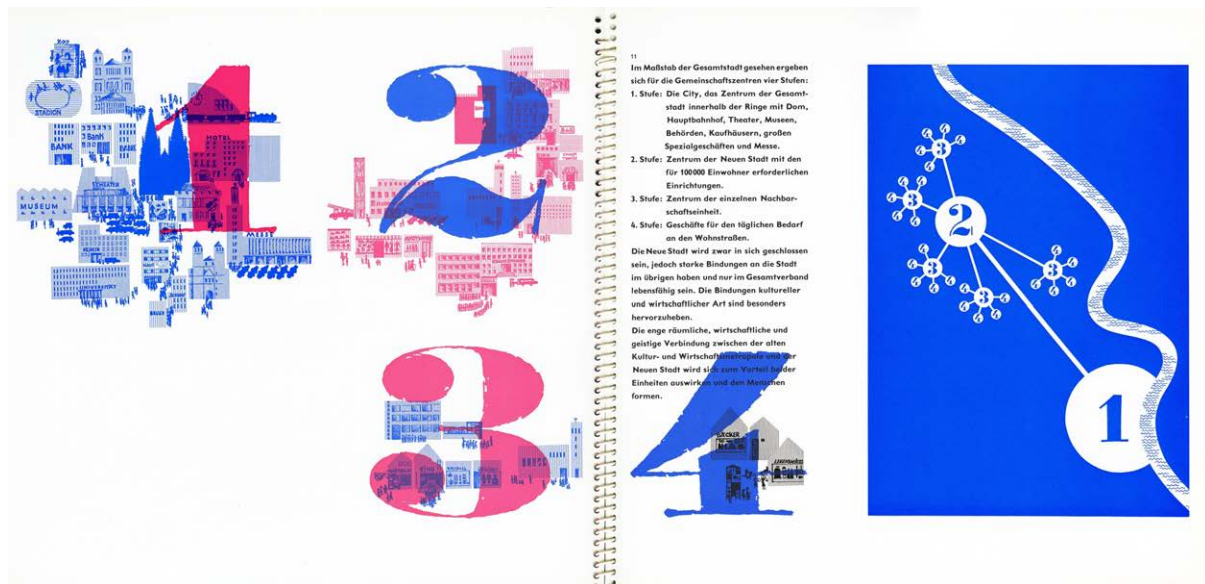


Fig. 3: Spread from *Eine Neue Stadt in Köln* (1958), showing the principle of the Neue Stadt as a fractal branching structure.

⁴ Max Adenauer, untitled preface, in: *Eine Neue Stadt in Köln: Aufgabe, Planung, Durchführung*. Brochure, published by the City of Cologne, privately printed, April 1958, unpaginated. Adenauer was Cologne’s Oberstadtdirektor (1953–65).

⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 3.

⁶ See Kirsten Hölter, “Chorweiler bis 1970 – Die ‘Neue Stadt’?”, in: Jost Dülffer (Ed.), *Köln in den 50er Jahren. Zwischen Tradition und Modernisierung*, Cologne 2001 (*Veröffentlichungen des Kölnischen Geschichtsvereins e. V.*, Vol. 44), pp. 441–452, p. 441. See also re. the Neue Stadt: Werner Heinen, Anne- Marie Pfeffer, *Stadtspuren – Denkmäler in Köln*, Vol. 10.II: *Köln: Siedlungen 1938–1988*, Cologne 1988, pp. 163–169.

But in the end, much of Cologne-Chorweiler remained unbuilt. Only parts were constructed, mainly from the beginning of the 1960s until the second half of the 1970s.⁷ By that time, the severe problems caused by such satellite towns had become apparent. In Chorweiler — a municipality (*Stadtbezirk*) with twelve districts (*Stadtteile*) — the greatest problems arose in the central district, which shares the name with the municipality as a whole (and when people refer to Chorweiler today, they usually mean this core only). With its massive social housing complexes, the core of Chorweiler quickly became an undesirable place to live in. Even today, it is still one of Cologne's most socially deprived areas.⁸

Yet, the “new city” was initially launched with great expectations and with the hope that it would provide ample opportunities for new mass-housing solutions. This widely shared hope is testified by a whole series of large-scale peripheral housing estates that were planned around the 1960s in Germany, for example, Neue Vahr (1958–1962) in Bremen, Hasenberg (1960–1968) in Munich, Neue Stadt Wulfen (1961), or Gropiusstadt (1962–1975) and Märkisches Viertel (1963–74) in Berlin.⁹ Architects, planners or housing companies were often directly commissioned to deliver these large developments to save time in meeting housing demand. While this approach was also used for the Neue Stadt, competitions were held for some sections to promote new approaches to the design of dwellings.¹⁰ The most successful competition (open to architects in North Rhine-Westphalia and West-Berlin) was for a neighbourhood called Seeberg – the third section of the first construction phase (*Bauabschnitt 1, Baubezirk 3*). The competition was announced in late 1961 with submissions due in spring 1962.

Among the submissions,¹¹ the one by Oswald Mathias Ungers (1926–2007) stands out as the most radical vision of the “new city”.¹² How radical Ungers's proposal was is evident when tracing the ideas he developed for his original competition entry, making its study far more rewarding than that of the modest version that was eventually built. In its initial, uncompromising form, Ungers's scheme presents a uniquely consistent and distinct compositional approach to the design of dwellings. Working across the scales of architecture and urban design, it demonstrates how an architectural idea can provide an urban strategy, while at the same time developing a persuasive case for the way an architectural form can create legible social space.

In this respect, Cologne Neue Stadt also marks the beginning of a series of complementary, critical design research projects through which Ungers would refine his understanding of urban

⁷ In 1961, Cologne had a mathematical housing deficit of 8.6 % and 9,699 new dwellings were built, of which 43.5 % received public funding. See, Statistisches Amt der Landeshauptstadt München, “Der Wohnungsbau in den großen Städten geht weiter zurück”, in: *Münchner Statistik*, 9–10/1964, pp. 256–265.

