

# REM KOOLHAAS: WHY I WROTE DELIRIOUS NEW YORK AND OTHER TEXTUAL STRATEGIES



**Cynthia Davidson:** The theme of this issue is "Writing in Architecture," not *on* or *about* but *in*, which could mean within, could mean writing *with*, as in writing in pen and ink, or writing in an alternative candidate on a ballot, thereby cancelling out the officially sanctioned choices. There are different ways of looking at *writing in*. You did a lot of writing before you began making architecture, and you are still writing, even in the making of architecture. Do you ever think of the architecture you are making as a kind of writing? Are you writing in architecture rather than making a text for a printed page? What do you think is the relationship between writing and architecture?

**Rem Koolhaas:** In general or for me?

**For you.** Why, for example, did you write *Delirious New York*?

My first reason for writing in architecture was technical or strategic in that I sensed that I wanted to be a particular kind of architect, and I felt that at the time there was no place for that kind of architect. So I wrote *New York* to prove that that kind of architect and therefore that type of architect had existed before and that there was still a possible role for architecture conceived on such a level. In that sense I would say that the writing of *New York* had one major "aim": I wanted to construct — as a writer — a terrain where I could eventually work as an architect.

**Could this terrain only be constructed through writing?**

**In what sense?**

**As opposed to drawing, or modeling, or even painting.**

I was trying to deemphasize the artistic part of being an architect and describe a role that was much more concerned with intellectual issues, where other interventions were possible and therefore, by definition, could not be done through drawing. You asked if our projects are writing in architecture. I would say that almost at the beginning of every project there is maybe not writing but a definition in words — a text — a concept, ambition, or theme that is *put in words*, and only at the moment that it is put in words can we begin to proceed, to think about architecture; the words unleash the design. All of our projects, or our best projects or maybe our most original projects, are first defined in literary terms, which then suggest an entire architectural program.

**How are those literary terms manifested in the architecture?**

In the case of the Bibliothèque Nationale there was a suggestive little sentence about "to imagine a building where the most important parts would be *absences* of building."

**What does that mean, *absences* of building?**

That is exactly what we asked ourselves, what does this mean? That questioning made us think of an enormous solid building in which there were excavations, and those excavations were exactly the public rooms, so therefore they were unbuilt in terms of the massiveness of the building. It was a kind of reversal. And you could say that, for instance, for Melun-Sénart it was a similar question: What happens if you no longer try to control the city through its built form but instead through its unbuilt parts, through its void?

**So you have a text that prefaces the design. Do you begin drawing to get yet another text?**

No, no. We can draw whatever we want and model whatever we want, but it's only when there is a textlike formulation of the problem that we can really start. The design is a demonstration of a thesis or a question or a literary idea.

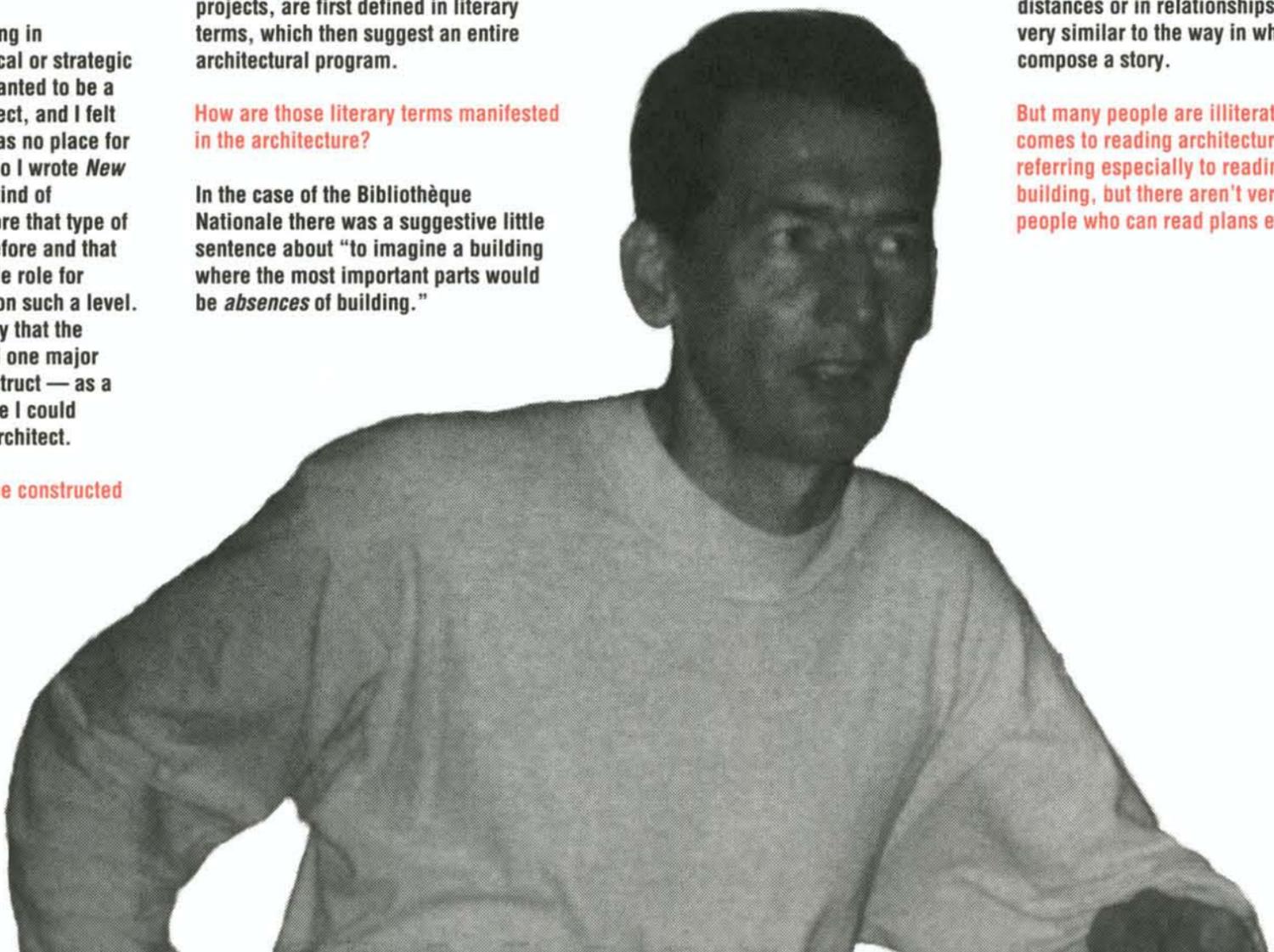
**Is the architecture itself something one can read literally as a text?**

