

Exhausting the Home Interior: A Perecquian Methodology for the Study of Temporary Homemaking

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sac**Arshia Eghbali**^{1,2} 

Abstract

Bringing into dialogue the common themes and approaches in the research on student homemaking, a discussion of the relevance of Georges Perec's works to spatial research, and an experimental empirical study carried out on student homes in Copenhagen, Denmark, this article proposes a Perecquian methodology for the study of the multiscalar phenomenon of temporary homemaking. This methodology revolves around three main empirical reference points: (1) a focus on the infra-ordinary and the everyday, (2) a keen eye for materialities, and (3) the interplays between the domestic and the urban scales. By defining and adopting a detailed set of Perecquian constraints as to how the fieldwork is carried out, recorded, and analyzed, this article broadens the horizon for more multidisciplinary perspectives on creative research and experimental fieldwork within home studies.

Keywords

homemaking, home, everyday, material culture, student mobility, Georges Perec

Introduction

In the context of heightened global mobility and rising precarity, “home” is no longer strictly tied to the more traditional notions of stability, security, and permanence, nor is it embodied by a heavy, fixed material spatiality (Ahmed et al., 2003; Bergan et al., 2021; Butcher, 2010; Heller, 1995; Nowicka, 2007). Emerging from a variety of temporally and spatially transitory living arrangements, homes can be temporary, dynamic, and fragmented. For the precarious, mobile youth (e.g., university students and early-career professionals), moving home is not seen as an extraordinary, one-off event where one transplants from one place to another, but it is rather a continuous process of redefining relations with people, things, and places. The making and un-making of home in this context is, thus, an important subject of study. As a particular and illustrative case of temporary homemaking, the ways in which students make a home in a new city for a relatively short period of time have been the focus of a limited but growing number of multidisciplinary studies (for instance, Chow & Healey, 2008; Cieraad, 2010; Collins, 2012; Ghimire & Barry, 2020; Holdsworth, 2006; Holton, 2016; Holton & Riley, 2016; Janning & Volk,

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2017; Kenyon, 1999; Prazeres, 2018; Rampazi, 2016; Thomsen, 2007). These works deal more or less with the same phenomenon, but it is not possible to speak of a coherent agenda or empirical strategy for the study of student temporary homemaking. However, I suggest that within this body of literature, common themes and methodological approaches can be identified as to how the question of homemaking is tackled empirically. These approaches revolve around three main points: (1) everyday practices, (2) materiality, and (3) the interplays between the domestic and the urban scales. To bring these components into focus and under one framework, I turn to an unusual yet not unexpected figure: the French writer Georges Perec, in whose works similar ideas and approaches stand out.

The world in which Georges Perec led his fecund literary career, bracketed between his debut novel *Les Choses* (first published in 1965) and his untimely death at the age of 46 in 1982, was in many ways different from the one that is ours today. Yet, his body of work has proved to be headed for multiple, rich “afterlives” (to borrow the term from Clemens and Wilken (2017)), which expand across various disciplines, especially when it comes to the engagements of scholars and artists with his take on the question of lived space (to name a few edited volumes: Constantin et al., 2015; Forsdick et al., 2019, and Rappolt, 2001). I would like to argue that, beyond fragments and curiosities, Perec’s oeuvre provides a unique epistemological standpoint for a structured approach to our very contemporary issue: the phenomenon of homemaking in our world of uncertainty and “non-sedentarism” (Sheller & Urry, 2006).

Based on a close analysis of the works of Perec vis-à-vis common themes and approaches in temporary home studies, and an extensive empirical study carried out in Copenhagen, Denmark, this article proposes a methodological framework for the study of the multiscale phenomenon of temporary homemaking, scrutinizing the “infra-ordinary” materialities and everyday practices of the temporary dweller, which in this case is exemplified by the figure of the international student. The rest of this article is structured into four main sections. First, I will review the literature on student temporary homemaking and trace its common themes and methodological approaches. Then, I will delve into Perec’s oeuvre—not only his works as end products, but even more so his enquiring and creative processes—and explain how they can shape a methodological framework for the study of temporary homemaking and a Perecquian fieldwork. In the following section, I will demonstrate how I employed the Perecquian framework in an empirical study of the homemaking processes of international students in Copenhagen. And eventually a summary of the main arguments and contributions will be presented in the last section.

Common Themes and Methodological Approaches to Student Homemaking

Although it is far from being an unexplored terrain, the study of student home experiences as a form of temporary homemaking remains a rather small niche. The existing research shares its main thematic and methodological approaches with the larger multidisciplinary literature on home studies as to how the question of homemaking is approached empirically. The three categories discussed below illustrate the main empirical reference points, which are used by these studies to build their frameworks. However, this classification does not suggest that these points are mutually exclusive; in fact, in almost all cases, studies employ a combination of them to frame and guide their empirical research.

The Everyday Practices of Home

The everyday is the realm of habits, routines, sameness, and repetition. It is both the most obvious and the most abundant. It encompasses the repetitive actions and places that form our closest

backdrop of familiarity. In fact, the everyday is the dynamic system that reacts to the new—that is the *unfamiliar*—and transforms and absorbs it into the mundane—that is the *familiar* (Highmore, 2002). No matter on which scale or in what form, home is what we are used to. In Agnes Heller's (1984) words, "familiarity is not in itself equivalent to 'feeling at home,' though familiarity is, of course, an indispensable ingredient in any definition of 'home'" (p. 239).