⁸ For a detailed account of Chorweiler's problems today, see Sebastian Kurtenbach, *Leben in herausfordernden Wohngebieten. Das Beispiel Köln-Chorweiler*, Wiesbaden 2017. See also: Klaus-Martin Ellerbrock, “Chorweiler: Ein Fallbeispiel für den kommunalen Umgang mit Wohnungsbeständen”, in: Olaf Schnur, Matthias Drilling, Oliver Niermann (Eds.), *Zwischen Lebenswelt und Renditeobjekt. Quartiersforschung*, Wiesbaden 2014, pp. 65–76.

⁹ Richard Turkington, Christopher Watson (Eds.), *Renewing Europe's Housing*, Bristol 2014, p. 146.

¹⁰ The first phase of the project and the general strategy is documented in: Harald Ludmann, Joachim Riedel, *Neue Stadt Köln-Chorweiler*, Stuttgart and Bern 1967.

¹¹ Other notable contributions were the courtyard housing and row house ideas by Klaus Kirsten and Heinz Nather. See Daniela Brahm, Les Schliesser, ExRotaprint (Eds.), *Kirsten & Nather: Wohn- und Fabrikationsgebäude zweier West-Berliner Architekten*, Ostfildern 2015 pp. 98–117.

¹² Research for this essay was assisted by Klaus Platzgummer, Tianyi Shu and Benedict Wahlbrink, who participated in an Architectural Association Visiting School directed by Jasper Cepl and Sam Jacoby at the Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft in Cologne in 2014. We wish to thank Sophia Ungers and Anja Sieber-Albers for their generous support.

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design.¹³ Among these, a competition entry for student housing in the Dutch city of Enschede (1964) represents the middle ground. Based on a powerful self-generating motive, the scheme was still able to adapt to the context. But the full spectrum of Ungers's methodological design thinking is revealed, on the one hand, by the proposal for Grünzug Süd in Cologne (1963–66),¹⁴ which develops an exemplary strategic response to an existing urban context (Fig. 4), and on the other, the Neue Stadt, as it imagines a new neighbourhood on a greenfield site that had yet to become a city.

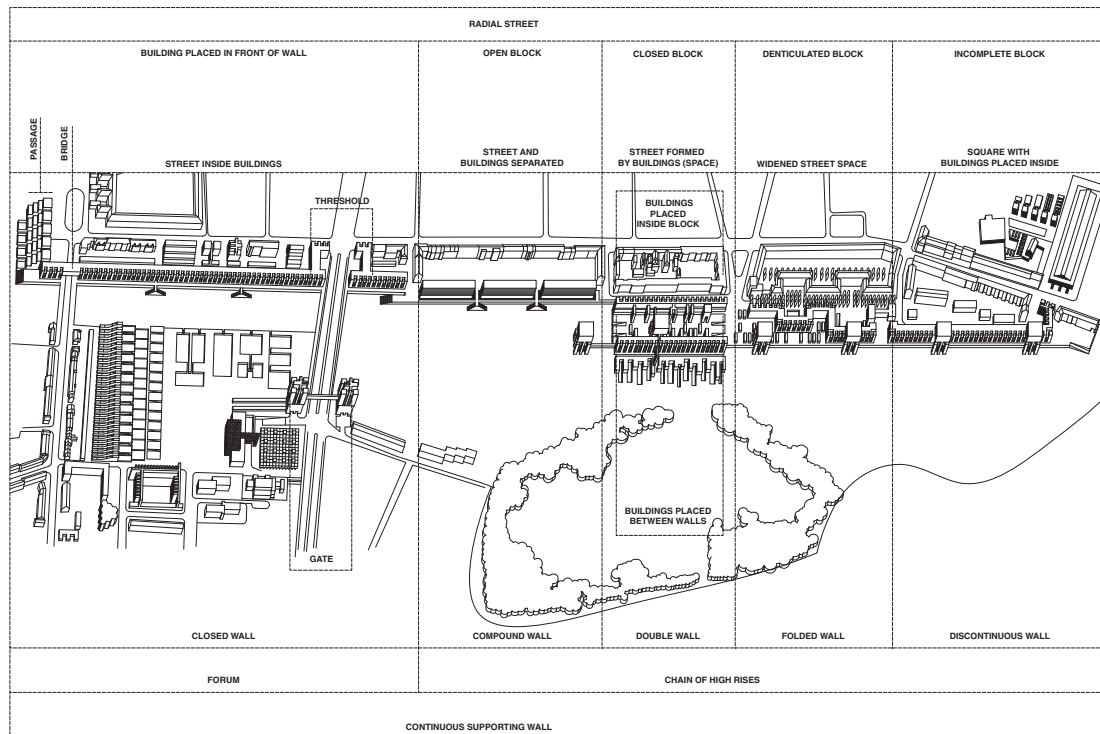


Fig. 4: Oswald Mathias Ungers, Grünzug Süd, Cologne, axonometric projection of the final project (1966). Redrawn by the authors, with a translation of Ungers's explanation of its five sectors (originally added to a top view of a master plan model).

The composition of housing, 1961–1962

At this stage of the Cologne-Chorweiler development, plans were still modest compared to the much larger and more problematic schemes that were completed later. The competition was simply for the design of new dwelling typologies. Competitors could develop a range of one- to two-storey family homes or three- to eight-storey rented apartment blocks, or both. Proposals were constrained by eight family and seven rental housing typologies, for which the number of bed spaces and maximum floor areas were defined in the brief. The competition brief also included a development plan (Fig. 5), which had been approved by the planning authority of Cologne in December 1961, just prior to the competition. While a requirement was to retain some of the existing buildings and follow the street layout, changes to the building outlines, building groupings, number of

¹³ Ungers's design research through a series of lectures, writings and large-scale housing projects until the 1980s is further discussed in Sam Jacoby, "Oswald Mathias Ungers: Dialectical Principles of Design", in: *The Journal of Architecture*, 23.7–8/2018, pp. 1230–1258.

¹⁴ See Jasper Cepl, Sam Jacoby, Valerio Massaro, "Grünzug Süd: An Urban Design Manifesto", in: *San Rocco*, 14.2018, pp. 133–143.

houses and plot sizes were permitted to give greater freedom in developing new housing models.



Fig. 5: Development plan by the City of Cologne (December 1961) forming the basis of the architectural design competition for new housing typologies.