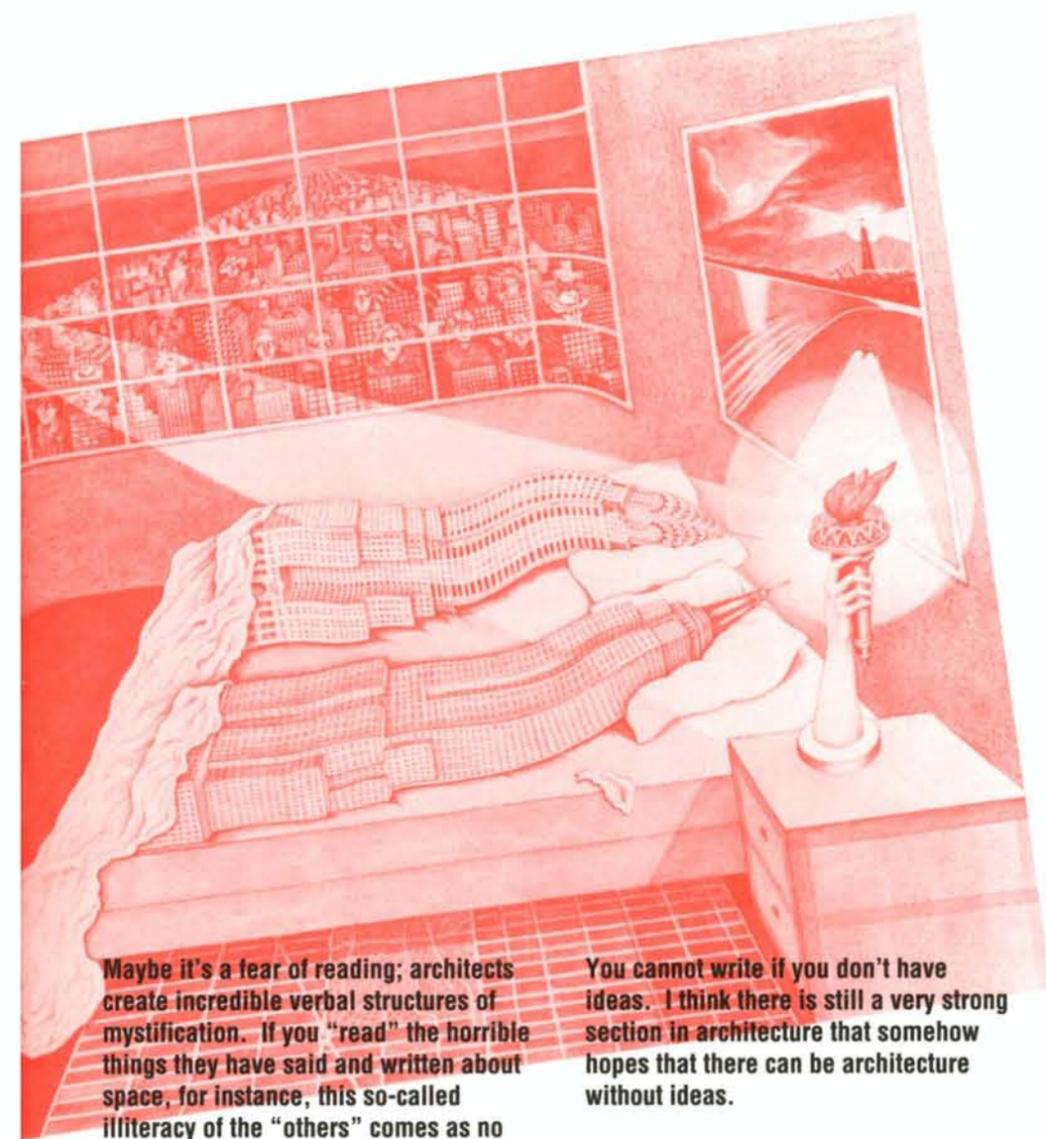
I think some of the best works can be read as text.

