I, Christopher Campbell, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Architecture in Architecture.

It is entitled:
Designing Theory: Social Space(s) in the Fiction of Georges Perec

Student's name: Christopher Campbell

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: John Eliot Hancock, M.Arch.

Committee member: Aarati Kanekar, Ph.D.
Designing Theory: Social Space(s) in the Fiction of Georges Perec

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The presence of spatial theory in the domain of academic disciplines can be easily overlooked, perhaps discrediting the relevance of interdisciplinary studies. A case in point can be made about fiction writing, an art form which clearly demonstrates the process of generating imaginative spaces and buildings in order to evoke the social conditions experienced by human beings. This thesis looks at writer Georges Perec and theorist Henri Lefebvre, and highlights an obvious similarity in their ideas of space, albeit one in theoretical writing and the other fictional. A cross-interpretation of Perec’s fiction with reference to Lefebvre’s theory can help us identify how social spaces in fiction, specifically, are created as a story is written. This can be demonstrated by juxtaposing the settings, characterizations, and narrative voices of Perec’s novels *Things: A Story of the Sixties* and *Life A User’s Manual*. If this link between the theory of social space and the craft of fiction can be exemplified, the potential for using fiction as a means to critique humans in their built environment may become more effective. Theoretical underpinnings, by example of this study, can be creatively rendered. More generally, this project intends to demonstrate that spatial theory can and does appear across disciplinary boundaries.
For my dad
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A high school math instructor first convinced me that space and literature are not mutually exclusive. He demonstrated this by having me read Flatland (1884), a fictional novella by Edwin A. Abbott, featuring the narrator and protagonist A Square. Along with his wife and children, A Square lives in the Two Dimensional world of the same name as the book’s title. Upon a chance encounter with a ‘Stranger from Spaceland,’ he comes to see that there exists a Three Dimensional world. Following this discovery, A Square sets out to document his findings in an effort to reveal to his fellow Flatlanders the extent to which reality can take form. He writes:

With the view of evading the Law, if possible, I spoke not of a physical Dimension, but of a Thoughtland whence, in theory, a Figure could look down upon Flatland and see simultaneously the insides of all things, and where it was possible that there might be supposed to exist a Figure environed, as it were, with six Squares, and containing eight terminal Points. But in writing this book I found myself sadly hampered by the impossibility of drawing such diagrams as were necessary for my purpose; for of course, in our country of Flatland, there are no tablets but Lines, and no diagrams but Lines, all in one straight Line and only distinguishable by difference of size and brightness; so that, when I had finished my treatise (which I entitled ‘Through Flatland to Thoughtland’) I could not feel certain that many would understand my meaning.\(^1\)

Unable to properly diagram an additional dimension of space, A Square does, at least, apply his ability to explain its properties. The novella ends with the government of Flatland jailing A Square for writing such polemical material, leaving him a sad martyr who claims, “These very tablets on which I am writing, and all the substantial realities of Flatland itself, appear no better than the offspring of a diseased imagination, or the baseless fabric of a dream.”\(^2\)

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\(^2\) Ibid., 118.
The drama of *Flatland*’s narrative aside, there is something to be said about its suggestion that the social conditions of alternate dimensions can be written about from the varying perspectives of a point, a line, a cube, and so forth; understand, for instance, that both A Square and the Stranger from Spaceland can ‘read’ the world of Three Dimensions as a composition of one-dimensional points and two-dimensional planes. And, yes, A Square can describe the world of Three Dimensions to his fellow Flatlanders in the world of Two Dimensions despite his not being from Spaceland. But what if we were to justify the ability of the utterly flat words, semantics, and grammatical structures of a work of fiction like *Flatland* to generate these socio-spatial dimensions, which we will call *social space(s)*? In what way can this
be done? This kind of question may appear unanswerable or to lead to illogical conclusions, and perhaps here it is permissible to dismiss the question altogether because words printed on a page, without contestation, are of a decidedly two-dimensional quality. But for the moment I ask that you suspend these doubts and consider the earnest plea of A Square:

To The Inhabitants of SPACE in GENERAL […] This Work is Dedicated By a Humble Native of Flatland In the Hope that Even as he was Initiated into the Mysteries Of THREE Dimensions Having been previously conversant With ONLY TWO So the Citizens of that Celestial Region May aspire yet higher and higher To the Secrets of FOUR FIVE OR EVEN SIX Dimensions Thereby contributing To the Enlargement of THE IMAGINATION And the possible Development Of that most rare and excellent Gift of MODESTY Among the Superior Races OF SOLID HUMANITY.³

On a level equal with *Flatland*, the following document concerns itself *not* with the limits of the visual but with “the enlargement of the imagination,” and *not* with the shortcomings of the printed word but with its potentialities.

To begin this project, first it is sensible to select a few works of fiction that will undergo the proposed analysis. Secondly, defining the present use of social space with the help of theoretical texts will be necessary. Finally, a discussion of how and what kind of social spaces are generated in these fictions will then lead to a set of conclusions. By example of this study, words that compose a piece of fiction can be shown to be conversant with, so as to generate, the dimensions of their own unique social space(s). More specifically, two novels by the same author written over a decade apart will demonstrate two unique approaches to the creation of social space(s) in fiction.

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³ Ibid., 5.
The Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (OuLiPo) & Georges Perec

“But presently I came to a smoky light proceeding from a low, wide building, the door of which stood invitingly open.”

- from *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville

The Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (Ou + li + po = OuLiPo) is a literary workshop comprised of poets, mathematicians, philosophers, and other creative and analytical individuals, all who implement puzzles and patterns into the design of their fictional and non-fictional texts. A fitting way to think of a work written by an Oulipian is to imagine an onion: as you peel off its skin, ovoid layers reveal themselves down to its core. These writers compose texts of a similar, multi-layered quality, at the center of which is a secret, a treasure, that the reader is prompted to actively search for along with the act of reading. Part and parcel of creating an Oulipian text is the implementation of the *constraint*, which is perhaps the signature characteristic of this breed of literary work. “As a group they exemplify the two principal directions of Oulipian research: analysis, that is, the identification and recuperation of older (even ancient) experiments in form; and synthesis, the elaboration of new forms,”⁴ writes translator and anthologist of Oulipian works William Motte Jr. Both borrowed from the past and created in the present, these ‘forms’ that Motte writes about function as the constraints, or constraining features, that determine the parameters of an Oulipian text. For example, the haiku, or the form of Japanese poetry that limits a poem strictly to three lines respectively made up of five, seven, and five *on* (a Japanese term that approximately resembles the English *syllable*), is an ancient form that can serve as an Oulipian constraint. Other examples of formative constraints used by members of OuLiPo are the palindrome (a text spelled exactly the same both forwards and backwards), the lipogram (a text

with one or more letters excluded from the entirety of its body), and the omission of a temporal structure (a narrative that has the effect of being frozen-in-time, a constraint discussed more in depth in this document). Of these constraints Oulipian Jacques Roubaud in *La mathématique dans la méthode de Raymond Queneau* writes:

> Another entirely false idea in fashion nowadays is the equivalence which is established between inspiration, exploration of the subconscious, and liberation; between chance, automatism, and freedom. Now the inspiration that consists in blind obedience to every impulse is in reality a sort of slavery. The classical playwright who writes his tragedy observing a certain number of familiar rules is freer than the poet who writes that which comes into his head and who is the slave of other rules of which he is ignorant.\(^5\)

Roubaud is implying that the writer who acknowledges the constraining forms both inherent in the act of writing and also those that they themselves implement into their own writing are more likely to create texts of an originality that cannot be achieved by the writer who whimsically follows inspiration, lacking rules and structure. The Oulipian method requires an adherence to form. In this way, the self-awareness of these constraints has guided and continues to guide the writers of Oulipo to the creation of new emergent texts that even these authors, and not just their readers, are capable of uncovering.

With this philosophy of the constraint at its core, Oulipo’s literary output has been vast in scope since the group’s inauguration in 1960. Raymond Queneau, for instance, published numerous essays and poetry chapbooks, along with eighteen novels. His knowledge of mathematics comes to the forefront in his impressive 1961 *Cent mille millards de poème* (*Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*), a chapbook made up of ten sonnets of which each line may be exchanged with any line from the other nine poems. Queneau calculated that if a person were to spend 24 hours a day reading every possible sonnet, it would take 190,258,751 years to

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\(^5\) Ibid., 77.
finish.\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Exercises in Style}, a novella written by Queneau, is made up of 99 short vignettes that relate the same story over-and-over again, albeit in different styles of writing (Past, Present, Tactile, Visual, Auditory, Gastronomical). In describing the novella, Queneau, one of the founding members of Oulipo, implies the general purpose of all Oulipian literature:

‘People have tried to see it as an attempt to demolish literature – that was not at all my intention. In any case my intention was merely to produce some exercises; the finished product may possibly act as a kind of rust-remover to literature, help to rid it of some of its scabs. If I have been able to contribute a little to this, then I am very proud, especially if I have done it without boring the reader too much.’\textsuperscript{7}

This attitude is evident in the writing of Harry Mathews, the lone American member of Oulipo, who uses similarly playful constraints in his approach to the construction of fiction. One of his novellas, \textit{Singular Pleasures}, contains 61 vignettes, each of which recounts a different person’s experience masturbating (the historical context, the atmosphere, their special technique), causing the novella to hold a striking resemblance to \textit{Exercises in Style}. Mathews’ wide range of publications have been determined by other constraints, such as his \textit{20 Lines a Day} that was written over the course of about a year and a half and is what its title suggests – strictly 20 lines of writing per day.

