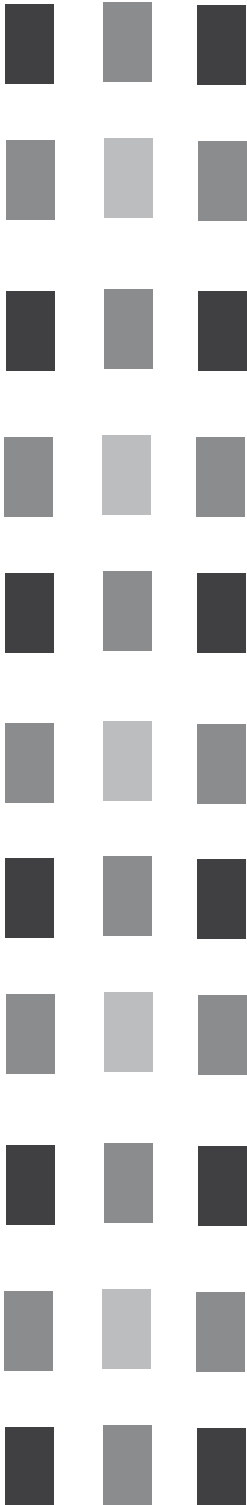


Delirium and Historical Project

Teresa Stoppani



The intent of this paper is to redefine delirium in architecture and re-engage it with(in) the historical project as a discourse of the present of architecture. Both delirium and historical project inhabit the present and are implied in it. They are at work together with their own materials, and constantly re-define themselves in their application to the specific. In this sense they are projects.

"Does not historical work possess a language that, entering perpetually into conflict with the multiple techniques of environmental formation, can function like litmus paper to verify the correctness of discourse on architecture?"¹ (fig. 1).

Historical work as defined by Tafuri is not a resolved, detached ex post discourse on the past, but a soft shifting ground which interacts with the other forces at play, still active or reactivated by the discourse itself.

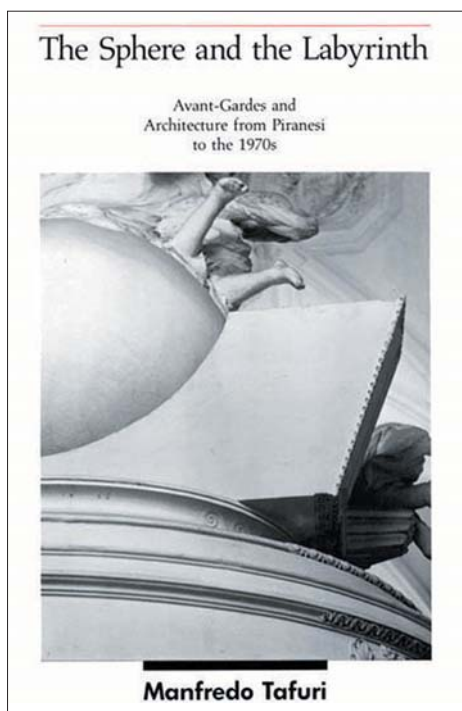
History as work in progress is not engaged a priori in supporting or demonstrating an already embraced theory. The historical work operates not on but together with the (other) 'techniques of environmental formation'. Here lies the ambiguity – and at the same time the power – of historical work thus conceived. Involved, implied with and inseparable from its materials (and while interacting with them) it must also become a ground of reference that takes measurements. But – again – a soft and shifting ground. Involvement and distance need to coexist, and this coexistence is not suspension – the impasse of architecture in the 1970s and 80s that Tafuri denounces – but the continuous re-engagement with the present.

It is in this context, and on the grounds of the Tafurian historical project, that delirium as introduced by Rem Koolhaas can be explored, repeatedly redefined, and reactivated within the architectural discourse. My argument here is that delirium as defined by Koolhaas is destined to become a closed project, that remains active only if transferred/translated from the written text to the practice of design. And yet, if the definition and modes of operations of delirium are opened and redefined, and if delirium offers a process of ongoing redefinition and adjustment of itself, it is then possible to return it to the architectural discourse, while keeping its congenial interference, implication and imbalance with the architectural project.

