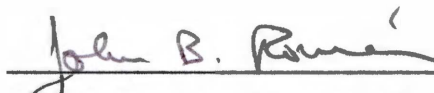


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Holly Ann MacDonald entitled "Fluidity in Marguerite Duras' *Le Vice-consul*: An Architectural Reflection on Culture and Consciousness." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in French.


John B. Romeiser, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:


(ESSIF)



Accepted for the Council:


Vice Chancellor and Dean of
Graduate Studies

**Fluidity in Marguerite Duras' *Le Vice-consul*:
An Architectural Reflection on Culture and Consciousness**

**A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Holly Ann MacDonald
May 2004**

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Craig and Linda MacDonald, without whose support, love, and good example I would not be where I am today, and to my brother Rob MacDonald, whose guidance and good humor has always helped me reach a higher ground.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends, whose support and encouragement made this thesis and Masters degree possible.

Abstract

This thesis explores Marguerite Duras' *Le Vice-consul* (1966) through an interdisciplinary approach to architecture and literature. Five architectural elements found within the novel — path, park, *grille*, octagon, and study — are explored through the concept of the “fluid” *mise en abyme* outlined in Lucy Stone McNeece's *Art and Politics in Duras' "India Cycle"* (1996). The contrasting theme of fluid versus rigid assumes a physical and symbolic meaning in both architectural and literary realms.

The analysis reveals a connection between the fluid framework of this *nouveau roman* and the structure of the built environment, which impacts our surroundings and psyche. Exploring the interwoven paths of the characters within the novel — the beggar-woman, Anne-Marie Stretter, and the Vice-consul — Duras makes an indirect political critique of colonialism, that is, the struggle to adapt within a foreign environment and to find one's identity and personal freedom within the “paternalism” of Western imperialism. At the same time, the characters' movements within an architectural framework suggest the role of architecture in shaping human consciousness.

In the spirit of the *nouveau roman*, this thesis concludes as a work in progress, offering questions which, as Alain Robbe-Grillet remarked, “ne se connaissent pas encore elle-mêmes” (Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*).

Preface

This thesis is by no means intended for those with little interest in the interdisciplinary approach which integrates literature and the arts, or rather, perhaps it is to *that* very audience which such a study ought be directed. The quest of this study is therefore two-fold: 1) to uncover the architectural framework of Marguerite Duras' *Vice-consul*, and, consequently, 2) to reveal through the resulting evidence the value and merit of such an interdisciplinary approach to architecture and literary analysis.

The interdisciplinary approach, which in theory is widely valued, in practice remains overshadowed and shamefully resigned to the sidelines of academia. Michel de Certeau, a pioneer of the interdisciplinary approach, in his *Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) maintains that “Un problème particulier se pose quand, au lieu d’être, comme c’est habituellement le cas, un discours sur d’autres discours, la théorie doit s’avancer au-dessus d’une région où il n’y a plus de discours. Dénivellation soudaine: le sol du langage verbal se met à manquer. L’opération théorisante se trouve sur les limites du terrain où elle fonctionne normalement, telle une voiture sur le bord de la falaise. Au-delà, il y a la mer” (125).

The “unevenness of terrain” is felt when scholars short-sightedly dismiss the inherent and potential benefits of correlating seemingly unrelated disciplines, in this instance, architecture and literature. Both the written word, and the built form, are deeply embedded in the humanities. Architecture, the tangible unearthing of concept and pen, has a way of “speaking” to our very being, as a more concrete testimony of

the living (and perhaps more abstract) art of literary discourse. One cannot fail but see the beauty in transcending the barrier of “discourse on other discourse,” of braving a new terrain, unfamiliar territory which lies over the cliff of intellectual thought, beyond the depths of the literary ocean.

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Introduction

One way to take an interdisciplinary approach to the study of Marguerite Duras' *Vice-consul* (1966) is to weave the concept of *mise en abyme* through both literary and architectural realms in order to unveil the major themes of this twentieth century "anti-novel," namely: love, death, post-colonialism, exploitation, survival. The *mise en abyme* serves as the intermediary, establishing a common ground with which to study the architectural elements of the novel in relation to its thematic structure and content.

The concept of *mise en abyme* is nothing new to literature and the arts. Perhaps one of the most well-known and literal manifestations of this concept can be found in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which offers a theatrical interpretation of the *mise en abyme*: "La pièce interne reprend le thème du jeu théâtrale, le lien entre les deux structures étant analogique ou parodique" (Pavis 209). In a broader context, incorporating all the arts, *mise en abyme* is "le procédé qui consiste à inclure dans l'œuvre (picturale, littéraire ou théâtrale) une enclave qui en reproduit certaines propriétés ou similitudes structurales" (Pavis 209). The actual term "mise en abyme" was coined in the first half of the twentieth century by French author André Gide in his *Journal 1889-1939*:

J'aime assez qu'en une œuvre d'art on retrouve ainsi transposé, à l'échelle des personnages, le sujet même de cette œuvre. Rien ne l'éclaire mieux et n'établit plus sûrement toutes les proportions de l'ensemble. Ainsi, dans tels tableaux de Memling ou de Quentin Metsys, un petit miroir convexe et sombre reflète, à son tour, l'intérieur de la pièce où se joue la scène peinte.

Ainsi, dans le tableau des *Ménines* de Velasquez (mais un peu différemment). Enfin, en littérature, dans *Hamlet*, la scène de la comédie; et ailleurs bien d'autres pièces. Dans *Wilhelm Meister*, les scènes de marionnettes ou de fêtes au château. Dans *la Chute de la maison Usher*, la lecture que l'on fait à Roderick, etc. Aucun de ces exemples n'est absolument juste. Ce qui le serait beaucoup plus, ce qui dirait mieux, ce que j'ai voulu dans mes *Cahiers*, dans mon *Narcisse* et dans *la Tentative*, c'est la comparaison avec ce procédé du blason qui consiste, dans le premier, à mettre un second "en abyme." (Gide 41)

Following Gide's definition, in the second half of the twentieth century, Lucien Dällenbach devotes an entire book to the *mise en abyme*, entitled *Le Récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme* (1977) in which he highlights two distinct aspects of the concept: 1) the image of the mirror and its reflection, and 2) "l'œuvre dans l'œuvre," or the interior duplication. Dällenbach elaborates on Gide's notion of the *mise en abyme*:

Gide a beau se figurer écrivain par mirage narcissique, il ne lui est pas plus loisible de se voir écrivain en acte qu'on ne peut s'arrêter pour se regarder marcher. << Je me voyais écrire >>, affirme-t-il. Mais sitôt énoncée, cette assertion se trouve démentie par la précision suivante: << entre chaque phrase je me regardais >>. Qu'est-ce à dire? Que la réappropriation ne saurait être totale? Sans aucun doute. Mais aussi qu'en articulant l'une sur l'autre les deux spécularisations demeurent spécifiques: alors que l'expérience visuelle du miroir est instantanée, ce n'est que tour à tour l'écrivain et son double se parlent et se répondent.

