THE HOUSE AND THE REVERSIBLE DESTINY: THE WORK OF ARAKAWA AND MADELINE GINS

Santirak Prasertsuk[1]

> For the sake of the body.
> For determining the site of a person.
> (Arakawa and Madeline Gins)

The above statement is from Arakawa and Madeline Gins who are architects of the so-called "The Critical Resemblance House", which is a part of an experimental architectural project named Site of Reversible Destiny (Figure 1). This project was completed in early 1995. The site is located in Gifu, a small city situated between Tokyo and Kyoto, the present capital and the former one respectively. It covers 18,100 square meters of land.

Concerning this project, the architects explain:

> Within an elliptical depression that sits at a twenty-five degree tilt lie four identical terrain segments composed of pairs of juxtaposed mounds and depressions. Surrounding the elliptical depression are maps of cities from different countries. Five topographical maps of Japan, ranging in size from four hundred and fifty feet to one foot

long, sit within the elliptical depression. The rises and falls of the terrain have been symmetrically arranged both to have the vistas and horizons of whoever traverses it be thoroughly predictable and in order for a sharper than usual definition to be given to the flow of events. (Arakawa and Gins 1994:87)
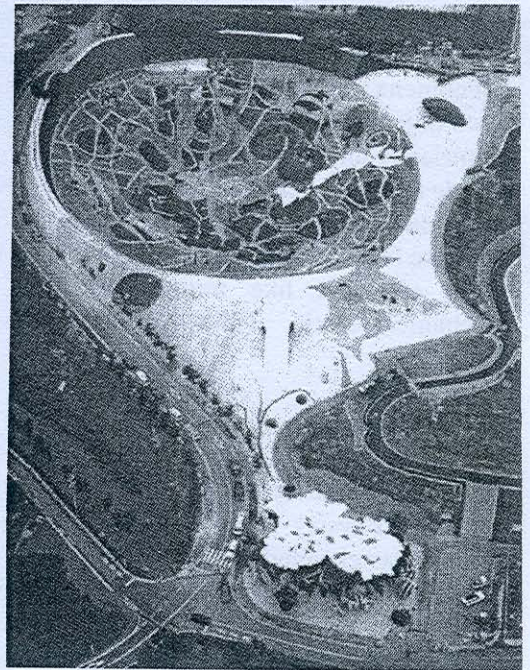

Figure 1: Site of Reversible Destiny

[1] Instructor, Faculty of Architecture, Kasem Bundit University, Bangkok, Thailand

What is interesting in the Critical Resemblance House is its attempt to propose an escape from the classical concept of display and conventional discipline of visuality which have persisted in architecture for centuries. This essay will examine and investigate this project in relation to both aspects and will also try to draw analogies with contemporary architecture and recent philosophical, scientific and architectural debates occurring in the Western world.

The Question of Body and Site

For the last two hundred years, a new scientific paradigm has replaced the classical science which is deeply rooted in scientific and philosophical theories invented by Galileo, Isaac Newton and Decartes - the French philosopher. This classical science has dominated Western society, and has provided a theoretical model to explain everything in nature, including natural phenomena, as a static, lifeless machine. Each object and its physical presence can be empirically understood in reasonable laws or simple mathematical equations. Every object from matter to the largest entity such as the universe can be disintegrated and reduced to small elements like minute parts in a mechanical clock. Time exists in another dimension.

The shift from the science of simplicity to a new science of complexity after Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity and Quantum Physics were proposed to public domain has changed the entire discourses in human history. This new science views everything in nature as interconnected living, dynamic organisms. Matter can not be reduced to small entities since what is found inside is a nonlinear, complex network of free elements. All natural phenomena can be explained by the knowledge of probability and predictability, providing more precision than the Newtonian science. Time plays a significant role in this new paradigm.

Since the new science of complexity has an effect on all human discourses, architecture which can be seen as an embodiment of cultural and technological factors, can not resist its discourse. The basic principle of architecture since Vitruvius, the Greek architect, has been challenged by a new concept of indeterminacy - nothing is any longer fixed and already given. This new paradigm has opened up other possibilities for architects to rethink the long-lasting principles of form, space and order in architecture.

