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Oswald Mathias Ungers
Gallery of Contemporary Art
Hamburg, 1986-1996

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A museum is really just a piece of architecture, nothing more. Nothing more? If one takes it seriously, that's no small thing. Every building commission is public by nature. It finds its audience in an environment that is mostly urban and with which it communicates: by way of its own function, by way of the demands of the other participants in the dialogue, by way of the place and its history, and - last but not least - by way of the act of building itself.

In this regard every building commission possesses its own symbols and its own history. The museum, too, the vessel for art or other entities on show, is always something more than the bare envelope, more than a container or a black box. Certainly, one may demand that it withdraw into the background with regard to the art on exhibition. But what does this really mean? Must one really emphasize this, considering that the last ornament already disappeared decades ago from the outermost edges of the exhibition surfaces?

A museum cannot disappear either. And here the paradoxical tenet of architecture is valid as well: the more the wall as relief withdraws into the background, the more substance and structure capture the foreground. One will always perceive them, just like the proportions and the atmosphere of the space. One must recognize that it is exactly here, in the emptiness of the museum, that the building exhibits itself. Briefly put: a museum is always a museum of architecture as well. Yet it's still a long way from being a forged work of art attempting to compete with the works on exhibit. What, then, could cause an architect to become disconcerted here?

Oswald Mathias Ungers has always worked on the most direct relationship between the envelope and its symbolism. The same design methodology that can entice countless variations from the square grid can at once appear simple, and in another moment precious: from the pragmatic convention centers for Frankfurt and Berlin to the representative residence of the German ambassador in Washington. What does this mean for the museum as such and - posed more concretely - where can the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Hamburg rightly take its place here?

One could initially take the question literally; then it points at the relationship to the core of the whole, to the old and noble Kunsthalle. The beautiful and unusual masonry building in forms from the neo-Renaissance is now over 130 years old. It was already expanded once, at the beginning of this century, with the cubical and classical addition in light limestone connecting directly toward the main train station. The other side remained for the Gallery of Contemporary Art, a long plateau with a view of the dam between the Binnenalster and Aussenalster water ways. The dreary boxes of the Kunsthhaus and the Kunstverein, which had stood here since the sixties and degraded the exclusive site to the level of a service court, were able to be razed in 1992 in order to commence with construction of the gallery. Five years earlier, and one year after it won the competition, Ungers's project was even presented at the Documenta in Kassel as the "museum in a box." The explanatory

text itself was already provocative in its lapidary self-demarkation: "As architecture, the museum is wall-space-light. The wall bounds the spaces. The flow of spaces effects the transformation between generosity and intimacy, uniformity and free form, light and dark, confinement and expanse, as well as inside and outside. The room sequence - the enfilade - is a museum."

Ungers advanced the new Gallery of Contemporary Art up to the front row and made it the terminating element in the row of buildings bordering the water of the Binnenalster like an inner-city square. The manner in which the radiant solitary is placed in this panorama while retaining its own exclusive distance is just as precisely fine-tuned as its relationship to the Kunsthalle.

The beveled base of red Swedish granite plays with the memory of the Glockengiesserwall (bell foundry rampart) that once ran through here. The bevel belongs in equal measure to the street space as well as to the museum. Sitting on top and identical on all four sides is the cube, clad in light-colored Portuguese limestone. Joints and window divisions trace the square as design module on the façade while a rising window axis establishes the building midsection.

Slightly raised, the base reaches to the front of the Kunsthalle, with the artificial island rising once more and crystallizing into a connecting platform. Ian Hamilton Finlay inscribed the base - in Roman type, and in four languages - with the first work of art: "Homeland is not a country; it is a community of feelings." What is blowing here, then - in the heavens above us, and in the art before and behind us - is the wind of enlightenment. Although only its wind, this is not a place of assembly for fraternal convocation. Rather, it is a place of sentimental empathy for humanity, which now finds its highest expression and hope solely in art.

The seismic uplifting of the tectonic plates is a hint as well of that which lies hidden beneath. The more appropriate entrance into this underworld offers itself, then, not through the foyer in the cube, but once again through the point of departure, the Kunsthalle.

From here, Jenny Holzer's light band draws us down the long stair to the lower most exhibition level, into a labyrinthine and cavernous space for the exhibition of art. Despite the considerable room height, one cannot fully forget the oppressiveness and the constriction unique to both genuine and false underworlds. An enfilade would have opened a passage and a view to the cube, had Richard Serra not blocked the path with an installation titled *Splashing, Seeing is Believing*. "Art first!" is another disarmingly ambiguous message in this small intervention.

The black floor, made from industrial ceramic tiles, patiently cooperates even with works like this one in poured lead. Possible damages to the floor can be easily and inexpensively repaired. The floor appears at once workshop-like and then again elegant. For this reason one will find it in (nearly) every space in which art is on exhibition while ascending through the cube.

Nonetheless, our first impression would have been much different had we chosen the stately, ground-level entrance into the gallery. Once inside, the central hall directs our view upward through all levels to the very top, where it is drawn out by a house-like skylight. Two flights of stairs, leading upward while knowing nothing of each other, wrap themselves simultaneously around this space. Here, too, their proportions are steep and nearly sublime in nature. The exhibition spaces form a second outer circuit - white, of course, and with the possibility of flexible division.

The light changes from floor to floor. On the ground floor, with its floor-to-ceiling fenestration, a first gallery space lies between the bistro and the auditorium. Here, Ungers already suggests that he won't hesitate to project art in to the city: art as a part of the museum once again becomes a part of the urban culture whence it arises. This is particularly evident on the second floor, where the windows reach from the floor up to half of the room height, admitting light rich in effect around the sides. Even when pure artificial light from the neon bays predominates in the floor above and skylights supplemented with artificial lighting illuminate the uppermost floor, the continuous fenestration of the middle axis always establishes contact with the outside world and with the inside

world via the central hall running straight through the building. At least as long as the sensor-driven cloth sunshading remains open, the Gallery of Contemporary Art is also a compass, offering orientation and a lookout tower replete with perfect picture-postcard views.

Here in the cube the square as the unit of measurement is omnipresent, from the ground plan to the flooring and the furnishings up to the sunken lighting fixtures, including those for the emergency exits. The fire extinguishers and other installations have, like much else, disappeared into the walls. Everything is already in place in the concept. That offers quietude and the necessary concentration, without the design degenerating into meek incognizance or an unconscious collection of unrelated solutions.

If the interconnectedness with the outer world holds out to the domain of artistic self-reference that there is indeed life outside art, then it can be interpreted within the wealth and diversity of the elementary realm, that there is equally an idea of architecture that withdraws from art (and life). But only when art is in this triangulation does it, too, receive that of which it is needful: resistance and free space.