

## Towards a Dialectic Object (after O.M. Ungers)

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We have reached a point at which any attempt to find a complete and self-contained urban system is doomed to failure from the outset.<sup>1</sup>

—O.M. Ungers, *The Dialectic City*

Thus introduces German architect Oswald Mathias Ungers the idea of the “dialectic city” in his 1997 book of the same title. A decisive break with the long (and ongoing) lineage of *exclusive* theories of urbanism ever since CIAM’s Functional City, Ungers’ dialectic city remains to date one of the few truly *inclusive* theories. Challenging the modernist concept of the city as singular plannable system, he insists that instead, it exists as a balance of coinciding opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*<sup>2</sup>), in which thesis and antithesis are suspended within a constellation of distinct layers and places. These layers – formally and ideologically discrete – only in sum define a city’s pluralistic character:

The city made up of “complementary places” consists of the largest possible variety of different parts, in each of which a special urban aspect is developed with a view to the whole. In a sense it is a system of the “city within the city.” Every part has its own special features, without however being complete or self-contained. [...] and therefore combines with other highly developed places to form a complex system, a kind of federation.<sup>3</sup>

The “morphological approach” of complementary places is complemented by a “structural approach” of the “city as layer<sup>5</sup>,” to account for infrastructures and large-scale ordering systems to provide higher degrees of urban organization. Layers can be added onto, transformed, changed, or superimposed as the city evolves, adding a dimension of change over time.

One possible outcome of this concept is the city of islands, famously explored in Ungers’ 1977 “Green Archipelago” project. Disconnected from its antithetical neighbors, each thesis takes the shape of an urban island floating in a sea of

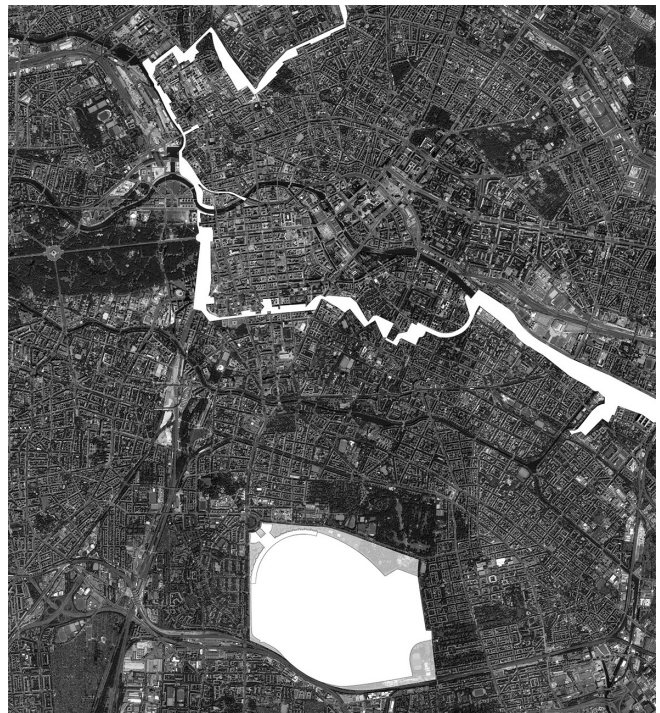


Figure 1. Two Berlin voids: the former “death strip” along the wall and the decommissioned Tempelhof airport.

x-urban formlessness, yet co-dependent in a federative system: Leonidov’s Magnitogorsk suspended next to Weinbrenner’s baroque plan of Karlsruhe in an urban space of exacerbated difference.

What is easily overlooked is that this model does not only rely on the dialectic condition between its ideal fragments, but equally between “island” and “sea”. The neutral grid upon which the islands float takes on the role of the structural layer, great equalizer, and shared common ground of the urban enterprise as such. Despite their intuitive reading as urbanisms of fragments, both the dialectic city and the archipelago rely on the authority of a binding federative principle and the civic governance of the territory that enables the morphological opposites.