Despite the taken-for-grantedness of the everyday, this familiarity is not a given, it is, in fact, actively produced over time and is thus essentially linked to what we call *habit* (Felski, 1999). But this linkage is a reciprocal one. Through our repetitive practices, we form these habits, but, as Bourdieu (1972/2013) maintains, these habits generate an underlying, unconscious, everyday order which directs our footsteps and shapes us. As such, one is not isolatable from one's landscape of home. In his seminal work on the practices of everyday life, Michel de Certeau (1990) distinguishes between "strategies" and "tactics" in the sense that he associates strategies with a totalizing view when "a subject of will and power is isolatable from its environment," while a tactic is more spontaneous as due to its "placelessness, a tactic depends on time, waiting observingly to seize passing possibilities of profit" (p. xlvi, my translation). Tactics are associated with "doing" and "operating." Even as consumers, we find our own "ways" and "arts" of doing through everyday practices that at first sight seem to be dictated by the "user's manual" (de Certeau, 1990). Thus, if we understand home as a dynamic entity with certain degrees of fading and emerging placelessness, the everyday landscape of home possesses a "creative," "tactical" nature—one of everyday practices. The inclusions and exclusions, preferences, arrangements of the furniture, manners of organizing the space, order or disorder, routines, all of these already compose a "life narrative" (de Certeau et al., 1998, p. 145).

In the studies of temporary homes, and in particular, student homemaking, everyday life narratives are a crucial methodological device. Looking at the twofold process of *familiarizing* oneself with the situation and *creating* one's own ways of doing provides the backbone for this approach. In the field, through ethnographic methods, scholars have tried to record and interpret students' everyday domestic practices, against contextual backdrops such as cohabitation and sharing (for example, see Holton, 2016; Rampazi, 2016), youth transition from living with parents to living away (for example, see Chow & Healey, 2008; Janning & Volk, 2017; Kenyon, 1999), or sociocultural differences (for example, see Ghimire & Barry, 2020).

Material Culture and Home

A key methodological premise in dealing with material culture, as laid out by Appadurai (1996, 1988), is to return our attention to the things themselves rather than an excessive focus on the social transactions and human motivations behind them. According to this approach, "even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" (Appadurai, 1988, p. 5; original emphasis). Similarly, Miller (1987, 2005, 2008, 2010) argues that the real level of the relationship between persons and things is where they are mutually defined and redefined through each other. For Miller, material objects are a "setting" that "make us aware of what is appropriate and inappropriate," while they themselves remain unnoticed (2010, p. 50). In brief, material objects comprise not only a representation of self but are constitutive of self. Therefore, home, as the primary site where stuff is accumulated, is constitutive of self, not because it is invested with some transcendental meaning, but because, through its materiality, it is simply the effective setting of one's everyday life. As an approach for the study of home, it calls for an ethnographic fieldwork that puts the materialities of home in the center and seeks to make connections with the human narratives provided by the inhabitants of the home (for a few examples see Búriková, 2006; Galčanová & Vacková, 2016; Marcoux, 2001; Miller, 2008; Owen, 2022; Pechurina, 2020; Walsh, 2006).

Turning toward studies of student homemaking, material belongings have been an important methodological point of focus. Due to their temporary nature, student homes are closely tied to mobilities of people and material objects, as the processes of moving in and out simply bracket the short period of homemaking. The student room is thus a key object of research. When students engage in material homemaking in their temporary homes, they are not only presented with the challenge to make the space habitable, but also tend to assert their identity and create a “sense of place” (Holton & Riley, 2016), recreate the “feeling of home” (Rampazi, 2016), and relate to past and future homes (Cieraad, 2010; Kenyon, 1999). In all these studies, the researchers have used in-depth interviews with the students as the main means to explore the ways in which they have arranged their belongings and spaces, complemented with a combination of participant observation and photography in some cases. However, with the exception of Holton and Riley (2016) who have given a more detailed explanation of their participant photography method to both collect data and also prompt discussion later in the interviews, detailed methodological accounts as to how the research on student home materialies have been conducted are scarce.

Home–City Relations

Home is a multiscalar entity. Imaginaries of home and processes of homemaking can operate on various scales and therefore may construct home within other scales (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). In other words, home is not necessarily limited to a house or an apartment, it can also be one’s own body, a neighborhood, a city, a nation, and beyond. Likewise, as scale itself is a social construct, in that it is not a predetermined property of the world but is “made by and through social processes” (Marston, 2004, p. 172), the very practices and imaginaries that are associated with the scale of the physical home and the domestic world may well take place in other scales too. One may feel safe and comfortable in an entire city, one may sleep in a public library, and one may celebrate Christmas over a video call with family members across continents. As such, homemaking processes can be witnessed on a myriad of empirical reference points, extending over various spatial and relational scales. However, when it comes to case studies, for operational reasons, there is a need for a more delimited approach. Given the current context of mobility and precarity, Blunt and Sheringham (2019) lay out an agenda for “home-city geographies” that calls for research that focuses on the interconnectedness of lived experiences of home and belonging on domestic and urban scales within the same frame. Various forms of home-city approaches are highlighted in case studies that deal with home and migration, both qualitatively and quantitatively (for example, see Blunt & Bonnerjee, 2013; Boccagni & Vargas-Silva, 2021; Feng & Breitung, 2018; Ley-Cervantes & Duyvendak, 2017).