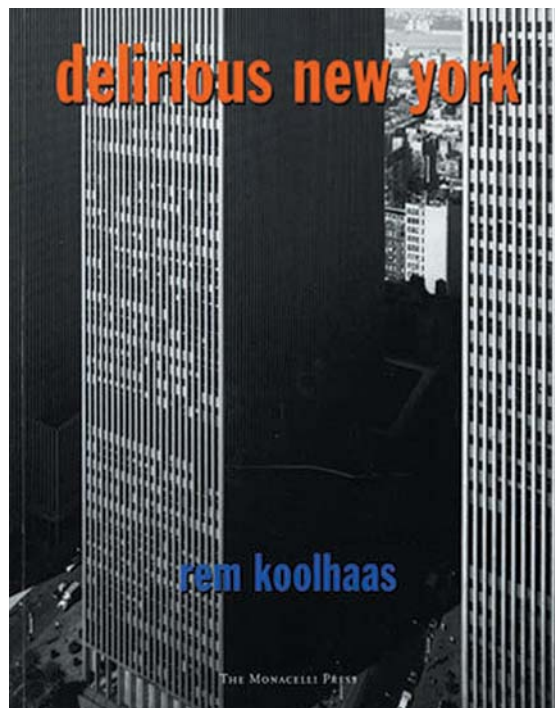
Con-texts and questions

Having set this framework of operations, it is now possible to explore the specific (con)texts within which delirium and historical project are introduced.

In the 1970s Rem Koolhaas inaugurates his project on the contemporary city by focusing on Manhattan in his *Delirious New York*² (fig. 2). The forces that produce Manhattan – unconsciously, claims Koolhaas – become the paradigm for the development of the contemporary metropolis, beyond and besides – and notwithstanding – modernism. It is these forces that Koolhaas intends to call upon and to reactivate for the production of an architecture capable to cope with the contem-



1 | Manfredo Tafuri: "The Sphere and The Labyrinth", Cover



2 | Rem Koolhaas: "Delirious New York", Cover

porary city. Koolhaas writes on Manhattan but produces his manifesto for the contemporary metropolis, anticipating themes and issues which will later generate specific researches and projects.

Manfredo Tafuri's work on Venice³, which develops mainly in the 1980s through several texts, is introduced by the open definition of the historical project set forth in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*. The Venetian opus constitutes not only an application and a testing, but a redefinition and reactivation of the idea of historical project itself. Tafuri writes on Venice but thinks contemporary city. After exposing the subjection of architecture by the forces of capitalism and its silencing or retreat into the boudoir in the '70s and '80s, Tafuri directs his project to the pre-capitalist metropolis of international commerce as a body that can offer grounds of a complexity and plurality similar to those of the contemporary city. In studying Renaissance Venice, Tafuri constructs the first fragment of the historical project as an open investigation that goes beyond the specifics of its object in order to address the discipline itself – history and architecture.

Both Koolhaas's and Tafuri's projects operate by cutting 'significant sections' through the objects of their investigation, which in turn become the materials for the definition of methods capable of fleeing from the initial locus of their application. Both texts/projects are articulated as analogical reconstructions of the urban complexities they address, and assimilate their *modus operandi*. Both operate by selections and exclusions, returns, simultaneity, lacunae and correspondences, constituting an oriented and yet non-linear and non-continuous discourse – by islands, juxtaposition and dynamic montage. Because the narrative structure and the spatial development of the text replicate that of their object-city, they not only explicate the reasons of such spaces but become able to produce – project.

What is the relationship between delirium and historical project, both *ex post* architectural discourses on the city and on the dynamic interactions that lie behind the production of its physical complexity? Can we argue that the space of their difference is occupied by architecture, and that therefore these discourses are not developed *ex post* but are *in* architecture? What does it mean to reconsider the site of this occupation in the contemporary city – or, in other words, how do delirium and historical project operate in and on the present? And how can delirium be redefined after or in the historical project?

