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Light, Form, and Scale.
On Seven Sacred Spaces by Simon Ungers¹

Abstract

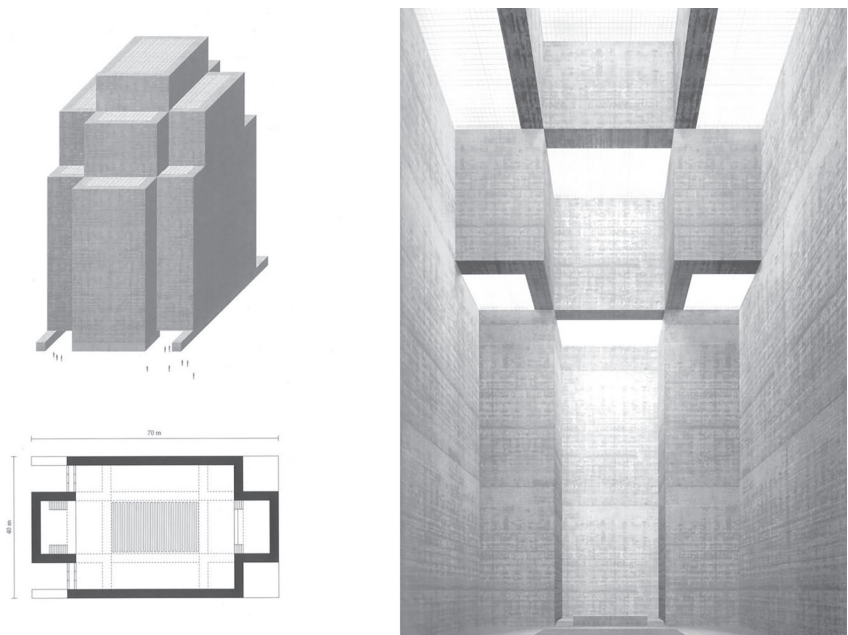
Starting from the figure of Étienne-Louis Boullée we try to face a new reading of the *Seven Sacred Spaces* by Simon Ungers. Through the association of seven types of *sacred spaces* we determine the binomials that link the idea of sacred space, developed by Ungers, and the ability of buildings, like poetry, to *awaken* our senses that, for Boullée, leads architecture - as art - towards the *sublime*.

Keywords

Poetry — Measure — Light — Sublime — Character

Seven Sacred Spaces (*Sieben Sakrale Räume*) is the title of a series of works exhibited by the architect and artist Simon Ungers (1957-2006) – who grew up in Germany and then moved to the United States – in the exhibition space of Sankt Peter in Cologne in 2003. In conjunction with the exhibition the catalogue *Sieben Sakrale Räume* was published, which contains a very interesting introduction by the theologian Friedhelm Meneke on the dimensions of sacred space (Ungers 2003). In the architectural designs, which can also be described as “artistic works”², Simon Ungers examines seven fundamental types of sacred architecture: Basilica, Minster, Synagogue, Mosque, Church and Chapel. For the purpose of useful comparison, various works of architecture are presented together on the same scale in plan, elevation and section views, and are enriched with spatial drawings of interiors and exteriors. From an architectural perspective, the respective “objects descriptions” are supplemented by simplified wooden models. In this series, the architecturally constitutive dimension of the “place” is elided entirely, endowing each architectural design with a theoretical or model-like aspect, or – depending on the “education” of the observer’s eye – each artistic work with an object-like or sculptural character. In this view, the “place” is only relevant as the space in which these designs/artworks are exhibited.