Toutefois, on se gardera d'en induire qu'il suffit d'accepter cette contrainte diachronique pour composer une œuvre en abyme telle que Gide la conçoit. Pour que cette forme s'impose, il faut qu'une autre condition soit remplie: qu'on indique dans l'œuvre même la spécularisation en cours – plus précisément: qu'on prenne cette dernière pour matière de l'acte qu'on accomplit.

While Dällenbach's exploration of the *mise en abyme* probes deeper into the consciousness of writing and of seeing oneself write, it likewise establishes a connection between theory and practice. In an architectural sense, to take the

“spécularisation en cours” as the “matière de l’acte qu’on accomplit” is to create a design concept powerful enough to make the building the very embodiment of the concept. The ideas and process of the design become “le sujet de lui-même” which manifests itself in built form.

With such compelling thoughts in mind, five years prior to encountering innovative writings of Marguerite Duras, I undertook a undergraduate honors thesis on the *mise en abyme* as the unifying concept in a proposed World’s Fair for Milwaukee, 2000. Written in French, the thesis developed a conceptual literary analysis combined with a pragmatic architectural model for a World Expo Center to be located at the symbolic convergence of three rivers in downtown Milwaukee, a city whose name is the Potawatomi Indian word for “the gathering at the rivers.” The premise of the project was that of a “culture within a culture,” reflected in the notion of a World’s Fair being an ideal opportunity for the promotion of multi-cultural awareness and understanding. Distinct from previous World Expositions which housed pavilions architecturally representative of each country, this World’s Fair aimed toward a “universal” architecture representing “cultural within culture,” as in the “crossroads” of various cultures. The ultimate question addressed was the capability of architecture in creating a human and interactive space which engages people of different races and nationalities to meet and learn from one another, an architecture and environment which enable peace and harmony.

My critically informed and seductively idyllic essay concluded tidily on the positive note, “Le spectateur devient le spectacle. Et le spectacle devient plus lucide”

(MacDonald 34). The thesis placed neatly on the shelf, I ventured into the wild world of architecture for some five odd years until one day finding myself in a graduate classroom reading a commentary on Marguerite Duras' *Vice-consul* by Lucy Stone McNeece:

The opening movement of the text, therefore, is part of a structure of *mise-en-abyme*, whose narrative relation to the dominant story is tangential. As the novel progresses, the boundaries of this tale-within-a-tale become increasingly fluid so that the content and frame, figure and ground, narration and narrator begin to merge. (McNeece 52).

For a moment I sat transfixed, encapsulated by a single word, "fluid." The notion that the *mise en abyme* could be fluid opened the floodgate to an entire new realm of possibilities and ideas, such as: How might a building be designed as a "fluid" space? Can the *mise en abyme* of a "building within a building" assume a fluid nature through its circulation, elevations, site, material systems and assemblies? What does this fluidity achieve in terms of the universality of a place, the solidity of architecture? Such questions are not normally of a literary nature and are traditionally considered within an architectural context. McNeece's notion of the "fluid" *mise en abyme*, read by the architect, encompasses a wider range of meaning and possibility. Such an interdisciplinary brainstorm might leave a critic aghast: a framework for architectural design theory that deigns to emerge from a literary analysis of a novel! The novel has informed architecture, not simply literature. From an architectural perspective, the new novel has not only informed literature, but has also offered stimulating questions bearing on the built environment. Literary narration and architectural circulation blend together; like the synaesthete who

4

touches sounds and tastes colors, my mind is overwhelmed by a poetic architecture, and an architectural literature, a *mise en abyme* of my own consciousness. I dust off the undergraduate thesis drawn from the shelf, which upon rereading seems to have barely grazed the surface of this *mise en abyme*.

In retrospect, I realize that I had taken things too literally, as too rigid an approach to the *mise en abyme* in architecture. Designing a multi-cultural center seems only a most obvious and small example of promoting interdisciplinary awareness. In truth it is a pedantic, esoteric, and elitist approach to the issue. Ironically, it borders on an imperialist notion that contradicts the very nature of multi-cultural understanding, a condescension not unlike that of the first-world nations of the 1931 Exposition Coloniale de Paris. The entire concept is too forced, too neatly packaged, with little room to breathe. It needs more fluidity, both literally and figuratively, as well as tangibly, in the movement from one space to another. Perhaps this rigidity of theory corresponds to the decline of interest in the notion of the World's Fair in general, whose shameful attendance in Seville in 1992 would appear to indicate as much. Less literal, less categorized (neoclassical, postmodern, deconstructivist, etc.) movements may be in order, flowing toward a sustainable architecture which is simply suitable to the well-being of its environment and inhabitants. Such a purpose alone ought to make it awe-inspiring and enduring through the ages. The high-speed, fast-paced, internet-accessible schemata demand by necessity less literal and more integrated forms in architecture, as in literature,

more innovative genres. How can architecture and literature avoid achieving their ideals through interdisciplinary symbiosis?

Acknowledging this diversity and complexity of schemata in modern day society, I will take into consideration the nomenclature used in John Tomlinson's insights on *Cultural Imperialism* in the renaming of my work: "To talk of a 'thesis' entails the idea of an explicit or implicit speaker [...] To speak of a discourse rather than a thesis is to recognize the multiplicity of voices in this area and the inherently 'unruly' nature of these articulations" (8-9). Consequently, I shall refer to this study as a "discourse" as opposed to "thesis," in that its purpose is not meant to be final, authoritative, or exclusive, but to elicit questions provoking further study, discussion, and hopefully, *action*. Tomlinson likewise asserts the need "to proceed via conceptual synthesis rather than analysis. This is liable to be less neat and tidy, but it has more chance of grasping the significant ongoing intellectual and political *arguments* which . . . are the real substance of cultural studies" (8). In this discourse, we shall examine the notion of fluid *mise en abyme* in Duras' *Vice-consul* through a synthesis of architectural and literary elements:

Part I: Path

Part II: Park

Part III: Grille

Part IV: Octagon

Part V: Study

This cross-disciplinary discourse aims to promote a fruitful exchange and dialogue in the understanding of literary study and architectural design interwoven by the common thread of the fluid *mise en abyme*. Within this literary analysis, I hope to develop an architectural “manual” of thoughts, concepts, and diagrams for design promoting cultural awareness in architecture, thoughts for architectural design elicited by the literary study or vice-versa. In this regard, I shall strive to avoid fragmentation to achieve a certain fluidity within this discourse, just like the “composition fluide” of Duras, whose flowing narration, structure, and incantatory rhythm awaken the senses and offer some semblance of hope amidst the turbulent realm of post-colonialism.