Ungers’s multi-scalar design approach went far beyond the brief, however, by proposing a completely new urban plan (Fig. 6). As can be seen from extensive studies of alternative urban configurations – for which paper cut-outs of unit types were provisionally taped to a base plan to quickly test different options – his approach is primarily compositional (Fig. 7). Unlike the given development plan that was zoned according to dwelling typologies and loosely followed a grid layout, Ungers proposes a composition of meandering, branching and enclosing lines that seem to follow the existing topography. This creates a dynamic composition of freely clustered buildings but also a formal coherence across the site. The design studies reveal the critical importance Ungers gives to the unit plans in his overall design, as these are formative to the urban plan and possible design iterations (Fig. 8). In fact, Ungers’s Neue Stadt is the outcome of a compositional game that starts with the individual unit and develops via continuous trial and error into a larger neighbourhood plan or ensemble.

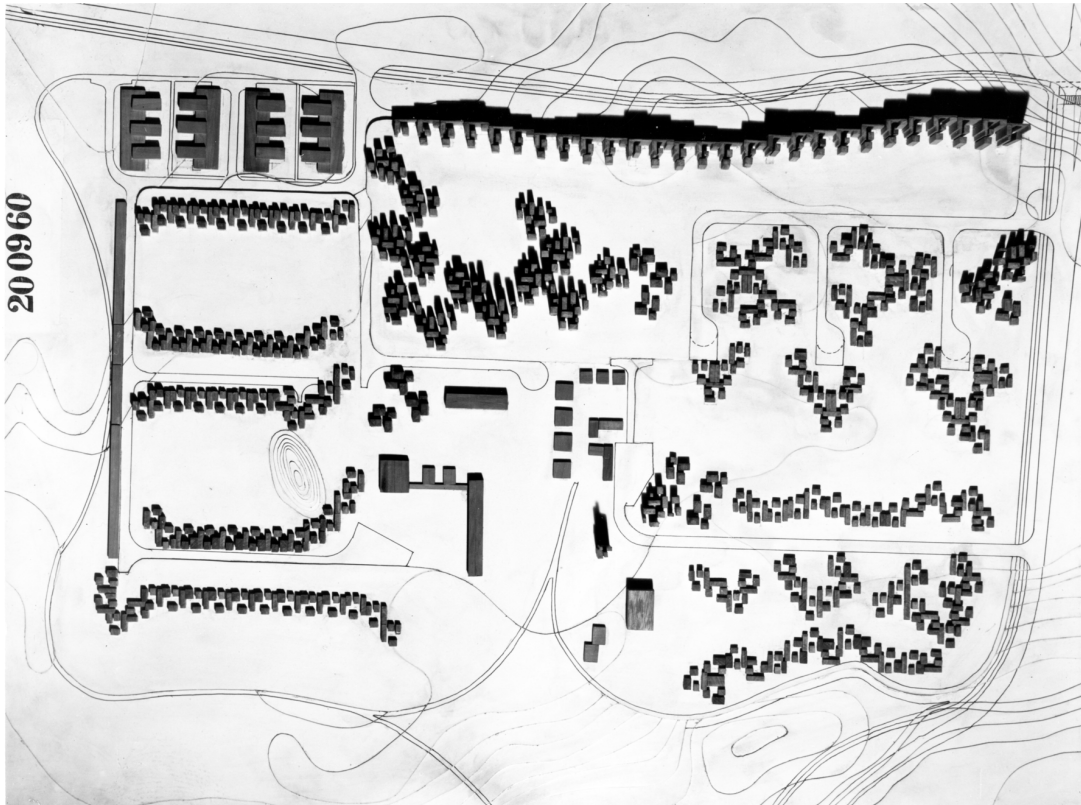


Fig. 6: Photograph of volumetric urban plan model. Wooden block representing solid “towers” placed on a site plan. Oswald Mathias Ungers, competition entry for Cologne Neue Stadt (1962).



Fig. 7: Urban plan studies. Cut-out dwelling plan clusters provisionally taped to a typographic plan of the development site (including streets and structures to be retained). Oswald Mathias Ungers, competition entry for Cologne Neue Stadt (1962).

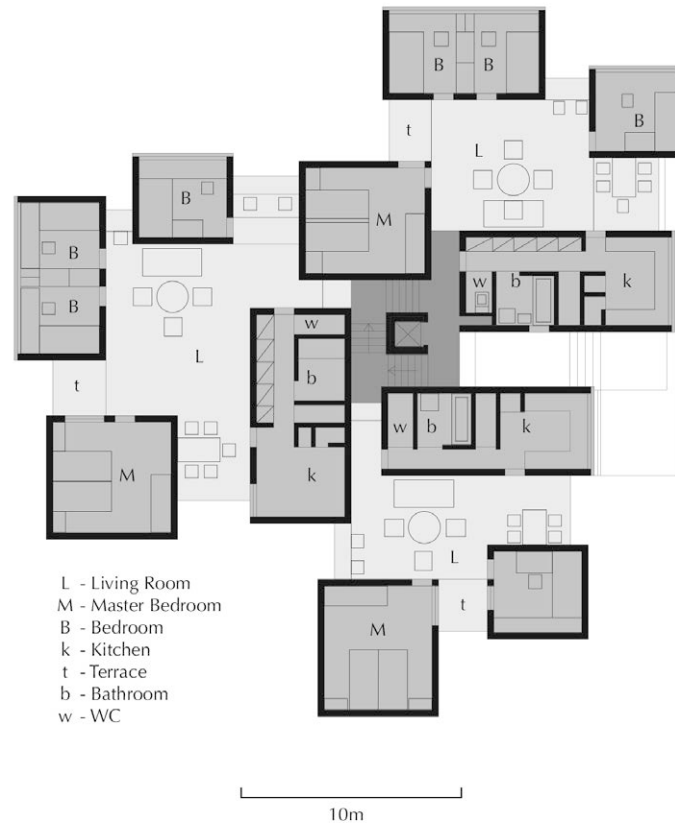


Fig. 8: Typical dwelling cluster plan. Oswald Mathias Ungers, competition entry for Cologne Neue Stadt (1962). Redrawn by the authors.

