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GEORGES PEREC

Species of Spaces
and Other Pieces

Edited and translated by JOHN STURROCK

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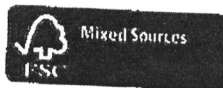
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The Apartment

1

For two years, I had a very old neighbour. She had lived in the building for seventy years, had been a widow for sixty. In the last years of her life, after she had broken the neck of her femur, she never went further than the landing on her own floor. The concierge, or a young boy from the building, ran her errands. Several times she stopped me on the stairs to ask me what day it was. One day I went to get her a slice of ham. She offered me an apple and invited me in. She lived surrounded by exceedingly gloomy furniture that she spent her time rubbing.

2

A few years ago, one of my friends had the idea of living for a whole month in an international airport, without ever leaving it (unless, all international airports being by definition identical, to catch a plane that would have taken him to another international airport). To my knowledge, he has never realized this project, but it's hard to see what, objectively, there might be to prevent him. The activities essential to life, and most social activities, can be carried out without difficulty within the confines of an international airport: there are deep armchairs and bench seats that aren't too uncomfortable, and often restrooms even, in which passengers in transit can take a nap. You've got toilets, baths and showers, and often saunas and Turkish baths. You've got hairdressers, pedicurists, nurses, masseurs and physiotherapists, bootblacks, dry cleaners who are equally happy to mend heels and make duplicate keys, watchmakers and opticians. You've got restaurants, bars and cafeterias, leather shops and perfumeries,

florists, bookshops, record shops, tobacconists and sweet shops, shops selling pens and photographers. You've got food shops, cinemas, a post office, flying secretarial services and, naturally, a whole host of banks (since it's practically impossible, in this day and age, to live without having dealings with a bank).

The interest of such an undertaking would lie above all in its exoticism: a displacement, more apparent than real, of our habits and rhythms, and minor problems of adaptation. It would quite soon become tedious no doubt. All told, it would be too easy and, as a consequence, not very testing. Seen in this light, an airport is no more than a sort of shopping mall, a simulated urban neighbourhood. Give or take a few things, it offers the same benefits as a hotel. So we could hardly draw any practical conclusion from such an undertaking, by way of either subversion or acclimatization. At most, we might use it as the subject-matter for a piece of reportage, or as the point of departure for an umpteenth comic screenplay.

3

A bedroom is a room in which there is a bed; a dining-room is a room in which there are a table and chairs, and often a sideboard; a sitting-room is a room in which there are armchairs and a couch; a kitchen is a room in which there is a cooker and a water inlet; a bathroom is a room in which there is a water inlet above a bathtub; when there is only a shower, it is known as a shower room; when there is only a wash-basin it is known as a cloakroom; an entrance-hall is a room in which at least one of the doors leads outside the apartment; in addition, you may find a coat rack in there; a child's bedroom is a room into which you put a child; a broom closet is a room into which you put brooms and the vacuum cleaner; a maid's bedroom is a room that you let to a student.

From this list, which might easily be extended, two elementary conclusions may be drawn that I offer by way of definitions:

1. Every apartment consists of a variable, but finite, number of rooms.
2. Each room has a particular function.

It would seem difficult, or rather it would seem derisory, to question these self-evident facts. Apartments are built by architects who have very precise ideas of what an entrance-hall, a sitting-room (living-room, reception room), a parents' bedroom, a child's room, a maid's room, a box-room, a kitchen, and a bathroom ought to be like. To start with, however, all rooms are alike, more or less, and it is no good their trying to impress us with stuff about modules and other nonsense: they're never anything more than a sort of cube, or let's say rectangular parallelepiped. They always have at least one door and also, quite often, a window. They're heated, let's say by a radiator, and fitted with one or two power points (very rarely more, but if I start in on the niggardliness of building contractors, I shall never stop). In sum, a room is a fairly malleable space.