Part I: Path

path 1 a. A way beaten or trodden by the feet of men or beasts; a track formed incidentally by passage between places, rather than expressly planned or constructed to accommodate traffic: a narrow unmade and (usually) unenclosed way across the open country, through the woods or fields, over a mountain, etc; [. . .] 2 a. In Old Northumbrian used to render L. *vallis* vale, dene, and *chaos* abyss, gap; [. . .] 3 a. The way, course, or line along which a person or thing moves, passes, or travels (not necessarily a made or marked way, but more usually the imaginary line described or indicated by a moving body [. . .] 4 *fig.* A course of action or procedure, line of conduct, way of behavior; less commonly, a course or line of thought, argument, or the like (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989)

n. a way or track laid down for walking or made by continual treading (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002)

The image of the path offers an appropriate opening for a discourse on a novel whose narration is fluid and whose first words are “Elle marche”(9). Beginning with the *mise en abyme* of Peter Morgan’s writings of the ten-year journey of a beggar-woman from the Cambodian region of Battambang to Calcutta, the novel “continue en zigzaguant”(14) through three histories which intertwine: the beggar-woman, Anne-Marie Stretter, and the ex-Vice-Consul of France at Lahore. This undulating structure provides the premise for McNeece’s suggestion that the narration is “fluid.” As Michel de Certeau points out in the preface to his *Invention du Quotidien* (1980), “La marche d’une analyse inscrit ses pas, réguliers ou zigzaguant, sur un sol habité depuis longtemps”(7). Like the path of the beggar-woman, our discourse will “zigzag” through this narrative discourse. Duras’s narrative ruse goes against the grain of the traditional novel, such that the situation of the narrator can no longer be

classified. Perhaps the narrator, represented by the character of Peter Morgan writing his account of the beggar-woman at the outset of the novel, is according to Daniel Bergez's classifications "intradiégétique" (the narrator is included within the story) [151]. However, when we reach the scene of the reception at the French Embassy, the elusive use of the pronoun "on" leaves one uncertain as to whether the "hétérodiégétique" narrator (who is not a part of the events he or she recounts) [151] feigns a "focalisation externe" (appearing to discover, without exactly understanding, what he or she is relating) [151] or is truly omniscient.

Starting with the path as the narrative element through which the journey of the novel progresses, there is likewise an architectural discourse which we can assemble through the elements found along the journey which serve as architectural landmarks within a literary field, or as literary motifs within an architectural backdrop: the sea (the "Tonlé-Sap"), the current, the "thread" of the horizon, "la voie," (the road, the way), the river, "les jonques" (flat-bottomed sailing vessels), the shores, "l'eau sans mouvement" (the motionless water), the quarry, the rain, the clay, "les marécages" (the marsh), the isolated straw hut, and the monsoon.

fluid n. ■ a substance that has no fixed shape and yields easily to external pressure [. . .] adj. ■ [. . .] able to flow easily [. . .] ■ not settled or stable; likely or able to change [. . .] ■ smoothly elegant or graceful.

(*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002)

What one comes to discover through the course of this path is that images which generally harbor a connotation of "fluid" or "liquid," within this "fluid" narration are actually "rigid":

rigid adj. ■ unable to bend or be forced out of shape; [...] not flexible pressure. ■ (of a person or part of the body) stiff and unmoving, esp. as a result of shock or fear. ■ figurative not able to be changed or adapted. (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002)

Consider, for example, the Tonlé-Sap, the lake which serves as a cardinal point for the beggar-woman (a pregnant “woman” who is still but a child herself), banished from her house in the village of Battambang, as she journeys north at random, not knowing the direction of “la plaine des Oiseaux” where, according to her father, a cousin lives who may be able to take her in as a housemaid. The current of the lake is described as “invisible”(11), and its waters as “étalés” (without movement), “terreuses”(muddy), and which “font peur” (cause fear). The south “se dilue”(dilutes itself) into the lake of clay “purée d’argile”(15), while the beggar-woman sees a rigid north “fixe”(12) bounded by mountains “infranchissables”(16). These impassable mountains and this thick, stagnant water serve as a barrier “unable to bend or be forced out of shape” as opposed to “able to flow easily” (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002). Likewise the “fil de l’horizon” which from the very beginning of the journey is described as “hostile”(9) metaphorically engulfs any notion of fluidity, acting instead as the “fil droit de sa jeunesse entre le ciel et la terre”(15). While the south dilutes itself and the lake disappears to the north, the destitute child travels unknowingly in the opposite direction to that which she had intended, heading to Cambodia instead of Siam: “Elle s’est trompée. Elle a remonté le Stung Pursat qui prend sa source dans les Cardamones, au sud”(13). An old man, one of few people to even respond to the girl, informs her of her position: “La plaine

des Oiseaux? Il faut suivre le Mékong”(16). The water, like the mountains and the horizon, serve as nothing but a rigid coordinate, a fixed perimeter in an already inescapable and primitive plight for survival.

In much the same manner, the images of “la pluie”(rain) assume not the more common, uplifting and sustainable connotation of nourishment and regrowth, but serve instead as a “métaphore filée” (extended metaphor of several signifiers tied together in a semantically coherent network) [Bergez 137] for the beggar-woman’s tears: “elle pleure”(18). Abandoned, she faces toward “les eaux jaunes et les bambous noyés”(19), a ten-year journey passing through the seasons, taking cover from the most extreme rains of “la mousson d’été”(25). Rain, tears, and hunger form a vicious, unyielding cycle: “Il pleut souvent. Après la pluie la faim augmente”(15). Nature and body become one: “Nature,” pleads the beggar-girl, “nourrissez-moi”(14). As the child becomes one with nature, the “fluid” narration blends into translucent descriptions which, though seeming to describe the girl, also seem to describe the earth itself: “La salive monte, jaillit dans la bouche, c’est salé, elle pleure, elle bave” (22). It becomes difficult to distinguish between the primitive, natural state of the girl portrayed like an animal which “bave”(slavers), and that of the “bouche” (mouth) of a river or volcano which “foams.”