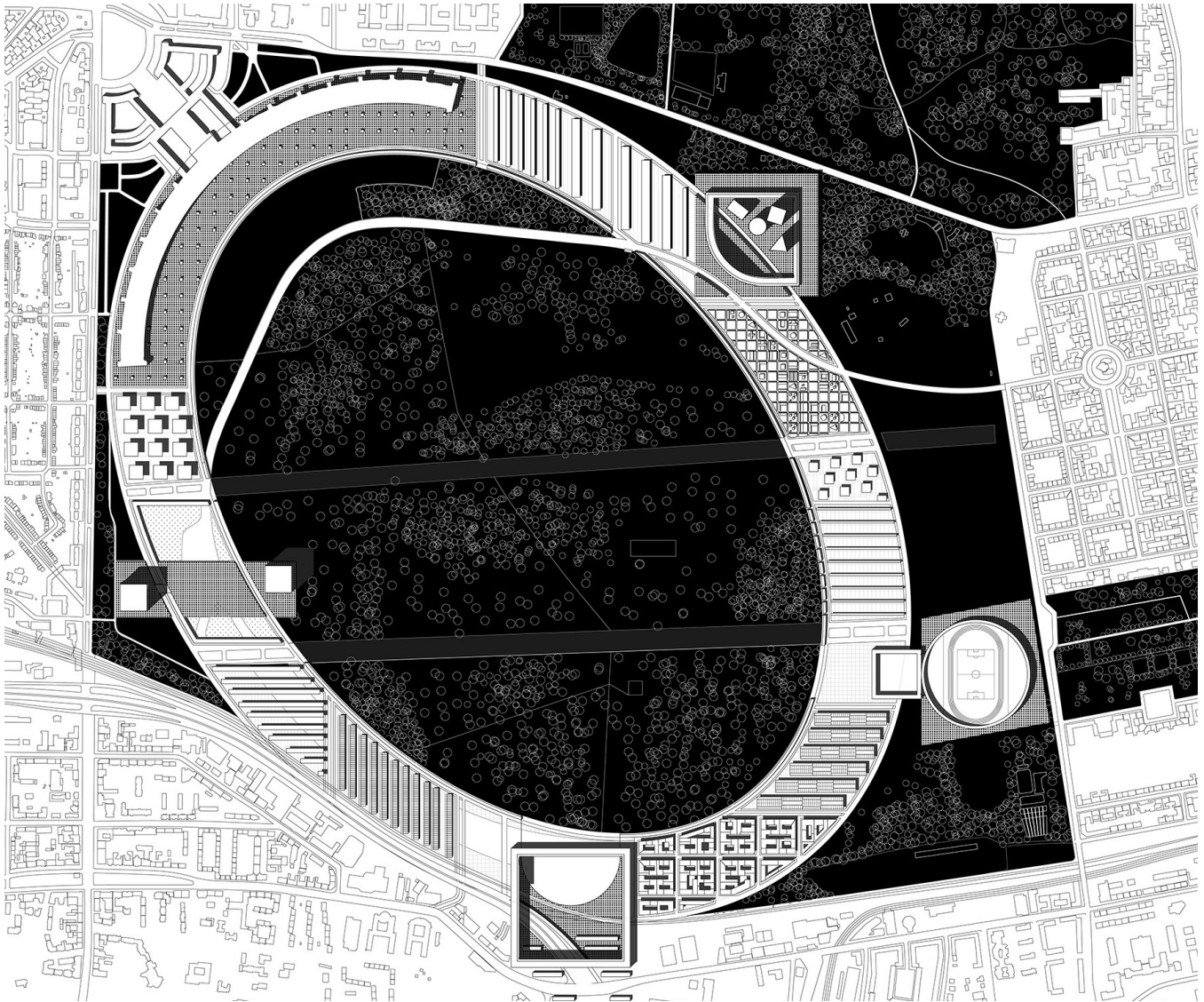


Figure 2. Tempelhof master plan. A finite urban object negotiates several dialectical relationships.



Figure 3. Tempelhof, former terminal building, Ernst Sagebiel, 1935-39. The original scheme is already characterized by a series of coinciding opposites: a technologically highly advanced infrastructure project inserted into Albert Speer's neo-baroque plan for Berlin.