I don't know, and don't want to know, where functionality begins or ends. It seems to me, in any case, that in the ideal dividing up of today's apartments functionality functions in accordance with a procedure that is unequivocal, sequential and nycthemeral.¹ The activities of the day correspond to slices of time, and to each slice of time there corresponds one room of the apartment. The following model is hardly a caricature:

07.00	The mother gets up and goes to get breakfast in the	KITCHEN
07.15	The child gets up and goes into the	BATHROOM
07.30	The father gets up and goes into the	BATHROOM
07.45	The father and the child have their breakfast in the	KITCHEN
08.00	The child takes his coat from the	ENTRANCE-HALL

1. This is the best phrase in the whole book!

	and goes off to school	
08.15	The father takes his coat from the	ENTRANCE-HALL
	and goes off to his office	
08.30	The mother performs her toilet in the	BATHROOM
08.45	The mother takes the vacuum cleaner from the and does the housework (she then goes through all the rooms of the apartment but I forbear from listing them)	BROOM CLOSET
09.30	The mother fetches her shopping basket from the and her coat from the and goes to do the shopping	KITCHEN ENTRANCE-HALL
10.30	The mother returns from shopping and puts her coat back in the	ENTRANCE-HALL
10.45	The mother prepares lunch in the	KITCHEN
12.15	The father returns from the office and hangs his coat up in the	ENTRANCE-HALL
12.30	The father and the mother have lunch in the (the child is a day boarder)	DINING-ROOM
13.15	The father takes his coat from the and leaves again for his office	ENTRANCE-HALL
13.30	The mother does the dishes in the	KITCHEN
14.00	The mother takes her coat from the and goes out for a walk or	ENTRANCE-HALL

	to run some errands before going to fetch the child from school	
16.15	The mother and the child return and put their coats back in the	ENTRANCE-HALL
16.30	The child has his tea in the	KITCHEN
16.45	The child goes to do his homework in the	CHILD'S ROOM
18.30	The mother gets supper ready in the	KITCHEN
18.45	The father returns from his office and puts his coat back in the	ENTRANCE-HALL
18.50	The father goes to wash his hands in the	BATHROOM
19.00	The whole small family has supper in the	DINING-ROOM
20.00	The child goes to brush his teeth in the	BATHROOM
20.15	The child goes to bed in the	CHILD'S ROOM
20.30	The father and the mother go into the they watch television, or else they listen to the radio, or else they play cards, or else the father reads the newspaper while the mother does some sewing, in short they while away the time	SITTING-ROOM
21.45	The father and the mother go and brush their teeth in the	BATHROOM
22.00	The father and the mother go to bed in their	BEDROOM

You will notice that in this model, which, I would stress, is both fictional and problematic, though I'm convinced of its elementary rightness (no one lives exactly like that, of course, but it is nevertheless like that, and not otherwise, that architects and town planners see us as living or want us to live), you will notice then, that, on the one hand, the sitting-room and bedroom are of hardly any more importance than the broom closet (the vacuum cleaner goes into the broom closet; exhausted bodies into the bedroom; the two functions are the same, of recuperation and maintenance) and, on the other hand, that my model would not be modified in any practical way if, instead of having, as here, spaces separated by partitions delimiting a bedroom, a sitting-room, a dining-room, a kitchen, etc., we envisaged, as is often done these days, a purportedly single, pseudo-modular space (living-room, sitting-room, etc.). We would then have, not a kitchen but a cooking-area, not a bedroom but a sleeping-area, not a dining-room but an eating-area.

It's not hard to imagine an apartment whose layout would depend, no longer on the activities of the day, but on functional relationships is between the rooms. That after all was how the so-called reception rooms were divided up ideally in the large town houses of the eighteenth century or the great bourgeois apartments of the *fin de siècle*: a sequence of drawing-rooms en suite, leading off a large vestibule, whose specification rested on minimal variations all revolving around the notion of reception: large drawing-room, small drawing-room, Monsieur's study, Madame's boudoir, smoking-room, library, billiard-room, etc.

It takes a little more imagination no doubt to picture an apartment whose layout was based on the functioning of the senses. We can imagine well enough what a gustatorium might be, or an auditory, but one might wonder what a seeery might look like, or an smellery or a feelery.