Expanding the design principle of the dwelling units to the scale of the entire site, an architecture of urban character is proposed. The typological solution of a cluster plan rejects the conventional approach of designing a unit through the subdivision of an enclosed space, commonly formed by the linear disposition of rooms along an access corridor. Instead, Ungers explores a compositional problem that he considered fundamental to the principles of architectonic formation: free-standing volumes delimiting an open, shared and central space.¹⁵ This eliminates the need for an access corridor and creates a dwelling in which each volume represents a room and function, such as a bedroom, kitchen, bathroom and storage area (1). The central, free-flowing and connecting “public” interior space – the living room (2) – is created by closing the spaces between these volumes. This also creates a corresponding shared external public “urban” space (3), once three or four units form a larger cluster (Fig. 9). The “double intentionality” of architectural design – creating both an interior dwelling and exterior urban space – is central to Ungers’s understanding of “social architecture”. In the proposal for Neue Stadt, the idea gives rationality to the typological principle working across the spatial scales from room to room, room cluster to unit, unit to building, building to building cluster, and building cluster to the urban neighbourhood.¹⁶

¹⁵ For Ungers, this was one of two fundamental principles of architectural creation. In his candidate lecture at the Technische Universität Berlin (1963), he differentiates between figures that delimit enclosed spaces and open spaces defined by delimiting figures. See Oswald Mathias Ungers, “Prinzipien der Raumgestaltung. Berufungsvortrag TU Berlin 1963”, in: *Arch+*, No. 65, 1982, pp. 41–48, p. 42.

¹⁶ Re. “double intentionality”, see Oswald Mathias Ungers, “Zum Projekt ‘Neue Stadt’ in Köln”, in: *Werk*, 50.1963, pp. 281–284. Asked about the meaning of social architecture, Ungers later stated: “Social architecture is a degree of quality (not quantity) in the design of public spaces – that is, halls, foyers, galleries, streets, squares. The public place, experienced and lived in by the community, is the most important basis of identity for people in the town.” See Justus Dahinden, “Ungers, O(swald) M(athias)”, in: Muriel Emanuel (Ed.), *Contemporary Architects*, London and Basingstoke 1980.



Fig. 9: Typical neighbourhood plan showing the relationships between four dwelling clusters. Oswald Mathias Ungers, competition entry for Cologne Neue Stadt (1962). Key: 1 – room, 2 – living room, 3 – urban square. Redrawn by the authors.

The principle of a multi-scalar interplay of “private” solid volumes and “public” open spaces creates a full range of social spaces and experiences, whereby volumes are placed in such a way that they define central physical spaces but also their programmatic, circulatory, visual and social characteristics. This intentional complementarity between scales as well as simultaneity between internal living and external urban space (*Wohnraum* and *Stadtraum*) is confirmed when Ungers refers to the solid volumes as “houses for sleeping” (*Schlafhäuser*) and “houses for services” (*Wirtschaftshäuser*), which conflates room and house and private interior and public urban exterior.¹⁷ Ungers himself explained the principle of his dwellings as follows:

The floor plan consists of positive and negative spaces. The closed tower-like volumes contain the bed- or utility rooms. In between these emerge the living rooms that are in direct spatial relation to the outdoor spaces. The arrangement of the floor plan enables a wide variation in height and an amalgamation of the development into one “total building” [*Gesamtgebäude*] that increases from two storeys to eight in rhythmic movement. It contains apartments with three to six beds. The roof level is partially taken up by two-storey apartments with roof terraces. There are no apartments on the ground floor. Here, free passage remains between the separate volumes, in which rooms for common purposes such as a laundry, drying room, bicycle and equipment room, caretaker’s room and so on are located. One can also set up a small sales stall or a closed children’s playroom for bad weather.¹⁸

¹⁷ Hermann Funke, “Schlaftürme und Negativräume: Interessante Projekte des Architekten Oswald Mathias Ungers”, in: *Die Zeit*, February 5, 1965, p. 9.

¹⁸ Ungers, “Zum Projekt ‘Neue Stadt’ in Köln”, p. 281. Translation by the authors.

Ungers's design intentions are particularly visible in a physical model of a typical area of the urban plan made up of several blocks of apartments. Only the positive spaces are modelled, leaving the negative spaces unrepresented, which highlights the urban "tower-like" character of the proposal and the clustering of building volumes (Fig. 10).