To date, over 38 members, including Marcel Duchamp and Italo Calvino, officially belong to the Oulipo, and, as such, detailing the array of Oulipian work would take a great deal of time. For this reason it is sensible to focus our attention on one specific member, Georges Perec, whose Oulipian work will be shown to best suit the study of social space(s) in fiction. A novelist, documentarian, and filmmaker, Perec (1936-1982) was raised in Paris by his aunt and uncle following the untimely passing of his father who died serving as a soldier in World War II,

and of his mother who was killed while imprisoned at Auschwitz. His early ambitions to write were hampered by his inability to get published until 1965, when, at thirty-years-old, Perec managed to do so with *Les Choses: Une Histoire des Annees Soixantes* (*Les Choses: A Story of the Sixties*). *Les Choses* translates into English as *Things*, and, reflecting this title, the narrative weighs upon the condition of the French people as consumers of things in a product-driven capitalist society. In an interview conducted in December of 1965, Perec explained that *Les Choses* reflects upon themes related to the “commodation of lifestyles” and the “necessary connection […] between modern things and happiness” that characterized Western culture after World War II. The novel tells of Jérôme, 24, and Sylvie, 22, a Parisian couple fresh out of university who are both working as psycho-sociologists, a term for entry-level personnel working in the field of “motivational studies.” Raking in 100 francs per interview, Jérôme and Sylvie travel to various parts of France to ask their fellow citizens such questions as, “How will the French woman vote? Do people like cheese in tubes?” Despite their relatively comfortable petit-bourgeois lives, Jérôme and Sylvie desire more things, thus setting the stage for their plot to buy themselves a new and speculatively better-suited lifestyle. In their effort to do so, the couple rearranges and changes their home and its location numerous times, moving from France to Tunisia and back again, accumulating an increasing degree of instability in the process. For the purpose of this project, what is meaningful about their chronic lack of satisfaction, which is at times comical but ultimately disconcerting, is that it enables the narrative to shift social spaces, the definition of which follows in the next section. For the moment, it suffices to confirm *Les Choses* as one of two fictions written by Perec deemed examinable by this project due not only

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to its narrative content but additionally to its existence as a text written before Pèrec began writing in the constrained mode of the Oulipo.

Methodologically, the reason for including the pre-Oulipian *Les Choses* is to juxtapose its generated social space(s) with those of a novel written by Pèrec after his inauguration into the Oulipo. Thus, the second of the two fictions will have been written by Pèrec as well, but with the distinction that its writing process involved the application of formative constraints. It can be argued that committing to a specific Oulipian novel of his could prove difficult because there are many, but nestled within a collection of his nonfiction is the seed for a novel that seems to speak most directly, upon initial investigation, to the concept of social space(s):

*I imagine a Parisian apartment building whose façade has been removed – a sort of equivalent to the roof that is lifted off in Le Diable boiteux, or to the scene with the game of Go in The Tale of Genji – so that all the rooms in the front, from the ground floor up to the attics, are instantly and simultaneously visible.*

*The novel – whose title is Life A User’s Manual – restricts itself (if I dare use that verb for a project that will finally extend to something like four hundred pages) to describing the rooms thus unveiled and the activities unfolding in them, the whole in accordance with formal procedures which it doesn’t seem necessary to go into here in detail, but the mere statis of which seems to me rather alluring: a polygraph of the moves made by a chess knight (adapted, what’s more, to a board of 10 squares by 10), a pseudo-quenine of order 10, an orthogonal Latin bi-square of order 10 (the one that Euler conjectured didn’t exist, but which was demonstrated in 1960 by Bose, Parker and Shirkhande).* \(^{11}\)

Near to what Pèrec projected, his idea of the fictitious apartment building became realized in the 657-page *La Vie mode d’emploi* (1978), the original cover illustration of which shows a section of an apartment building that reveals all of the simultaneous happenings typically hidden by a façade: a man stretching and yawning in a chair; a person with an umbrella climbing a flight of stairs; a young couple admiring their newborn child. This colorful illustration reflects the book’s narrative, which gives life through description to the objects and beings found in 99 rooms at 11

rue Simon-Crubellier on the twenty-third of June nineteen seventy-five, just before 8:00 pm.\textsuperscript{12}

“The composition of the saga of 11 rue Simon-Crubellier was organised like a building contract. The planning had taken years and now provided detailed instructions about the shape and the decoration of each room,”\textsuperscript{13} writes Perec’s biographer and translator David Bellos about the novel’s careful construction. In a way similar to \textit{Les Choses}, the reader comes to know the inhabitants of the building through lists of their belongings but, in opposition to an entire novel about specific people like Jérôme and Sylvie, the reader of \textit{Life A User’s Manual} is provided with a few brief chapters describing the rooms of many characters and, through this style of indirect characterization, a story is told. For example, we receive a description of tenants Madame and Monsieur Altamont’s boudoir in a fashion similar to descriptions of other rooms in the building:

A dark and intimate room with oak woodwork, silk hangings, and heavy grey velvet curtains. Against the left-hand wall, between two doors, stands a tobacco-coloured divan on which a silky long-haired King Charles Spaniel lies. Above the divan hangs a large hyper-realist canvas portraying a steaming plate of spaghetti and packet of Van Houten cocoa.\textsuperscript{14}

As can be seen here, Perec achieves not a literal design of a room but a literary one, intimating that the boudoir is comprised of materials ranging from ‘oak’ to ‘silk’ to ‘velvet’ that house objects that are placed ‘against the left-hand wall’, ‘between’ some things, and ‘above’ others, and work together to create a ‘dark’ and ‘intimate’ atmosphere. One can infer from these details that the Altamont’s collect art, have a taste for luxury furniture, and own a dog, but, in this way, the couple is not directly characterized. That is why, instead of limiting the novel to descriptions of the architectural structure and its interior design, Perec goes on to describe Madame Altamont

\textsuperscript{12} One of \textit{Life A User’s Manual}’s distinctly Oulipian constraints is that it lacks a temporal structure; all things described pertaining to 11 rue Simon-Crubellier occur either historically before or exactly at this specified moment.
\textsuperscript{13} David Bellos, \textit{Georges Perec: A Life in Words} (Boston: Godine, 1993), 621.
in her boudoir at that moment. He writes, “[She is] a woman of about forty-five who has kept her beauty, with an impeccable bearing, a bony face, protruding cheekbones, and stern eyes. She is wearing only a brassiere and black lace panties. A narrow strip of black gauze is wrapped around her right hand.”

Acknowledged here are the woman’s age, her ‘stern’ temperament that includes her facial structure, and the few articles of clothing she wears. All of these small details (the wrap of black gauze, for example), although very precise, ultimately point to the many trivial questions and mysteries left unsolved in the novel. It remains that this is how Madame Altamont looks at one moment, at the age of 45, and clearly this description, matched with that of the trappings of the boudoir in which she is primping herself, illustrate the surface appearance of things. This façade of the circumstance persists because movement in the novel, which would entail a progression of events that the reader could use as a way to come to know characters like Madame Altamont, is entirely left out in the present time (June 23, 1975, just before 8:00pm). Nothing in the narrative takes place beyond this precise point in history; thus, Madame Altamont will always be found clad in nothing but her undergarments. To the dismay of some literary traditionalists, this level of narrative restriction is not a fluke on the part of Perec. Such a stark lack of movement in Life A User’s Manual is derived from the application of one of the four constraints in its writing – the omission of a temporal structure. This constraint is one way Perec gives the novel the quality of being metaphorically puzzle-like: chapters functioning as individual puzzle pieces bearing the picture imagined (or signified) by their content.

To complement this constraint are the three other constraints: the Latin bi-square, the quinine, and a Latin bi-square of order 12. For the purpose of this document, let it suffice to say that these three remaining constraints are used by Perec to determine what and how many things are found in each room and also the order of the rooms by chapter. In this way, Perec controls

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15 Ibid., 334-335.
the novel as if he is the maker of the puzzle and his readers are meant to put its pieces together, or to understand how the tenants and the space of their apartments are interconnected. “All recourse to chance would be ruled out, and the project would make time and space serve as the abstract coordinates plotting the ineluctable recursion of identical events occurring inevitably in their allotted places, on their allotted dates,”16 Perec writes in the novel, implying how Life A User’s Manual, in the exact same way, involved an intricate formative process.

Lastly, while it does not include temporal progression, the novel does make reference to the histories of the tenants. For example, we learn that Madame Altamont gave the concierge of the building, Madame Nochère, a number of food items when she was preparing to leave Paris with her husband for an extended vacation. Upon learning that she would be in town for an extra 24 hours, Madame Altamont asked that the concierge give back the green beans she included in the package. Unfortunately, Madame Nochère was already in the process of cooking them. Despite efforts on both of their parts to resolve the situation, the tension never comes to a clear resolve, and “since then Madame Altamont hasn’t missed a single co-owners’ meeting, and each time, on one pretext or another, she asks for Madame Nochère to be replaced by a new concierge.”17 These more often than not eccentric histories of the tenants complement descriptions of their physiognomies and rooms to give an all around sense of unification, or comprehensiveness, to life as it exists in one moment at 11 rue Simon-Crubellier.

Overall, Madame Altamont represents a small fraction of the life in this fictitious apartment building, the breadth and scope of which is reflected in the 70-page index Perec placed at the end of the book. That Life A User’s Manual concertedly performs an undertaking of great proportions is elaborated upon by its English translator Bellos:

16 Ibid., 118.
17 Ibid., 188.
In terms of technique, *Life A User’s Manual* is a *Meisterstück*, designed to demonstrate the writer’s mastery of all the skills of his craft. Perec shows that he can tell fairy tales, that he can construct a novel in letters, an adventure narrative, a business saga, a dream sequence, a detective story, a family drama, a sporting history; he demonstrates that he has mastered comic techniques, the creation of pathos, historical reconstruction, and many non-narrative forms of writing, from the table of contents to the kitchen recipe, the equipment catalogue, the reflective essay, the dictionary entry, the newspaper, résumé, and (of course!) the bibliography and index.\(^{18}\)

Bellos verifies that, with years of planning behind him, Perec executed a written work that demonstrates the tremendous amount of life blended into one small sliver of space and time.

From the patterning detail of a building inspector’s purse to one tenant’s daydream of the whole block being leveled to the ground, Perec seemingly provides everything one could possibly learn about this edifice. For this reason, little consideration is required to confirm the use of *Life A User’s Manual* in the context of this project because its extensive detail gives a great deal of content to the social space(s) of 11 rue Simon-Crubellier.