Regarding temporary student homes, the interplays of home-city scales have been used, to some extent, as empirical references by Rampazi (2016), Prazeres (2018), and Collins (2012). Analyzing the everyday life narratives of students, Rampazi (2016) has paid special attention to the ways in which they manage the “interplay between the domestic interior and the urban exterior” (p. 366) to recreate a sense of home. In the case of Prazeres (2018), the focus is turned toward homemaking in the city and the everyday practices of international students to make a distinction between living in and visiting a city. Through participant-photography and extensive interviews, Prazeres (2018) shows that as international students familiarize themselves with the context of their new cities, they accumulate a certain local, everyday knowledge that enables them to integrate better in the environment and to support a sense of belonging. Similarly, Collins (2012) also focuses on the urban dimensions of the everyday lives of international students as “temporary residents” of the city, through a set of creative qualitative methods such as diary-writing, map-drawing, and research on personal homepages alongside interviews, observation, and a survey.

A Perecquian Methodology for the Study of Temporary Homemaking

The Infra-Ordinary

What runs like a thread through Perec's career is a fascination with and a desire for investigating the everyday. And although he was not the only one,¹ he is indeed one of the most tireless, hands-on explorers of it. With a practical mindset, he defines the "infra-ordinary" through a simple dichotomy between that which is noticed and that which is generally neglected. Between the "event" and "the rest"—the "exotic" versus the "endotic" (Perec, 1989). He elaborates this in his manifesto-like piece *Approches de quoi?*, which he first published in 1973 in the fifth issue of *Cause Commune*—a journal run by Paul Virilio, Jean Duvignaud, and himself. It is the practical questions of *what* and *how* that direct his inquiry:

What really happens, what we live, the rest, all the rest, where is it? What happens every day and recurs every day, the banal, the everyday, the evident, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual, how to take account of it, how to investigate it, how to describe it? (Perec, 1989, p. 10; my translation)

The problem that Perec is facing is twofold. On one hand, whatever comes forward as significant is already loaded with meaning and for political, social, or discursive reasons, bears the mark of an uncontested value produced and reproduced by social order—a Bourdieusian doxa (Highmore, 2017). On the other hand, the everyday is vast, omnipresent, and formless, to the extent that it appears simply natural. Perec's response is in what Schilling (2006) calls Perec's "*anthropologie du proche*" (anthropology of the near): to defamiliarize the actuality to neutralize the cunning effects of a normalized everydayness. This is where the ethnographic dimensions of the Perecquian project come to the fore. He seeks to *exhaustively* register the infra-ordinary, to turn to the uneventful and note each and every mundane practice and object, to make lists, to make inventories, to classify. But to create the necessary distance, to make the defamiliarization possible, he defines a set of meticulous rules and constraints, in every project, as to how the exhaustive observation is to be effectuated. This is well exemplified by his "*tentatives*" (attempts): *Tentative d'inventaire des aliments liquides et solides que j'ai ingurgités au cours de l'année mil neuf cent soixante-quatorze*,² *Tentative de description des choses vues au carrefour de Mabillon le 19 mai 1978*,³ or most famously in *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*,⁴ where he tries to exhaustively write down every detail in sight in Place Saint-Sulpice in Paris, during 3 days of observation.

Hyperrealist Materiality

Perec's attempts at exhaustively registering the material details of everyday life constitute the basis of his hyperrealism. His descriptions of spaces and objects tend to be rigorous and overly detailed. By avoiding the extraordinary, Perec avoids what is already marked by established meanings and values and tries to grasp reality as a totality that is not yet known (through established notions) but is yet to be discovered. As such, from a methodological point of view, this hyperrealism is a heuristic device for exploring "emergent generalities" and "totalities-in-transformation" (Highmore, 2017, p. 110).

Beyond his strictly ethnographic works, Perec's focus on materialities also fuels his works of fiction, where he complements this material hyperrealism with a certain anti-psychological position. This is not only evident in his most famous works of fiction *Les Choses* (Perec, 1965/1990) and *La Vie mode d'emploi* (Perec, 1978/2010), where he resists to give psychological depth to his

characters, and, instead, chooses to focus on material objects, spatial arrangements, and anecdotes to portray them, but has also been clearly voiced out by him in an interview with Ewa Pawlikowska in 1981:

I hate what is called “psychology,” especially in novels. I prefer books where the characters are described by their actions, their gestures, and by what surrounds them. [. . .] Things describe us. We can describe beings through objects, through the scene that surrounds them and the way they move within that scene. (Perec, 1983, p. 71; my translation)

For Perec, therefore, *the scene* is of utmost importance—be it static or dynamic. Reality needs to be illustrated into a hyperrealistic *image*, which is heavily spatial and obsessed with materiality. Again, methodologically, the point of departure is always an illustration that Perec renders through writing but can also be done through other means.⁵ His primary device to do so is *the list*, which he employs in many of his fiction and nonfiction works. From his first novel boldly titled *Les choses* (Things), where the driving force is the material surroundings of the characters, to his obsessive inventories and lists of objects in his works of nonfiction, such as the various *tentatives* already mentioned; his space-memory projects *Lieux* and *Lieux où j'ai dormi*⁶; or simply *Notes concernant les objets qui sont sur ma table de travail*,⁷ where he not only lists objects but also reflects on them as a way to view his space and everyday practices in an oblique manner. But where Perec's rapport with the material scene reaches its zenith is undoubtedly *La vie mode d'emploi*.