It is hardly any more transgressive to conceive of a division

based, no longer on circadian, but on heptadian rhythms.¹ This would give us apartments of seven rooms, known respectively as the Mondayery, Tuesdayery, Wednesdayery, Thursdayery, Fridayery, Saturdayery, and Sundayery. These two last rooms, it should be observed, already exist in abundance, commercialized under the name of 'second' or 'weekend homes'. It's no more foolish to conceive of a room exclusively devoted to Mondays than to build villas that are only *used* for sixty days in the year. The Mondayery could ideally be a laundry-room (our country forebears did their washing on Mondays) and the Tuesdayery a drawing-room (our urban forebears were happy to receive visitors on Tuesdays). This, obviously, would hardly be a departure from the functional. It would be better, while we're at it, to imagine a thematic arrangement, roughly analogous to that which used to exist in brothels (after they were shut down, and until the fifties, they were turned into student hostels; several of my friends thus lived in a former 'maison' in the Rue de l'Arcade, one in the 'torture chamber', another in the 'aeroplane' [bed shaped like a cockpit, fake portholes, etc.], a third in the 'trapper's cabin' [walls papered with fake logs, etc.]). The Mondayery, for example, would imitate a boat: you would sleep in hammocks, swab down the floor and eat fish. The Tuesdayery, why not, would commemorate one of Man's great victories over Nature, the discovery of the Pole (North or South, to choice), or the ascent of Everest: the room wouldn't be heated, you would sleep under thick furs, the diet would be based on pemmican (corned beef at the end of the month, dried beef when you're flush). The Wednesdayery would glorify children, obviously, being the day on which, for a long time now, they haven't had to go to school; it could be a sort of Dame Tartine's

1. A habitat based on a circa-annual rhythm exists among a few of the 'happy few' who are sufficiently well endowed with residences to be able to attempt to reconcile their sense of values, their liking for travel, climatic conditions and cultural imperatives. They are to be found, for example, in Mexico in January, in Switzerland in February, in Venice in March, in Marrakesh in April, in Paris in May, in Cyprus in June, in Bayreuth in July, in the Dordogne in August, in Scotland in September, in Rome in October, on the Côte d'Azur in November, and in London in December.

Palace,* gingerbread walls, furniture made from plasticine, etc.

4

A space without a use

I have several times tried to think of an apartment in which there would be a useless room, absolutely and intentionally useless. It wouldn't be a junkroom, it wouldn't be an extra bedroom, or a corridor, or a cubby-hole, or a corner. It would be a functionless space. It would serve for nothing, relate to nothing.

For all my efforts, I found it impossible to follow this idea through to the end. Language itself, seemingly, proved unsuited to describing this nothing, this void, as if we could only speak of what is full, useful and functional.

A space without a function. Not 'without any precise function' but precisely without any function; not pluri-functional (everyone knows how to do that), but a-functional. It wouldn't obviously be a space intended solely to 'release' the others (lumber-room, cupboard, hanging space, storage space, etc.) but a space, I repeat, that would serve no purpose at all.

I sometimes manage to think of nothing, not even, like Raymond Queneau's Ami Pierrot,† of the death of Louis XVI. All of a sudden I realize I am here, that the Métro train has just stopped and that, having left Dugommier some ninety seconds before, I am now well and truly at Daumesnil. But, in the event, I haven't succeeded in thinking of nothing. How does one think of nothing? How to think of nothing without automatically putting something round that nothing, so turning it into a hole, into which one will hasten to put something, an activity, a function, a destiny, a gaze, a need, a lack, a surplus . . . ?

I have tried to follow wherever this limp idea led me. I have

*The reference is to a well-known French *comptine*, or nursery rhyme.