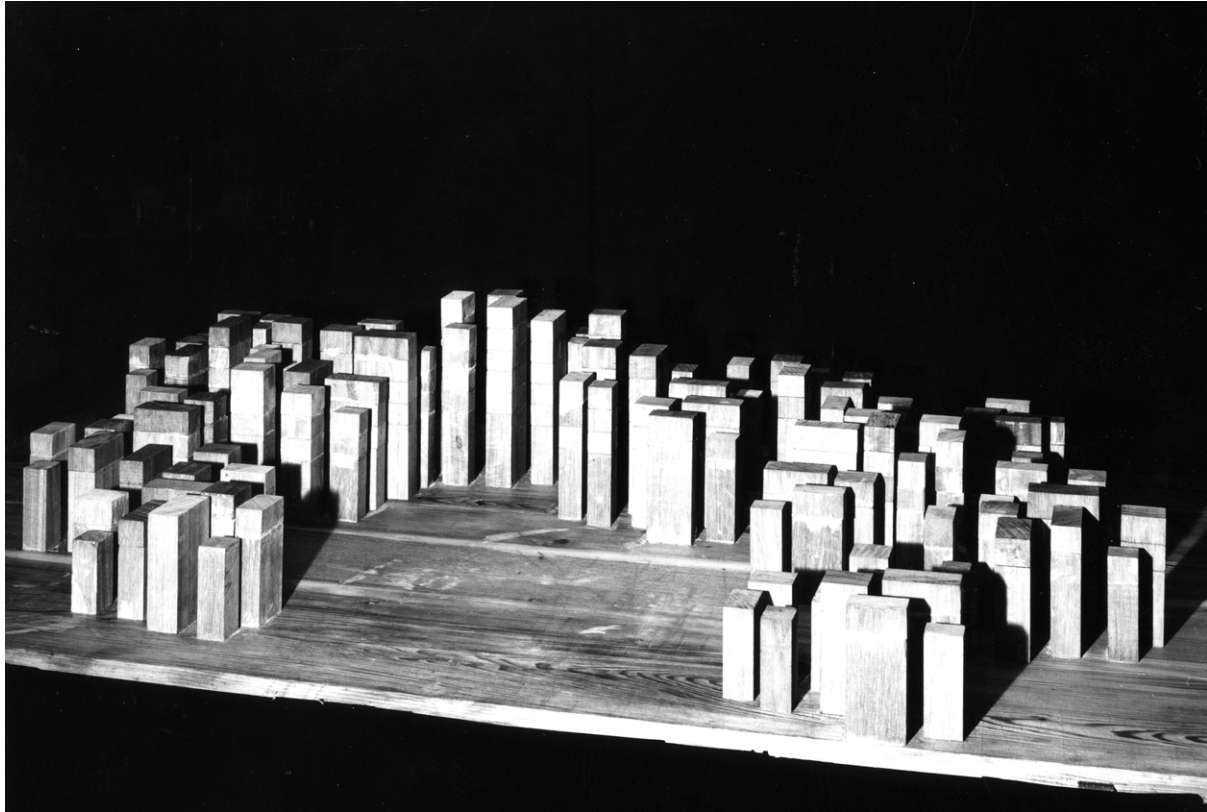


Fig. 10: Photograph of the model showing the "positive" spaces of the proposal. Oswald Mathias Ungers, competition entry for Cologne Neue Stadt (1962).

The problem of habitat

Although Ungers seems foremost interested in the "formal laws"¹⁹ that unify the structural diversities of architecture and the urban into a morpho- logical whole, his proposal is also an attempt to spatialise the idea of habitat. This interest can be traced back to the CIAM 9 conference dedicated to the theme of "Habitat", which he attended in 1953.²⁰ Held in Aix-en-Provence, France, the aim of CIAM 9 was to produce a Charter of Habitat as a direct counterpart to the Athens Charter, which had resulted from the 1933 CIAM 4 meeting in Athens, Greece, on the theme of "The Functional City". Striving for a broader understanding of city planning, the CIAM 9 focused on the social practices of everyday life and associated dwelling conditions that could capture the multi-scalar complexity and environment of human habitat. While the conference failed in formulating a charter or to even agree on the meaning of habitat, it was an important turning point for a younger generation of CIAM members in voicing a new social, cultural and diverse town-planning agenda.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jasper Cepl, *Oswald Mathias Ungers: Eine intellektuelle Biographie*, Cologne 2007, pp. 38–39.

²¹ The following CIAM 10, which continued the theme of "habitat", also failed to produce a Charter of Habitat.

Ungers was evidently fascinated by this new debate, particularly by ideas presented by Werner Aebli (1925–2011), Reinhard Gieselmann (1925–2013) and Theo Manz (1922–1975) from the Swiss delegation. They called for a reorganisation of “habitat” through “core-creating elements” on different scales. After the conference, Aebli, Gieselmann and Manz published their ideas in “Ein Beitrag zur Abklärung des HABITAT” (trans: A Contribution to the Clarification of HABITAT) in the Swiss journal *Werk*, in which they argue for a definition of habitat as a spatialisation of societal and social forms. Moving from the single person to the family, the neighbourhood, the district, the municipality and the canton (state), the text presents critical observations on their current state and then proposes desirable spatial structures. Postulating that society is formed by groups structured around shared social and physical spaces at different scales, sociological meanings are translated into spatial elements that can form a social core. For example, at the scale of the single person, these elements are central communal rooms, whereas at the scale of the neighbourhood, shared core elements can be play-grounds, local shops or green areas located within quiet spaces created by residential buildings. These buildings are central, as they simultaneously offer undisturbed private family living, meaningful neighbourly interaction and connection to the larger district, thus making the family part of a local social entity in which daily life occurs. Explicating this further, they write:

The Apartment (desirable)

Its spatial structure: When taken as the starting point of planning, the family’s core-creating functions lead to replacing the alignment of rooms with an arrangement of room clusters [*Raumgruppen*] that are horizontally and vertically arranged around a central, communal space. Depending on the size of the apartment, spatially articulated zones emerge for parents, children (and possibly guests and servants) that are orientated towards the living zone. In any case, the apartment is understood as one large, differentiated living space that, as a receptacle of all interests, correlating the individual and collective activities of family members. Thus, the family will come alive and not just subsist. Pure circulation areas inside the apartment are superfluous and amount to a waste of space.²²

While the text is accompanied by illustrations overlaid with branching diagrams and photographs to indicate a network relationship between different physical parts and the core element as in-between spaces, it does not include any specific design guidance (Fig. 11).

²² Werner Aebli, Reinhard Gieselmann, Theo Manz, “Ein Beitrag zur Abklärung des Habitat”, in: *Werk*, 41.1954, pp. 8–14, p. 9. Translation by the authors. The penultimate sentence was freely translated to convey its meaning. German original: “So wird über das Bedürfnis der Existenzfähigkeit hinaus die Lebensfähigkeit der Familie angestrebt.”

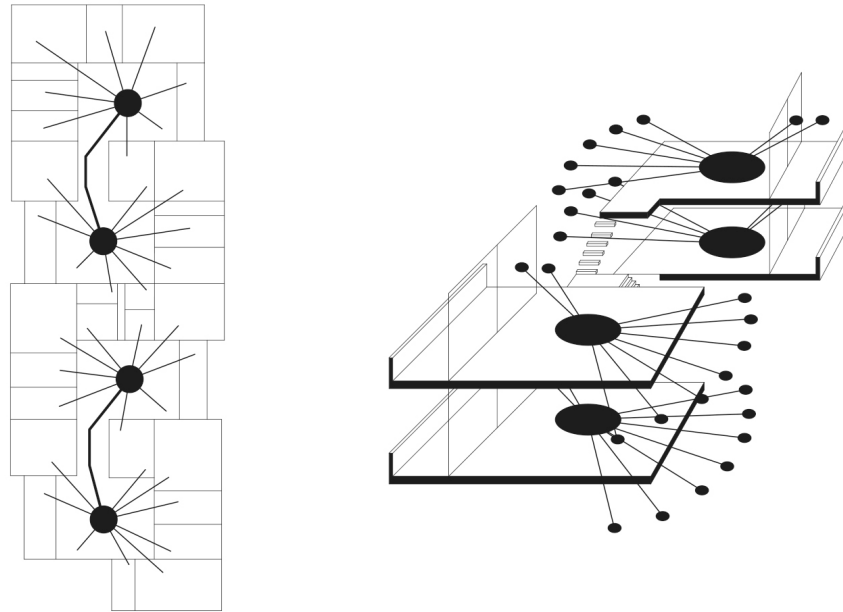


Fig. 11: Diagram showing the social and spatial relationships between single persons. Redrawn by authors from Werner Aebli, Reinhard Gieselmann and Theo Manz, “Ein Beitrag zur Abklärung des Habitat”, in: *Werk*, 41.1954, pp. 8–14.