Arakawa and Madeline Gins question other possible alternatives which emerge from the predominant idea of the so-called singular destiny - what happens in that place is in some way already given and is an inevitable occurrence. In architecture, the place of the body traditionally has an already fixed place. Architecture is also tied to the dualistic relationship between form and function, but one has to be subordinated to the other. Function has to follow form or, in other words, form is an outcome of function. Like a mechanical clock, a building can be divided into small units called rooms. This concept of singular destiny in architecture is comparable to the cause-effect relationship which is rooted in the Cartesian or deterministic worldview. What Arakawa and Gins try to propose is a new emerging concept of reversible destiny, a reversal of

the singular destiny, which will step beyond that of the Newtonian science.

The architects go on to explain:

> The world is all site for a person, who appears to be the agent of the body formed expressly for configuring and for being(a part of) the world. When trying to seek the site of a person in and around the body, it would be best to choose as wide a field of search as possible or to seek ubiquitously, for the site of a person happens as the world, everywhere. (Arakawa and Gins 1994:18)

This statement asserts that the site of a person should be thought of as wide-ranging and continually on the move, that is to say, the movement of the body should not begin and end on that piece of groundpon which a person stands. The term "landing site" is thereby redefined as a place for unpredictable, complex and nonlinear events to take place.

In the search for the new landing site, the architects focus on the falling of a body from a high building. At such a moment, the body is in a state of imbalance in which its identity disappears--the body can no longer be a body. To keep the body in such state of imbalance for as long as possible becomes the aim because for the body and its actions to regain balance will reveal the physicality of the reversible destiny and the body's hidden essential nature (Figure 2).

The Critical Resemblance House is situated as a part of this project at the opposite end of the site from the elliptical bowl (Figure 3). It consists of two slightly overlapping, identical, circular areas of patterned segments--labyrinths, providing the standard house's full complement of rooms twice over. The lower labyrinth, placed above the terrain, is curvilinear while the upper is rectilinear. The patterned segments unconventionally eviscerate the interior space and cut into the sets of furniture. Two identical sets of furniture stand similarly positioned one above the other on the upper
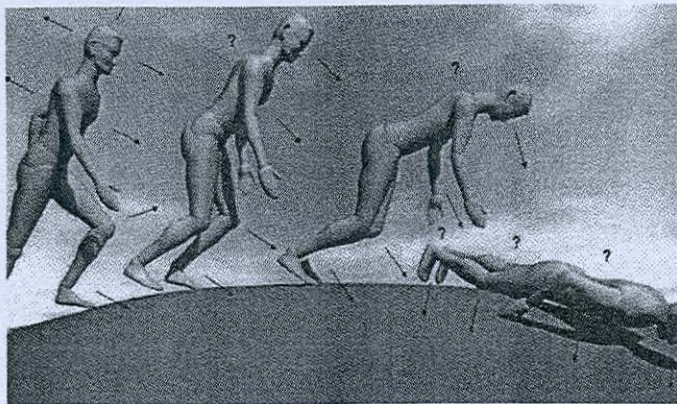

Figure 2: Landing Site and the Body

labyrinth but hang upside down from the ceiling. The entire interior expresses a kind of mirror effect to the viewers (Figure 4).

A House as a Space for Display

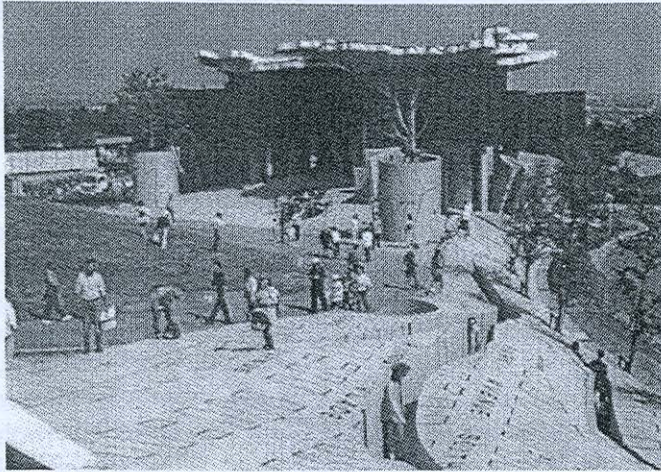In **The Production of Space**, Henry Lefebvre gives a classical definition of a