†In a novel called *Pierrot mon ami*.

encountered many unusable spaces and many unused spaces. But I wanted neither the unusable nor the unused, but the useless. How to expel functions, rhythms, habits, how to expel necessity? I imagined myself living in a vast apartment, so vast that I could never remember how many rooms it had (I had known, in the old days, but had forgotten, and knew I was too old now to start again on such a complicated enumeration). All the rooms, except one, were used for something. The whole point was to find this last room. It was no harder, when all's said and done, than for the readers in Borges's story of the 'Library of Babel' to find the book that held the key to all the others. Indeed, there is something almost vertiginously Borgesian in trying to imagine a room reserved for listening to Haydn's Symphony Number 48 in C, the so-called Maria Theresa, another devoted to reading the barometer or to cleaning my right big toe.

I thought of old Prince Bolkonsky who, in his anxiety as to the fate of his son, vainly searches all night long, from room to room, torch in hand, followed by his servant Tikhon carrying fur blankets, for the bed where he will be able finally to get to sleep. I thought of a science-fiction novel in which the very notion of habitat has vanished. I thought of another Borges story ('The Immortals'), in which men no longer inhabited by the need to live and to die have built ruined palaces and unusable staircases. I thought of engravings by Escher and paintings by Magritte. I thought of a gigantic Skinner's Box: a bedroom entirely hung in black, a solitary switch on the wall, by pressing which you can make something like a grey Maltese cross appear for a brief flash against a white background; I thought of the Great Pyramids and the church interiors of Saenredam;* I thought of something Japanese. I thought of the vague memory I had of a text by Heissenbüttel in which the narrator discovers a room without either doors or windows. I thought of the dreams I had had on this very subject, discovering a room I didn't know about in my own apartment.

I never managed anything that was really satisfactory. But I

*A Dutch painter (1597-1665).

don't think I was altogether wasting my time in trying to go beyond this improbable limit. The effort itself seemed to produce something that might be a statute of the inhabitable.

5

Moving out

Leaving an apartment. Vacating the scene. Decamping. Clearing up. Clearing out.

Making an inventory tidying up sorting out going through

Eliminating throwing away palming off on

Breaking

Burning

Taking down unfastening unnailling unsticking unscrewing unhooking

Unplugging detaching cutting pulling dismantling folding up cutting off

Rolling up

Wrapping up packing away strapping up tying piling up assembling heaping up fastening wrapping protecting covering surrounding locking

Removing carrying lifting

Sweeping

Closing

Leaving

Moving in

cleaning checking trying out changing fitting signing waiting imagining inventing investing deciding bending folding stooping sheathing fitting out stripping bare splitting turning returning beating muttering rushing at kneading lining up protecting covering over mixing ripping out slicing connecting hiding setting going activating installing botching up sizing breaking threading filtering tamping cramming sharpening

polishing making firm driving in pinning together hanging up
 arranging sawing fixing pinning up marking noting working
 out climbing measuring mastering seeing surveying pressing
 hard down on priming rubbing down painting rubbing scrap-
 ingconnecting climbing stumbling straddling mislaying finding
 again rummaging around getting nowhere brushing puttying
 stripping camouflaging puttying adjusting coming and going
 putting a gloss on allowing to dry admiring being surprised
 getting worked up growing impatient suspending judgment
 assessing adding up inserting sealing nailing screwing bolting
 sewing crouching perching moping centring reaching washing
 laundering evaluating reckoning smiling main taining sub-
 tracting multiplying kicking your heels roughing out buying
 acquiring receiving bringing back unpacking undoing edging
 framing rivetting observing considering musing fixing scoop-
 ing out wiping down the plaster camping out going thoroughly
 into raising procuring sitting down leaning against bracing
 yourself rinsing out unblocking completing sorting sweeping
 sighing whistling while you work moistening becoming very
 keen on pulling off sticking up glueing swearing insisting
 tracing rubbing down brushing painting drilling plugging in
 switching on starting up soldering bending unfixing sharpening
 aiming dillydallying shortening supporting shaking before
 using grinding going into raptures touching up botching
 scraping dusting manoeuvring pulverising balancing checking
 moistening stopping up emptying crushing roughing out
 explaining shrugging fitting the handle on dividing up walking
 up and down tightening timing juxtaposing bringing together
 matching whitewashing varnishing replacing the top insulating
 assessing pinning up arranging distempering hanging up
 starting again inserting spreading out washing looking for
 entering breathing hard
 settling in
 living in
 living

Doors

We protect ourselves, we barricade ourselves in. Doors stop and separate.