Habitat reconsidered in volume and space

Ungers embraced the formal design challenge set by this interpretation of habitat. He first explored the design implications in a private residence in Cologne (House Müller, 1957–1958), about which he wrote:

The house is made up of four independent building volumes: 1st: sleeping house, 2nd: kitchen house, 3rd: tower, 4th: garage. These individual building volumes are related to each other in such a way that an urban ensemble is created on a small scale. The open spaces between the building volumes successively form: the entrance courtyard, living room (= square), dining area and inner courtyard.²³

As described, the two-family house is composed of a set of detached volumes that define a central, interlocking living room as a core social space (Fig. 12). While the plan still lacks conceptual clarity, the arrangement anticipates the proposal for Cologne Neue Stadt, in which Ungers finally manages to fully resolve the design problem posed by the rather abstract proposition of habitat by Aebli, Gieselmann and Manz. He translates their idea of community into an architectural strategy of creating private areas inside enclosed “positive spaces”. These are clustered to delimit “negative spaces” that contain “public” areas. Discussing the simultaneous architectural and urban nature of his Neue Stadt proposal, Ungers explained:

The project shown here stems from the intention to place single buildings in relation to each other so that new spatial connections result. Positive volumetric form and negative interstitial space are brought into correlation. In the interplay

²³ Oswald Mathias Ungers, “Ein Werkstattbericht. Bauten und Projekte von Oswald Mathias Ungers”, in: *Bauwelt*, 51.1960, pp. 204–217, p. 208. Translation by the authors

between volumes and space is expressed the complex's character, which arises from its ability to organize two realms – internal and external – to a specific purpose.²⁴

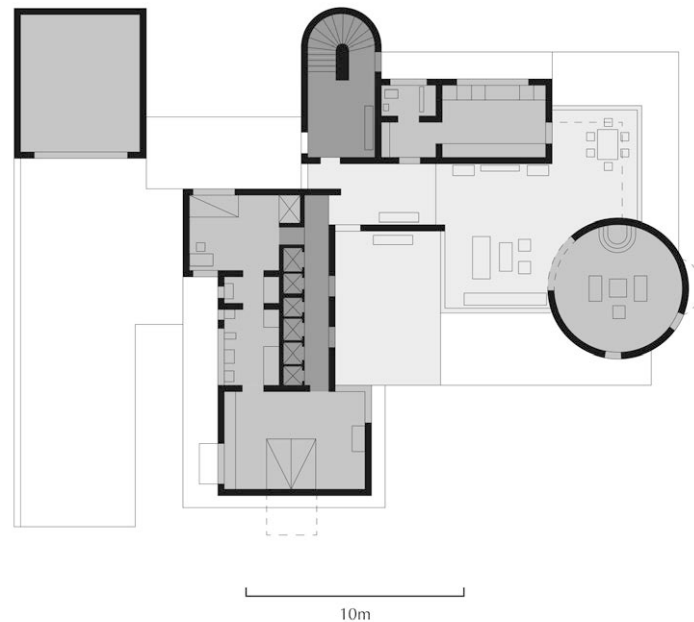


Fig. 12: Oswald Mathias Ungers, Wohnhaus Müller, Köln-Lindenthal, Werthmannstraße (1957–58). Redrawn by authors.

Further elaborating on his design thinking, Ungers explained his concept of “double intentionality”, by both providing a glimpse of his sources and showing how far he was willing to take the idea:

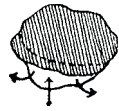
The phenomenon of double intentionality, which Sörgel calls the Janus face of architecture, is the essential formative factor of an urban ensemble. It is apparent in the street spaces, places, and relations between building volumes. The combination of bodies with connective elements, as it is realized here, offers the possibility of allowing spatial movement to advance further and further, and of extending communal space uninterruptedly in all directions. The single volume becomes a building element that maintains its position in an overall composition based upon spatial extension in all directions. The volume achieves this status because of its ability to continue this extension and to enlarge it at will until it becomes an omnipresent spatial totality, the true goal of architecture.²⁵

The reference to Herman Sörgel (1885–1952) discloses an important source of inspiration to Ungers’s formal solution to the problem of habitat. In his *Architektur-Ästhetik* (1918), Sörgel had shown a diagram that foreshadowed the theme of volume and space taken up by Ungers in his design for the Neue Stadt. Explaining how architecture differed from sculpture, Sörgel claimed:

²⁴ Ungers, “Zum Projekt ‘Neue Stadt’ in Köln”. Translated by Lynnette Widder: Oswald Mathias Ungers, “The City as a Work of Art”, in: Joan Ockman (Ed.), *Architecture Culture 1943–1968. A Documentary Anthology*, with the collaboration of Edward Eigen, New York 1993, pp. 362–364, p. 364. Re. the text, see also the introduction on p. 361.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Sculpture arises from removing something from an existing mass already at hand, whereas architecture arises from positioning, assembling something on a free and empty site. In other words: sculpture is subtraction, architecture is addition. One should not think of architectural concavity as the result of working into [a mass from] a surface, but as a grouping around, as a placing around and in front. The concave in architecture does not come about like this:



but rather as follows



While Sörgel provided Ungers with a particularly insightful analysis of how architectural space is created, he was not the only influence on his enquiry into the formal laws of architecture. In his quest to regain architecture as an art, Ungers also explored numerous other sources ranging from art history to Bauhaus pedagogy.²⁷ He also profited from discussions with Gieselmann, whom he had befriended after their meeting in Aix-en-Provence.²⁸ But Ungers remained without peers when turning these ideas into an architectural composition.

