

International colloquium

Gender dynamics  
and practices  
in  
architecture  
urbanism  
and landscape  
architecture

Webinar  
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# GENDER DYNAMICS AND PRACTICES IN ARCHITECTURE, URBANISM AND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

## MEMBERS OF THE COLLOQUIUM ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

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## MEMBERS OF THE COLLOQUIUM SCIENTIFICAL COMMITTEE

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## Abstract

This work inserts the relationship between Liselotte and Oswald Mathias Ungers in the larger context of couples of architects and other intellectual professionals in the Second Post-War period. The paper is structured in three parts. The first part introduces the case study at hand: the contribution of Liselotte Ungers to the intellectual production of her husband, Oswald Mathias Ungers. The second part raises the methodological difficulties of researching 'grey work', placing this case study into the discourse of contemporary gender critique. The third part evaluates the impact of this methodology on the trope of the architect's couple, challenging its possibilities and limitations.

# INTELLECTUAL HOUSEWORK

## THE CASE OF LISELOTTE UNGERS

By Giulia La Delfa, Niccolò Suraci, Alberto Geuna and James Cleverley

This work places the relationship between Liselotte and Oswald Mathias Ungers in the larger context of couples of architects and other intellectual professionals in the Second Post-War period. The paper is structured in three parts. The first part introduces the case study at hand: the contribution of Liselotte Ungers to the intellectual production of her husband, Oswald Mathias Ungers. The second part raises the methodological difficulties of researching 'grey work', placing this case study into the discourse of contemporary gender critique. The third part evaluates the impact of this methodology on the trope of the architect's couple, challenging its possibilities and limitations.

### Placing Liselotte Ungers in the Picture

1. Liselotte Ungers told the local Cologne newspaper *Blickpunkt Müngersdorf* that a friend invited her to that party purposely to introduce her to 'a toller Typ' (a nice guy). *Blickpunkt Müngersdorf* 9, Winter 2006/2007.

Liselotte Gabler met her future husband Oswald Mathias Ungers at a party in 1956 during her studies in business administration at the University of Cologne<sup>1</sup>. Both were born in 1926 in the Ruhr area: Liselotte was the daughter of bourgeois construction developers from Wuppertal, while Oswald Mathias was of more humble origins, being the son of a postman from the small village of Kaisersesch. By the time the two met, Oswald Mathias Ungers was already actively involved in architecture, having graduated in 1950s from TU Dortmund, and had started his own office the same year in Cologne. His practice would soon attract the attention of the architectural press as a rising star in the German architectural panorama. The couple married later that year, initiating a relationship that would last

2. Famously, a visit by Italian architects Aldo Rossi and Giorgio Grassi in 1960 resulted in the publication of a seminal article on Casabella. Aldo Rossi, "Un giovane architetto tedesco: Oswald Mathias Ungers / A Young German Architect: Oswald Mathias Ungers", *Casabella* 244, October 1960, 22-37.

3. Alberto Geuna, Niccolò Suraci, and Giulia La Delfa, "Go West OMU", *San Rocco* 16 (2018): 62-8.

4. The library is located in the former courtyard of the Belvederestrasse villa, originally built in 1958.

5. An anecdote from the interview, involving the Ungers children throwing snowballs at Colin Rowe, was featured in Log 46. Cynthia Davidson, "Observations on Snowballs", *Log* 46 (2019): 60.

6. As Sophia Ungers stated during our interview: "When we were in Germany, my mother had worked in the office and helped in that way". Her statement was corroborated by Anja Sieber-Albers: "In the US there was not an office to organize, so she had time to let her interests emerge more. Especially political activism".

until the death of Oswald Mathias Ungers in 2008. About a year after the wedding the design for a family house on the Belvedere Strasse in Cologne was initiated. The villa, which Ungers designed for himself, his newly married wife and infant son Simon (born 1957), invested him with international fame<sup>2</sup>. Despite the numerous relocations the Ungers would undertake over the years this house would remain the centre of the family's universe, serving in turn as home, architectural office and, more recently, as the seat of the Ungers Archive for Architectural Research. It is in this location that, in May 2017, we had the chance of recording a conversation with Sophia Ungers (daughter of the couple) and Anja Sieber-Albers (wife of Joachim Sieber and lifelong collaborator and friend of the Ungers), which constitutes the main direct source for this article, and which was the prompt for our considerations of how to account for labour that has been historically hidden or forgotten through gender dynamics. Methodologically it became a research imperative to think about how Liselotte's work has been hidden in the shadows of her husband, and how we, as researchers, might go about uncovering that work.