Particularly because the themes of Perec’s writing, more than other Oulipians, are centered upon space, architecture, the city, and, subsequently, how our everyday life is bound by these societal constructs, this project takes on Perec and his novels *Les Choses* and *Life A User’s Manual*. With its nuanced attention to form and constraints, the Oulipo and its texts are an accessible gateway into a project that aims to discern how the parameters of the latter novel generate social space(s) in comparison with those of the former novel, which will stand as a representation of all other non-Oulipian fictions. Before this task is carried out, above all else it is necessary to define, at last, *social space(s)*.

\(^{18}\) Bellos, *A Life in Words*, 626.
Henri Lefebvre & Social Space(s)

“Notice a room, in noticing a room what is there to notice, the first thing to notice is the room and the windows and the door and the table and the place where there are divisions and the center of the room and the rest of the people. All this is necessary and then there is finance.”

from Geography and Plays, Gertrude Stein

Considering the repeated presence of socio-spatial themes in his writing, it should not come as a great surprise to learn that Perec worked as an assistant to one of the original thinkers that expanded upon the idea of social space, Henri Lefebvre, who, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was reaching a level of contention with the French Communist Party of which he was a member. At the time, the French philosopher and theorist had become dissatisfied with the lack of critical engagement with the party’s traditionally held beliefs, specifically those that, in a cold and calculated manner, quantified and divided human beings into social groups based upon numbers and statistics, such as income levels. To revise these features of Marxism, Lefebvre intended to demonstrate “that sociology served a purpose and could not be reduced to bourgeois science.” He argued that such a method of scientifically categorizing people reduced to near insignificance the value of the lived experience of everyday human life. To assist in his effort to dismantle this and other disagreeable ideological constructs of his time he created the *Groupe d’étude de la vie quotidienne*, composed of a collection of students given “various research projects on aspects of France’s new love affair with things.” In issue one of *Revue Française de Sociologie*, published in 1960, the aims of the *Groupe* are described as follows:

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20 Bellos, *A Life in Words*, 236.
1.) Research on needs in the framework of the family (How mothers see the needs of children. Sociology of everyday life. Theory of needs. Research into needs in the family framework).
2.) The birth of a city (Lacq and Mourenx).
3.) Monographs on villages.\textsuperscript{21}

Part of this research required that the \textit{Groupe} travel to various parts of France to conduct interviews with the French people in their homes. Perec, prior to his publications, was assigned a position in the \textit{Groupe} as a field researcher in 1960. He was sent to North-Western France to conduct interviews with local miners and their families of the \textit{Société Métallurgique de Normandie}. There he undertook “a full-scale attitudinal survey of a mining community prior to the probable closure of iron-ore mines in Normandy.”\textsuperscript{22} Unfortunately, documentation of Perec’s experience in Normandy has not been uncovered.\textsuperscript{23}

Lefebvre’s research, insight, and revision of contemporary thought and society, including the results contributed by the \textit{Groupe}, culminated into \textit{Critique of Everyday Life Volume II} (1961). A work of Marxist revisionism that constructs a new Marxist sociology, \textit{Critique Vol. II} ranges from discussions of systems of musical tonality to forewarnings of the dangerous hierarchical deceptions that function within the networks of mass communication. Biographer and translator of Perec and Perec’s works David Bellos best describes the volume as the means by which Lefebvre sought to apply an old idea inherited from Hegel to the modern world of consumer capitalism: in an affluent society, or one that was fast becoming affluent… people came to define themselves as consumers: their lives, at the mundane and everyday level, were constructed according to the list of things they purchased, or wished to purchase, until in the end they were themselves no more than items on the list, mere \textit{things} in the circuit of economic exchange.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} Bellos, \textit{A Life in Words}, 236.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 236.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 236.
Beginning with a repositioning of himself both temporally and socio-politically in “Clearing the Ground,” Lefebvre moves forward to create the “Formal Implements” (Axioms, Hypothesis, Transduction, the Idea of Level, Continuity and Discontinuity, Micro and Macro, Indexes, Criteria, Variables, Dimensions, and, finally, the Idea of Structures) of the two models of his new Marxist Sociology. He then explains the theories built upon the Formal Implements: the Theory of the Semantic Field; the Theory of Accumulative and non-Accumulative Processes; and the Theory of Moments. Of particular importance to Critique Vol. II is the theorist’s re-evaluation of then current positions concerning structure and structuralism, terms to which Lefebvre goes so far as to ascribe the adjective ‘shop-worn’. Structuralism, he argues, proclaims the absolute nature of the structure, thereby casting social realities within, among other rigid constructs, static temporal sequences. As a result, structuralism causes thought and analysis to lose sight of the multi-directional fluxes, intersections, and divergences of everyday life. This, of course, is where his argument points to Karl Marx’s Capital, where, Lefebvre reminds his reader, this faulty reductionism can be found in the structure of the ‘bourgeois science.’ Lefebvre describes this science as “capitalist society reduced to its essential forces and polarities: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.” He pivots his revision of Marx from this point of contention, thus disagreeing with and going so far as to critically reevaluate a major tenet of Marxism, exemplifying his divergence from the traditional ideologies of the French Communist Party of his time. “What appears most contingent and most accidental in the everyday can contain and translate – and sometimes traduce – group tactics and strategies,” he writes, pointing to the manipulation of power and hierarchical status characteristic of the reductionism in scientific

26 Ibid., 160.
27 Ibid., 164.
structures – such as that of the ‘bourgeois science’ of Marxism and Communism. To counter the development of such reductive structures, Lefebvre, with Critique Vol. II, constructs both the foundations and the components of two models (a model of needs and a model of communications) of everyday life that acknowledge new ways of comprehending human interaction in social space.

Likely in the early stages of conceptualization, Lefebvre’s idea of social space receives relatively minor direct address in Critique Vol. II. “Subjectively,” he poses, “social space is the environment of the group and of the individual within the group; it is the horizon at the centre of which they place themselves and in which they live. The extent of this horizon differs from group to group, according to their situation and their particular activities.”28 In this way, Lefebvre casts social space in a vast, general, and multitudinal light. These are the spaces that are always-already part of human interaction, preceding both culture and knowledge. Leaving more to be desired, these few details lend themselves to the more advanced studies of space and social space in his later writings. For example, while Critique Vol. II examines the everyday life of individuals and groups within social space(s), The Production of Space (1974) assumes a more abstract analysis of the nature of these social space(s), outlining a general history of social space(s), their inner mechanics, and explanations of how they interact with other types of space.

The Production of Space is divided into several parts: Plan of the Present Work; Social Space; Spatial Architectonics; From Absolute Space to Abstract Space; Contradictory Space; From the Contradictions of Space to Differential Space; Openings and Conclusions. Lefebvre uses these seven sections to analyze the multitude of intersections present in space: locally, nationally, and globally. He aims to build a connection between mental space (the internal space of the Idea, thought, and reason) and social space (the external space where law, religion, and

28 Ibid., 231.
ideology are implemented). He posits that beginning with Roman civilization Western philosophers have valued mental space more highly than social space. He claims that this overvaluing of mental space provided the ease for different forms of internally formulated logic and reason to control what happens in social space(s). As such, the classes that ruled the production and reproduction of mental space could control the commodity market and politics via the mass proliferation of their ideas and institutions. This means that the majority of people who had little to no knowledge or comprehension of the production and reproduction of mental space were subjected, by default, to the practices and ideologies determined by the classes that had enough power and money to invest in the religious doctrines and philosophies in their own self interest. To limit this fashion of covert mind-and-body control, Lefebvre suggests that one must set aside the Western predilection for the dangerous reductionism of mathematics and languages (this may remind one of the argument against the ‘bourgeois science’ referenced in *Critique Vol. II*) in order to seek an understanding of the truth of space, which would reveal the social forces of production that rule patterns of thought and spatial relations. Rather than assuming the transparency of everyday life, social relations in space must be decoded by a ‘supercode’ exemplified by a history of space that Lefebvre develops in order to come to his conclusions that promote societal change through revolution, destruction, and rebuilding. Thus, in the end, *The Production of Space* stands as an attempt to spread knowledge about how to subvert the state and political control produced and reproduced through spatial abstractions.

Despite its great profundity, the radical intent of *The Production of Space* is not what we are concerned with here; rather, it is the concept of social space(s) that Lefebvre details in this book at a length significantly greater than he does in *Critique Vol. II*. One of the simple truths at the core of *The Production of Space* is this: (social) space is a (social) product. From this
assertion many other assertions follow. First of all, it must be strictly clarified that a social space is not a natural space (the forests, the oceans, the Earth, the Universe), particularly because social space, unlike natural space, is staged. In other words, nature is not produced in the sense that social space is produced (the change of the seasons is not a product of human effort; the erection of a building is a product of human effort). What additionally separates the two spaces is the capacity for social space(s) to willingly encroach upon natural space, using its elements and resources to fuel both its expansion and also the growth of more social space(s). Secondly, social space, Lefebvre claims, is constituted of things and relations, “including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information,” like tunnels, bridges, highways, electrical wires, or even the aisles of a grocery store.²⁹ It should be stressed that, despite this seemingly all-encompassing quality, social space(s) do not encompass all things imaginable. Instead, social space subsumes all things produced through human interaction.

Thirdly, it follows that historically anterior practices have given rise to the social space(s) of the present. “[Social space] is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object… Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others,” he writes.³⁰

Thus, social spaces of the present are a product of past social spaces, even the ancient ones because parts of them do not disappear. As for modern social spaces, Lefebvre characterizes them as repetitive. Repetitious spaces in the form of houses, apartments, and office buildings are easily designed, constructed, used, and exchanged by the masses. Lacking any identifiable uniqueness and therefore stripped of individual value, Lefebvre argues that we think of these edifices “in terms of spatiality, and so fetishize space in a way reminiscent of the old fetishism of

³⁰Ibid., 73.
commodities, where the trap lay in exchange, and the error was to consider ‘things’ in isolation, as ‘things in themselves.’” We will return to these modern social spaces as we decipher them in Perec’s fictions.

In his later publications there is a sense of clarity and succinctness to Lefebvre’s concept of social space(s). In State, Space, and World, he puts it simply:

Space is social: it involves assigning more or less appropriated places to the social relations of reproduction, namely, the biophysiological relations between the sexes, the ages, the specified organization of the family, and to the relations of production, namely, the division of labor and its organization.