Jumping Between Scales

In *La vie mode d'emploi*, Perec gives a snapshot of life in a Parisian apartment building, as if the façade is lifted and every piece is visible as it is in one moment of time. Therefore, the book escapes the conventional structure of a novel, in which the story unravels through time, and contrarily adopts a spatial structure. An “architext” (Mitchell, 2004), where the book and the building become one. The basic unit of the text, as with the building, is the room and, in every chapter, Perec gives us a detailed description of the interior of one piece, where there are small objects, items of furniture, and people. As a result, 99 chapters tell us about life in and beyond this Parisian apartment building, as the anecdotes tied to these materialities expand the reach of the narrative. As the book goes on, “what always begins as firmly entrenched between the walls of a particular flat or room soon becomes a story which transgresses these boundaries” (Brassett, 1991, p. 153). Material objects are the key to this transgression. They act as portals that allow for jumping between different spatial and temporal scales. Describing these objects in detail, Perec often mentions how or where the object was acquired by the character or how it ended up there. In many instances, people are long gone, but there are still residues, trivial objects, testifying to their existence. Such narratives that stem from material objects lead one to the other and create an extremely substantial body of narratives that go beyond the time and space of the room.

In *Espèces d'espaces* (Perec, 1974/1992), Perec explores space through the lived experience of the self by the successive enlargement of scale, from the small intimate space of the bed to and beyond territories as vast as a country, like an onion with its many successive layers. This expansion, however, does not mean that scales and spaces lead one to the other seamlessly and unchallengedly. In fact, Perec uses this succession to emphasize the arbitrariness of hard borders and to highlight the interplays between scales. Therefore, by situating himself within this succession, he focuses on the inhabiting of space as the key to the constant negotiation of the dialectics of the intimate and the public that urban life brings to us (Chassain, 2014), just as also demonstrated in *La Vie mode d'emploi*.

Another example of the constant dialogue between different scales of space is *Les Choses*. *Les Choses* recounts the story of Jerome and Sylvie, a young couple in the 1960s, and their desires and aspirations that are materialized in an obsession with *things* to acquire. At first glance, it might appear as a sociological commentary on the consumer culture of the 1960s. However, there are complex dialectics of scales at play. Jerome and Sylvie's small home in Paris is where they conduct their everyday lives from and although they dream of a bigger home and more decorative objects and items of furniture, they are still surrounded by their favorite belongings. When they move to Tunisia, despite having a bigger house, they are unable to fill it with the things they want and that makes them even less satisfied. But that is not all. In Paris, the scale of the city is in fact the biggest contributor to their daydreaming, they see the face of their desires in fancy shop windows, and they have friends who share the same dreams with them. The city fuels their longings. But for them, Sfax in Tunisia has no dreams to offer. Objects, the intimate space of home, the urban context, and the cultural context, are all in constant dialogue and affect one another. This intertwining of scales is what shapes Perce's idea of the complexity of lived space.

Toward a Percequian Methodology

The Percequian methodology proposed here shares its empirical reference points and themes with the literature on temporary homemaking: a focus on the infra-ordinary and the everyday, a keen eye for materialities, and a multiscale understanding of urban-domestic dynamics. On the operational side, this approach is a *Percequian project*, a *tentative* (attempt) with meticulously defined rules and constraints as to how the fieldwork is carried out and registered. The Percequian fieldwork, thus, implies taking the role of a scholar-artist. Phillips (2018) counts three main characteristics for the Percequian fieldwork: experimentation with structured and disciplined forms of play where rules and constraints are stressed, detailed and exhaustive documentation of ordinary things, and an emphasis on essayistic writing as an important part of the fieldwork. For Phillips (2018), this essayistic approach is not so much about the literary form of the essay but means that the writing takes its shape from concrete, everyday experiences rather than imposing arguments and abstractions upon them, as exemplified in Perce's notes and lists in his *tentatives*. I would further argue that this essayistic approach is not even limited to writing. Any creative process that *generates* documentation from the concrete experience can substitute or complement writing. The goal is to build a process that provides enough distance and externality to enable us to analyze what is otherwise too mundane to be noticed (i.e., the infra-ordinary), to be able to study life at its recurring everyday level, where homemaking belongs. I propose—and demonstrate in the following section—a process through which texts and graphic materials are *generated* as a hyperrealist medium between the actuality and the analysis. The fieldwork, thus, takes the student room as its primary unit of study. And then, the materiality and the everyday practices it contains, and the narratives connected to them, provide access to the urban scale and beyond.