The interview was enabled by the mediation of Pier Paolo Tamburelli on the occasion of our contribution to the architectural journal *San Rocco* 16<sup>3</sup>. It was conducted by Alberto Geuna and Niccolò Suraci in the library adjacent to the Belvederestrasse house known as Kubus<sup>4</sup>. Except for some short greetings in German the language spoken was English. While only Sophia Ungers was intended to participate in the conversation, Anja Sieber-Albers organically joined in. The conversation was recorded via laptop, meaning no technical recording equipment was visible in the room. We suspect this, paired with the familiar and domestic environment, played a role in shaping the conversation, which was friendly, colloquial, and rich in personal anecdotes and tales<sup>5</sup>.

The original intention of the interview was to investigate the crafting of the Ungers 1972 book *Kommunen in der Neuen Welt: 1780 – 1972*, which was written in Ithaca (New York) while OMU held a position as professor at Cornell University. The topic quickly shifted to the contribution of Liselotte Ungers. The initiative to write the book, Sophia revealed, was largely the making of Liselotte, who saw it as an intellectual reaction to stimulus of the newly discovered American context. In particular it was the transfer to Ithaca that enabled Liselotte to play such an active role. The Ithaca years are thus particularly interesting from our standpoint, as the role of Liselotte becomes explicit through her participation in the production of published work.

While we are aware from the conversation that Liselotte had a role in the architectural office in Cologne and Berlin in the late 1950s and 1960s, presumably as a chief operation officer and office manager<sup>6</sup>, her exact influence over her husband's work remains undocumented during this time. Furthermore, we are not aware of any formal work contract stipulated between the two. These difficulties are practical obstacles to



the uncovering of hidden, suppressed or forgotten labour according to gendered power dynamics. It is the challenge of the researcher to work to reveal that which has not been officially acknowledged in these spaces before, either through accessing direct testimony or through the reconsideration of published work and archival documents. Liselotte's work belongs to a grey history of the influence and contributions of women into professional industries, a contribution that has not been acknowledged until recently and whose approach requires ad hoc methodologies adapted to the specific availability of information.

In this sense the move to the US was critical in revealing Liselotte's contribution. During this time O. M. Ungers' architectural practice would be heavily reduced (O. M. Ungers would not build again until the late seventies) and his research would take a turn, drifting away from the contemporary European debate and focusing mainly on theoretical questions regarding morphology and the processes of urban change.

In this context, Liselotte started observing different living phenomena, from the alternative communities that were popping up throughout the land to the traditional native American settlements<sup>7</sup>. An interest towards the forms and practices of dwelling that she shared deeply with her husband. As Sophia states:

There was a lot of curiosity. They discovered something they did not know very well, until that moment. They used their intelligence to create some links between something they were seeing and some historical roots. So, they decided to write the book together.

The result of this interest was a series of travels that the family undertook over the summer holidays, visiting alternative communes and Native American towns across the USA and Canada<sup>8</sup>. The result of these trips was collected in the first two books authored by Liselotte and published in German by the publisher Kiepenheuer & Witsch in the Series "Pocket". The first, called *Communes in the New World 1740-1972*<sup>9</sup> and co-authored with O.M.Ungers, was a detailed ethnological study of a series of exemplary American alternative communities. The second, *The Return of the Red Man*<sup>10</sup>, focuses on the Native American communities and their architecture, from the pueblos to the reservations.

Not being an architect herself, Liselotte was never formally or officially identified as a part of a designer's couple, nor are we led to believe she acknowledged herself as part of one. As we will see, an analysis of her written work rather leads us to infer that Liselotte saw herself as an author of books about architecture and as a privileged observer to O. M. Ungers' work. Indeed, except for a handful of publications directly signed and attributed to her, she was never directly acknowledged as a contributor to her husband's work. Yet, as we previously argued in an article published

7. As Sophia Ungers stated during our interview: "The Faculty (at Cornell) was, how can we say, on traditionalist positions. Especially about Vietnam and Women. Anyway, she sometimes went in front of the architecture department, with other people, screaming slogan against the war... That was not good at all for OMU's image".

8. As Sophia Ungers states: "In the end of the 60s to the early 70s there were a very fragmented situation in America: there was the relationship between little communities and the others, the Indians who were fighting for their rights, the Vietnam war, a lot of activism, the political activism, it was a very intellectual, exciting and social time. OMU and my mother, thanks to the clear categorization of the historical communities, made a comparison between them. In particular, that allowed my parents to explore the reasons for alternative, hippie and free way of life".

9. Liselotte Ungers and Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Kommunen in der Neuen Welt 1740-1972*, Köln: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1972.

10. Liselotte Ungers, *Die Rückkehr des Roten Mannes: Indianer in den USA*, Köln: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1974.