While the narration of the novel becomes progressively fluid, the images of the path run dry. That is, the state of the beggar-woman becomes increasingly “rigid” in the sense of being both physically and mentally “unable to bend or be forced out of shape” (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002). For example, the

tributaries that flow into the Tonlé-Sap are initially grouped into “une chevelure”(13), evoking perhaps the flowing poetic image of Baudelaire’s “La Chevelure” (*Les Fleurs du mal*, 1857): “Où les vaisseaux, glissant dans l’or et dans la moire,/ Ouvrent leurs vastes bras pour embrasser la gloire” (58). However, this Samsonian idyll finds itself short-lived within the thematic context of the novel, where the image of the “chevelure” soon surrenders to one of a famine which causes the beggar-woman to lose her hair in mass. Unlike the captivated poet who dreams, “Sur le bords duvetés de vos mèches tordues/ Je m’enivre ardemment des senteurs confondues”(58), we find a very different image of the “mèches” of the beggar-woman: “Par terre, dans la carrière, elle trouve ses cheveux. Elle tire, ils viennent par mèches épaisses” (17). The only images of fluidity derived from the beggar-woman are those of a very graphic and disturbing nature depicting the pains of her body, impregnated by random fishermen in exchange for money for food: “Elle vomit, s’efforce de vomir l’enfant, de se l’extirper, mais c’est de l’eau de mangue acide qui vient” (18). This fluid within the body is further described as a “feu acide” (acid fire). Body and mind in a continual state of neglect, rejection, and malnourishment result in the incoherent speech and laughter of a madwoman and the jarring image at the end of the novel of her biting the head off of a live fish: “Elle reprend le poisson et, lui montrant, elle croque la tête en riant davantage encore” (205). The image conforms with the earlier view of the woman where “elle bave”(she froths at the mouth). Any natural fluid or liquid substance reinforces the baseness of human existence as opposed to the analogy of “flowing” in the sense of “liberating.”

In contrast to the viscous images along the path of the beggar-woman, the narration of the novel itself is fluid in the more liberating sense of the word. We find the “hétérodiégétique” narrator (Bergez 151) often transforming into a “homodiégétique” narrator (151); in other words, from a narrator set apart from the action to one directly involved (often written in first person). Within the first four pages of the novel, where the character of Peter Morgan is writing his story of the beggar-woman as a third-person narrator both “intradiégétique” (a character within the novel) [151] and “hétérodiégétique” (set apart from the events that he, Peter Morgan, recounts) [151], the narrator shifts to first-person “intradiégétique” and “homodiégétique” (embedded in the actions that she, the beggar-woman, takes) [151]. According to the narrator, the beggar-woman is searching for a way to lose herself, “Elle cherche l’autre façon de se perdre,” when suddenly the narration shifts to first-person, and what we presume to be the beggar-woman talking to herself, “j’échapperai à cette habitude que j’ai de suivre l’eau”(12). This shift to first-person occurs as the beggar-woman asserts that she will escape the habit of “following the water.” Taking the water to be a stagnant and debilitating force renders this statement significant as an early and one of decreasingly few attempts by the beggar-woman to ameliorate her state of being. These glimpses shall create their own small culvert allowing a flow of hope through the course of the novel. It is evident, however, within the next shift in narration that this hope is futile. The narration shifts again from third to first person when the beggar-woman declares the state of her own being: “Je suis une jeune fille maigre, la peau de ce ventre se tend [. . .] je suis une jeune fille

très maigre chassée qui va avoir un enfant” (18). Simultaneously, she suffers the “acid fire” within her body while looking at the “yellow waters” and “drowning bamboo” (19), again emphasizing the parallel between woman and nature. Like the discolored waters and the “drowning bamboo,” the beggar-woman is “sinking” in the sense of being destitute, and discolored from malnourishment. The narration again shifts to “je” when the beggar-woman sees several fishermen, which reminds her how she first became pregnant: “Le voisin de la famille avec lequel je suis allée dans la forêt était un pêcheur du Tonlé-Sap, je suis trop jeune pour comprendre” (20). The “je,” which we presume to be the voice of the beggar-woman, states in present tense here that she is “too young to understand.” She is at once serving as the narrator, while at the same time maintaining an innocence in relation to her character as the abandoned young beggar-woman described by Peter Morgan. Within the same page the narration again shifts to “je” as the beggar-woman appears to be addressing her mother: “Les explosions des carrières et celles des corbeaux, je te les raconterai peut-être un jour, car je te reverrai”(19). The use of pronouns and unnamed nouns such as “la mère” create a degree of uncertainty; it might very well be that the “mother” here referred to is the beggar-woman herself, addressing her unborn child. However, the end of the passage more clearly describes the relation between the pregnant child and her mother: “Elle reviendrait pour lui dire, à cette ignorante qui l’a chassée: Je t’ai oubliée” (20). The “je” interspersed with the third person transcends the “stream of consciousness” form of narration into a stream of narration freed even from the

bounds of pronouns and grammatical restraint, all set against the rigid “stream” of stagnant water, marsh, and rain.

Although the narration may be like the “sentiers confondus” (58) of Baudelaire’s “Chevelure,” such paths are still liberating in the sense of McNeece’s interpretation of Duras’ narration, as we shall see below. Although the *mise en abyme* may appear in the literal sense at the outset of the novel, with the character of Peter Morgan in the process of writing his account of the beggar-woman, the concept soon shifts to more fluid forms of “narration within narration.” Rigid or unbending images, such as the daily struggle of survival of the beggar-woman on her journey, and the cultural and psychological transplantation of Anne-Marie Stretter and the Vice-consul from France to India, are set within the fluid framework of the novel, illustrated by the “anti-chronological” nature and multiple perspectives of the narration. By opposing a chronological order, the narration is no longer constrained by a rigid timeline or sequencing of events and is able to be more “fluid.” In outlining the structure of the new novel, one encounters the following changes in perspective, journeys, events, or dialogues:

- 1.) Peter Morgan (“intradiégétique” and “hétérodiégétique”):
Account of the beggar-woman (9-29)
- 2.) Third-person narrator (“extradiégétique” and “hétérodiégétique”):
Peter Morgan/first view of the Vice-consul (29-30)
- 3.) Third-person narrator (“extradiégétique” and “hétérodiégétique”):
Description of the Vice-consul (31-37)
- 4.) Third-person narrator (“extradiégétique” and “hétérodiégétique”):
Dialogue: Charles Rossett and the Ambassador (38-50)
- 5.) Peter Morgan (“intradiégétique” and “hétérodiégétique”):
Account of the beggar-woman (51-71)

- 6.) Third-person narrator ("extradiégétique" and "hétérodiégétique"):
Dialogue: The Vice-consul and the Director (74-81)
- 7.) Third-person narrator ("extradiégétique" and "hétérodiégétique"):
Dialogue: The Vice-consul and the Director (82-91)
- 8.) Third-person narrator ("extradiégétique" and "hétérodiégétique"):
Dialogue: The Vice-consul, Anne-Marie Stretter, and "On" (92-148)
- 9.) Third-person narrator ("extradiégétique" and "hétérodiégétique"):
Description of the Beggar-woman (149)
- 10.) Third-person narrator ("extradiégétique" and "hétérodiégétique"):
Polylogue: Anne-Marie Stretter, Charles Rossett, Peter Morgan,
George Crown, Michael Richard (150-162)
- 11.) Third-person narrator ("extradiégétique" and "hétérodiégétique"):
Anne-Marie/Dialogue: Charles Rossett and the Vice-consul (163-174)
- 12.) Third-person narrator ("extradiégétique" and "hétérodiégétique"):
Journey to "les Îles/ Suggestion of the death of Anne-Marie (175-200)
- 13.) Third-person narrator ("extradiégétique" and "hétérodiégétique"):
The ruminations of Charles Rossett/ The Beggar-woman (201-207)
- 14.) Third-person narrator ("extradiégétique" and "hétérodiégétique"):
Dialogue: The Vice-consul and the Director (208-212)

Within these changes in narration, namely in Peter Morgan's account of the beggar-woman, we also encounter the aforementioned interspersions of "je." As McNeece states, "[. . .] the boundaries of this tale-within-a-tale become increasingly fluid so that the content and frame, figure and ground, narration and narrator begin to merge"(52). During the reception at the French Embassy (#8 above), the elusive use of the pronoun "on" causes the elements of dialogue, dance, and commentaries of the minor characters in the background ballroom to blend together, as interpreted by McNeece:

[. . .] much of the narration appears in the "style indirecte-libre"[indirect style] in which questions are posed to no one in particular and the tenses of verbs (conditional, future perfect) suggest conjecture rather than fact. It is often difficult to distinguish dialogue from inner monologue. Duras elides the various speaking subjects by using impersonal pronouns and exploiting syntactical ambiguities." (66)

McNeece further expands on how the use of the impersonal “on dit” gives the reader “a palpable sense of how easily rumor becomes official meaning” (66). Another important distinction of the elusive “on” is its signification of “autrui” (the Other), an important theme in the twentieth century novel. The concept of the Other encompasses a wide range of meaning. For example, the Other for the beggar-woman being “des Blancs”(white people), and for the Europeans living in the colonies exists this “other India” (McNeece 53), the material existence of the beggar-woman which “both repels and fascinates the Europeans” (53).

The paradox is one of a fluid narration set within a framework of rigid images: “desperate, voracious, shackled to the pursuit of sheer physical survival, the beggar embodies those aspects of material existence that the Europeans attempt to keep at bay”(52). What is the significance, in terms of literal and architectural repercussions, of the paradox of the fluid path set within a rigid frame? While the path of the beggar-woman is one worn down by “continual treading” (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002), the “path” or structure of the narration itself of the novel is innovative and by no means “worn.” The contrast of fluid versus rigid in Duras’ novel creates “a spatial metaphor to dramatize the impotence and sterility behind the paternalism that has become the last refuge of Western Imperialism”(53), which provokes an implicit political as well as a social critique on twentieth century post-colonialism.

From an architectural standpoint, the zigzagging path and dichotomous rapport of the beggar-woman’s plight versus fluid narration, evokes images such as

Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin (Figure A-1)¹, where a similar dichotomy of fluid versus rigid provokes socio-political query. The narration of the novel becomes, in an architectural sense, the circulation within the building. Therefore the structure of Duras's new novel may be translated architecturally into a "flowing" circulation within a "rigid" framework. Such a structure, unique in the literary sense, is nothing new to architecture, in which "fluid" and innovative ideas in conceptual designs are always subject to the more often rigid physical constraints of site and building material. Within the literary field, however, the constraints may be more abstract than material. Whereas in literature, ink and paper offer direct, "fluid" transmission from thought to written word, in architecture this transference from thought (initial design concept) to built structure depends on more "rigid" material constraints, for example, steel and concrete building systems. The "power of the word" may however prove as effective as the eminence of a physically built monument. Both architecture and literature can achieve a similar end result, whether they be Duras's post-colonial commentary evoked by the writing of the *Vice-consul*, or Libeskind's commentary on the Holocaust manifest in the construction of the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

¹ Refer to Appendix (p.98) for all Figures.

Part II: Park

park n. 1 a large enclosed area of land with grass and trees, which is specially arranged so that people can walk in it for pleasure or children can play in it (*Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, 2003)

2 A tract of ground kept in its natural state, about or adjacent to a residence, as for the preservation of game, for walking, riding, or the like. *Chaucer*. While in the **park** I sing, the listening deer/ Attend my passion, and forget to fear. *Waller*. (*Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, 1913 Edition)

3 [L. *parcus*, saving.] A large piece of ground inclosed and privileged for wild beasts of chase, in England, by the king's grant or by prescription. To constitute a park, three things are required; a royal grant or license; inclosure by pales, a wall or hedge; and beasts of chase, as deer, &c. (*Webster's 1828 Dictionary*, 2002)

4 a large public green area in a town, used for recreation [. . .] a large area of land kept in its natural state for public recreational use [. . .] an area devoted to a specified purpose: *an industrial park* (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002)

parc n.m. (1664) étendue de terrain boisé entièrement clos, dépendant généralement d'un château, d'une grande habitation. *Allées, bassin, pelouse d'un parc. Parc à l'anglaise, à la française. Parc public* ⇒ jardin. *Le parc du château de Versailles. Le parc Monceau.* (à Paris) (*Le Petit Robert*, 2002)

Before delving into a discussion of the park, it is necessary to make a distinction between the English versus French definition of “park.” Dating back to the 17th century gardens of Versailles, for instance, we recall that the French notion of “parc” is a large, ordered and immaculately designed landscape that surrounds a *château* or estate. The English “park,” or garden, is traditionally seen as something more “natural,” in the sense of being less controlled, and consisting of winding woodland paths. Within the English definition also lies the notion of a “park” with a

specific purpose, such as a World's Fair "park." In French, the word "exposition" encompasses this idea of "park." In discussing the "park" within the *Vice-consul*, we shall consider the word primarily in the sense of a French formal garden surrounding an estate. However, Duras' style of keeping descriptions rather vague enables various readings, interpretations, and implications which will also bring other definitions of "park" into play.