The only relevant “place” is the sacred space of Sankt Peter since the “artworks”³ are in no way related to specific places, rather they are autonomous regardless of whether they are seen as works of architecture or whereas sculptures. Similarly, even in Ungers’ architectural projects, “place” takes on a secondary role: topographical considerations may be crucial and may be exploited in order to intensify the monumentalization

**Fig. 1**

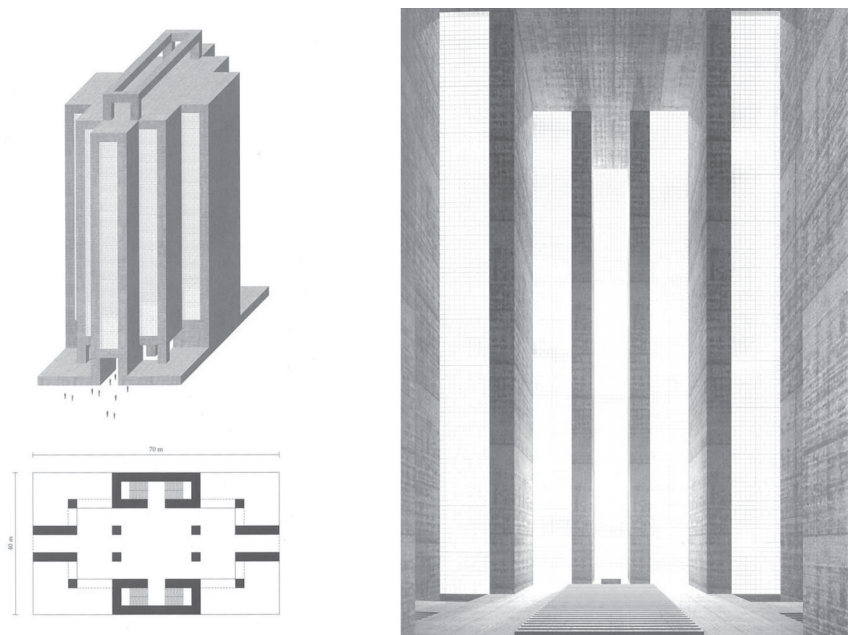
Simon Ungers, «Basilika» (da *Sieben sakrale Räume*, Köln 2003). della Scuola.

of form, for example with the T-House or other works by the German architect, but his buildings are autonomous, self-referential objects, what is to say functional, accessible, inhabitable sculptures. In particular, in the architecture of Simon Ungers it's the interior, closely linked to the form of the building, that takes on a primary role: these are architectural spaces, and as such interiors constantly imbued with intentionality. And it may be precisely the term “function”, apparently meaningless, that is equivalent to a constitutive prerequisite of space and form in the works of the German architect, who always attributes a typological programme to his works. Reference is made to architectural types, that is to say the museum, the theatre, the library, and so on, which are continually elaborated until they arrive at ever-changing variations by virtue of superordinate ideas and expanded conditions – for example, massiveness, the joint, the opening, or material – and these types are raised to the level of an architectural language in space and form, and thus to the level of the speech.

Similarly, in the recent history of art there are references to this research work – for example, in the artistic works of Richard Serra, Carl Andre, Kazimir Malevich –, *exempla* that can also be found in the history of architecture: just think of El Lissitzky's Constructivist designs, and in particular the “speaking” architecture of Étienne-Louis Boullée. We will be invoking Boullée in order to approach Ungers' *Seven Sacred Spaces* from a sensual and symbolic perspective under the categories of poetry, the object, measure, proportion, light, character, and the sublime.

The Beautiful and the Sublime

The English philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-1797) was the first to oppose the sublime to the beautiful as an actual category. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* of 1758 (Burke 1956/1987), the term is elaborated as a basic phenomenon of aesthetic experience. For Burke, the senses and powers of the imagination – originally the same for all people, though developed differently by individuals – constitute the sole foundational elements of aesthetic experience. For the philosopher, the beautiful and the sublime are the antithetical basic categories of aesthetics, and their origin is found in the human instinct for conviviality and self-preservation.

**Fig. 2**

Simon Ungers, «Dom» (da Sieben sakrale Räume, Köln 2003).