Delirium

For Koolhaas the true nature of Manhattan, beneath and within its orderly grid, is that of "an

acutely disordered state of mind involving incoherent speech, hallucinations, and frenzied excitement" – thus delirium according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*.⁴ Delirious is that which deviates from the straight(forward)ness of the lira (the ridge between furrows), the linearity of the Modern *tabula rasa* and its precepts of growth.

In Koolhaas, the multiplicity of New York's "blueprint" derails from the projected *a priori* straightness of the lira and can only be described and explained by an "irrational activity". Yet this derangement happens in keeping with the rules and regulations of the city's planned linearity and its three-dimensional developments. That is to say, the architectural delirium takes place within the control of – and it is indeed liberated and made possible by – the "multiple techniques of environmental formation" (Tafuri) that are external to the architectural discourse. But how much of this activity and of its object is really irrational? What is this delirium, and how does it operate on the city – and in the present.

If we read delirium beyond its etymological sense of transgression from linearity, and consider it in Freudian terms as an intentional erasure and censorship, we can then argue that in Koolhaas this method becomes 'operative' – in a Tafurian sense of the term.⁵ Delirium here produces a closed project, which only its engaged design counterpart can unfold: delirium is in itself incomplete and the process of translation becomes necessary for its actuation. For Freud, "Deliria are the work of censorship which no longer takes the trouble to conceal its operation; (...) it ruthlessly deletes whatever it disapproves of, so that what remains becomes quite disconnected."⁶ It is the ruthlessness and the determination of the delirium that make it – already and intentionally – a project.

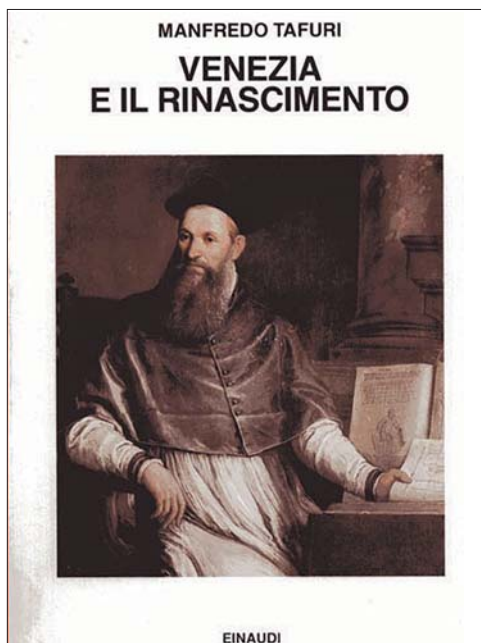
Manhattan finds in *Delirious New York* a faithful reconstruction of its intentionally intermittent and discontinuous space – linear and homogeneous on the outside, internally stratified and complex. Delirium here operates through selection, erasure and censorship on the blueprint of the city, and it can only be implemented through the decision and the direct engagement of a design by superimposition that reproduces the modalities of Manhattanism. Koolhaas's illustrated (hi)story book of New York precedes Tafuri's enunciation of the historical project and its further definition in the studies on Venice. New York seems simpler, its grid easier to read, but it is also a relentless web that entraps and conceals ambiguities. Is it possible then to think of the grid as a temporal accelerator and a censor that erases problems? Is New York itself delirious in its physical presence, already before its retroactive manifesto is announced? New York swallows, hides, conceals the struggles and macerations that Venice drags

through time, dissects, sediments, rediscovers, re-gurgitates. In showing itself as readable and understandable, in having an outer order and constructing an exterior façade, in outlining its undefined, New York remains more close and more secret than Venice.