11. Alberto Geuna et al, *op. cit.*

12. Florian Hertwerck and Sebastien Marot, *The City in The City. Berlin: a Green Archipelago. A manifesto (1977)* by Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas with Peter Riemann, Hans Kolhoff, and Arthur Ovaska. Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers for UZZ Ungers Archiv for Architectural Research, 2013.

13. Liselotte Ungers, *Die Suche nach einer neuen Wohnform*, München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1982.

14. All pictures in the book belong to the authors. Sophia Ungers testifies that the site visits took the form of family trips. Visits to communes happened during weekends, while the travelling for the book on Native Americans was done during the Summer semester break.

15. Oswald Mathias Ungers, *Die Thematisierung der Architektur*. München: Deutsche Verlags Anstalt, 1983.

16. Oswald Mathias Ungers and Stephan Vieths, *The Dialectic City*. Lausanne: Skira, 1999.

on the Magazine San Rocco in 2018<sup>11</sup>, these publications allow for the recognition of Liselotte as a ghostwriter<sup>12</sup> of sorts, whose influence is recognizable and detectable in O. M. Ungers work. As Sophia Ungers states :

She studied economics, but she was very connected to every book written by OMU. She did not study sociology, she used to read a lot of books on middle class families. I am pretty sure she read engineering books. She was a book lover.

When the family moved back from the United States, Liselotte returned to her occupation as office manager. Yet, she would continue to write and publish. *The Search for a New Living Form*<sup>13</sup>, published in 1983, is an ideal prosecution of the themes developed previously in the American books. While focusing on a markedly different topic (the book focuses on the Siedlung projects of Czechoslovakia and the Weimar Republic of the 1920s), the method employed in the research is reminiscent of the one the Ungers used in the United States, as the archival research is complemented by extensive site visits<sup>14</sup>. In this way the original designs of the settlements are juxtaposed to the contemporary dwelling practices that characterize them, allowing for a comparative evaluation and serious considerations regarding the development of modern architecture throughout time. The innovative sophistication of this analytical method doesn't merely demonstrate the intellectual depth of Liselotte Ungers herself, but also illustrates how the reflections developed in the same time period by O.M.Ungers in publications such as *The Thematization of Architecture*<sup>15</sup> adhere and complement his wife's work.

Liselotte published her fourth and last book in 2002, titled *Über Architekten - Leben, Werk und Theorie*. This last publication, which appears after a significant gap in time, is quite different from the previous ones, as it constitutes a collective biography of famous architects. The book is a comparative study of the theories and works of these figures. Of the 23 architects involved, 21 are male. Denise Scott - Brown and Alison Smithson, the only two female architects on the list, are included as part of the couples they formed with their respective husbands: Robert Venturi and Peter Smithson. In the section dedicated to her husband Oswald Mathias Ungers, Liselotte makes no mention of her own contribution to his career, nor does she paint herself in the picture as part of an intellectual couple. The choice of architects in the book is not neutral: the 21 cases are examples of architects that constitute a precedent for O.M. Ungers, being figures that developed an architectural theory alongside their built work. Again, the book enters into a dialogue with O.M. Ungers own written work, being published shortly after Ungers' most comprehensively theoretical book: the *Dialectic City*<sup>16</sup>.

## 'Grey Areas'

The case of Liselotte Ungers, in particular her relative obscurity in relation to male figures in architecture from the era, not least her husband, provides a good example of the dynamic of the trope of the 'architect's couple'. While we can certainly find numerous examples of architect's couples in the literature, these tend to have been only recognised as separate cases. Indeed, the architect's couple has rarely been named or commented on as a post-war phenomenon belonging to the wider narrative of the increasing participation of women in architecture, part of a broader pattern of engagement in professional labour.

This paper sees the work of Liselotte Ungers as an example of the work of women in architecture that belongs to this transitional period. This is part of a grey area, in which women have been somewhat hidden behind the men who were part of their lives. We propose Liselotte's functions as a 'missing link' between the women in these architect's couples, and other patterns which have begun to be recognised.

Liselotte was responsible for office management, day-to-day communication, administration and, after co-writing books with her husband, she published her own books. Her case is a prime example of what we are calling 'intellectual housework', following the arguments of feminist writers such as Federici, who argued for the legitimacy of women's labour, and who challenged the patriarchal capitalist society for failing to provide wages for housework and other gendered labour. Interestingly, our research has uncovered another scholar who has used this term and used it to describe a case that bears many similarities with the patterns and phenomena with which we intend it. Ursula Huws, (Professor of Labor and Globalisation at the University of Hertfordshire) uses the same term to describe the work of her aunt, Jaqueline Tyrhwitt, who was an influential figure in 20th century Urban Planning and Design: 'one of the most important people you never heard of'<sup>17</sup>. Huws describes Tyrhwitt's labour thus:

She brought people from across the disciplines together in networks, organised conferences, designed courses, wrote textbooks, put together grant proposals, edited and translated other people's work, negotiated with publishers, founded and edited journals, intervened tactfully to bring peace between warring egos, encouraged young scholars and artists, introducing them to potential employers and patrons, and generally facilitated the flowering of others' work. Much of her career was precarious, slipping from one short-term post or freelance contract to another, denied tenure and dependent on the goodwill of male sponsors.