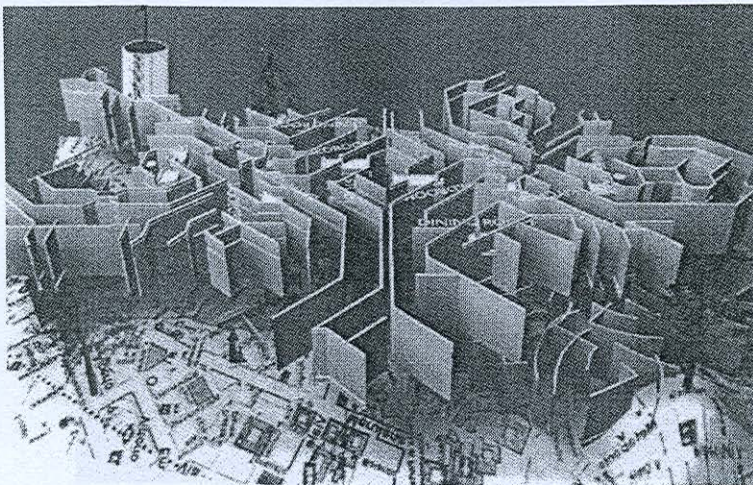**Figure 3:** The Critical Resemblance House

Figure 4: The Plan of the House

house as a mechanical device, which is integrated into a machine-like order of streets and cities on a larger scale. (Lefebrve 1991:93)   His notion provides us with the conceptual tools for understanding the house as a passageway of a large number of inter-coordinated mechanistic materials and social relations.   His   machine   metaphor deconstructs the myth of the house as an isolated, static object, and shares the machinic essence of the classical science.

In the Critical Resemblance House, the architects attempt to establish a new discipline and domestic typology which escape from Lefebrve's statement. In order to do so, the issue of display becomes significantly involved.

The concept of display has a long history of development since the public display of the tortured, dismembered bodies in the 18th century. After the disappearance of torture as a public spectacle in the early 19th century as a result of the establishment of a new moral or political code, the display began to take a new complicated form. Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, wrote about the Panopticism[2], the concept of disciplinary power based on the system of surveillance, in **Discipline and Punish, The**

Birth of the Prison. In this book, Jeremy Bentham's   paradigmatic   Panopticon expressed a desire to see everything from one place. The panopticon prison is an immobile, frozen space where prisoners and their visibility are trapped inside. (Foucault 1979:195-209)

Foucault's interest in the Panopticon is in the act of seeing and being seen when an individual or a prisoner is in a confined space. The panopticon prison allows the individual in the tower, to see everything from a fixed, enclosed space, without being seen. It is thus a visual condition of one-to-many–an   individual   to   many persons. Display for Foucault, in this sense, is a discipline of vision and a mechanism of human power in the concentration of being here or being in one specific place.

The very old concept of the singular destiny can be seen to be similar to the concept of the 18th-century panopticon where the place of the body is already given, static and fixed. In the Critical Resemblance House, the display for the architects thus is a new discipline of vision. It creates an evolution from the linear system of the panopticon (the condition of being one place at one time) to the complex condition of being any places at any time by allowing each viewer to move freely around the interior space of the house in unpredictable, nonlinear ways.

The traditional typology of a house, which is seen as an assemblage of conventional living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, and offices, is shattered. The entire house is turned into a completely public or display space by the invasion of bodies which destroy the classical dichotomy between

---

[2] Panopticon is a type of 18th-century prison in Europe. In this prison, each prisoner is locked up in an individual cell, and monitored by a guard who is in an observing tower. The prisoners never know they are being watched and never see the guard in the tower. This kind of surveillance, which is based on the condition of one-to-many, is the basic principle of the so-called "Panopticism" which Jeremy Bentham, the philosopher, invented in 1787.

inside and outside, and private and public. This invasion of body into the private space of the house creates what would be called the mobilization of gaze, and violates the barrier between the public-private spaces of the house and the public social life. Additionally, two patterns of segmented walls are superimposed onto the plan, cutting through the household objects. The objects in everyday life are transformed into an unusual, blurred state.

In architecture, the conventional use of glass as a material for enclosure correlates to the discipline of display. Despite its physical presence, glass gives a transparent quality, expresses its visual absence, and reveals what is behind it to the public. Philip Johnson's Glass House in Connecticut, one of the most well-known 20th-century houses, demonstrates the relation of transparency to the concept of dwelling very well.

If Philip Johnson's house indicates an attempt to collapse the solidity of the architectural elements, the opacity of the segmented walls in the Critical Resemblance House operates on a different principle. The solid, segmented walls expose nothing to the viewer, mystifying the interior space as a space to discover. Each visitor is invited to the house by the method of opacity, not that of transparency.