To be concerned with social space(s) is to be concerned with the places where human interactions occur: where we exercise and where we break for coffee, where we go for vacation and where we wait on standby with the telephone company. It is equally to be concerned with how we practice these interactions on a daily basis: Do we run in certain areas but not in others? Do we serve coffee in plastic cups? Do we send postcards to our loved ones from exotic locales? Do we find it fulfilling to yell at the incompetent operator? These basic everyday interactions that we humans perform and how we perform them can be organized into the social space(s) that Lefebvre discusses in his theory. No detail of our everyday lives in and through space goes unconnected to the social space(s) of the past, present, and future. Thus Lefebvre’s concept of social space(s) is understandably broad and abstract. As such, it requires a particular social space to observe and discuss its components and parameters. For this reason we will now return to Perec’s fictions: where Sylvie and Jerome are looking at a map of France in an interviewee’s home in Les Choses, and where Madame Altamont, still in her lingerie, sits in her boudoir in Life A User’s Manual. Clearly these are the places where Perec is most in dialogue with Lefebvre.

31 Ibid., 90.
Methodology

“The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of enrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling.”

from “The Fall of the House of Usher”, Edgar Allan Poe

While in 1974 The Production of Space was making its way into the hands of French readers, Perec was releasing a collection of nonfiction entitled Espèces d’espaces (Species of Spaces). Published by Editions Galilée, Espèces d’espaces begins with a simple concept: the written word as a medium an author can use to create space. In the sense that they both inhabit and signify space, written words were being promoted by Perec as a way to construct fictional realities with their own shape, size, and dimension. “This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page,” he writes. “To describe space: to name it, to trace it.”

For Perec, the action of describing space actually gives definition, or form, to space. One can liken this act to deciphering what a cloud passing overhead may look like (That one looks like a squirrel running up a tree while this one here looks like a man throwing a football). To some extent this conceptual framework of Species of Spaces is a derivation of the ideas discussed by 20th century linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who contributed widely to the study of linguistics and philology, including his definition of three essential terms: the signifier (the form of a sign), the signified (that which the form represents), and the sign (the combined experience of the
signifier and the signified). At the foundation of this project is the assumption that Perec treats the words of *Species of Spaces* not only as signifiers but also as signifieds, meaning that this collection of essays can be viewed as a collection of signs that signify themselves with the intent to exist as and generate into their own ‘world’ with their own space to be experienced. Thus, words for Perec are a material just like paint, wood, clay, and other media used to create something out of nothing. In the introduction to his English translation of *Espèces d'espaces*, linguist John Sturrock expands upon the Saussurian wordplay at work in Perec’s writing:

> It was materialism that extended also to writing and to language. Materialists of language are distinctive for taking full advantage of the fact that language’s constituents, or words, are so many objects existing materially, in the form either of graphic inscription or acoustically, as a sound made in the mouth and received by the ear. All materialists do is to exploit the possibilities inherent in words as things, or signifiers, rather than doing what most of us do most of the time, which is to overlook the materiality or thingness of words and pass directly on to their meaning, or the signified. Perec was a writer waiting, you might say, for Structuralism to happen and to bring to the fore this suggestive division of language into its material and its semantic aspects.  

Perec exemplifies this way of applying language as a material with the horizontal, vertical, and otherwise haphazardly typeset text in the first few pages of *Species of Spaces*. In doing so, he sets a precedent indicating how the reader should spatially interpret the remainder of the book in just the same way. Each of the fifteen essays included in *Species of Spaces* is titled quite frankly, emphasizing its expansiveness relative to the preceding chapters: *The Page, The Bed, The Bedroom, The Apartment, The Apartment Building, The Street, The Neighbourhood, The Town, The Country, Countries, Europe, Old Continent, New Continent, The World, and Space*. Perec reveals the unique characteristics of each of these levels of space through his largely personal reflection upon their physical, emotional, and philosophical significance, the details of which are unnecessary to go into here. For the purpose of this project, what is most important about *Species of Spaces* is its way of demonstrating how the literal material of the written word weaves these

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34 Ibid., 13.
essays together. This property of the book is made apparent even at a moment when Perec makes a clever quip:

The space of a sheet of paper (regulation international size, as used in Government departments, on sale at all stationers) measures 623.7 sq. cm. You have to write a little over sixteen pages to take up one square metre. Assuming the average format of a book to be 21 by 29.7 cm, you could, if you were to pull apart all the printed books kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale and spread the pages carefully out one beside the other, cover the whole, either of the island of St. Helena or Lake Trasimeno.35

How could Perec more blatantly express that the pages and words in a book take up a space of their own while, at the same time, signifying spaces to be imagined? If one is not convinced that this holds true for all of the books at the Bibliothèque Nationale then one must at least agree that at this point in the text Species of Spaces becomes self-referential, both signifying and being that which is signified. As such, a project that examines the social space(s) of Les Choses and Life A User’s Manual must take into account the legacy of this collection of essays, which suggests that Perec’s non-fiction and fiction affirm their own space, particularly with the help of constraints in the case of the latter novel.

But before social spaces assume the quality of being ‘social’, they must first originate from ‘space,’ which is an all-encompassing, elusive, and abstract state that can span as far as the universe stretches. Space specifically in fiction is ambiguous just as much, but, nonetheless, this project requires its definition for the purpose of moving on to the more substantive spaces of fiction that are social. To begin, the space of fiction is unlike all-encompassing space because it has not always-already been there; instead, this type of space starts to form when words, sentences, and grammatical structures become intelligible enough to relate a narrative, just like Perec explains at the beginning of Species of Spaces. In this way, writing a work of fiction becomes a design process. Although the content of the design varies book by book, each one

involves the creation of what is no less than its own space for the reader to experience. In the
case of a traditional work of fiction, characters are appropriated a setting and a position in
history. Between the first and the last page, these characters, subjected to the gradual change
prompted by the sequence of events specific to their place and time, develop and show their
strengths, weaknesses, desires, attitudes, preferences, regrets, hopes, and so on. These characters
and the trials they undergo determine a plot and its scope. Inherent in a plot are the themes that
attempt to speak to the reader in order for the novel to clarify its purpose, whether that be about
love, revenge, war, lineage, post-colonialism, or endless other things. Typically, the definition
and exposure of this design is conveyed by a narrative voice that speaks outside of character
dialogue and frames the story with its own mood, prejudices, and modes of reflection. Overall,
the design process entails the use of these traditional storytelling elements to begin and end a
work of fiction. Generally speaking, how this design and its components tell a story and what
they tell are the space of the fiction taken up by this project. The specifics of each work of fiction
determine its space that, again, is equal to the universe of the novel – something broad, abstract,
and difficult to summarize. As Perec writes elsewhere in *Species of Spaces*, “In short, spaces
have multiplied, been broken up and have diversified. There are spaces today of every kind and
every size, for every use and every function. To live is to pass from one space to another.” The
diversification of space also stands for spaces in fiction, from the dangerous halls of *Beowulf* to
the seemingly secluded forest where rendezvous take place in *The Mill on the Floss*.

*Les Choses* and *Life A User’s Manual*, in ways different from one another, have three of
the most basic design components of traditional fiction in common: setting, characterization, and
narrative voice. On a general level, the setting for *Les Choses* is both Paris and Tunis and the
setting for *Life A User’s Manual* is 11 rue Simon-Crubblier in Paris. Jérôme and Sylvie are the

36Ibid., 6.
main characters of *Les Choses* while the many tenants of 11 rue Simon-Crubellier are the characters of *Life A User’s Manual*. Finally, the narrative voice of both novels is the third-person omniscient, meaning that the narrator can both tell the story as it unfolds on the surface while also relating the inner thoughts and workings of each character.\(^{37}\) Thus, this project maintains that the settings, characterizations, and narrative voices of these novels function to create the general space(s) of fiction, but additionally that these three different design components can make contributions to the space that are *social* in nature.

This method of interpretively extracting the space(s) of Perec’s fiction lends itself to the ultimate purpose of this project: to equally demonstrate how to decipher social space(s) in fiction. How will this be done? Recourse to Saussure helps to begin defining this method. Roy Harris, a linguist and translator of Saussure’s work, describes the relevance of the Saussurian method of linguistic study:

> Language is no longer regarded as peripheral to our grasp of the world we live in, but as central to it. Words are not mere vocal labels of communicational adjuncts superimposed upon an already given order of things. They are collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world.\(^ {38}\)

Judging solely by Perec’s more than 35 book publications, for him ‘social interaction’ was best conveyed through writing. To ‘constitute’ and ‘articulate’ a ‘world’, or to design his fictions, he had words as his tools and materials. This project argues that the ‘social interaction’ conveyed through setting, characterization, and narrative voice, cumulatively referred to as the social space(s) in his fiction, reflect the state of ‘social interaction’ and the social conditions experienced by Perec in 1950s, 60s, and 70s France. This means that there are remnants of ideas accrued from historical events such as the Algerian War and the student protests of 1968 that determine the nature of these social space(s). Shed in such a light, this project approaches their

\(^{37}\) These parameters of space in fiction will be discussed more specifically in the sections to follow.

design in Perec’s fictions with particular attention to their inclusion of ideas related to class structure and organization (i.e. Lefebvre’s revision of Marxist sociology and Guy Debord and the Socialist International). This project does not end here in terms of the social dimension of space in fiction. In addition, the social space(s) of Les Choses and Life A User’s Manual are understood as new and specific ones designed with their own interactions and conditions. In La Distinction (1979), Pierre Bourdieu touches upon design, art, and the sociological dimension of space similar to how this project conceives of Perec’s social space(s):

Through the economic and social conditions which they presuppose, the different ways of relating to realities and fictions, of believing in fictions and the realities they simulate, with more or less distance or detachment, are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and, consequently, bound up with the systems of dispositions (habitus) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions. Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.39

The carefully designed settings, characterizations, and narrative voices of Les Choses and Life A User’s Manual, by example of this project, each convey the socio-economic conditions of space in their own unique way. The added nuance to this project is that to explain the space(s) and social space(s) of Life A User’s Manual requires the acknowledgement of its Oulipian constraints. This is not the case for Les Choses, which, because it was published four years before Perec became a member of Oulipo, reflects little pre-conceived effort to define its constraining features. For this reason, Les Choses will be treated as a novel lacking extra Oulipian constraints while still exhibiting its own social space(s) in a way different from Life A User’s Manual.