Architecture and “The City as a Work of Art”

Ungers thought he had found a formula allowing him to base both architecture and urban design on the same fundamental principles. In his explanation of the Neue Stadt proposal, he outlined the far-reaching consequences he saw in his new understanding of urban morphology:

The city is governed by the same formal laws as the individual houses that comprise it. The house’s structure is simultaneously the basis for the structure of the city. Only the dimensions are different. The role of the walls, columns, piers, and volumes that constitute the house is assumed in the city by closed rows of houses, freestanding buildings, and interrelated blocks. The sole difference in the translation from house to city is scale. The fundamental composition is in both cases the same.²⁹

This opening paragraph sets the tone. Instead of a modest project description, Ungers offers a brief yet ambitious treatise on urban form. By elaborating on the similarities between such phenomena as atrium houses and perimeter blocks, Ungers finds eternal structural principles “independent of place and historical epoch”.³⁰ He argues that functional or technical considerations merely provide constraints but can neither produce the design of a house nor that of a city: “Each has its own structure and grows according to internal, not external, formal laws.”³¹ This raises the question how “the most structurally varied forms, which have appeared over the passage of time” can be “brought together in a unified whole”, with Ungers insisting that only “insights won from the morphological

²⁶ Herman Sörgel, *Einführung in die Architektur-Ästhetik. Prolegomena zu einer Theorie der Baukunst*, Munich 1918, pp. 142–143. Translation by the authors.

²⁷ Re. Ungers’s sources, see Cepl, pp. 56–59.

²⁸ Cf. details in Cepl, pp. 39–44.

²⁹ Ungers, “Zum Projekt ‘Neue Stadt’ in Köln”, p. 281. Widder translation, p. 362.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

study of form” can yield an answer and calling for an understanding of “the *city as a work of art*”.³²

Ungers elaborates on this argument in a candidate lecture for a professorship at the Technische Universität Berlin in 1963. Discussing the principles of spatial design, he postulates: “In the simultaneity of intertwined positive and negative three-dimensional relationships lies a peculiarity of architectural creation. The ever-changing interpenetrations of corporeal and spatial forms [*Körperform* and *Raumform*], of interior and exterior space, are the matter of architecture and must always be present to the architect.”³³ This “insight”, so Ungers continues, offers “the possibility to organise larger building complexes into spatial constructs of higher order”.³⁴ Concluding, Ungers shows only one – crowning – example of his own work, the Neue Stadt, as a new paradigm of the “city as a work of art”.

Ungers was not alone in being carried away by the artistic prospects the Neue Stadt and a search for a new *Stadtbaukunst* offered. In the widely circulated weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, Hermann Funke marvelled: “From the plan of the single apartment to the plan and elevation of the city, one is connected to the other and one gives rise to the other. Ungers’s city is a well-constructed, logically structured, fascinating edifice of thought, an architectural work of art.”³⁵

However, these high hopes remained unfulfilled. It transpired that Ungers and his admirers were deluded, at least in their conviction that the problems of social housing could be solved in this way.

Back to reality, 1962–1966

Ungers’s initial ideas were greatly reduced and only realised on parts of the original site, as major compromises had to be made due to budget constraints – as Franz Oswald, who worked for Ungers on the redesign, recalls.³⁶

A comparison between the initial concept and the implemented plans (Fig. 13) shows how the design was substantially revised after the competition and rationalised by arranging the dwellings in a compact, cross-shaped plan (largely in 1963). Living rooms are no longer generous and free-flowing central spaces with no distinct orientation or order, and the former three connections to the outside are reduced to two openings, creating a simple sandwiched and L-shaped room. The distributed cluster plan was changed to a more clearly defined and familiar sequence of kitchen-and-bathroom service block, living room and bedroom, but the living room continued to serve all internal circulation as there were still no internal corridors. Further changes to the layout ranged from a reduction of room sizes and floor areas to a simplified design for a common access to the apartments. In the original plans, three apartments were arranged like a pinwheel around a central staircase, which meant that the floor level of an apartment was a third of a storey above the one below and only every third could be served by a lift. The

³² Ibid., Ungers’s italics.

³³ Ungers, “Berufungsvortrag”, 1982, p. 44. Translation by the authors.

³⁴ Ibid. Translation by the authors.

³⁵ Funke, “Schlaftürme und Negativräume.” Translation by the authors. Equally enthusiastic: Jürgen Pahl, “Betrachtungen über das Schaffen des Architekten O. M. Ungers”, in: *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, 71.1966, pp. 585–586, p. 586.

³⁶ Franz Oswald, telephone conversation with Jasper Cepl on August 28, 2015.

resulting irregular façade with varying floor, roof and fenestration levels would have increased costs and created redundancy, so these level differences were omitted in the built project. Furthermore, the competition plans proposed buildings with greatly animated façades, stepping in and out, following the rhythm of each “tower” formed by stacked rooms. The spaces between these “solid” volumes were to be enclosed by large windows with a noticeable recess from the outer building line to visually emphasise the idea of the living room as a “void” space.

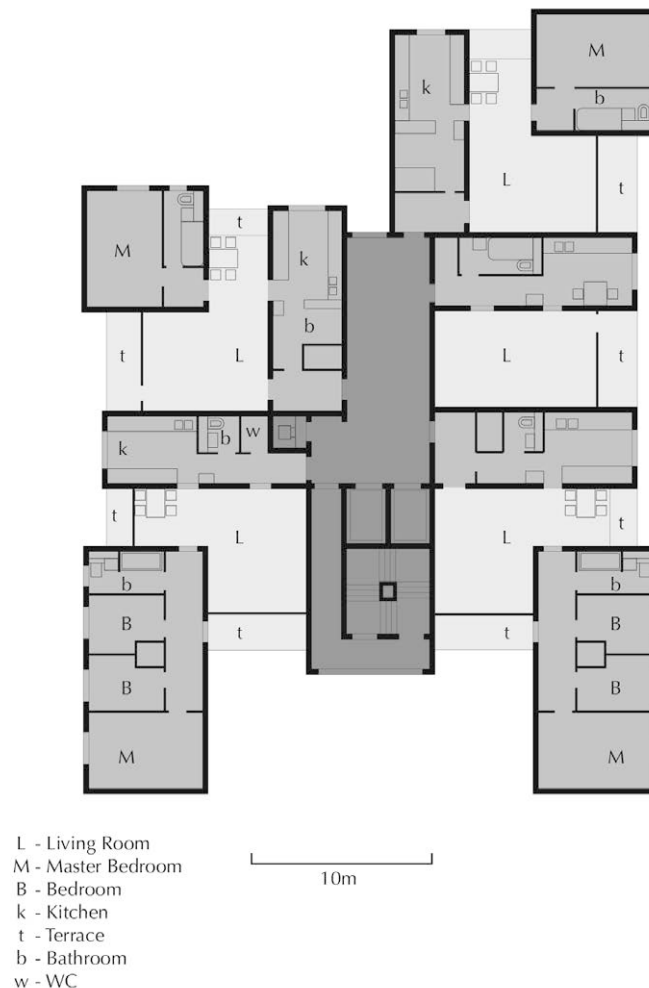


Fig. 13: Typical cluster of units as built. Project Neue Stadt Cologne, Oswald Mathias Ungers, 1962.