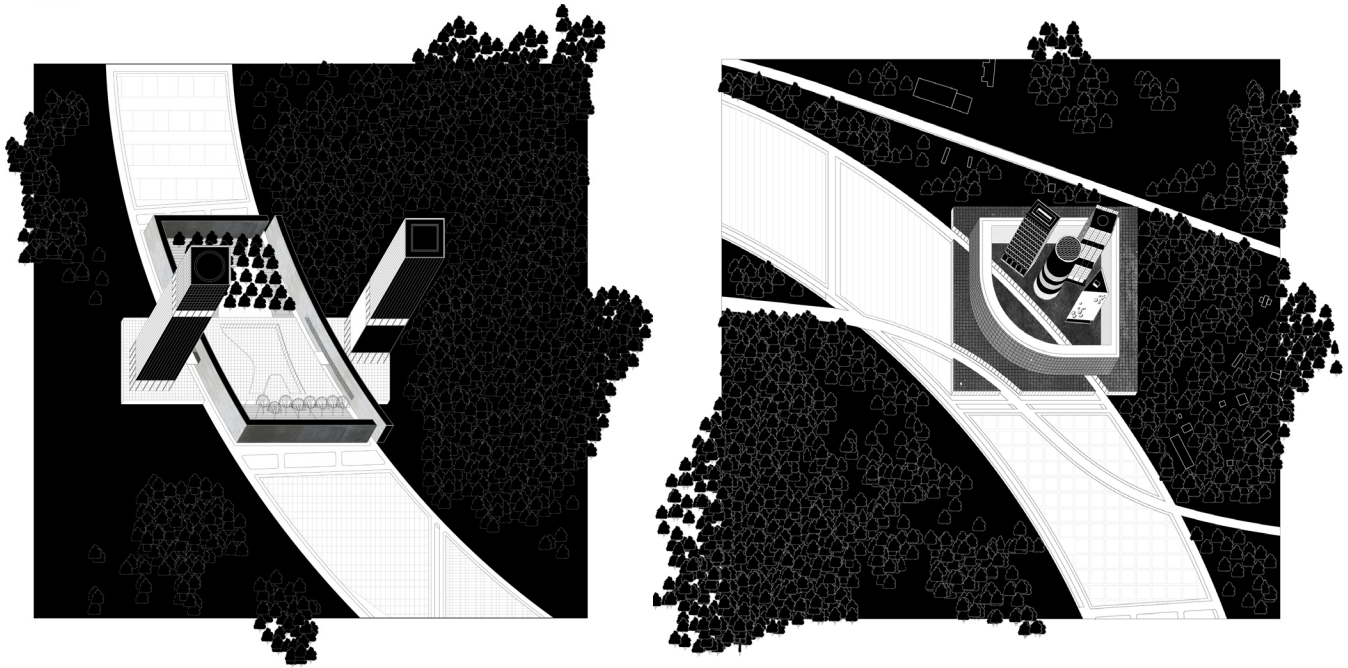


Figure 4 / 5. Monuments: A series of monumental public buildings mark strategic locations, transitions, and provide points of orientation within the urban figure.

When this civic contract falls prey to privatization, unhindered growth, economic depression, or any combination thereof (as is arguably the case in many of today’s urban environments), little is left to distinguish the islands from gated communities in a field of post-urban entropy.

How, under these circumstances, can the island itself become the guarantor of a pluralistic project in a territory no longer bound by a federative principle?

This question is at the heart of a speculative master plan for the decommissioned Berlin Tempelhof airport. The project condenses the complexities of the “dialectic city” into what one might call a “dialectic object.” Building on Tempelhof’s varied histories, it embraces the formal strength of the airfield’s elliptical figure as a superstructure to accommodate a variety of spatial theses. Weinbrenner’s Karlsruhe meets Leonidov’s Magnitogorsk again – but unlike in Ungers’ archipelago not as separate islands, but as a linear city folding back onto itself around a central park. The project proposes a shift of scale: Unlike in the dialectic city, pluralistic differences are no longer negotiated at the urban, but at the architectural scale. In a world increasingly defined by an erosion of urban-scale planning agency, the “dialectic object” thus becomes a pluralistic alternative to the homogeneity of the gated community. Several dialectic relationships are embedded in this layout:

First is the project as a megaform, an enclave in Berlin’s fabric at the scale of the Tiergarten or the former “death strip” along the Wall. Form itself becomes the organizing layer, building upon the existing airport geometry as an elliptical island of progressive aviation within Albert Speer’s retrogressive neo-baroque plan for Berlin. But where Unger’s islands float on the gridded sea of a vaguely defined territory, Tempelhof is an atoll, guarding its precious central void, and preserving the increasingly rare asset of empty space from Berlin’s hunger for developable land.

Second is the relationship between different housing morphologies embedded in the ring: The 215-meter-wide perimeter band acts as container rather than prescriptive organizer – formally finite, yet open-ended. Instead of the baroque radial organization of the original airport, subdivision becomes the strategy to accommodate a variety of prototypical urban fabric types: 19th century block structure, *Zeilenbau*, modern unités, point towers, row houses, and individually buildable plots are connected by a ring road on the exterior, and a boulevard flanked by public amenities on the interior. The variety of morphologies is subject to change over time, sections may be demolished and rebuild according to need, life span, or economic circumstances.