The intrinsically pleasant feelings of sympathy and benevolence arise from the impulse to social solidarity and are triggered by the feeling of the beautiful. In contrast, the feeling of the sublime arises from the experience of fear. To objects, Burke argues, correspond actual qualities that he considers and specifies individually to define the contrast between the sublime and the beautiful in oppositional terms:

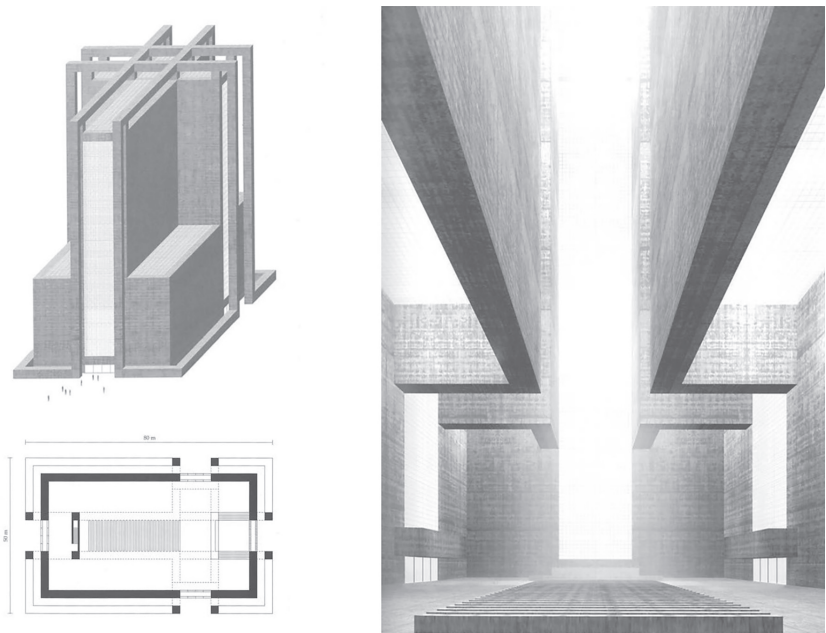
For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth and polished; the great, rugged and negligent, beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates it often makes a strong deviation; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive (Burke 1987, p. 139).

Burke's attention is focused above all on the new experience of the sublime, and it is architecture – with its consubstantial aptitude for great size, for “vastness” – that appears particularly suited to giving expression to this new feeling. Infinitude as the source of the sublime finds its architectural expression in the seemingly endless succession of columns of a colonnade; spaces are meant to appear dark, gloomy and gloomy; to achieve a melancholic immensity, materials and ornamentation must confer dark and gloomy tones, as with black, brown or dark purple (Burke 1987a).

The qualities of the sublime – and the same is true of beauty – are concretely present in objects, even though aesthetic judgement is in itself subjective and therefore also linked to a question of taste (Burke 1987b).

“E io anche son pittore”⁴

«That is my belief. Our buildings – and our public buildings in particular – should be to some extent poems. The impression they make on us should arouse in us sensations that correspond to the function of the building in question»¹⁰. The terminology used by Étienne-Louis Boullée already reveals the purpose for which he developed his new aesthetic: buildings are designed to directly capture our senses, like poetry, and should awaken in us feelings, impulses that emerge from the “magical poetry” of which architecture is capable.