An analysis of the park in the *Vice-consul* helps to elucidate several of the themes drawn out in the path. When McNeece states that the fluid narration of Duras's new novel creates "a spatial metaphor to dramatize the impotence and sterility behind the paternalism that has become the last refuge of Western Imperialism"(53), we might inquire as to what socio-political commentary on twentieth century post-colonialism Duras is attempting to make. The novel is set in the 1930's in French-colonized regions of Cambodia and India, centering mainly on the French Embassy in Calcutta. Ironically, the events of the novel occur at the same time as the actual 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, whose mission was stated by its delegate general Marcel Olivier as follows: "Colonization is legitimate. It is beneficial. These are the truths that are inscribed in the walls of the pavilions at the Bois de Vincennes" (Olivier 11). As alluded to in the introduction, this imperialist and condescending notion of first-world powers, which seeks to legitimize the exploitation of third-world countries, contradicts today's notion of the "World Exposition" whose aim is to promote multi-cultural understanding. The commissioner general of the 1931 Expo, Maréchal Hubert Lyautey, along with his colleagues sought

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to “make the Colonial Exposition reflect the beneficial progress of the French ‘civilizing mission,’ the responsibility to bring civilization to the natives by means of scientific, authentic exhibitions, rather than vulgar, exotic entertainments” (Morton, “National and Colonial” 357). That there still existed less than seventy some years ago the mentality of “civilizing the savages” of foreign lands is at best disconcerting. The architecture of the exposition reflected this same mentality of Western supremacy: “the pavilions at the Colonial Exposition maintained a strict architectural hierarchy: a variant of the Art Décor for the metropolitan pavilions. . .and ‘native’ styles for the pavilions of the colonies” (Morton, “National and Colonial” 360). Classifying the pavilions of the colonized nations altogether as “native” in contrast with the Art Décor of the metropolitan pavilions perpetuated the notion of white supremacy in establishing a hierarchy within the organization and design of the architecture and fairgrounds of the Exposition. Analyzing the park of the French Embassy in Calcutta in the *Vice-consul* against the backdrop of the park of the 1931 Colonial Exposition elicits a discussion of Duras’s post-colonial commentary and its repercussions from both a literary and architectural perspective.

After much deliberation, the location for the 1931 Expo was fixed along the outskirts of the southwest corner of Paris, where “the pavilions of the colonial territories of French and other European powers were dispersed through the glades of a part of the Bois de Vincennes, 80 hectares around the lake of Daumesnil” (Vigato 24). Vincennes, the site of an old royal castle and a park since the days of Napoleon III, was selected by the National Committee for Colonial Expositions and served as a

symbol of French refinement and taste. Along with Lyautey's "civilizing mission," the defining purpose of the Expo was expressed "in the absence of a more 'fundamental' cohesiveness" whereby "the leaders of the Republic and subsequent governments constructed a conceptual unity based on the claim that France was the "Queen of Civilization," the most civilized nation in the world, and that it was the "civilizing instinct" or *la mission civilisatrice*, that united all Frenchmen" (Morton, "National and Colonial" 362). The fundamental flaw of this "mission," as with other colonizing nations, was a failure to recognize the existing civilization and culture of the colonized countries. These were regions and countries with their own pre-established non-Western traditions and cultures upon which an unfamiliar culture was imposed. In his *Post-colonial cultures in France*, Alec Hargreaves explains these conflicts resulting in former colonies. Having gained independence in name only, the colonies were not autonomous. The same problems of the colonial era still existed in the post-colonial era, while the colonizing nations still maintained economic and political control over their former colonies. In the present "neo-colonial" era, the former colonizing nations still have economic power over the former colonies. Several generations of immigration and emigration between former colonies and colonizing nations have recreated complex social strata, subcultures, and racial discrimination.

The 80 hectares (approximately 200 acres) of the Bois de Vincennes became a carefully designed and ordered space in which every inch is accounted for as seen in the final site plan of Albert Tournaire (Figure A-2). "The architectural

demonstrations at the exposition depicted the colonized peoples and their placement in “natural” slots within the colonial hierarchy” (Morton, “A Study of Hybridity” 78). In *Le Vice-consul*, this social hierarchy can also be seen through the first glimpse of the park of the French Embassy in Calcutta: “Peter Morgan quitte vivement le boulevard, se dissimule derrière la grille du parc, attend. Le vice-consul de France à Lahore apparaît, à moitié nu, sur son balcon, il regarde un instant le boulevard puis se retire. Peter Morgan traverse les jardins de l’ambassade de France, il revient vers la résidence de ses amis, les Stretter” (30). The “grille du parc” fixes a social hierarchy as a barrier separating foreign diplomats from natives. “Le vice-consul fait le trajet à pied, il longe le Gange pendant dix minutes, il dépasse les arbres à l’ombre desquels les lépreux hilares attendent. Il traverse les jardins de lauriers-roses et de palmes de l’ambassade: les bureaux du consulat forment un bâtiment enclos dans ce jardin” (34). Within the park is an enclosed building forming the offices of the consulate, an enclave within the “buffer” of surrounding gardens.

These scenes of the novel set in the gardens of the Embassy present another paradox: the park is not a “large public green area” (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002) as one might expect. It is traversed by only one person at a time, or through a series of elusive or solitary images: natives waiting in the shadows of trees, others wishing to be concealed from the vice-consul, Anne-Marie and her daughters playing tennis, Anne-Marie alone walking or riding her bicycle, the gardens abandoned, Anne-Marie’s bicycle resting along side a fence, unriden, nothing to indicate a place or sense of “gathering.”