**How would you read it?**

For instance, in the monograph I'm working on with Bruce Mau and Jennifer Sigler, we are trying to assert the idea that there is a genuine equivalence between text and plans, that plans can be *read* not as compositions, but more and more as partitions where programs are simply inscribed in proximities or distances or in relationships that are very similar to the way in which you compose a story.

**But many people are illiterate when it comes to reading architecture. I'm referring especially to reading a built building, but there aren't very many people who can read plans either.**





Maybe it's a fear of reading; architects create incredible verbal structures of mystification. If you "read" the horrible things they have said and written about space, for instance, this so-called illiteracy of the "others" comes as no surprise. We excluded everybody and now we feel suddenly lonely . . . we have no one to play with. I think a new architectural project has to be *described* — written — before we can begin to complain about literacy. We first have to prove our own.

Generally speaking, do you think that architecture must necessarily have a relationship to writing or that writing must have a relationship to architecture as defined by *in*? Is this preposition *in* relevant to a consideration of writing and architecture, rather than writing on or about, which could be reporting on or criticism of?

In general I would say yes. For me it is very brutal and primitive, because for me architecture is an intellectual discipline and for me writing is the privileged communication of our intellectual disciplines. So writing is absolutely without question necessary. We abuse the alibi of the otherness of our profession. But chemists *write* about chemistry, they don't pretend that you cannot describe the meeting between hydrogen and oxygen. They don't say "you should have been there . . ."

So you think that in writing architecture one also has to come to terms with ideas in a different way.

You cannot write if you don't have ideas. I think there is still a very strong section in architecture that somehow hopes that there can be architecture without ideas.

Can we consider *Delirious New York* a work of architecture?

Yes, *undoubtedly*, he said eagerly. The structure of the text is very architectural. I talk about blocks in analogy to New York itself; each block is subdivided in episodes that have a very architectural relationship to each other: i.e., they mostly *coexist*. Each component is extremely autonomous, nevertheless there are complementarities. Its written structure is analogous to the urbanism it describes. In terms of its layout, its fragmentation, it is also very architectural. Each minichapter has a title, and one of the main reasons is that otherwise you would have to spend inordinate amounts of words and time and whatever to create interesting "bridges," which correspond to the now, for me, completely impossible way of creating architectural "connections" in a building. It is a book without a single "however," and that to me is very architectural. It has the same logic as a city. Anyway, a crucial element of the work — whether writing or architecture — is *montage*. Ultimately, I'm still writing scripts, which is what I did when I was 22.

The montage of film and the montage of architecture?

And writing. For all three, I would say that is the crucial moment.

An interesting thing has happened in writing. When we used to write by hand or by typewriter, we would cut the pieces apart and collage the pieces of paper together. But now everyone is writing on these screens that continuously scroll out, and it's very difficult to make a collage because if you want to move the text it simply removes it and reinserts it somewhere else. There's no sense of the puzzle, no sense of physically or even visually piecing it.

But I'm still doing it that way. Let's say we do it on computer, we print it, and then we cut it up. I have to *see* it how it fits. So in that sense it is also almost visual.

So when you are working on a new project, do you write it down first?

Let's say I make a one-page synopsis of what it is about.

Which sounds like you are indeed writing a film or perhaps a novel.

Yeah, it's true. One page on what it is about. And that is also becoming necessary because basically there are so many people in the office that even to disseminate an idea in the "inner" circle you almost need that kind of medium, otherwise you couldn't even begin to communicate with any precision. That's why I would say that, for instance, *Delirious New York* is deliberately not about architecture but about things that are much more accessible.

*New York* always struck me as an architectural act, as a work of architecture in itself, not because of its composition, not because of titles that were bridges, but because the book itself became a work of architecture by virtue of the words you wrote, what you had to say. The ideas were architectural, which made the book a piece of architecture.

Rem Koolhaas is a founder of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture in Rotterdam, which has built the Dance Theater at The Hague, housing in Fukuoka, Japan, and designed the master plan for the Centre International D'Affaires in Lille, France. His book *Delirious New York* (1978) was his first major work in a career that has included extensive comment on the condition of the 20th-century city.

OMA — Madelon Vriesendorp, *Flagrant délit*, from *Delirious New York*. Photo: Hectic Pictures.