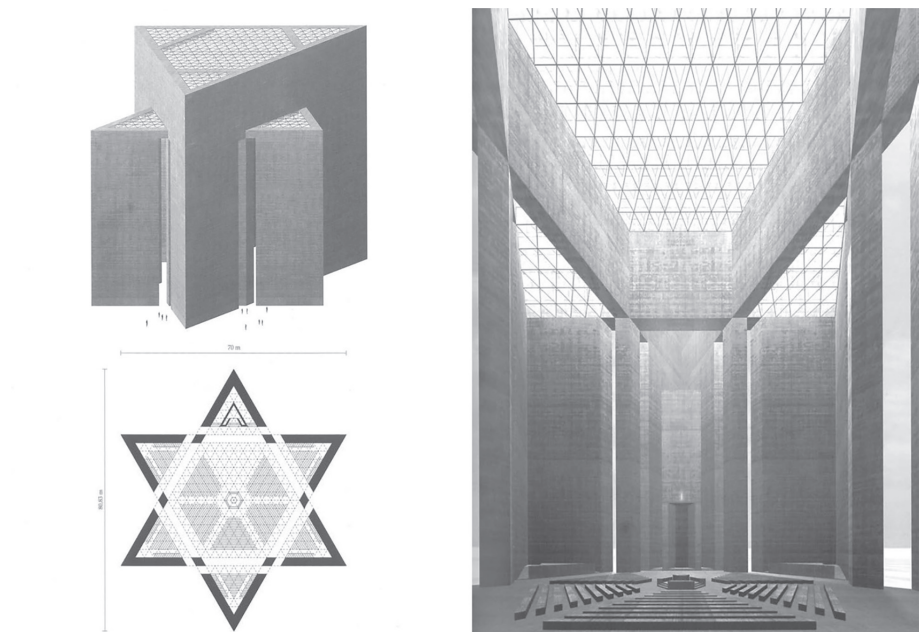
**Fig. 3**

Simon Ungers, «Kathedrale»
(da Sieben sakrale Räume, Köln
2003).

For Boullée, poetry is grounded in the art of eliciting figurative impressions through the involvement of the body. It is said that it is the mass of objects and its proportions, based on regularity, symmetry, on “harmonious appearance”, that give rise to sensations in the observer (Boullée 1967, p. 66). If architecture must act on our senses and in this way know, then it must imitate the principles of nature: «I borrow the valuable effects of the latter. I adapt them to art. And it is these gifts of nature that ennoble me to raise art to the sublime» (Boullée 1967, p. 90).

Boullée wishes to guide architecture as art towards sensations of the sublime. It is therefore not surprising that he limits to a very circumscribed series of buildings the capacity and the task of expressing the immensity and infinity of the sublime. He considers residential buildings “fruitless themes” because it is very difficult for the poetics of architecture to be fulfilled in them¹³. In the central, programmatic part of his essay, where words and images converge magnificently, he lists only public buildings. Before the third paragraph entitled “Basilicas”, Boullée devotes an autonomous paragraph to the term “Character”. By “character” he means the effect which emanates from an object and which gives rise exclusively to that sensation which is commensurate with it (Boullée 1967, p. 74). Winter appears to us black, barren, colourless, angular and hard and we become sad, gloomy, subject to fright, because this is its character (Boullée 1967, p. 75).

Returning to the Basilica, to sacred space, and, through analogy with his reflections on nature, passing through the “dark” and “mysterious” forest, Boullée comes to the conclusion that in architectural space it is only through the way light is allowed to enter that the desired effect is achieved. «It is light that produces impressions which arouse in us various contradictory sensations depending on whether they are brilliant or somber» (Boullée 1967, pp. 85-86). The effects of light condition the appropriate character of the sacred space, giving rise to a corresponding state of mind in the spectator. Bright light, says Boullée, fills the spirit with joy while, on the contrary, a gloomy space arouses sadness. And where the light penetrates the space by an indirect route, without the observer perceiving where it originates, the result is an “unfathomable” and “mysterious” impression that produces an “enchanted magic” (Boullée 1967, p. 86).

**Fig. 4**

Simon Ungers, «Synagoge» (da *Sieben sakrale Räume*, Köln 2003). Firmian, Bolzano, 2014.

Seven terms

Having completed this *excursus* on Burke and Boullée, we now return, better equipped on the logical terms of the question, to Simon Ungers' *Seven Sacred Spaces*.

I Poetry (the Basilica)

Ungers' *Seven Sacred Spaces* give rise to figurative perceptions. They are figurative in the sense that their respective purposes, those suggested by the names given to them – for example, “Basilica” – are investigated typologically, translated immediately and unequivocally into architecture, depicted and embodied by an architectural idea. The “magic poetry” that allows the space or form to appear as an object emerges all the more strikingly the more – and more clearly – ideas of purpose and the space converge.

II Object (the Cathedral)

The effect achieved derives entirely from the impressive massiveness of the architecture, its simple, polished forms, thick, heavy walls, massive pillars and ceilings. The few elements used are presented in a regular way and mostly follow a symmetrical arrangement. Because of the chosen material, rough concrete, the surfaces of the object appear differently depending on the incident light.