Historical project

It is Tafuri's reference to Freudian delirious representations that makes it possible to redefine delirium as an open instrument of analysis and reconstruction for the historical project. Tafuri identifies "ideologies as (socially produced) 'delirious representations' (that) (...) act as dams to restrain surging forces"⁷, and he places the task of historical analysis in "the deconstruction of these dams"⁸. The role of the historical project is to go beyond a history as repression, and to refrain from segmentation and from the instrumental definition of a figure – solution, form, history, story. The historical project remains open. Here the delirious approach produces a "determinate abstraction (that allows) to give a sense of direction to theoretical work"⁹, but it constantly questions its limits, its relationship with its material and the nature and stability of the material itself; here analysis operates by erecting temporary and constantly re-definable barriers. The historical project moves forward by 'significant samplings' to seek solutions and modes for the present. In an attempt to avoid total erasures and maintain complexities, it operates in a 'Venetian way' by absorbing and holding together differences: events are exposed and their *fasci* (groups in the English translation but I prefer bundles) are untangled, but links are never ignored, erased, severed. Tafuri's text on Venice is constructed in time through a series of writings which tie links and references to constitute an evolving corpus that constantly looks back onto its origins with a 'Venetian' circularity. Venice is not a passive object of investigation but an active subject that reacts to the analysis, and the writing embraces the suspended and unresolved complexities that Venice always holds together.

In *Venice and the Renaissance*¹⁰ (fig. 3, 4) the reactivation of Venice operated by the historical project contains the not-so-hidden goal of constructing – at once – a historical method and a theory of the present: it recognises the need for the two to proceed together, as elements of the same mutating continuum in an always provisional analytical construction. Tafuri investigates the appearance of the novitas in Renaissance Venice to reveal the city's malleability and capacity to react, appropriate and absorb, and include the modified new in an anti-classical order that offers itself as a flexible paradigm for addressing the present. In *Ricerca del Rinascimento*¹¹ Venice becomes the



3 | Manfredo Tafuri: "Venezia e il Rinascimento", Cover



4 | Manfredo Tafuri: "Venice and the Renaissance", Cover

moment and the place where certainties are questioned and produce a crisis that opens up the anxiety of the modern. Through history, Venice has at first rejected, then manipulated and eventually included 'foreign bodies', and thus it offers a precedent to the contemporary cosmopolitan condition. Beyond delirium as censorship, Venice be-



5 | Venezia, Piazza San Marco. Procuratie Vecchie and urban fabric as seen from the Campanile



6 | Venezia, Piazza S. Marco. Acqua alta



7 | Venezia, Canal Grande. La Serenata

comes a paradigm of complexity and of acceptance through rejection. In-between lies the time of incubation, the time of the pause, the suspension of the insoluble immediacy, combined with the capacity to hold together diversities. The study of a peculiar reinterpretation of the Renaissance contaminated with extra-orthodox – we could say delirious – positions allows Tafuri to examine a condition where architecture is still one of the key agents in the unfolding and questioning of the political, economic, religious forces at play (fig. 5–7).

Delirium and historical project

Both delirium and historical project act retroactively on architecture and on the physical complexity of the city. The erasures and superpositions operated by the delirium imply its strategic and automatic translation into the practice of design. The tension between the historical project and the processes it investigates aims, instead, at maintaining the complexity of the relationships that concur to the production of architecture, in order to develop an analysis capable of transforming itself and its own language together with the material it produces and reactivates.

Delirium as a close and partial project acts and retro-acts on the city as an operative strategy that works through translation, in order not to extin-

guish its process. It operates by leaps and selective discontinuities, and translates itself into the necessary partiality of the architectural project, which carries within itself the traces of erasures produced by the delirium. Nothing is more rational, intentional, controlled, structured than this form of delirium – in architecture itself.

The possibility of architecture resides in this in-between. The moment one of the directions is chosen or privileged, the tension dissolves: delirium as a discourse is in itself closed, and sustainable only if corroborated by the project. If delirium moves away from the practice of the project it sanctions its own end, it remains unresolved, sedates the tensions that generate it, loses its multiplicity. Then only the project is possible, but it becomes reiteration and application of a consolidated strategy.