At the core of this project is a consideration of the written word and its potential to evoke social space(s) and, as such, there is one definite problem glaring from this method. As Sturrock writes, one can use language “to say what isn’t in the world, as well as what is. And since we

come to know the world through whatever language we have been born into the midst of, it is
legitimate to argue that our language determines reality, rather than reality our language." The
native language spoken by both Lefebvre and Perec was French and, subsequently, all of their
books were written originally in French. One fault of this project is that it does not use the texts
by Lefebvre and Perec in their original French, meaning that some of their ideas may not have
been translated according to their original intention. The major analysis here will ignore this
issue because it avoids becoming overly philosophical when it touches upon the undeniable
linguistic parameter at the margins of this study. It is also important to note that the majority of
theoretical material from *Critique of Everyday Life Volume II, The Production of Space,* and
*State, Space, and World,* which extends beyond a mere discussion of social space(s), will not be
used in this analysis. For this reason, to borrow only a portion of Lefebvre’s ideas means that
some of his major arguments are lost in this analysis in favor of singling out those that are
relevant to the project at hand. The same can be mentioned about *Species of Spaces, Les Choses,*
and *Life A User’s Manual,* all of which involve meditations upon ideas and themes not only
related to social space(s).

In summary, at the crux of this project is a cross-comparison of *Les Choses* and *Life A
User’s Manual* with recourse to theoretical material from *Critique of Everyday Life Volume II,*
*The Production of Space,* and *State, Space, and World.* This thesis simultaneously cycles
between *Les Choses* and *Life A User’s Manual,* teasing out the similarities and dissimilarities of
their design for the purpose of establishing how social space(s) in fiction can be created in a
variety of ways. More pointedly, the pre-conceived constraints of *Life A User’s Manual* will be
shown to make the design of social space(s) that much more different from the common
constraints of non-Oulipian novels like *Les Choses.* In this way, this document will arrive at a

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number of conclusions, including, but not limited to, those about the nature of the dialogue between theoretician Lefebvre and author Perec, the design of the dimensions of a world in fiction, and the theory that the experience of space and architecture (i.e. the built environment) can be constructed using the written word.

Setting

“And thus, in great good spirits, the young people climbed out of the wagon, which had slowly mounted the steep, winding drive and deposited them before the portal of the International Sanatorium Berghof.”

- from The Magic Mountain, Thomas Mann

“We live in space, in these spaces, these towns, this countryside, these corridors, these parks. That seems obvious to us. Perhaps indeed it should be obvious,” Perec writes in the foreword to Species of Spaces, going on to claim that our experience of space isn’t so obvious:

What’s certain, in any case, is that at a time too remote no doubt for any of us to have retained anything like a precise memory of it, there was none of all this: neither corridors, nor parks, nor towns, nor countryside. The problem isn’t so much to find out how we have reached this point, but simply to recognize that we have reached it, that we are here.41

Otherwise known as setting, the ‘here’ of Perec’s fictions absorbs in its strongly asserted presence virtually all of the remaining elements of the narrative, so much so that the geographic and architectural locations of his novels seem as if they function as characters in the plot. His fictions, by again and again re-enforcing the recognition of their own settings, indicate the agency of ‘points’ of ‘here’ like 11 rue Simon-Crubeilier to be a leading element in the denouement of a novel. Of these settings the statement ‘there was none of all this’ holds true because, having not previously existed, these places were crafted by the written word at the time

41Perec, Species of Spaces, 5-6.
of writing such novels as *Les Choses* and *Life A User’s Manual*. What must be clarified, though, is that Perec’s notion of space as exemplified by the excerpt above comes near to being synonymous with the notion of place (countryside, corridors, and parks), and to maintain this narrow definition would limit the scope of a study of the social space(s) in fiction to an exploration of settings. Alternately, setting, or place, in this project is but one of the design components of a work of fiction that contributes to the generation of social space(s) in fiction, and it serves as a helpful starting point for this project because of its clear association with space.

As Jérôme and Sylvie stroll down the boulevards in the Paris of *Les Choses*, the accoutrements of lavish lifestyles taunt them from behind the glass of display cases, inciting what becomes a comparative evaluation of their current lifestyle with that which they could acquire with more money. The potential for accessing this new life makes them dissatisfied with the one they lead; despite being owners of a quaint, cozy apartment with a view they once adored, Jérôme and Sylvie desire a living situation that they perceive as better. Putting in the time and effort to gain raises or promotions at their work place, of course, lacks appeal as a way to assuage their state of discontentment. “Impatience, Jérôme and Sylvie told themselves, is a twentieth-century virtue.”\(^{42}\) Instead, with not enough money in their pockets, the couple waits to win the lottery or to inherit, suddenly, millions of francs from a family member, all the while becoming “submerged by the vastness of their needs.”\(^{43}\) This is the major function of the setting of *Les Choses*, Paris: to produce these pressures that begin to impact the couple’s perception of reality, “because everywhere, all around them, everything forced them to understand, because it was dinned into their heads all day long, what with slogans, posters, neon signs, lighted windows, they understood that they were always a little lower on the ladder, always just a little

\(^{42}\) Perec, *Les Choses*, 58.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 32.
By realizing that it manipulates Jérôme and Sylvie’s mindset, one can clearly see for themselves that the Paris of Les Choses is a mirage of material deceptions built into post-WWII consumerist culture, which Perec discusses in an interview about Les Choses:

There is a current form of happiness that means, I think, that you have to be absolutely modern to achieve happiness. People who think I have denounced consumer society have understood absolutely nothing about my book. But that happiness is only potential— in our capitalist society, what’s promised isn’t delivered. Everything is promised; well, advertising entices us towards everything, to having everything, to possessing everything; and we have nothing, or we have just tiny little things, tiny little bits of happiness.\(^45\)

Unbeknownst to themselves, the form of happiness Jérôme and Sylvie aim to experience can be characterized as an illusion attributable to the capitalist setting of the novel. The relatively better form of Paris in Les Choses is the promise that isn’t delivered for Jérôme and Sylvie, causing for them to look at their financial means as the source of their discontentment. “They wanted to enjoy life, but everywhere around them joy was confused with possessing.”\(^46\) the novel stresses.

Gesturing to Roland Barthes’s Mythologies, a text familiar to Lefebvre, Perec ascribes this emotional dependence to the “value-system imposed by advertising.”\(^47\) Of this value-system Barthes writes, “Advertisements… indicate the effect of the product (and in superlative fashion, incidentally), but they chiefly reveal its mode of action; in doing so, they involve the consumer in a kind of direct experience of the substance, make him the accomplice of a liberation rather than the mere beneficiary of a result; matter here is endowed with value-bearing states.”\(^48\) The inaccessibility of the material things they desire, for Jérôme and Sylvie, deprives them of achieving full ‘liberation’, or what Perec refers to as the ‘form of happiness’. For example, to wear the beautiful dress displayed in a shop window would, for Sylvie, implicate her into the

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 41.
\(^{43}\) Benabou and Marcenac, “Georges Perec Owns Up: An Interview,” 16.
\(^{44}\) Perec. Les Choses, 58.
\(^{45}\) Benabou and Marcenac, “Georges Perec Owns Up: An Interview,” 17.
web of socio-economic meanings entailed by its production and display, but since she cannot do so she is not liberated in the sense of which Barthes writes and does not achieve full happiness in the sense of which Perec writes. Lefebvre, for his part, makes similar assertions:

A car is an item of goods, an object whose use brings satisfactions and which has a functional utility. The relations forged between individuals and this object go far beyond mere use and sheer pleasure. There are many individuals who ‘realize’ themselves by driving their cars. They employ qualities which lie fallow elsewhere; daring, virility, mastery of self, energy, and even sexuality (or so they say) would all be part of this relationship with the car. It is laden with ideology.49

The material items that compose the setting of Paris explored by Jérôme and Sylvie, who lack these objects that they so desire, are laden with capitalistic ideologies related to the appearance of states of being such as success, luxury, and comfort. As their current lifestyle feels unjustified because of its lack of these qualities, Jérôme and Sylvie perceive their reality as foreign, unjust. Perhaps unable to ‘realize’ themselves because of their predilection for material accumulation, they alienate themselves from (and become alienated by) their reality, which can otherwise be understood as the setting of Les Choses. “Alienation is the result of a relation with ‘otherness’, and this relation makes us ‘other’, i.e., it changes us, tears us from our self and transforms an activity (be it conscious or not) into something else, or quite simply, into a thing,”50 Lefebvre writes. The ‘otherness’ of the vague lifestyle Jérôme and Sylvie dream of having becomes so imbedded within their daily functioning as human beings that they are torn from their original selves, alienated from their reality and immersed in illusion.

In the second part of the novel, Jérôme and Sylvie have decided to move to Sfax, a city in Tunisia, where Sylvie takes a position teaching French in a grade school and Jerome idles his time away after leaving his own teaching position in a different school. Consistent with their Parisian lifestyle, Jérôme and Sylvie arrive in Sfax with the same romanticized ideals that caused

49 Lefebvre, Critique Volume II, 212.
50 Ibid., 214.
for them to seek a new life in a former foreign protectorate of the French colonial empire. Despite their motivations to use a new exotic location to make their lifestyle more desirable in their eyes, Jérôme and Sylvie are confronted with the realities of another place; hot weather hinders them from enjoying the outdoors, cultural barriers cause for difficulty in making new friends, and boredom, ultimately, settles in. We are told that in Paris Jérôme and Sylvie pass along the boulevards and look longingly at luxurious items showcased in display windows of various stores. Likewise, they carry on this same tradition in Sfax, where, as opposed to exploring the city and its inhabitants in a personal or intimate way, the two alienate themselves by merely looking at their environment as a city of material goods and not experiencing it more actively. “Since they were really only strollers they always remained outsiders. They did not understand even its simplest mechanisms; they see in it only a labyrinth of streets,” the reader is told. Their single-minded impatience for their desires to become manifest in their lifestyle perpetuates their alienation in this different country. Nostalgia for their old setting in Paris eventually incites the couple’s return to France, where, eventually, the two settle down and accept the material matter of their lifestyle as it comes to them through mid-level work in a large company.