III Measure (the Cathedral)

The plan, section and elevation drawings are enriched with the dimensions of the exterior shown in metres. Depending on the type of construction, the architectural objects of the Cathedral show graduated dimensions. Number and size refer to a systemic context. The order is constructed in a modular way and can be traced back to the thickness of the parts.

IV Proportion (the Synagogue)

Object and dimension determine the proportions of space and form. The Synagogue is commensurably divisible, the proportions of the space can be traced to the opening, just as the proportions of the form can be traced to the pillars. Boullée speaks of “harmonious appearance”.

Ungers inserts references to scale, to the proportionality between man and architecture. Certain objects of furniture, such as benches, are introduced into the interior to show the “vastness” of the architecture. Outside the sacred building, on the other hand, tiny human figures appear.

V Light (the Mosque)

Light determines the atmosphere of sacred spaces in a decisive way: «The manipulation of light is the essence of sacred space» (Ungers 2005). White light enters through translucent windows in the perimeter walls and ceiling. In the Mosque, Ungers has completely renounced bright light and deep shade. The spaces are neutral in their lighting; overly theatrical effects are avoided, and only occasionally does light enter the building indirectly.

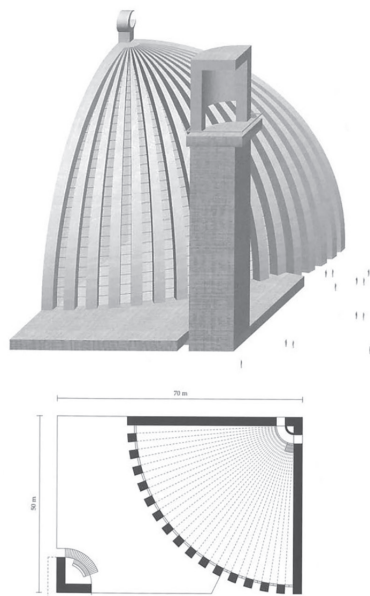
VI Character (the Church)

Similar to Boullée’s assertion in his *Essay on Art*, Simon Ungers believes that art can bring architecture to the level of speech. Ungers allows his *Seven Sacred Spaces* to speak to us, but they must remain open if the German architect is to ask questions similar to those raised by Boullée in his preoccupation with sacred architecture; questions, for example, about the “profound respect” that accompanies religious faith, for a “grandeur” that “imposes itself on the onlooker, filling him with astonishment and wonder”, for the “inconceivable”, and so forth (Boullée 1967).

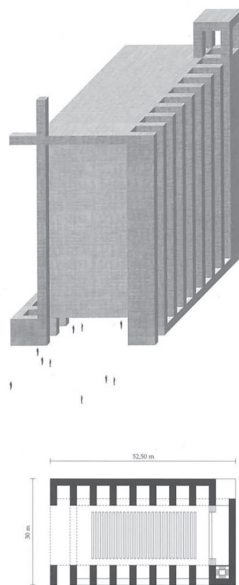
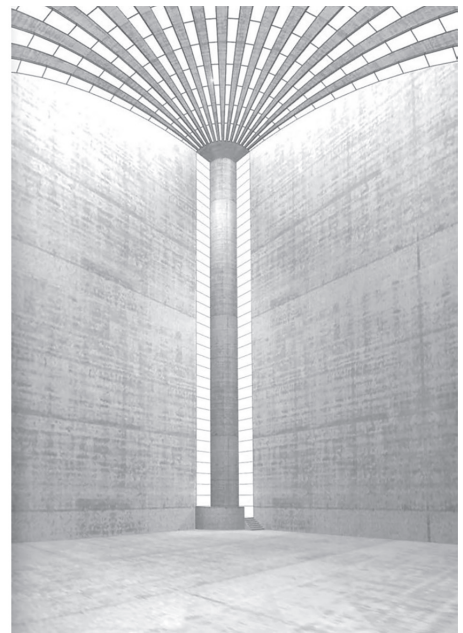
VII Sublimity (the Chapel)

The sublime sacred space may aim at transcendence, but in Ungers’ works this higher purpose is present only as an abstract idea, and so remains entirely in the background against which his architecture appears as an art form.