This physical depiction of the absence of social interaction might simply be on account of the heat in Calcutta. However, further analysis indicates that another reason is the architecture of the park itself. Based on the rather obscure and dark panoramic views of the French Embassy in Calcutta shown in Duras's film *India Song*, and the knowledge that the building used to represent the French Embassy in the film was the Château Rothschild in Bordeaux, one suspects that the "parc" of the French Embassy in Calcutta is of the traditional French style. While it is the nature of a foreign embassy to reflect its nation's characteristic architecture, it is reasonable to assume that the French Embassy of Calcutta, in its actual form as well as Duras's recreation, was designed as a reflection of French culture and architecture, presumably incorporating a park in the style of the classical French garden. As mentioned earlier with the example of Versailles, this style is, in a word, "ordered," and magnificently so: "In the 17th century French gardens were constructed in a style that emphasized the control and manipulation of nature. Garden architects attempted to create large gardens with many sections that overall possessed a geometrical design" ("17th Century French Gardens"). One need only look at the gardens of Versailles, constructed by the famous landscape architect Le Nôtre. The notion of a "style that emphasized the control and manipulation of nature" is intriguing. The "control" exhibited in the style of the park parallels the European imperialist control of native inhabitants in the colonies. Traditional English gardens, by contrast, are much less ordered, geometric, and rigid, and instead "flowing." Influenced by Chinese garden design, the English garden became characterized by an "amiable

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simplicity of unadorned nature” consisting of “narrow paths which wind through the woods” and “woodland paths” which “wind in a more ‘natural’ manner” (Johnson 2). Perhaps the more “fluid” nature of the English park might better lend itself to the design of a world exposition where people gather to interact among cultures. An interesting question thus arises as to what degree of “order” needs to be maintained to create an environment which facilitates open communication and social interaction. The design of the environment might avoid social hierarchy by creating a more “universal” order that is inviting to all nations, and makes one receptive to different cultural expressions. The question of aesthetic order runs parallel to that of political order. We may also ask to what degree “order” needs to be imposed in the colonies and how much can be left “fluid” or, in more political terms, “autonomous.” This leads to the more fundamental and ethical question as to whether the West should be “imposing” its order on others, or offering an example of an alternative order to the pre-existing one. In other words, how can an awareness and understanding of diverse cultures be established to create a more harmonious global existence?

A world exposition, a gathering place, or a park will not single-handedly create world peace on a global scale. However, within the microcosm of the exposition, — of a “gathering” — a wealth of ideas are generated. The ordered and hierarchical structure of the 1931 Colonial Exposition did not lend itself to the generation of ideas; however, this does not seem surprising for an exposition whose purpose was the “placing before the eyes of its visitors an impressive summary of the results of colonization, its present realities, and its future” (Morton, “National and

Colonial,” 357). The nature of the design (and its success!), is therefore in direct relation to its initial purpose or concept. Revisit, for example, Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin (Figure A-1), whose zigzagging form acts as a symbolic representation of the Jewish history of Berlin and provides the conceptual framework for the design: the origins of the elongated, sharply angled and folded building are themselves manifold and various. Libeskind derived its zigzagging contours in part from imaginary lines on the city map which connect the site with the street addresses of great figures in Berlin Jewish cultural history—Heinrich von Kleist, Heinrich Heine, Mies van der Rohe, Rahel Varnhagen, Walter Benjamin, Arnold Schönberg” (Schneider 36). As mentioned earlier, the “fluid” ideas, in the sense of political or social commentaries behind the conceptual designs, are always subject to the more often rigid physical constraints of site and building material representation. Within the museum, the void is the “substance that has no fixed shape” that acts as the symbolic “fluid” element of the journey through the building: “The vertical hollows of the six Voids extending in a straight line from front to back of the zigzag configuration evoke the gap that evolved in German and European culture and history by the destruction of Jewish lives. . .The museum is pervaded by this absence” (Schneider 53). When traveling within the building:

Two crossroads lead off the main corridor. Their floor is somewhat more steeply inclined, while the ceiling height remains constant, so that they decrease in height towards the end. The diagonally branching first crossroad leads into the open air and the sunken E.T.A. Hoffman Garden, the “Garden of Exile,” through a glass door. This is the only path leading to the outside world from the ground below – evoking the idea of exile as the only way to freedom. . .Some visitors might find the constricted space between the

inclined concrete columns and the uneven ground beneath their feet unsettling. The columns which are perpendicular to the sloping paving do induce a feeling of dizziness, and make the surrounding buildings appear to totter. What will remain standing and what will fall seems uncertain, and there is no common level with the surroundings that could provide orientation and security. (Schneider 50)

Similarly, the evocation of “exile as the only way to freedom” also appears from the first page of *Le Vice-consul* where the pregnant child, who has been banished from her home, deliberately searches for “une indication pour me perdre” and travels “vers le point de l’horizon le plus hostile” (9). Likewise, the induced “feeling of dizziness” created by the configuration of walls, columns, and floor in the description above of the zigzagging museum bears a resemblance to the experience of the beggar-woman: “Elle dépasse un peu l’endroit où se trouve Pursat, continue en zigzaguant, à peu près droit, en fin de compte, vers les montagnes” (14).

The paths designed in the park of the 1931 Colonial Exposition, as well as the gardens of the French Embassy of Calcutta in *Le Vice-consul*, consist by contrast of “des grands boulevards” which are straight as opposed to zigzagged or winding. However, this rectilinearity is but a false impression, an illusion of the “order” maintained by imperialist power. The park is not a gathering place but rather a symbolic barrier, a landscaped “void” separating at least three cultures as defined in response or reaction to the Other:

- 1) French diplomats in Calcutta; those who attempt to ignore the Other (here, referring to the native inhabitants) and the problems of colonialism
- 2) French diplomats such as the vice-consul of Lahore, and Anne-Marie Stretter, who attempt to understand the Other (native inhabitants)

- 3) Native peoples, generally the poor, beggars, lepers, who feed off the waste of the Other (here, referring to “les blancs”)

This relatively unused space of the park in *Le Vice-Consul*, “ce parc qui entoure l’ambassade” (36), acts more as a moat than a gathering place, if not entirely in the physical sense, then most certainly in the sense of a “defense ditch” (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002) whereby the European colonizing populace can shield itself from the poverty and problems of the colonized society. This gap, illustrating the separation between the colonizer and the colonized, is further evidenced in the novel by the different ways the characters move through the park. Regarding the beggar-woman, Duras writes: “Elle contourne les parcs, elle chante, elle va vers le Gange” (149). It is important to note the distinction of the verb, “contourne,” meaning to walk around, to bypass, or to skirt. When describing the movement of the French consulate through the park, the narrator chooses “traversent,” meaning to walk *through*. Again, the social hierarchy is maintained, in that the whites walk directly through the park whereas the natives must walk around it.

