

## The Potential of Interpretation: A Game of Imagination

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A Novel: "*Life: A User's Manual*"

In 1987 Georges Perec published a novel "*Life: A User's Manual*" which can be seen as a game of imagination that is closely related to architectural design. Perec's novel provides a clear view into the game of vision of possibility. It induces creative invention through recognizing spaces and places not as fixed but as potential and possible. The book seems to randomly move from floor to floor and from apartment to apartment within the building 11 *Rue Simon-Crubellier*. The reader is turned into an observer of the text. The meaning of existence from within the pages is waited to be found. The reader is free from any single plot-line and aware of nothing so much as the multiplicity of the existence in and of the text. The reader is thus responsible for the meaning of the book, and if he pauses with any one part of the novel, the meaning found is only partial. A satisfaction is caused by the possibility that perhaps the reader could find something better or clearer with the next tenant, in the next apartment. By these means, the reader as spectator has to get up and start going up and down the stairs once again.

A Film: "*Drowning by Numbers*"

Peter Greenaway's film seems to create the parallel effects. Anyone who have seen *Drowning by Numbers*, *Prospero's Books*, *A Zed and Two Naughts*, and other films by Greenaway, may agree that his and Perec's work have something in common. There has never been any single plot-line and rigid order in the work. The audience is, at all time, fully aware of the multiplicity of the existence in the film. Yet, the meaning of each existence and event have to be found and connected by the audience. A satisfaction in the film is created by many possible readings that each event in the film can convey. Each time one goes back to see the film, again and again, it would never be the same.

AuLiPo (Ouvroirs de Littérature Potentielle) is a contemporary group of practicing writers and artists who got together to drink and to talk theory. Their theory is a method of practice, a series of games induce creative invention though recognizing literature not as fixed or final but as generative or potential. Raymond Queneau identifies two kind of Potential Literature, analytical and synthetic. Analytical writing is the study of the possibilities of existing works, such that new works may be generated from old. A new poem might be made by rearranging the works of a Shakespeare sonnet, or even by minimal displacements of a word or line that reveal new meanings. Synthetic writing is new work made so that its generative power is apparent. Queneau wrote "Cent mille milliards de poèmes", ten poems each with ten lines such that reshuffling the lines creates a million poems. The reader then reads poetry that lies in potential within the lines of Shakespeare or Queneau, such that reading is a kind of writing.<sup>1</sup>

### Architecture: Constraints and a Game of Imagination

Is there also potential in architecture? As the uniqueness in Perec's and Greenaway's works lie in their mystery, excitement, surprise and potential, can architecture also generate many possible readings and the possibility of entering differently? Those imaginative games of possibility in literature and film represent our cosmological understanding of order and change. Architectural design can well be a part of this game. In other words, one could enter each place observing the fleeting and the contingent content of the eternal and the immovable forms of architecture. In a sense all architecture is potential as is all literature and film, for the work generates many possible readings, but to seek out its potential or to design for potential is a more self-conscious task. An analytical approach might see existing buildings or sites as generative, able to evolve onto new poetry that is rich and surprising. Strategic changes might create new readings of the old, or open the way to potential within an interaction of new and old. Redesign is then truly re-novation, a making new again, creating for a contemporary audience new potentials for their reading.<sup>2</sup>

In the normal course of renovation in an older city, buildings are reread repeatedly, reworked and represented in roles that are well outside the original. But this kind of imaginative game, as any other games, must have its own rule. Architecture always has its own immortal constraints and rules from its origin till today. These constraints are, in their own way, active to creativity. For architecture is not, and will never be, a total work of art, architectural design could never rely upon imagination alone. Rather, as architect Adolf Loos saw, architecture is in the same category as any other objects of utility. Imagination must not interfere its original purpose, that is its function as human shelter. As a chair can never be beautiful if one cannot sit comfortably on it. The shape and form of a chair cannot be created by any artist's will. We do not sit in this way because someone designs a chair in such way, but rather, a chair is designed in such way because we naturally sit that way. The same logic applies to architecture. We do not live, move, or conduct our habits in such and such ways because someone designs a house that way, someone does not tell us that he designs our house this way so we should live in such way. This simple rule has always been forgotten, and history bares witnesses. There has been such period of time when imaginative power of designers ruled over nature that they blindly forced their imagination onto the live of others, for rules were seen as obstruction of creativity. But for an architect, it must not be forgotten that with rules and constraints, underlying the game of imagination is a conviction that such resistance or constraints on creative work are not detriment but an active to the imagination. Potential design plays the games of both old and new. It resists, but not by chance, one is conscious, one knows what one produces, but not everything that will self-produce.<sup>3</sup> Design and re-design both partake in the potential of interpretation to draw from the past toward the future.

1. Gray Read. The Practice of Creative Constraint, Ph.D. Conference on Architecture: Imagining a Common Ground for Theory and Practice. University of Pennsylvania. April 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>, 1997.
2. Ibid.
3. Raymond Queneau. Oulipo Atlas de Literature Potentielle. Gallimard, p.25.