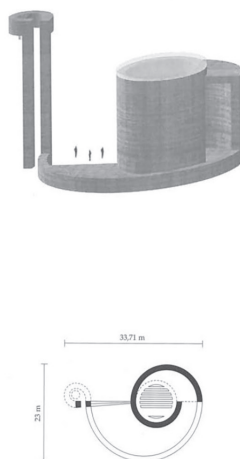
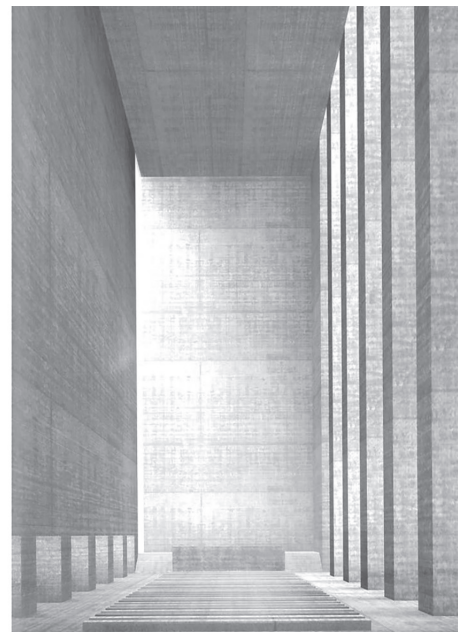
In conclusion, on the occasion of the interview with Jos Bosman in 2005, Simon Ungers (2005) states: «For me thinking about sacred space is thinking about architecture in its purest form. Sacred space is not contaminated by programmatic concerns. (...) It is pure light, form and scale and this was the motivation for doing the series».

**Fig. 5**

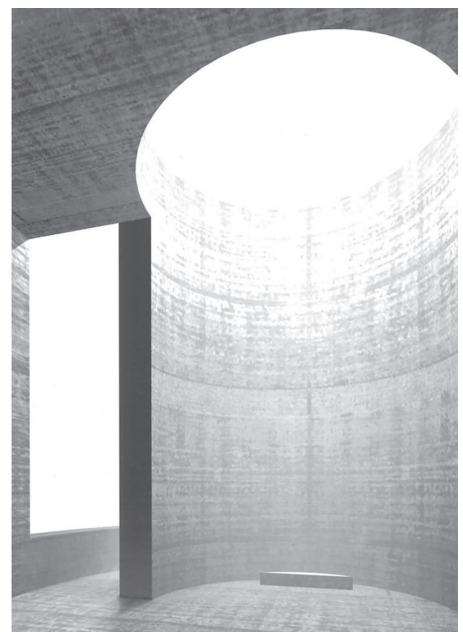
Simon Ungers, «Moschee» (da *Sieben sakrale Räume*, Köln 2003).

**Fig. 6**

Simon Ungers, «Kirche» (da *Sieben sakrale Räume*, Köln 2003).

**Fig. 7**

Simon Ungers, «Kapelle» (da *Sieben sakrale Räume*, Köln 2003).



Notes

¹ *Lectio* by Uwe Schröder on the occasion of the Symposium entitled “Holy Spaces. On the Construction of Sacred Architecture” at the Politecnico di Milano on 18 March 2019.

² In Simon Ungers’ work, it seems appropriate to speak of both “architectural project” and “artistic works”.

³ The term is used here as a synonym for “project”.

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Uwe Schröder (Bonn 1964) is an architect and professor at the RWTH University in Aachen. In 1993 he founded his architectural office in Bonn, devoting himself to the theory and practice of design. From 2004 to 2008 he taught as full professor of architectural theory and design at the TH in Cologne. Since 2008 he has been a professor at the Department of Spatial Formation at RWTH Aachen University. He has also served as visiting professor at several Italian universities, including Bologna, Naples, Bari, Catania, Milan and Parma.