All of Jérôme and Sylvie’s struggles are caused, in part, by the alluring products made inaccessible by the capitalist Paris of the 1960s, and, in this way, the Paris of Les Choses is not just a setting but a setting that lends itself to the social space(s) of the novel. Their Parisian milieu, along with their apartments, restaurants and retail stores of choice, and job arena, all combine to make a more or less comfortable but temporary social space for Jérôme, Sylvie, and their counterparts. Jérôme and Sylvie are introduced within one particular social space (post-university, psycho-sociologists, petit-bourgeoisie), but the progression of the narrative reveals

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51 Ibid., 100.
the deterioration of that social space, as many of their friends opt for “settling down” with mid-level jobs and children. With their social space dissolving around them, Jérôme and Sylvie pack up their belongings, leave their jobs in the field of motivational studies, and move to an exotic locale, a new social space. In other words, Paris and Sfax are mere locations in the novel, but the social dynamics initiated by their presence, such as Jérôme and Sylvie’s desire for upward social mobility and the ensuing form of alienation they experience, make these locations, or these settings, components of the social space(s) of Les Choses.

The setting of Life A User’s Manual is considerably more specific than the city-wide settings of Sfax and Paris in Les Choses. 11 rue Simon-Crubellier takes the forefront in this second novel, save for the small, more insignificant settings told in the sub-stories, which will not be discussed in this document because they are of relatively smaller value compared with the apartment building. For the most part, all of the 600-pages of Life A User’s Manual takes place at 11 rue Simon-Crubellier: just one apartment block in the context of the entire city of Paris. To build this place, Père uses the written word as material, otherwise known as his form of “verbal assemblage,” as the decisive way for 11 rue Simon-Crubellier’s creation. For example:

Further down, another maze of ducts, pipes, and flues; drains winding among main and lateral sewers; narrow canals edged with black stone parapets; unrailinged stairs above precipitous voids; a whole inextricable geography of stalls, backyards, porches, pavements, blind alleys, and arcades, a whole subterranean city organized vertically into neighbourhoods, districts, and zones: the tanners’ quarter with its unbearable stench, its faltering machines fitted with sagging drive belts, its stacks of pelts and leathers, its vats brimming with brownish substances; the scrapyards littered with mantelpieces of marble and stucco, with bidets, bathtubs, rusty radiators, statues of startled nymphs, standing lamps, and park benches.52

In this way, as the book becomes longer, page-by-page, the apartment block described in 11 rue Simon-Crubellier becomes equally larger and more complete in the scope of the reader’s comprehension of its structure and content. Allegorically, each of the 99 rooms in Père’s

fictional apartment building corresponds to one of the 99 chapters that compose the book. Furthermore, it is implied that each individual chapter represents a single piece of a jigsaw puzzle. This notion gives the spatial structure of 11 rue Simon-Crubellier the character of reflecting *Life A User’s Manual*’s thematic tension between puzzle-maker and puzzle-doer, writer and reader. Of a jigsaw puzzle, Perec writes:

> The pieces are readable, take on a sense, only when assembled; in isolation, a puzzle piece means nothing – just an impossible question, an opaque challenge. But as soon as you have succeeded, after minutes of trial and error, or after a prodigious half-second flash of inspiration, in fitting it into one of its neighbours, the piece disappears, ceases to exist as a piece.\(^{53}\)

Once Perec establishes the nature of the relationship between himself and his readers, he goes on to explain, “Despite appearances, puzzling is not a solitary game: every move the puzzler makes, the puzzle-maker has made before; every piece the puzzler picks up, and picks up again, and studies and strokes, every combination he tried, and tries a second time, every blunder and every insight, each hope and each discouragement have all been designed, calculated, and decided by the other.”\(^{54}\) In this way, *Life A User’s Manual* quickly becomes about assembling the individual parts of the whole of the setting of 11 rue Simon-Crubellier. Peta Mitchell likens Perec’s writing process for this novel to building an *architext*, or a book that reads as if it simultaneously builds an edifice with its words. Mitchell discusses the architext and its jigsaw puzzle structure with reference to one of the constraints in the novel used to determine which room is taken up by each chapter: the knight’s tour, which restricts movement from one chapter to the next by limiting the succession to the moves a knight is able to make on a chess board. Mitchell writes:

> While the knight’s tour is mapped out for the reader, the *petits récits* the reader accumulates on his or her tour are much like the disassembled pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., xv-xvi.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., xviii.
that require a proactive approach to be placed back into the larger whole. In order to decipher the puzzle, the reader must see each chapter as a jigsaw-puzzle piece whose minute detail is simply part of the larger picture and whose place in that larger narrative must be puzzled out. In the same way, each room visited can be placed, like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, back within the frame of the building’s architectural floor plan.55

As such, the three or so rooms that make up Madame and Monsieur Altamont’s apartment unit are not told in sequential order, but are spread out through the book according to the calculated movements determined by the knight’s tour. Through this mode of writing a sharp comparison between the apartments of the different tenants is easy to discern, and their juxtapositions begin to show a number of differences between the tenants, the most striking of which is the varying socio-economic positions on a scale made clear by both descriptions of the material things that each tenant owns and the location of their apartment in the building. Social spaces repeat social structures, including that of the socio-economic hierarchy perpetuated by capitalist societies reflected in both Les Choses and Life A User’s Manual. Arguably, the latter novel renders the tenants of 11 rue Simon-Crubellier as necessarily, perhaps unjustifiably, divided economically and socially in their social space:

But the glazed door remains a subtle and fearfully persistent mark of a difference. Even if there are people upstairs much richer than those downstairs, that does not prevent it being the case that from the point of view of downstairs people those upstairs are somehow inferior: as it happens, if they are not servants, they are paupers, children (young people), or artists for whom life must necessarily be inscribed with these tiny rooms where there is space only for a bed, a cupboard, and a stack of shelves for jars of jam with which to eke out the days before the next pay cheque.56

From this excerpt it can be seen that there exists a fiscal division between the tenants of the building presented by Perec through his verbal representation of each tenant’s belongings and the orientation of their rooms. Other than the substories revealing the histories of the tenants, nothing else in Life A User’s Manual, because the narrative is restricted to surface appearance (and not

discussions of desire, like in *Les Choses*), these descriptions of their belongings are really the only indication of the socio-economically divided social space at 11 rue Simon-Crubellier.

Thus, although the settings of the novels are constructed and presented in two entirely different ways, both pertain to the social space(s) that interested Perec the most: socio-economically divided ones, where there is a relative and near-invisible line at the barrier to ‘liberation’, ‘freedom’, and ‘happiness’. The difference between the ways Perec has achieved social space(s) through these settings is in their construction. *Les Choses* takes a much more vague approach to the construction of its Paris of material illusion, while *Life A User’s Manual* actively builds the material of its setting through the assemblage, or the design, of many words guided by constraints.

**Characterization**

“Tilting a little down the hill, as our house does, a breeze draws through the hall all the time, upslanting. a feather dropped near the front door will rise and brush along the ceiling, slanting backward, until it reaches down – turning current at the back door: so with voices. As you enter the hall, they sound as though they were speaking out of the air about your head.”

from *As I Lay Dying*, William Faulkner

For Lefebvre, social space involves human beings. For him and for this project, the term social connotes its relation to people, human beings, who, in fiction, are known as characters. For the purpose of this project, characterization is the way that the personalities of characters are described.

In *Les Choses*, Jérôme and Sylvie are characterized as if they belong to society composed not of humans but of statistics. Their group of friends and colleagues is described as composed
of “young executives who had not yet cut all their teeth, technocrats halfway along the road to success. They came, almost all of them, from the petite bourgeoisie, and its values, they thought, were no longer good enough for them. They looked, with envy, with despair, toward the obvious comforts, the luxury, the perfection of the grands bourgeois." 57 All of the characters in the spotlight of Les Choses, including the couple, come from the petite bourgeoisie, the characteristics of which are related in a generalized and all-encompassing way by Perec. This “group unto themselves… knew each other well; rubbing off on each other, they had common habits, tastes, memories. They had their own vocabulary, their own symbols, their own hobbies.” 58 This means that all those individuals from Jérôme and Sylvie’s particular socio-economic class, in the eyes of Les Choses, are virtually the same people that think and act in the same mode. As the narration progresses, the characterization of this social caste becomes synonymous with that of the dangerously idealistic Jérôme and Sylvie. Often referencing an ambiguous “they,” the text can be interpreted to be examining not only Jérôme and Sylvie but also their friends and colleagues, who share similar lifestyles. A result of the combined forces of modern capitalism, the production of needs, and mass consumption, ambiguity for Lefebvre is “a category of unawareness and ignorance, or rather of misunderstanding and lack of knowledge, where appearances merge with the ‘real’. ” 59 The narrator’s words inform the reader of the apparent lack of differentiability between Jérôme, Sylvie, and their social milieu, which ambiguously characterizes the characters and combines them with the illusionistic quality of the capitalist Parisian setting of Les Choses. “Ambiguity between individuals and social needs and desires papers over unperceived contradictions, blunting them and coinciding with the three-dimensional ‘realness’ of the everyday. Only when there is ambiguity can the illusion and the

57 Perec, Les Choses, 50.
58 Ibid., 35.
appearance be sustained,”⁶⁰ Lefebvre writes. Although the novel focuses upon Jerome and Sylvie, the descriptions of the couple serve to just as well characterize the people that surround them. Thus, the way of non-specifically characterizing the main characters of Les Choses adds to the overarching socio-economic atmosphere, or social space, of the novel, which ascribes illusion and a lack of distinction in humanity to those living in the capitalist system functioning in the product-driven Paris of that era.