17. Ursula Huws, "Being Got. Or Not", *Ursula Huws' blog*, 29 October, 2016, <https://ursulahuws.wordpress.com/2016/10/29/being-got-or-not/>

This research, which promises to uncover ‘intellectual housework’ and other forms of grey areas that have been hidden in the shadows of historically prominent male figures in history, has the potential to assist not only in re-righting and re-writing the wrongs of oppressive gender structures in the past, but in contributing to the work of undoing gendered assumptions about talent, intellect, opportunity and ability in the present.

In this sense the case of Liselotte acquires a peculiar meaning due to the presence of a published body of work. Her books allow for an examination of the contribution to her husband’s work based on tangible documents. From the publishing of *Communes in the New World 1740-1972* Liselotte’s books generate a dialogue with her husband’s publications that demonstrates the existence of a meaningful intellectual contribution on her part, while also alluding to a wider conversation on architecture between husband and wife over the decades.

### **Evaluating the Impact**

As we have seen, the conversation with Sophia Ungers and Anja Sieber-Albers allowed us to unveil part of the contribution of Liselotte Ungers to her husband’s work. It is important to note that this result was a byproduct of research dedicated to the study of a specific book, the only one in which OMU and Liselotte were both recognised as authors. It is this key moment of recognition that allowed for the establishment of a hypothetical recognition of the Ungers as an architect’s couple. In terms of data collection, the study of the book provided for a concrete backdrop on which the shadow of Liselotte assumed a clear delineation. In the absence of it, the content of such an intimate and informal conversation would have a merely anecdotal value.

The importance of Liselotte Unger’s underestimated role became clear in the course of the conversation with Sophia Ungers and Anja Sieber-Albers and it surprised us. Prior to the conversation we assumed the 1972 book to be merely a slightly dissonant chapter in O. M. Ungers’ production as an author. We approached the subject of the *Commune* book as a group of young architects interested in exploring new perspectives on O.M. Unger’s work, but following the conversation we realized that this objective could not be achieved by merely studying the figure of the architect in isolation. The network of people surrounding O.M. Ungers, and Liselotte in primis, became the focus of our attention.

In this sense the research, started initially by Alberto Geuna and Niccolò Suraci, found in Giulia La Delfa’s interest in domesticity a fundamental addition. We started observing the work of O. M. Ungers not as an authorial research, but as a collective product of the intellectual environment of the Ungers household, particularly focusing on the role of his wife Liselotte.

Yet, as we started interpreting the subject in terms of gender relations, we felt the need to include a specialized figure in the team. We thus contacted James Cleverley, who holds a PhD. in German Studies with a focus on post-war gender relations, to help us make sense of the information at our disposal.

In order to understand more clearly the changes and shifts that occurred in the decades after World War II, there is a need to interrogate the archive thoroughly, looking for details and documents which may not have previously been considered so important when tracing the history of architecture. This research constitutes what this paper suggests as the 'next steps' in the historical, social and political refiguring of our understanding of women in architecture. Just how crucial it is to understand the precise contribution of the pioneering women in architecture is clear, as Huws writes: 'perhaps we are all shaped by larger patterns which have persisted over the last century despite the huge changes that have been made in women's public positions.'<sup>18</sup> Evidence of the 'grey work' of women architects, and professional women (like Ungers) working immediately adjacent to and with architects, will help shed light on the 'grey history' of the influence and contributions of women into professional industries which still fail to fully acknowledge the roles of those who went before. The case of Liselotte Ungers allows us to question established narratives on gender dynamics of married couples in the history of architecture, reframing the role of the male author in light of a more inclusive perspective.

18. Ibidem

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This international colloquium entitled 'Gender dynamics and practices in architecture, urbanism and landscape architecture' (webinar February 2020) brought together contributions for an assessment of the gains and limits of feminization and gender dynamics at work in the professional worlds of architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture in France, fifty years after the 'massive' entry of women into architecture schools in 1968. It allowed for the sharing of data and analyse the modalities, temporalities, and effects of the social and historical process of transformation of gender relations and, more broadly, of power relations (based on race, social class, etc.) with an intersectional perspective.

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