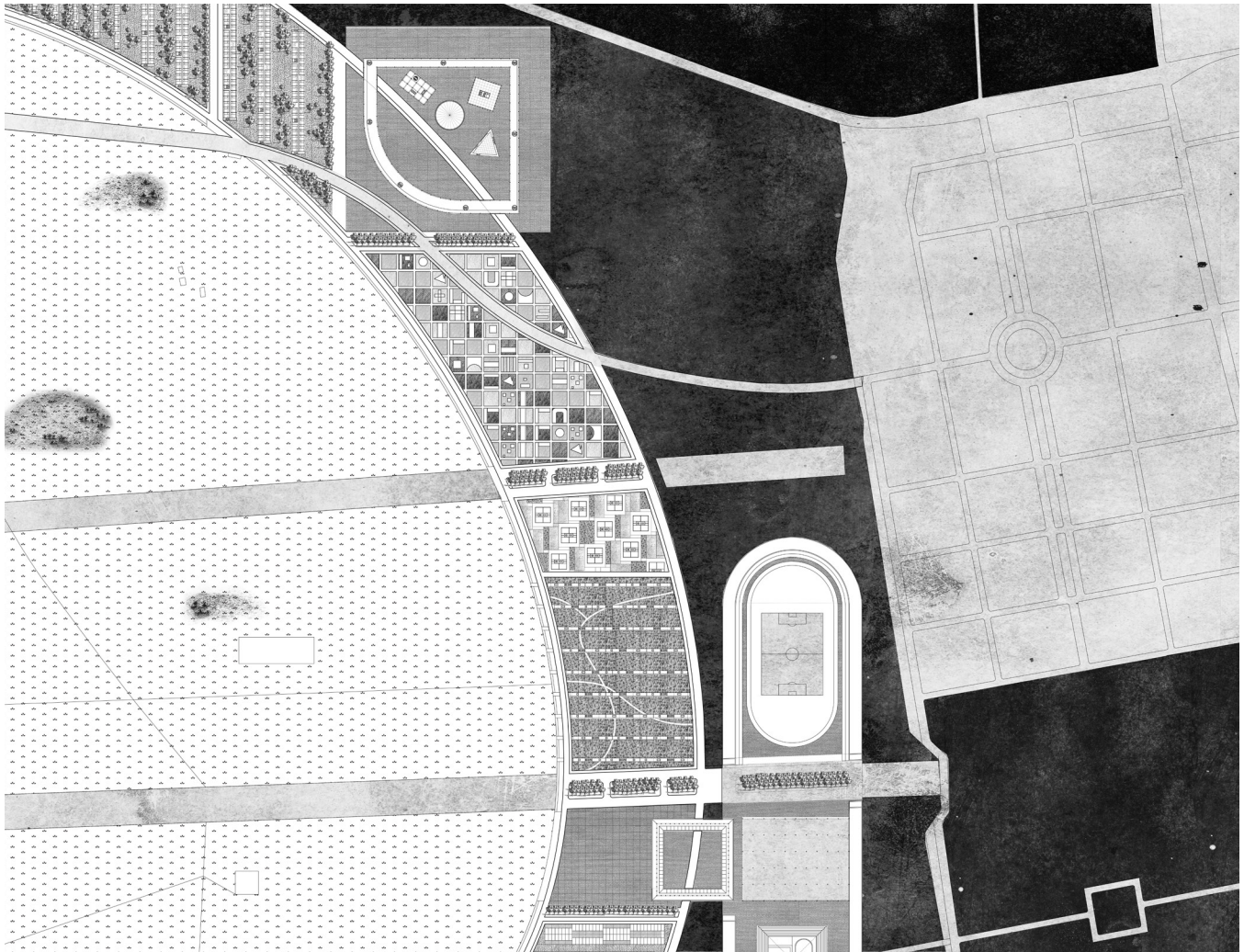


Figure 6. Northeast perimeter segment. The elliptical ring around the former airfield accommodates a wide variety of housing types.

And third is the relationship between the ring and a series of public monuments. The existing crescent-shaped terminal building (once the largest building in the world) is absolved of its role as a solitary monument, and additional monuments are placed around the perimeter, marking transitions, providing orientation within the system, as well as links to the city beyond. Half appendices, half anchors, they are neither fully integrated into the ring, nor completely independent, and provide points of orientation and connection to the city.

The project is characterized by a tentative balance between formal completeness and fragmentation. While opposite poles coexist, they never dissolve into fragments but remain dedicated

to a greater legible figural presence in the city. The project establishes a strong hierarchy of basic spatial and organizational relationships (inside/outside, object/fabric, superstructure/infill, radial/concentric), yet the dialectic object rejects the claim of totality: its formal framework does not govern every relationship, and leaves space for friction, uncomfortable adjacencies, and the resulting social opportunities.