The Percequian Methodology in Action: The Case of Student Homemaking in Copenhagen

The fieldwork was carried out in November and December 2018 in Copenhagen, Denmark, as part of my master's thesis. Ten international graduate students from the "Cohort 10" of 4CITIES Master Course in Urban Studies, who were spending their semester-long stay in the city, agreed to participate in the research. The constraints and methods I applied were the following:

The first phase:

- I asked the participants to draw mental maps of their rooms and of the city. This exercise was done in a place other than their homes, so that they would reconstruct their rooms from memory. As a result, 20 maps were gathered.
- I visited their rooms, and this time, I drew a quick architectural plan of the room and then photo-documented the space and their objects. To maintain the scalar approach, I used two different lenses for the photographs. A wide lens was used to capture the space and a normal 50-mm lens with a deep focus to capture the objects. As a result, 10 sets of visual documents containing plans and photographs were created.
- Then, in the same space of the room, I conducted semi-structured interviews to discuss the lived experience of the participants and their narratives of objects, places, and practices. The interviews followed a designed flow and a set of questions; however, the questions were of an open-ended nature and were inspired and prompted by the materialities of the space. The result was over 430 min of in-depth interviews.

The second phase:

- I compiled the collected data in a total of 20 tables—two for each participant: one classifying the objects in their “homes” and the other classifying their everyday practices both at home and in the city. The narratives related to each object or practice were noted and quoted from the interviews. Furthermore, the entries were microgeographically located with regard to their actual physical position and their links to scales beyond that.
- Based on the tables and the visual materials gathered, I composed texts of approximately 600 to 800 words to describe the rooms in the Perecquian “exhaustive” fashion.
- Complementary to the written texts, I made scaled axonometric drawings of the rooms, recording the detailed positioning of architectonic elements such as doors and windows, furniture items, and the smaller objects and decorations. Additional written notes were added to these illustrations to add narrative depth to the material depiction (see Figure 1). These illustrations, along with the texts from the previous step, create the “hyperrealist medium” that was discussed in explaining the methodology.

The third phase:

- As the final step, based on the content generated in the previous phase, I selected a number of the most common material objects and practices as the main discussion points for the eventual analysis of findings: bed; desk; suitcase; pictures, postcards, and posters; finding a room; moving in; eating in the bedroom; doing the laundry; cycling; moving out.

A detailed discussion of all the findings is beyond the scope of this article. However, in what follows, I will turn the spotlight on three different instances of how the findings highlight particular aspects of this Perecquian methodology and the methods in action. In the first example, we will look at a room in its entirety via its detailed visual reconstruction as a Perecquian medium that unfolds processes of homemaking (and unmaking) in and beyond the interior. In the second example, the exhaustive, infra-ordinary description of a part of a room will demonstrate how negligible everyday details can reveal the greater context of homemaking. And finally, for the third example, we will take a single material item and explore its pivotal role across a number of student rooms.

Reconstructing the Interior Space: Narratives and Materialities

As mentioned earlier, all the 10 student rooms were reconstructed in drawings. In this example, we look at the room belonging to one of the participants whom we will call Tara. The illustration