The historical project is, instead, an open system that operates by endless possible returns, by proximity and continuity (including filiation), to trigger a process of investigation that may or may not approach design. In Tafuri the historical project addresses the impasse of architecture as a discipline through the 1960s and up to the 1980s, and becomes not only a method for the production of histories, but also a generator of endless analysis and further projects – be they design, critical, textual. What is then, or what can be the

connection between the historical project and a move towards the design project, if Tafuri's intentions are clearly those of a re-engagement of architecture? The historical project is more than just 'historical': if this history is inevitably a history of the present, it is embedded in the project. And if we argue that architecture is that which occupies the space of the difference between delirium and historical project, delirium needs to be redefined once again.

Then it is important to consider what delirium – a redefined delirium – and the historical project have in common, or – rather – what allows us to reconsider them jointly in their attempt to instigate non-modernist histories of Modernism. For Tafuri, the best history is not historical, in it the past is annihilated but not finished, and although history is apparently outside the contemporary project it might explode within it. In Koolhaas, the past is hijacked and placed in the service of the contemporary project and – through it – it is, still, not finished. In both projects, history and delirium are connected with the past not as history but as a series of unresolved and still-active issues. In both, the historical work operates in a polemical sense with the present, which is the actual object of their history.

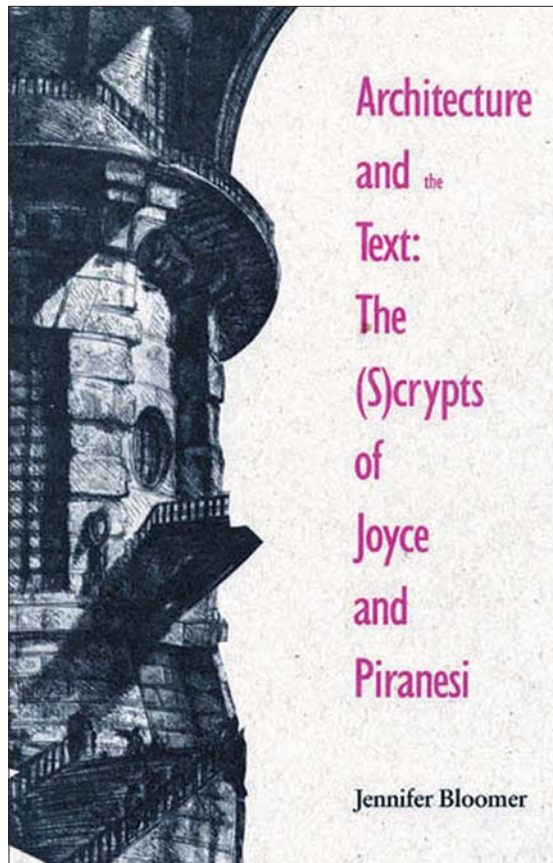
Delirium after the historical project: the 'mulier delirans'

For Tafuri "'True history' is not that which cloaks itself in indisputable 'philological proofs', but that which recognises its own arbitrariness, which recognises itself as an 'unsafe building'."¹²

After Koolhaas and Tafuri, is it possible to re-define delirium in the light of the historical project and within it, as a historical work in and of architecture, which becomes proposition? A delirium that defies linearity but also – and mainly – uses erasure to unveil (possibilities) rather than delete, to accumulate complexities and re-value and dwell in the detail. This delirium is not that of the erasure but that of the erased, an open project rather than a closed operative sedated one; delirium not as deviation, or transgression, or censorship, but as placement of a re-examined past within the present.

Voices of the delirium thus redefined as open project can be found in what I would call – for the purpose of this argument – the work of the 'mulier delirans', that is, the corpus of discursive practices (and projects) produced in the 1980s and 90s by women architectural theorists. A few examples.