The door breaks space in two, splits it, prevents osmosis, imposes a partition. On one side, me and *my place*, the private, the domestic (a space overfilled with my possessions: my bed, my carpet, my table, my typewriter, my books, my odd copies of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*); on the other side, other people, the world, the public, politics. You can't simply let yourself slide from one into the other, can't pass from one to the other, neither in one direction nor in the other. You have to have the password, have to cross the threshold, have to show your credentials, have to communicate, just as the prisoner communicates with the world outside.

From the triangular shape and phenomenal size of the doors in the film of *Forbidden Planet*, you can deduce some of the morphological characteristics of their very ancient builders. The idea is as spectacular as it is gratuitous (why triangular?), but if there hadn't been any doors at all, we would have been able to draw far more startling conclusions.

How to be specific? It's not a matter of opening or not opening the door, not a matter of 'leaving the key in the door'. The problem isn't whether or not there are keys: if there wasn't a door, there wouldn't be a key.

It's hard obviously to imagine a house which doesn't have a door. I saw one one day, several years ago, in Lansing, Michigan. It had been built by Frank Lloyd Wright. You began by following a gently winding path to the left of which there rose up, very gradually, with an extreme nonchalance even, a slight declivity that was oblique to start with but which slowly approached the vertical. Bit by bit, as if by chance, without thinking, without your having any right at any given moment to declare that you had remarked anything like a transition, an interruption, a passage, a break in continuity, the path became stony, that's to say that at

first there was only grass, then there began to be stones in the middle of the grass, then there were a few more stones and it became like a paved, grassy walkway, while on your left, the slope of the ground began to resemble, very vaguely, a low wall, then a wall made of crazy paving. Then there appeared something like an open-work roof that was practically indissociable from the vegetation that had invaded it. In actual fact, it was already too late to know whether you were indoors or out. At the end of the path, the paving stones were set edge to edge and you found yourself in what is customarily called an entrance-hall, which opened directly on to a fairly enormous room that ended in one direction on a terrace graced by a large swimming-pool. The rest of the house was no less remarkable, not only for its comfort, its luxury even, but because you had the impression that it had slid on to its hillside like a cat curling itself up in a cushion.

The punch line of this anecdote is as moral as it is predictable. A dozen more or less similar houses were scattered through the surrounds of a private golf club. The course was entirely closed off. Guards who it was all too easy to imagine as being armed with sawn-off shotguns (I saw lots of American movies in my youth) were on duty at the one entrance gate.

Staircases

We don't think enough about staircases.

Nothing was more beautiful in old houses than the staircases. Nothing is uglier, colder, more hostile, meaner, in today's apartment buildings.

We should learn to live more on staircases. But how?

Walls

'Granted there is a wall, what's going on behind it?'

Jean Tardieu

I put a picture up on a wall. Then I forget there is a wall. I no longer know what there is behind this wall, I no longer know there is a wall, I no longer know this wall is a wall, I no longer know what a wall is. I no longer know that in my apartment there are walls, and that if there weren't any walls, there would be no apartment. The wall is no longer what delimits and defines the place where I live, that which separates it from the other places where other people live, it is nothing more than a support for the picture. But I also forget the picture, I no longer look at it, I no longer know how to look at it. I have put the picture on the wall so as to forget there was a wall, but in forgetting the wall, I forget the picture, too. There are pictures because there are walls. We have to be able to forget there are walls, and have found no better way to do that than pictures. Pictures efface walls. But walls kill pictures. So we need continually to be changing, either the wall or the picture, to be forever putting other pictures up on the walls, or else constantly moving the picture from one wall to another.

We could write on our walls (as we sometimes write on the fronts of houses, on fences round building sites and on the walls of prisons), but we do it only very rarely.