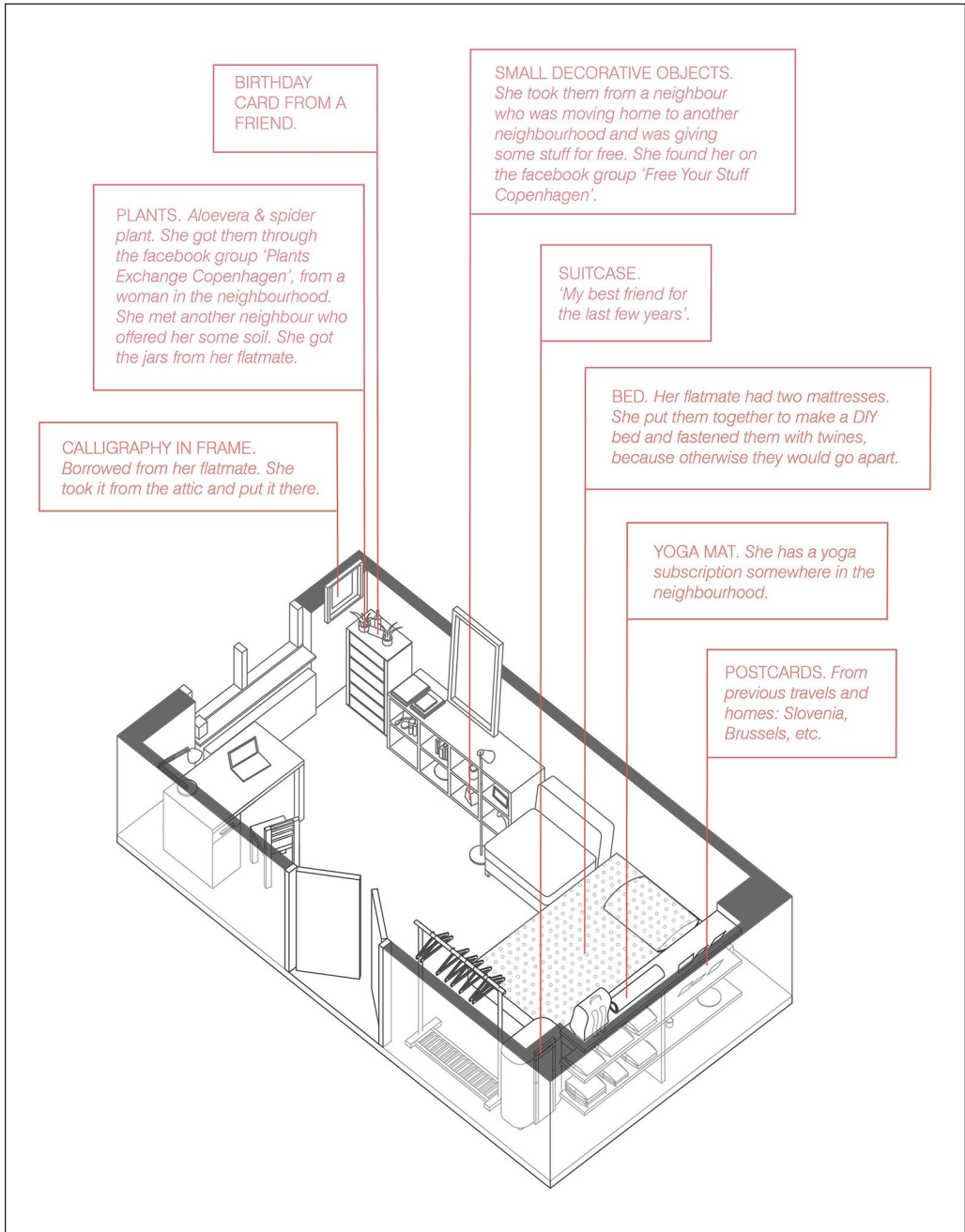


Figure 1. Axonometric Illustration of Tara's Room in Copenhagen, Revealing the Narratives Embedded in the Materiality of the Interior.

Source. Author.

pairs the material setting of the room with Tara's narratives of how these objects have ended up in there (see Figure 1). The illustration serves as a Perecquian medium for making sense of the otherwise insignificant interior. The tactical processes of homemaking can now be revealed. The

makeshift “bed,” which is in fact two mattresses placed on the floor, fastened together using twines, to avoid their moving apart when they are slept on. The small plants in the corner that Tara got for free from a neighbor, whom she found on a Facebook group (“Plants Exchange Copenhagen”). Similarly, the small decorative knickknacks that sit on her shelves once belonged to another young person in the neighborhood, who gave them away for free (also through a local Facebook group, “Free Your Stuff Copenhagen”) when they were moving to another part of town and Tara, who moved into her new room at the same time, took them—a cycle of unmaking and making home.

In this way, the room also unfolds homemaking processes beyond the confines of its walls through the connections of Tara’s belongings with other places (see Figure 2). The scale can vary from another space in the same building, to the neighborhood, the city, and her previous homes in other countries, even across continents. Just as in Perec’s *La vie mode d’emploi*, the interior and its objects act as keys to these various scales. The yoga mat on the shelf is a connection to Tara’s local yoga class. The plants and the little decorative objects are links with the neighborhood and newly found friends and acquaintances:

Somebody who is living right there, three blocks away, posted that “I have some aloe vera and spider plants to give away”—they were babies—and then I was like “yes, I can come.” And then after 20 minutes I just met her and then she gave me a very small aloe vera and spider plant. And the soil, I got it from a guy—another neighbour—there. He was also there to collect another spider plant, so we just talked . . . he’s a student too.

As a newcomer to the city, Tara’s attempts at furnishing her modest room are also acts of connection and familiarization with the neighborhood and the city at large. Even beyond that, the very presence of her suitcase at the corner of the room, which she calls her “best friend for the last few years,” is a constant reminder of her temporary status in her new home as well as the homes she has left behind in other cities before Copenhagen, shedding light on her feelings of home. In a similar way, the postcards that she has put on display on the shelves point to a history of past homes. Two unassuming postcards, one from Vienna and one from Brussels, are the subtle reminders that Tara once lived in those cities, while also serving the all-too-prosaic purpose of filling up the shelves since Tara found them “very empty.”

Foregrounding the Background: The Infra-Ordinary

As explained earlier in the part dedicated to the methods and constraints, I wrote a description for each room in the exhaustive Perecquian manner. This focus on the infra-ordinary is an active attempt to foreground the background noise and to read the students’ homemaking practices against their actual setting. In this second example, we turn our attention to an excerpt of one of these texts, depicting a part of Zoya’s room:

At the foot of the bed is the door to a built-in closet. Next to that, on the wall, is a poster which reads: “Louisiana. 8.11.18–10.3.19. Cecily Brown.” The poster is about an exhibition in the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 35 kilometres north of Copenhagen. Zoya has taken it off the walls of the university and has put it on the wall here. Opposite the poster, across the room, is Zoya’s desk. The desk is in the corner where the window is located. There are some small objects scattered over the entire windowsill. On the desk, there is a small board leaning against the wall. There are some pieces of paper pinned to it; among which an *affiche* with a vintage-looking reception desk and the words “BELLEVUE BADEHOTEL,” which is the name of a comedy show at the Bellevue Theatre in Klampenborg, Copenhagen; a *Lebara* sim card pack; a used *Urbano Napoli* “corsa singola” ticket; and a small flyer with a drawing of Karl Marx, which reads: “MARX—200 ÅR.” Next to the desk is Zoya’s suitcase and right next to that a white chest of drawers, with some toiletry items and jewellery spread on top of it.