In *The Wicked Architect* (in: *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*) Tafuri describes how Piranesi's restitution of the Campo Marzio combines archaeological knowledge with absolute arbitrariness: "History no longer offers values as such. (...) It is the experien-



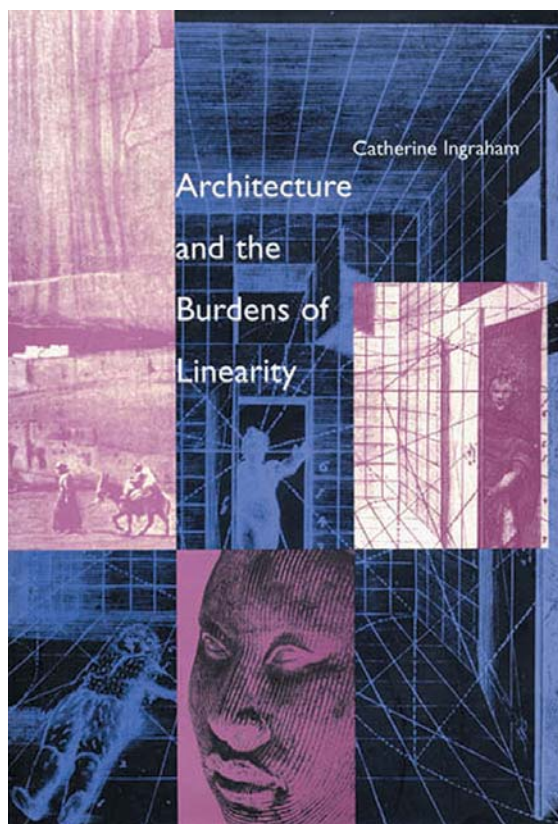
8 | Jennifer Bloomer: "Architecture and the Text: The (S)cripts of Joyce and Piranesi", Cover

ce of the subject that establishes values". It is here that Tafuri asks a key question for modernity: "cannot this interest in 'what is hidden' in ancient architecture (caves, underground passages, sub-structures) be interpreted as a metaphor for the search for a place in which the exploration of the 'roots' of the monuments meets with the exploration of the depths of the subject?"¹³ – thus Tafuri. And isn't this – I ask – the germ that generates – directly or indirectly, it does not matter – Jennifer Bloomer's study of Piranesi and Joyce, and her proposition of an 'architecture féminine' in her *Architecture and the Text: The (S)cripts of Joyce and Piranesi* (fig. 8).¹⁴

In less direct but perhaps more relevant processes of filiation, it is possible to see how delirium and its erasures are reversed into a process of inclusion and continuation. The erasures produced by delirium and official history are never total and absolute, they always leave traces, marks, unsolved knots buried within. It is the project of the new historical work to operate as a Tafurian "litmus paper", to reveal, expose and reactivate these partially buried traces. In *Architecture from Without* (1988), Diana Agrest's writes: "The refoules (repressed) of architecture, the public, the negation all become the material of my fictional configuration. The (project) marks I make are organized

through a contradiction – a negation through an affirmation. ... It is the affirmation of the erasure of the city in order to reinstate its trace¹⁵. Here erasure becomes the recuperation of the erased – nothing is dismissed.

Another story. Catherine Ingraham opens her *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity* (1998) (fig. 9) with – among else – an analysis of King Lear's tragedy of daughters and lines, maps and traces, relations of knowledge and power, in order to explore the relationship of architecture to the proper. But what is proper to architecture, or, can architecture be "improper"? For Ingraham the architecture of the proper constructs within itself its own built history as the fixed interpretation of a historical event. But architecture imports a plurality of materials and knowledge from elsewhere, and this guarantees "that architecture will be open, especially open ..., to the play and danger of



9 | Catherine Ingraham: *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity*, Cover

'meaning'.¹⁶ And yet – continues Ingraham – "what begins as the authoritative conjunction of different languages and foreign material very quickly becomes the exclusion of these differences."¹⁷ It is at this point – I would argue – that architecture needs to redefine its delirium as that which opens up the space of the difference – between history and historical project, between erasure and undialectical suspension. Ingraham again: "In fact, one might be tempted to say that architecture comes into its own the moment the structure of the proper is destabilized; (...) a certain ground opens up then, and open ground is where architecture can sink roots and thrive."¹⁸

For Tafuri the historical project is "an intermittent journey through a maze of entangled paths, one of the many possible 'provisional constructions' (...) The cards can be reshuffled and to them added many that were intentionally left out (...)"¹⁹ Can we then consider the foregoing texts as fragments of the historical project that redefine, incorporate and use delirium? Rather than a deviation from linearity or a process that – in Freudian terms – "ruthlessly deletes", delirium after the historical project is here both the erasure and the (trace of the) erased, a co(i)mplication of the line that holds together erasure/erased and becomes space – the space occupied by architecture. But is it, or is it only, feminine architecture?