The architecture of museums is a historical departure from the display of parts of the human body to the public and can not be overlooked. The museum manifests the relationship between the context of display and objects in places. In conventional museums, the building is static, while collecting is a living process. This transition of the personal collection into a museum, in other words--the private into the public, is seen as a pivotal moment when the collecting process ceases and the museum begins to take form.

The logic of display in the Critical Resemblance House makes another move beyond the conventional concept of the museum in terms of the collecting of objects. An argument can be established here that the collection of this house is also a living process but functions in a different manner. When the viewers enter the house, what is being displayed is the furniture and spaces. The house itself is completely a display of architecture--a domestic environment to explore, display and finding something. Its meandering interior and segmented walls also turn the viewers into displayed objects too. One might easily get lost or take more than a few hours to find a way to another room or to exit and in doing so, one's awkward action will then be observed by other viewers and become eventually a part of public display.

Seen from the air, the concrete roof of the house resembles a map of Japan's city, as a detached, elevated piece of large map from the ground (Figure 5). It is, thereby, an imitation of an existing--imitation from the real world--a map--a reproduction of a representation. This is cohesive to the technique of miniature model which is deployed to display objects which are difficult to show in museums.

In the plan, there is the obvious footprint of a plan of a house. This could be perceived as resembling a typical house whose domestic typology has been disturbed by the super-
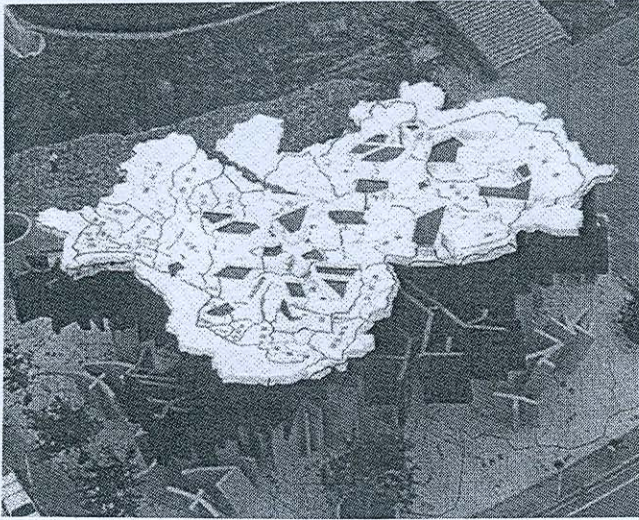
Figure 5: The Roof of the House

imposition of labyrinthine space. Additionally there is another resemblance-- the second layer--between floor, walls and ceiling. This is an intentional resemblance to create an inaccessible space within which the second set of furniture is placed upside-down (Figure 6). The concept of resemblance here is employed to create a new system of visuality which will be explained in the next part of this essay.

Arakawa and Gins turn the domestic interior of a house to the display space by deconstructing the inside and outside, the act of seeing and being seen, the notion of transparency of glass material, the context of the museum and the employment of models. The classical definition of the house is re-established, creating a new relationship between display and domestic space.

A House as a New Discipline of Visuality

The invention of one-point perspective by the architect Filipo Brunelleschi during the 15th century created a new discipline of visuality. Perspective transfers all spaces into mathematical space, where subject and object become rationalized and mathematicized. Erwin Panofsky wrote the critical book entitled **Perspective as Symbolic Form** that:

> Perspective creates distance between human beings and things (the first is the eye that sees, the second is the object seen, the third is the distance between them.)

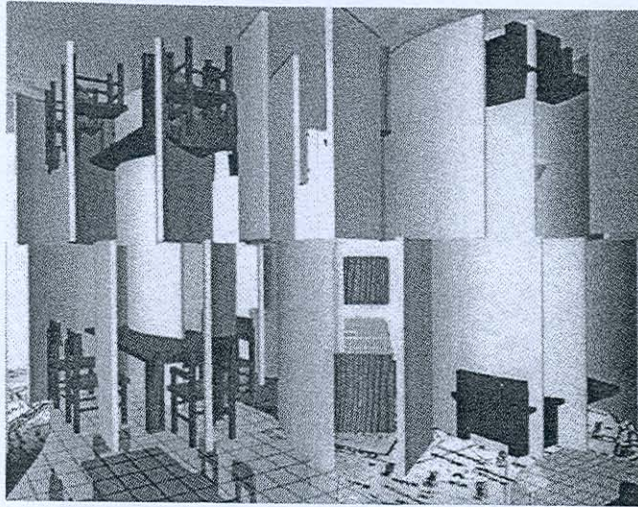> ...Perspective subjects the artistic phenomenon to stable and even

Figure 6: The Interior of the House

mathematically exact rules, both on the other hand, makes that phenomenon contingent upon human beings, indeed upon the individual. (Panofsky 1991:47-72)

This implies that perspective, with the discovery of vanishing points and picture planes, confirms vision as the dominant discourse in architecture from this period to the present.