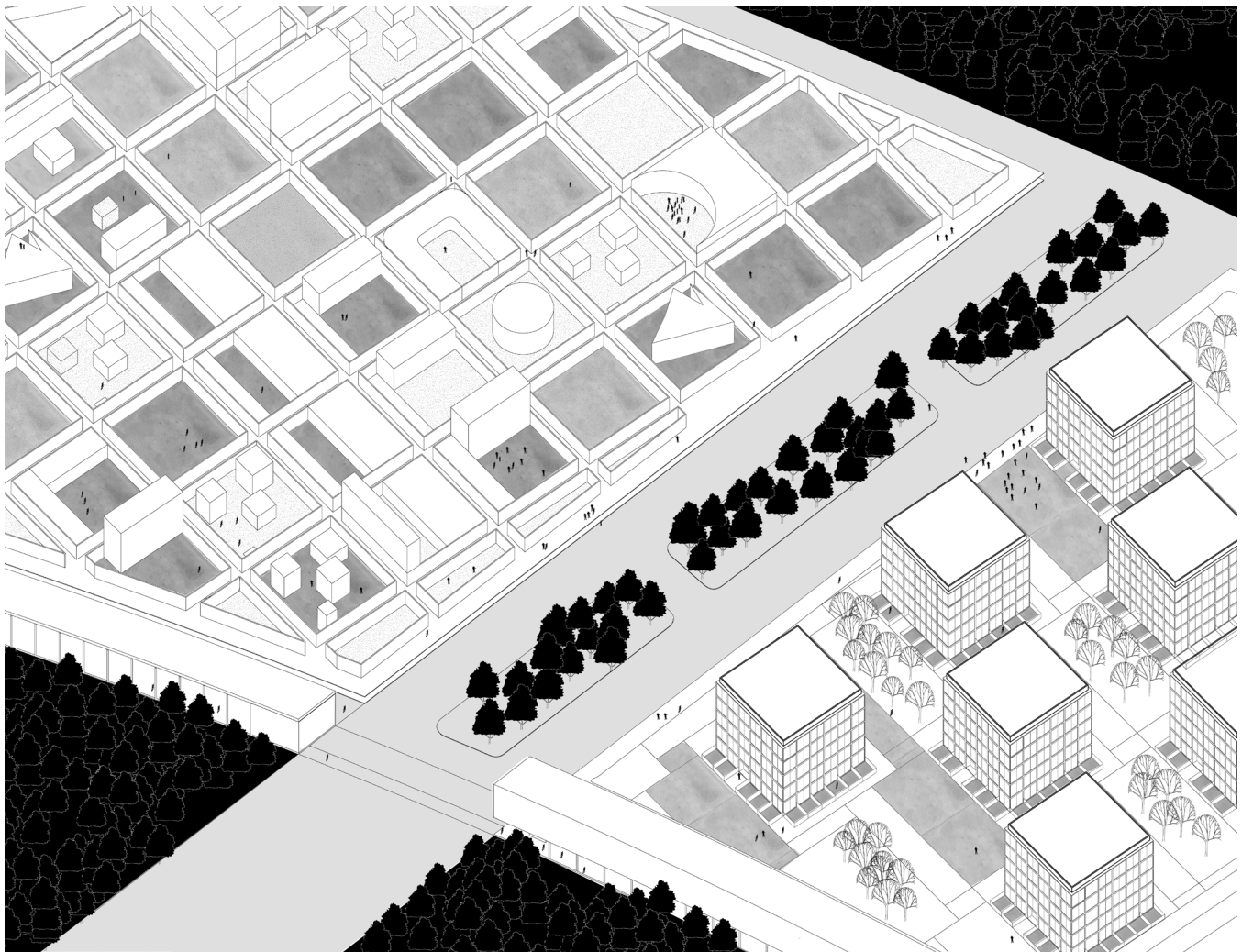


Figure 7. Northeast perimeter segment showing point tower housing and individually buildable plots.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Oswald Mathias Ungers, Stefan Vieths, *The Dialectic City* (Milan: Skira, 1997), 13.
2. a term Ungers borrows from Nicholas of Kues' *De Docta Ignorantia*. Dialectical principles and the pursuit of states of coinciding opposites are a recurring theme in Ungers' work. For a good summary, see: Sam Jacoby, "Oswald Mathias Ungers: dialectical principles of design," *The Journal of Architecture*, Vol.23, 7-8 (2018): 1230-1258, DOI: 10.1080/13602365.2018.1513415.
3. Ungers, Vieths, *The Dialectic City*, 20.
4. *ibid.*, 22.
5. *ibid.*