The work of the 'mulieres delirantes' provides a gendered take of a seminal text and ideas. This work is individual and yet choral, constructed within the complexity of the single text, as well as through the manifold web of connections between them. As a choral project it remains discontinuous undeveloped unresolved – and incomplete, in the following sense: Does what is in-between need to be deviant? Does that which de-lire need to pose itself as 'the other'? Does this redefined delirium – not-deviation, not-transgression, not-censorship, not-erasure – need to be gender-identified as 'woman'? Can the placement of a re-examined past in the present be operated from within architecture and without identifying 'woman' as an opponent, or the marginal, the excluded?

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Notes:

- 1 Manfredo Tafuri, *The Historical Project*, in: *The Sphere and the Labyrinth. Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. P. d'Acierno and R. Connolly, Cambridge/London, 1990 (1980), pp. 1–2.
- 2 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, New York, 1994 (1978).
- 3 Part of it is published in English in: Manfredo Tafuri: *Venice and the Renaissance*, trans. J. Levine, Cambridge/London, 1995, which is the translation of *Venezia e il Rinascimento*, Torino, 1985.

- 4 *Delirium*, in: *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, second edition, edited by J. Pearsall and B. Trumble, Oxford/New York, 1996.
- 5 Manfredo Tafuri, *Teorie e storia dell'architettura*, Laterza, Bari 1968, 'Introduzione' and chapter IV 'La critica operativa'.
- 6 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Second Part), in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. J. Strachey, Volume V (1900–1901), London, 2001 (1953), p. 529 (chapter VII *The Psychology of the Dream Processes, (A) The Forgetting of Dreams*); my emphasis.
- 7 Op. cit., note 1, pp. 9–10.
- 8 Ibid., p. 10; my emphasis.
- 9 Ibid., p. 10.
- 10 Manfredo Tafuri, *Venezia e il Rinascimento. Religione, scienza, architettura*, Einaudi, Torino 1985. English edition *Venice and the Renaissance*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1989.
- 11 Manfredo Tafuri, *Ricerca del Rinascimento. Principi, città, architetti*, Turin, 1992.
- 12 Op. cit., note 1, pp. 12.
- 13 Manfredo Tafuri, *The Wicked Architect*, in: *The Sphere and the Labyrinth. Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. P. d'Acerno and R. Connolly, Cambridge/London, 1990 (1980), pp. 38.
- 14 Jennifer Bloomer, *Architecture and the Text: The (S)crypts of Joyce and Piranesi*, New Haven/London, 1993.
- 15 Diana Agrest, *Architecture from Without. Body, Logic and Sex*, in: *Assemblage*, no. 7, 1988, pp. 29–41.
- 16 Catherine Ingraham: *Dividing the Land: Lines of Identity and Descent*, in: *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity*, New Haven/London, 1998, p. 18.
- 17 Ibid., p. 19.
- 18 Ibid., p. 28–29.
- 19 Op. cit., note 1, pp. 21.

Illustrations:

- 1 Cover of Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth. Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, American edition, Cambridge/London, 1990.
- 2 Cover of Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, second edition, New York, 1994.
- 3 Cover of Manfredo Tafuri, *Venezia e il Rinascimento. Religione, scienza, architettura*, Italian edition, Torino 1985.
- 4 Cover of Manfredo Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, American edition, Cambridge/London, 1989).
- 5 Photo by Teresa Stoppani, 1998.
- 6 Photo by GF Zerella, Venezia.
- 7 Photo by CPV, Milano.
- 8 Cover of Jennifer Bloomer, *Architecture and the Text: The (S)crypts of Joyce and Piranesi*, New Haven/London, 1993.
- 9 Cover of Catherine Ingraham, *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity*, New Haven/London, 1998.