Visuality or vision, according to the American architect Peter Eisenman, means the particular characteristic of sight which attaches seeing to thinking or the eye to the mind. In architecture, the dichotomy of sight/mind has persisted for many centuries. In his article entitled **Visions' Unfolding : Architecture in the Age of Electronic Media**, Eisenman contends that architecture

will never move beyond the Renaissance worldview unless it challenges representation or vision fundamentally. (Eisenman 1996:554-561) The Cartesian view of perception, which is based on the wrong assumption that the mind is separated from the external world of objects that we see, has to be reconsidered. Eisenman suggests that one of the many ways to challenge that idea is to detach what one sees from what one knows--the eye from the mind--and the relationship between subject and object.

The Post-modernist French philosopher Gilles Deleuze proposes a concept of the Fold in his book – **Le Pli**. In this book, the Fold is a state of sudden emergence or surprise which can be found in nature in the metamorphosis of insects and some animals. It is also found in non-living objects and

natural phenomena such as the phase transition from ice to water. Deleuze compares the unpredictable characteristics of the Fold to the curvilinear elements and interior spaces in Baroque architecture. The Fold then is taken by some practicing architects as a new architectural strategy to create so-called folding architecture–an architecture with an unbroken formal continuity. In folding architecture, it is no longer possible to relate a vision of space in a two-dimensional drawing to the three-dimensional reality. Walls, floors and roof become one single continuous surface. The result is what is called smooth space in Deleuzean terms. Cartesian space or Euclidean geometry, space with four walls, starts to collapse.

While Peter Eisenman challenges the classical worldview of vision through the concept of the Fold, Arakawa and Gins step back to the classical notion of labyrinth to create a new vision in architecture. According to Franco Rella, the space of the labyrinth is mysterious, metaphoric and didactic. It is a pleasure to lose oneself in the labyrinth. In **Eros and Polemos:The Poetics of the Labyrinth**, Rella describes a metaphor of labyrinth as follows:

> Labyrinth is a place of loss, and only beyond it one can find salvation.

> ...The journey into the labyrinth is the symptom of a changed cognitive.

> ...To lose oneself in a labyrinth, as one loses oneself in a forest, is something to learn. (Rella 1987:31-37)

The superimposition of the labyrinthine patterns in the Critical Resemblance House breaks down the conventional space of four walls. The labyrinth suggests another possibility of an alternative to the gridded space of the Cartesian order or Euclidean geometry. While the Fold in folding architecture produces smooth space, the labyrinth displaces the vision by overcoming or exceeding the grid, but there is still a planimetric view which then can be extruded vertically to provide a sectional space like the conventional way of producing an architecture from 2-D drawings. However this use of a centerless labyrinth destroys the distinction between the exterior facade and the interior walls of the house. The facade becomes a continuity of the interior walls.

The interior of the house consists of two levels. The upper level is a rectilinear labyrinth while the lower, which is placed on the terrain, is curvilinear. The difference of walls problematizes the viewers' mode of perception. When one moves through the interior receiving the order from the walls on the lower level, the contradicted order from the upper level confuses his or her sense of direction. If the vanishing point in perspective functions as a reference point of direction in the real world, the labyrinth without a vanishing point disconnects and violates the human perception from the reality. There is no longer a mechanism of perception that we can rely on to know where we are in the house.

The placement of two sets of furniture on the upper and lower levels also troubles the vision. The segmented walls in the middle of a bathtub, a bed, a desk, a stove, and a toilet raise some questions about the mental

image of objects (Figure 7). It questions whether we see the bathtub with walls as an object or separate objects and how we imagine ourselves using that furniture.

Theoretically, when we perceive an object, we automatically structure it to our mental images. In other words, the way we see things is affected by what we already know or have in our minds. The elementary schemas in our minds never change or vary across time or culture. If our conceptions of objects are to be changed, our current complex images in the minds will have to be disassembled also.