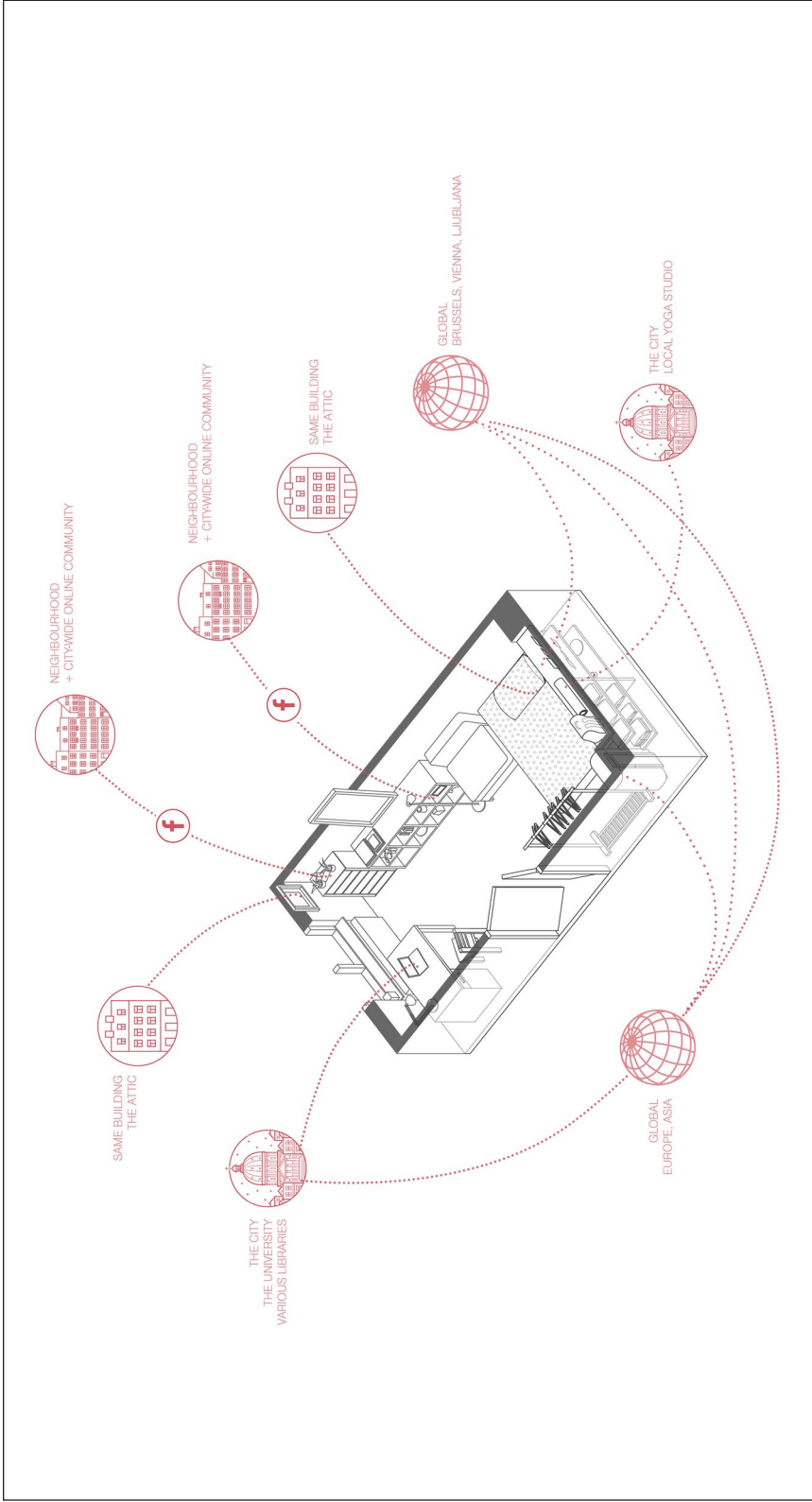


Figure 2. Axonometric Illustration of Tara's Room, Demonstrating Links and Connections to Scales Beyond the Confines of the Room.
Source: Author.



Figure 3. Luca’s “Desk.” An Upside-Down Melamine Bowl, Which is in Fact a “Margrethe Bowl,” a Danish Design Classic. Not Having a Desk, Luca Uses the Upside-Down Bowl as a Laptop Stand.
Source. Author.

By paying attention to such details, we are not only able to witness Zoya’s homemaking tactics, like getting a local sim card, or collecting posters and postcards from the places she has discovered in the city to add a touch of color and personality to the bare room, but we can also get a picture of the larger context within which she is making her temporary home. As such, this approach does not stop at finding postcards, for example, to simply label them as temporary decoration, but actually studies them to find where they lead to.

Desk: Studying and Being a Student

Finally, to illustrate how a single, everyday, material element can have a shared yet diversified role in different student rooms, we take the example of the desk. Understandably, the everyday lives of international students are closely tied to studying—the materialization of which, at home, is a study desk. At the same time, on a broader scale, studying, and thus, the university, is their principal connection to the city where they temporarily make a home. Due to its everyday qualities, Prazeres (2018) argues that “studying” gives a certain distinction to the temporary sojourn of international students in a city, as “living,” compared with a visit. One can, then, imagine that there is a link between the primary “living space” of the students (their rooms), and their primary “connection to the city” (university), particularly through the presence or absence of a desk.