Most of this rich three-dimensionality was sacrificed in the completed scheme. Small windows and recessed balconies still faintly express the idea of room-volumes, now hidden behind a relatively flat façade, and the building retained some visible volumetric articulation, despite appearing relatively conventional (Fig. 14). The constructed scheme provides 99 apartments and a total usable floor area of 9,075 square metres through a mix of much smaller dwelling typologies than initially planned (2, 2.5 and 2.75 rooms per unit), maisonettes, an old people’s home (1- and 2-room units) as well as 40 underground parking spaces (a novelty at the time). While many original architectural qualities were lost, new ones emerged: an “urban” corridor – a linear pedestrian path, declared as a “constituent element” by Ungers – now formed the central spine of the development by connecting the block of apartments, the old people’s home and public facilities with a bus stop – and symbolically beyond the building itself with the district and

city. From this urban spine, the building grows outwards into the site, defining the surrounding open areas.³⁷

While these changes concealed some of the initial ideas, there was another, important concurrent project that allowed Ungers to further dwell on them. In the housing complex he designed for the Märkisches Viertel in Berlin (1962–1967, Fig. 14), he elaborated on aspects such as the open ground floor and the staggered outline. But while this may have made the idea of the “city as a work of art” more comprehensible, the sheer size of the project – with blocks up to 12 storeys tall – seemed to ridicule the social intentions that had motivated Ungers when conceiving his design approach. In light of the many shortcomings of the Märkisches Viertel, talking about the “city as a work of art” seemed preposterous and Ungers soon abandoned this compositional interest – by first seeking more comprehensive urban planning strategies and eventually turning away from housing altogether.

And yet, though it may have discredited the notion of the “city as a work of art” when it was stretched beyond breaking point in the Märkisches Viertel, Ungers’s underlying ideas remain fruitful and his design for Cologne Neue Stadt still deserves to be considered as one of the most instructive and liveable urban housing concepts of its time, especially when taking into account the full potential of the original proposal. This ought to be reappraised.

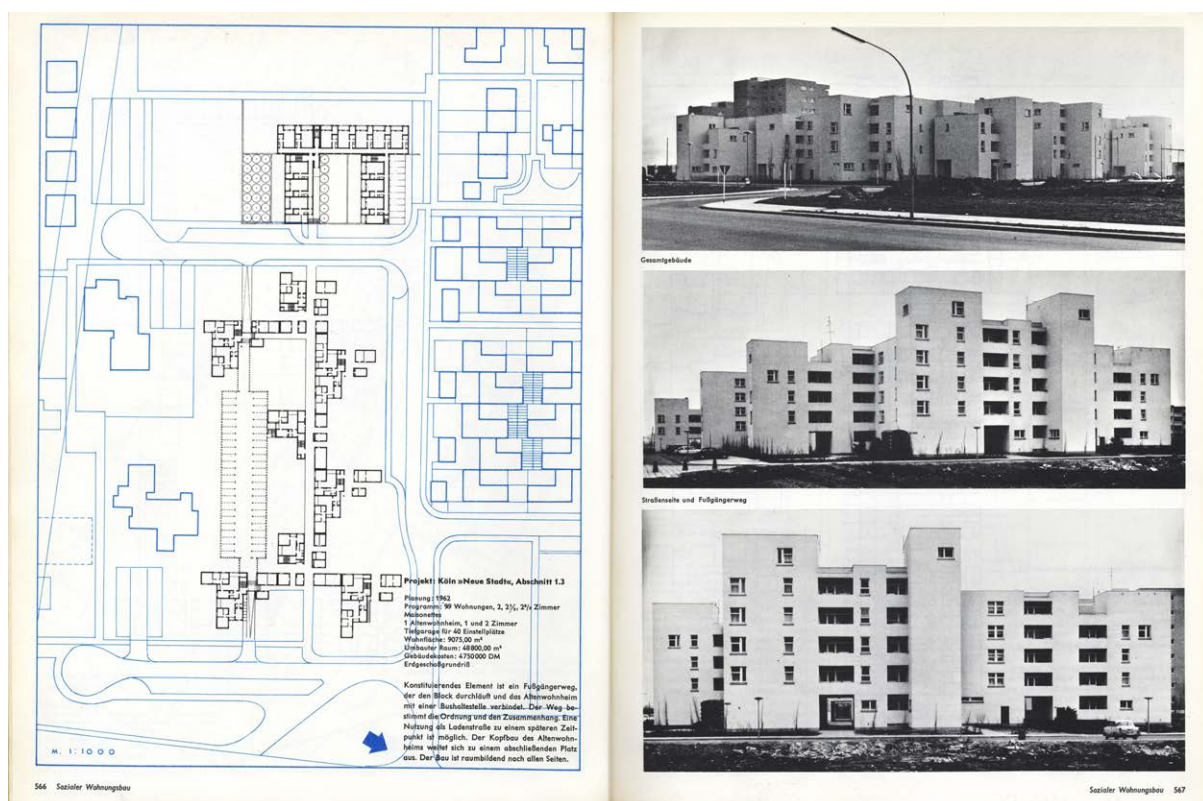


Fig. 14: Spread from “O. M. Ungers. Sozialer Wohnungsbau 1953–1966”, in: *Baumeister*, 64.1967, pp. 556–572.

³⁷ See “O. M. Ungers. Sozialer Wohnungsbau 1953–1966”, in: *Baumeister*, 64.1967, pp. 556–572, p. 566; and O. M. Ungers: *Veröffentlichungen zur Architektur 5: Großformen im Wohnungsbau*, December 1966.