A walk through the interior of this house is thus the process of conversion from the ordinary to the reversible image-schema. A new signified (meaning) is applied to each signifier (object) everytime the viewers

move. The viewers can see a bathtub with walls as a new object which never existed before. The pre-existing meaning of the bathtub is erased from the viewers' preconception. This mental procedure is applied to other objects throughout the house.

To answer the second question, the movement of the body has to be concerned in order to use that furniture. In this case, the physical movement of the body will be in the inconvenient, imbalanced positions in order to use the furniture and walk on the terrain. The labyrinth patterns will act as an obstacle, blocking off some actions, and interrupting the direct circulation: the concept of the landing site reveals itself in the house.
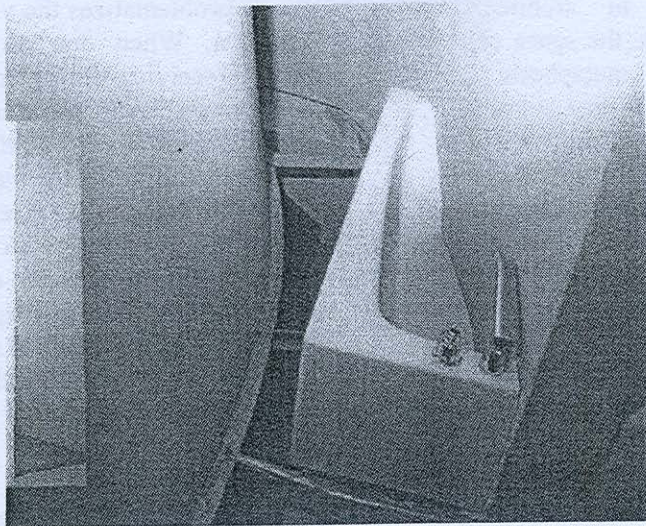

Figure 7: The Segmented Walls

The upper level of labyrinth pattern functions as a large mirrored surface. What one sees is a resemblance of space and furniture, but what one does not see is oneself. Such mirror reflection with its uncanny effect disturbs the perception too. When a person wanders into the labyrinth, his or her body will change to the out-of-balanced state - the state where the body will find the self. The Lacanian metaphor of the mirror, therefore, is deployed here to mirror a person - what is to be a person or the self-in the meandering space.

The new discipline of vision, created by the space of the Critical Resemblance House, is thus a very great challenge to the classical worldview of vision. It reproduces a new meaning of human perception.

Biography of Arakawa and Madeline Gins

Continuing their collaboration over 30 years, the New York-based artists Arakawa and Madeline Gins have created a number of unique and predominantly visual explorations into architecture and sculptures. Arakawa is a Japanese painter while Madeline Gins is a poet. **The Mechanism of Meaning**, their early work in 1963, is a touchstone of conceptual art. All of their later works have their roots in Arakawa's painting, the medium to which he has devoted most of his time from 1961 to the 1980s.

Most of their works raise the question of what is the nature of perception, and how the human being relates to surrounding space. In their initial work, the integration of stenciled letters, diagrams, drawings, and other collage elements offer a series of interactive exercises. With the use of computer-generated images in their later projects, viewers are presented with various ways of reworking the man-made world which is architecture. Their Critical Resemblance House is one of the very few built projects in the late work.

The recent exhibition of their works, developed throughout three decades, was held at The Guggenheim Museum at SoHo in New York in the Summer of 1997.

References

Arakawa and Gins, Madeline. 1994. *Architecture :Sites of Reversible Destiny*. London: Academy Editions.

Arakawa and Gins, Madeline. 1997. *Reversible Destiny - Arakawa/Gins*. New York: Guggenheim Museum.

Foucault,Michel. 1979. *Discipline and Punishment, The Birth of the Prison*. New York: A Sheridan Trans.

Jencks, Charles. 1995. *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe*. London: Academy Editions.

Lefebrve, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Nesbitt, Kate (ed.). 1996. *Theorising a New Agenda for Architecture*. New York: Princeton Press.

Panofsky,Erwin. 1991. *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. New York: Zone.

Rella, Franco .1987. "Eros and Polemos: The Poetics of the Labyrinth" . *Assemblage 3*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Toy, Maggie (ed.). 1996. *Games of Architecture*. London: Academy Editions.