Furthermore, Jérôme and Sylvie are characterized by descriptions of the goods bought and sold amongst individuals in the social space(s) of Paris that they own or that they would like to own. This assertion is best characterized by the lengthy exposition at the beginning of the novel, which wholly illustrates all of the things that the couple would have if their means matched their desires:

Its walls would be cupboards, in light-coloured wood, with fittings of gleaming brass. Three prints, depicting, respectively, the Derby winner Thunderbird, a paddle-steamer named Ville-de-Montereau, and a Stephenson locomotive, would lead to a leather curtain hanging on thick, black, grainy wooden rings which would slide back at the merest touch. There, the carpet would give way to an almost yellow woodblock floor, partly covered by three faded rugs.⁶¹

The first twenty pages of Les Choses are exactly this: entirely avoiding the story of the couple themselves by imagining the apartment that they could have if they had so much more money. Nowhere in these descriptions does the reader find any indication of how Jérôme and Sylvie would inhabit this specifically designed apartment; the two are nowhere implicated in this vastly detailed image of what things could look like. Characterizing Jérôme and Sylvie by the things they would like to own and the lifestyle that they would like to lead strips them of their humanity in a way similar to the way that they are indicated to the reader as having the same indistinctive needs, desires, and outlooks as their friends and colleagues. Sections of the novel like the one

⁶⁰ Ibid., 223.
⁶¹ Perec, Les Choses, 21.
above doubly characterize Jérôme and Sylvie as desirous, unthankful, impatient, and naïve, which are all adjectives that lend themselves to the social nature of their particular social space(s) in Paris and Sfax. Here, especially in the case of Jérôme and Sylvie, it is important to remember that Lefebvre writes, “Social space is the environment of the group and of the individual within the group; it is the horizon at the centre of which they place themselves and in which they live. The extent of his horizon differs from group to group, according to their situation and their particular activities.”  

62 Their Parisian milieu (or ‘horizon’), which includes their apartments, restaurants and retail stores of choice, job arena, matched with the adjectives offered above, all combine to characterize the social space(s) of Jérôme, Sylvie, and their counterparts.

Life A User’s Manual, in a way similar to Les Choses, simultaneously describes 11 rue Simon-Crubbellier and characterizes the tenants who live there through extensive lists of their belongings, as has been stated in this document. For instance, the reader finds a description of a therapist and his office-qua-apartment at 11 rue Simon-Crubbellier:

Dr. Dinteville’s consulting room: an examining couch, a metal desk, almost bare, with only a telephone, an angle-poise lamp, a prescription pad, a matt-finished steel pen in the groove of a marble inkstand; a small yellow leather divan, above which hangs a large reproduction of a Vasarely, two broad and sprouting succulents rising out of plaited raffia pot-holders, one on each side of the window.  

63 Perhaps this is a social space that does not allude necessarily to Dr. Dinteville’s way of living, but to his way of working. The objects in the room (the leather divan and the succulents, for example) characterize an atmosphere likely created by Dr. Dinteville for the purpose of making his patients more comfortable. In this way, the room described here lends itself to a social space related to the ideologies built-into the relationship between a doctor and his or her patients. As

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62 Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday Life Vol. II., 231.
such, this excerpt still demonstrates that the characterization of Dr. Dinteville’s way of conducting therapy is reflected in the characterization indirectly derived from a description of the objects in the room where he conducts his therapies. It must be reiterated that because the novel takes place at exactly one moment in time, the reader is provided with little to no insight related to the thoughts in the minds of the characters in the present moment. Instead, the reader is given surface descriptions of the individuals:

Dr. Dinteville sits at his table writing a prescription with a look of complete indifference. He is a man of about forty, almost bald, with an egg-shaped head. His patient is an old woman. She is about to get down from the examining couch where she has been lying, and is adjusting the brooch which holds her blouse together: a metal lozenge inscribed with a stylized fish.64

Thus, characterization of the characters in Life A User’s Manual, when the novel directly concerns their features, personalities, and so forth, receive little justification in descriptions of characters like the one of Dr. Dinteville and his patient seen here. The doctor’s near-baldness, his physical proximity to a female patient, and his position as a doctor do give the reader an indication of the social dynamics pertaining to the situation, which all reference a particular social space. These socio-economic relations are made apparent in excerpts such as the following:

The upstairs and the downstairs folk have entered into open conflict: the first time was when Olivier Gratiolet asked the Co-owners’ Association meeting to approve an extension of the stair carpet to the seventh and eighth floors, beyond the glazed door. He had the support of the manager, for whom a carpet on the stairs meant an extra one hundred francs per month per room. But the majority of the co-owners, whilst they deemed the operation permissible, demanded that its costs be borne solely by the owners of the top two floors, not by the whole association of co-owners. That would not have been worth it to the manager, who would have had to pay for the carpet almost on his own, so he took steps to have the idea buried.65

64 Ibid., 55-56.
65 Ibid., 246-47.
The characterization of the tenants of 11 rue Simon-Crubellier is conducted quite differently from that of Jérôme and Sylvie. First and foremost, the reader of Les Choses is given insight into the thoughts of the couple at the core of the novel. This is not the case for Life A User’s Manual, which provides little recourse to the inner workings of the individuals described in each of the chapters. Finally, it is clear that descriptions of objects work to characterize all of the characters in both of the novels, but the way that the range of objects described here differs in that those of Les Choses are not as calculated as the list of objects described in each room of 11 rue Simon-Crubellier. This is because of another constraint used by Perec in the construction of Life A User’s Manual, the bi-square, which determines 99 lists, each of which specify how many objects and what kind of objects are described in each of the 99 rooms. “Lists 9, 10, 14, 31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, and 38 specify visible aspects of the decorations and furnishings of the rooms in which the chapters are placed, and lists 1, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24 mostly determine the spatial relations and visible attire of the characters painted into the scene,” Bellos partially describes these lists. In this way, the characterizations that take place in Life A User’s Manual are constructed much more carefully and with more detail than the characterizations in Les Choses, which is completed on the whim of inspiration that Oulipians strive to avoid.

Narrative Voice

“Doorways offer passage but windows offer vision. Here at last is a chance to behold something beyond the interminable pattern of wall, room, and door; a chance to reach a place of perspective and perhaps make some sense of the whole.”

from House of Leaves, Mark Danielewski

66 A Life In Words, 604.
In an interview conducted following the publication of his 1965 novel *Les Choses: A Story of the Sixties*, Perec expressed his admiration for “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” a short story published by Herman Melville in 1853. “It’s a text I wanted to write: but since it’s impossible to write a text that already exists, I wanted to rewrite it – not to pastiche it, but to make a new Bartleby,” he explained. “It’s a desire to place yourself in a line that acknowledges all the literature of the past.”67 This predilection of Perec’s for literary reincarnation manifests itself in his writings. This means that a close read of Perec’s text makes it clear that the content of *Les Choses* is pieced together by ideas garnered from and beyond the literary discipline. Of particular interest to this project is how Perec implemented into his novel theoretical concepts derived from the framework of Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life Volume Two: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, specifically ideas related to the psycho-sociologist, who performs evaluations of human beings in social space. These ideas related to the psycho-sociologist, in the case of *Les Choses*, have much to do with the narrative voice and its connection to the social space(s) of the novel.

The voice of the narrative is decidedly third person omniscient, meaning that the narrator is able to describe both the story as it appears on the surface and also the story as it unfolds in an unspoken manner through the thoughts and inner workings of the main characters. For example, although they do not discuss these matters in dialogue, the narrator of *Les Choses* pinpoints Jérôme and Sylvie’s political leanings, their inherent contradictions as people, and their dissatisfaction with their current state of living (which is never brought up in conversation by the couple). Because we are never formally introduced to the narrator of *Les Choses* (who is it that knows so much about the inner workings of Jérôme and Sylvie?), a mistrust of the psycho-sociological approach to their lives can be sensed. If we do not personally know the narrator,

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67 Benabou and Marcenac “Georges Perec Owns Up: An Interview,” 16.
how can we trust his scrutinizing observations? This layering effect (the observers being observed) opens up the method of approach taken by the narrator to interpretation and critique. Perec, one can argue, was critiquing methodologies of sociological research in a way similar to Lefebvre. With Critique Vol. II, Lefebvre was criticizing current methods of sociological research. He attacked, for instance, “‘Quantitative’ sociology, which he criticized for sticking to enumerations and classifications that cannot exhaust reality; and, equally, ‘participatory’ sociology, the sociology of surveys and questionnaires postulating a spontaneity of the social.” 68 Reflecting Lefebvre’s denunciation of quantitative sociology’s way of reducing people to monetary figures, nowhere in Les Choses does the narrator indicate the exact amounts of Jérôme and Sylvie’s respective salaries, nor the cost of their rent, nor the number of friends and colleagues with whom they spend their time. Similarly, ‘participatory’ sociology, in which Jérôme and Sylvie comically take part, is cast in an ironic light when we consider the total untrustworthiness and carelessness with which the couple approaches their occupation, which they approach lackadaisically, not invested in the meaning of their observations as they work for their next paycheck. “Only via a return to his own everyday reality will he reach the everyday realm of the people he is interviewing. It is a detour he must take, and a disturbing one. He must purge himself not only of his ideological and theoretical prejudices, and of his limited vocabulary, but also of his value judgments, which perhaps constitute the biggest barrier of all,” 69 Lefebvre writes. Yet, the psycho-sociologist (or narrator) of Les Choses can be observed as not this type of person. “Millions of men once fought – and still fight – for bread,” the narrator jests. Continuing, “Jerome and Sylvie hardly thought that one could fight for a Chesterfield

69 Lefebvre, Critique Volume II, 103-04.
divan. But that would have been the slogan most likely to mobilize them." The narrator at one point offers a critique of the quality of sociological work performed by the couple. He writes, “A scrupulous, careful sociometric researcher would soon have discovered cleavages, mutual exclusions, latent hostilities.” Equally, the narrator lumps Jerome and Sylvie together with members of their social class, and in this way acts as the psycho-sociological narrator of Les Choses, a flawed one who deprives Jerome and Sylvie (or who merely shows that they have been deprived of) their own unique existence. In this way, the narrative voice of Les Choses contributes to its social space(s) that are characterized by illusion, alienation, and a lack of differentiation caused by the capitalist system at play in the novel’s Paris.