Three out of the 10 participants (we will call them Javed, Luca, and Noah) did not have a desk in their rooms. Javed spends the greater part of his days at the university:

I don’t have a desk, so it’s very difficult to work, I mean I sit on this chair over here. This is the closest thing I have to a study. So, I usually wake up in the morning and get ready and leave.

Further on, Javed also mentions that, as a result of being at the university, he often eats out. Similarly, Luca also spends most of his time at the university. In fact, on his mental map, he noted that he “basically *lives*” in the university. Nevertheless, for the little time he spends in his bare room—where he had no more than a mattress and a chair—he invented a simple desk, an upside-down plastic bowl (see Figure 3):

This is just because I don't have a desk. It doesn't work the best, but if you sit, this is just like if you're sitting on a chair, and you feel like this is a good stand. So, your laptop is a bit higher up, that's what that's about . . . I have a bit of a history of doing this kind of thing. I didn't have a desk in Vienna as well, so I found out that a big pot can be a decent substitute desk.

Both Javed's and Luca's arrangements show that, as students, on one hand, a certain material object close to a desk is a rather indispensable part of the home, not because of a purely symbolic value, but because the practice of studying is so central to a student's lifeworld, it cannot be erased from their primary living space. A substitute of a desk is needed, even if for very limited use. On the other hand, the university is annexed to the homely world of international students, through other everyday practices not related to studying. Examples of such practices are abundant. Another participant, Nana, for example, noted that she liked eating at the university because the food is good. Zoya (another participant) even mentioned that she considered sleeping at the university:

If I had to choose for studying again, I definitely choose Copenhagen, just for the campus of the university. It's just—I came there in the morning and I left there 10:00 in the evening. I didn't even have the feeling that I was tired or stressed from studying. I was ready to sleep there once.

Therefore, the material manifestations of the practice of studying are unfolded on two scales and go on to shape two different home spheres. The physical space of the university, which is the materialization of studying on the scale of the city, becomes the site of many familiar everyday activities, so much so that Luca, for instance, calls his rapport to the university campus "living." As such, homemaking is taking place on the scale of the university, and thus, the city. On the other side of the same coin, the desk, which is the materialization of studying on the scale of the room, is so essential to the arrangement of a room for a student, that its provision is an essential part of a student's material homemaking, so much so that it goes on to become the symbol of a "student room."

Conclusion

Bringing into dialogue the research on student temporary homemaking, a discussion of the relevance of Georges Perec's works to spatial research, and an original, experimental fieldwork, this article has developed a Perecquian methodology for the study of temporary homemaking. Driven by a Perecquian urge to salvage mundane spaces of life from disappearance, and parallel with the literature on student homemaking, this methodology revolves around three main empirical reference points: (1) a focus on the infra-ordinary and the everyday, (2) a keen eye for materialities, and (3) a multiscalar understanding of urban-domestic dynamics. On the operational side, it takes the form of a Perecquian *project*, by defining and adopting a detailed set of constraints as to how the fieldwork is carried out, recorded, and analyzed. Crucial to this type of fieldwork is a creative process to generate a hyperrealist medium between the actuality that is being documented and the analysis.

The main contributions of this article, thus, are in two areas. First, it contributes to how the question of homemaking is approached conceptually and methodologically. Within the context that the current general literature on home is concerned with mobility, instability, and precarity, this article draws attention to the mobile youth and in particular highlights the case of student temporary homemaking. In the presence of a more defined framework, further research that uses everyday practices, materialities, and home-city relations as part of its empirical strategy can develop. Second, by discussing the relevance of Georges Perec as a nuanced methodological guideline for spatial research, this article broadens the horizon for more multidisciplinary

perspectives on creative research and fieldwork. The methodology proposed and showcased here can be the basis for further Perecquian and non-Perecquian experimental approaches that wish to incorporate creative writing, mapping, and visual methods.

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Notes

1. The everyday had been an important preoccupation for many, including surrealists, Maurice Blanchot, figures like Roland Barthes and Henri Lefebvre (who were direct influences on Perec), and his contemporary Michel de Certeau, not to mention his very own collaborators Paul Virilio and Jean Duvignaud.
2. First published in *Action Poétique*, 1976. Later in the book *L'Infra-ordinaire* (Perec, 1989).
3. A radio program that Perec produced for the series *Atelier de création radiophonique* on *Radio France* (*France Culture*).
4. First published in *Cause Commune*, 1975. Later published as a book by the same title (Perec, 1982).
5. For explorations in photographic and cinematic aspects of Perec's writing, see "Le Temps des images" (Reggiani, 2010, pp. 109–153), "Georges Perec's Enduring Presence in the Visual Arts" (Rivière, 2017), "Perecquian fieldwork: Photography and the fairground" (Trowell, 2019), and "Force yourself to see more flatly: A photographic investigation of the infra-ordinary" (Lee, 2019).
6. Both projects were never completed but were outlined in *Espèces d'espaces* (Perec, 1974/1992). *Lieux* was recently published as a book composed of the materials that Perec had created for his enormous, incomplete project (Perec, 2022).
7. First published in *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 1976. Later published as part of *Penser/Classer* (Perec, 1991).

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