At this point it is important to remember Lefebvre and his conception of modern social space. Outlining the history of social space becomes a task of The Production of Space, but we are predominately looking at modern social space as a function of historical social space. The nature of modern social space is repetition and repetitious spaces, which are the outcome of capitalist enterprise in the 20th century. Repetitious spaces, which are easier to build but also to mask as individual and unique, are more easily used and exchanged among the masses. This leads Lefebvre to ask why this is so and how exactly this repetitiousness functions in modern society. The narrator alludes to this repetitive nature of modernity on the first page of Life A User’s Manual:

What happens behind the flats’ heavy doors can most often be perceived only through those fragmented echoes, those splinters, remnants, shadows, those first moves or incidents or accidents that happen in what are called the ‘common areas’, soft little sounds damped by the red woolen carpet, embryos of communal life which never go further than the landing. The inhabitants of a single building live a few inches from each other, they are separated by a mere partition wall, they share the same spaces repeated along each corridor, they perform the same movements at the same times, turning on a tap, flushing the water closet, switching on a light, laying the table, a few dozen

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70 Perec, Les Choses, 72.
71 Lefebvre, Critique Volume II, 42.
simultaneous existences repeated from storey to storey, from building to building, from street to street. They entrench themselves in their domestic dwelling space – since that is what it is called – and they would prefer nothing to emerge from it; but the little they do let out – the dog on a lead, the child off to fetch the bread, someone brought back, someone sent away – comes out by way of the landing. For all that passes, passes by the stairs, and all that comes, comes by the stairs: letters, announcements of births, marriages, and deaths, furniture brought in or taken out by removers, the doctor called in an emergency, the traveller returning from a long voyage.\textsuperscript{72}

The narrator of \textit{Life A User’s Manual} is much more objectively observant than the narrator of \textit{Les Choses}, who gives value and meaning to the plot taken by Jérôme and Sylvie. Seen here, the narrator simply implies that, despite the immense detail provided in the novel, all of the things and happenings inside 11 rue Simon-Crubellier compose a social space that is repeated in apartment buildings not only throughout Paris but also throughout the entire modern Western world. Thus, the narrator of \textit{Life A User’s Manual} does not imply a social space like the narrator of \textit{Les Choses}, he actually describes and gives life to social space, indicating exactly its features and details. In fact, the narrator of \textit{Life A User’s Manual} goes into a great deal of depth to describe exactly the social space of 11 rue Simon-Crubellier:

\begin{quote}
The young woman stands on tiptoe beside a Louis-XIII-style dresser, her arms outstretched to reach from the top shelf an earthenware plate decorated with a romantic landscape: wide fields surrounded by wooden fences and broken by dark spinneys of pine and little streams spilling over into lakes, and, in the distance, a tall narrow barnhouse with a balcony and flattened roof on which a stork has landed.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

Not only does the narrator describe what this individual is doing at this exact moment, he also describes, in minute detail leading all the way to the stork, the design of the plate resting on the top shelf. With the plethora of detail, it becomes hard to imagine that something in the building \textit{has not} been included in its extensive description. Despite appearances of comprehension, Bellos points out that, even though the novel seems to take a very objective approach to describing 11

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 46-47.
rue Simon-Crubellier, what the narrator does not say reveals something about attitudes taken by Perec due to his societal concerns regarding the media and the consumption of televised images:

In the 1960s, under de Gaulle, French television seemed to most young writers to be a medium entirely incompatible with cultural self-respect. The shabby tale of Remi Rorshach’s career as a television producer quite explicitly brings such attitudes into Life A User’s Manual. A less noticeable but more telling trace of Georges Perec’s specifically French prejudices about media is the fact that not a single inhabitant of the block of flats in his encyclopaedic novel is watching television. In reality, in June 1975, towards eight in the evening, when the novel is set, the majority of Parisians would have had their television sets switched on and would be waiting for the main news programme to begin.

In this deceptive way, a novel that attempts to describe life in its entirety actually fails to do so, particularly because, weaved into its construction, there is this totally unbelievable lack of television watching inhabitants. This fact highlighted by Bellos demonstrates that in the fabric of Life A User’s Manual there is a hole made by the narrator that connects the novel to social space(s) in the Paris where Perec was writing the novel. This is similar to the way that Les Choses constructs a narrator who resembles an actual psycho-sociologist who, although in their own faulty way, analyzes people in social space.

74Bellos, A Life in Words, 374.
Concluding Remarks

Analyses of two of Perec’s novels have composed the core of this project. The social space(s) in each of these fictions differs, by example of this study, according to how they are given definition by setting, characterization, and narrative voice. The social space(s) of the non-Oulipian Les Choses may represent many of the other books that have not been written by Oulipians. “Ourselves writing before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (ideology, genus, criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of language,” writes Roland Barthes, in a way pointing to how the design elements of non-Oulipian novels are subjected to the whim of inspiration, which in effect reduces the precision of craft a writer can attain while creating such things as setting, characterization, and narrative voice. It is with Oulipian novels like Life A User’s Manual that Perec is able to consciously and carefully create the design boundaries of his social space(s). As Bellos writes:

Perec’s work is explicitly built on nothing, on the absence that lies at the heart of language, and which is the truest expression of the self. Perec described himself as being like a child who does not know what he wants or fears the most: to stay hidden, or to be found. In fact, there is no tension in Perec’s work between self-affirmation and denial. What he achieved through intense reflection on the writer’s material, and through the acquisition of unparalleled craft with words, is the paradoxical assertion of the self by the conscious construction of its absence. Observation, formalism, wit, and autobiography combine on such premises to make Perec’s work not just entertaining, provoking, and formally bizarre, but also, for those who wish to hear, sharply poignant too. Perec’s tortuous ‘procedures’ are not ways of hiding sentiment but his own necessary means of arriving at simple emotion.

Beginning with the nothingness of the blank page, Perec uses words and constraints to the benefit of his socially-minded writing technique. Of course, the constraints that help to define the

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75 Barthes, Roland. 5.
setting, characterization, and narrative voice of this later novel are of a mathematical nature, which seemingly has nothing to do with social space(s). But, the lack of a temporal structure, the Latin bi-square, the quinine of order twelve, and the Knight’s Tour all make the illustration of one moment of time in social space ‘sharply poignant’, ‘arriving’ so much more succinctly and mindfully at an exploration of the social conditions of the French people than, say, Les Choses. Overall, though, setting has as much to do with characterization as characterization has to do with narrative voice. This fact makes it difficult to attribute the degree of contribution each design element has made to the construct of social space(s). But this problem deserves more nuanced attention outside of this project. Here, the juxtaposition of an Oulipian novel with a non-Oulipian novel has demonstrated that different approaches to the fictional design of social space(s) in fiction exist.

It should be clear by now that social spaces are not able to be concretely defined. Rather, the parameters, which in the case of this project largely have to do with socio-economics, begin to define a shifting, transient reality that people (or characters) share with one another. Thus, the social space(s) of Les Choses and Life A User’s Manual are not things to be absolutely defined but intuited once their contributing elements of design (setting, characterization, narrative voice) have been shown to provide a gateway into how they are constructed in fiction. In this way, the project at hand has not meant to illustrate or duplicate the social space(s) of these fictions, but to show how the three design elements of fiction introduced here are part and parcel of the way an author can depict the social conditions of any one atmosphere.

So if this project has contributed to the discussion of the relationship between literature and space (and even architecture, in the case of Life A User’s Manual especially), what pathways to new research and analyses can be taken from here? Architect Jill Stoner’s recently published
theoretical text *Toward a Minor Architecture* (2012) can be taken as an example of the contemporary direction being taken in projects concerned with the parallels and crossing paths of literary, spatial, and architectural ideas. Salient to the theoretical and methodological approach taken in *Toward a Minor Architecture* is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s philosophical publication *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, in which, Stoner observes, while “writing about literature, they build a bridge between literature and architecture through the very words they use to describe Kafkan space. Blocks, segments, strata, connectors, rhizomes, planes of immanence, lines of flight – all of these describe spatial strategies and spatial effects. I borrow these terms to construct an argument for minor architecture from within the lexicon of minor literature.”

Deleuze and Guattari’s prefabricated analogical method for analyzing architecture and literature is taken up by Stoner, who aligns her argument for a minor architecture not only with Franz Kafka’s fiction as it is situated in Deleuze and Guattari’s text but also with other writings by authors such as Ovid, Jorge Luis Borges, Herman Melville, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, John Updike, and T.S. Eliot, who have in common the status of being relatively famous authors. Numerous excerpts of fiction illustrate the approach, which is crafted furthermore in the semblance of the guidelines developed in *Kafka* for a minor literature. A minor literature is crafted with a major language. A minor architecture is built from the materials of a major architecture. The two philosophers suggest of a minor literature, “The expression must shatter the forms, marking the breaking points and the new tributaries. Once a form is shattered, the contents, which will necessarily have broken with the order of things, must be reconstructed. Sweeping along the material, getting ahead of it.”

A minor literature, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is characterized by (1) the deterritorialization of a major language through a minor

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literature, (2) its political nature, and (3) its connection with collective enunciation. Slipping covertly from Deleuzian striated space to smooth space, the characteristics of a minor architecture will become apparent after explaining the four myths that Stoner claims must be ‘debunked’ in the creation of the minor mode: the myth of the interior (deterritorialization); the myth of the object ( politicized nature); the myth of the subject (collective enunciation); and the myth of nature (reterritorialization). The fiction she uses as examples parallels each of the myths. As such, Stoner has used fiction to fashion her own architectural ideas, and this type of project she has performed with Toward a Minor Literature reflects aims similar to this project.

Authors can continue to use architectural and spatial ideas, much like Perec did, to create new literary texts. The possibilities for inter-disciplinary creation and design need not be limited to inspiration and whim, but open to ideas garnered from research and careful consideration of ideas produced in other fields of study. In this way, Madame Altamont in her boudoir in her lingerie is not only a literary creation but also so much more, existing, as she does, in many diverse layers of ideas, and among intersecting shades of analysis.
Bibliography