An analysis of the park addresses issues of hierarchy and inequality in relation to colonialism, Duras’ use of a “spatial metaphor to dramatize the impotence and sterility behind the paternalism that has become the last refuge of Western Imperialism” (McNeece 53) becomes more decipherable. While there exists a spatial as well as psychological “gap” between the inhabitants of the French Embassy and the natives in Calcutta, several characters, each in his or her own way, attempt to

cross the barrier. In other words, they attempt to make sense of their situation within the context of colonialism and a foreign culture. Peter Morgan attempts his own account of the story of the beggar-woman, while the vice-consul of Lahore randomly fires at a group of lepers outside his window. McNeece's proposition above is supported in the more maternal instinct exhibited by Anne-Marie Stretter, the wife of the French Ambassador in Calcutta:

À Calcutta, ce matin, dans la lumière crépusculaire, Anne-Marie Stretter traverse justement ce parc qui entoure l'ambassade et il la voit.

Anne-Marie Stretter va dans les dépendances, elle répète que les restes doivent être donnés aux affamés de Calcutta, elle dit qu'une bassine d'eau fraîche doit être mise aussi désormais chaque jour devant la grille des cuisines à côté des restes parce que la mousson d'été commence et qu'ils doivent boire. (36)

Instead of an "impotence and sterility," we see here a provision of nourishment, thus perhaps imparting a sense of hope. Those such as the vice-consul who attempt to break this political, economic, and cultural barrier, are critically examined by the other whites. The vice-consul's act of shooting at the lepers, and in essence, any inexplicable act that tacitly makes reference to the social and ethical implications of the colonial conflict, scares the other whites. An anonymous and collective "voix" asks questions about the vice-consul: "Une voix atténuée demande encore, dans le jardin: Lorsque ce monsieur [le vice-consul] est là, entendez-vous de la musique jouée au piano?" (34). The rigid path followed by those walking through the park reinforces the paradox, illustrated by the way in which Charles Rossett, for example, expressly avoids having to encounter the vice-consul along his path, diverting his direction:

Le vice-consul traverse les jardins. Il oblique vers les tennis déserts, les regarde, revient, repart, passe devant la fenêtre ouverte sans avoir l'air de connaître son existence.

D'autres personnes sortent et traversent les jardins. Il est midi. Personne ne l'aborde [. . .] Charles Rossett a pris congé de l'ambassadeur. Il traverse à son tour les jardins [. . .] Alors qu'il arrive sur le boulevard qui longe le Gange, Charles Rossett aperçoit le vice-consul [. . .] Charles Rossett hésite, la chaleur est telle, mais il finit par faire demi-tour. Il traverse à nouveau les jardins, il en sort par l'autre porte, regagne sa résidence" (45)

The rigid path, bordering the Ganges river and followed by those who cross the park, is not unlike the path along the Tonlé-Sap, which becomes delimiting as the beggar-woman zigzags in quest, -- "Il faut se perdre" (9), -- or more simply out of delirium caused by malnourishment. Charles Rossett's diversion, a zigzag or jog in his original path, is a conscious attempt to avoid the path of the vice-consul. However explicitly "ordered" the path might be, the "fluidity" of human consciousness may attempt to follow another direction. In a sense, it may multiply these limitations, in a similar way that the landscaping of Libeskind's Jewish Museum is described as a play of "unlimited, delimiting lines" (Schneider 38).

An analysis of the park in *Le Vice-consul* in relation to the notion of a global "exposition" poses the question as to whether the park creates a "gap" among cultures, or whether a type of "universal" architecture might be achieved representing all of humanity as opposed to distinct cultures and races. Or, is the West attempting to impose a cultural "unity" that erases the existing native cultures? Although each country in a world exposition is generally represented by a pavilion designed to capture the architecture of that nation and culture, often the host country will "impose" a preconceived design on the pavilions and native architectural styles,

another example of the “segregation of the colonial form from the metropolitan by aesthetic means” (Morton, “National and Colonial,” 373). For example, the frescoes in the Salle des Fêtes of the Musée de Colonies of the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris are “portrayed only as the product of *France*’s contribution to the colonies, not as the effect of the natives’ own effort and work” (Morton, “National and Colonial,” 370-371). Likewise, these “colonial motifs” became exploited in much the same way as the natural resources of the colonies. This “frenzy” escalated to such a degree that certain French designers, such as Émile Bayard in his book *L’art de reconnaître les styles coloniaux de la France* (1931) “denounced what he saw as an excessive admiration for colonial styles; applied to contemporary design in a ‘frenzy of exoticism’ and with a lack of knowledge” (Morton, “National and Colonial,” 365). The “Rapport général” of the Exposition went so far as to remark that “Exoticism has the privilege of endowing ignorance and lack of taste with a formidable potential” (*Exposition coloniale*, t. II, 35). The colonial exhibits became something more of a freak show at a carnival as opposed to pedagogical displays meant to inform the public of different cultures. “Displaying” the colonized countries and their natives as “exhibits,” through dances, art, and exotic features, perpetuated the problems of exploitation and maintained a hierarchy which would foster racial discrimination and cultural misunderstanding through the colonial, post-colonial, and now neo-colonial eras. In other words, such stereotypes unfortunately set a foundation which would take years to demolish.

Although the idea of architecture as an “event,” and the “spectator” or “participant” as being the vehicle of the event is valid, the notion of the “exhibition” of people and use of design to perpetuate stereotypes defeats the purpose of creating a “human” space for the gathering of different peoples. In the *Design for Gathering People: Seven Planning Process* the planners state: “Redevelopment will have to focus on the creation of cities which are capable of offering a comfortable environment for all residents [. . .] Traditionally, public squares [. . .] have fulfilled a role similar to that of the atrium in modern architectural designs. Such squares must not simply become forgotten spaces located between buildings” (RDD Inc, 8). It is not so much a matter of creating a new, universal architectural aesthetic so much as focusing first and foremost on the site. Whereas the Musée des Colonies of the 1931 Expo had the practically impossible task of “evoking the colonial world in a metropolitan building” (Morton, “National and Colonial,” 364) and merely accomplished maintaining a social hierarchy as discussed earlier, a better approach for the designers may be to focus more simply on the environmental aspects of the building site. When the built environment is a sustainable architecture in harmony with nature, this nurturing environment can then attempt to create harmony among different races. Without first having respect for nature, how will the built environment foster respect among peoples? This design ethic, however, must coincide with an open-minded attitude on the part of the builders as well.

The French Embassy park in *Le Vice-consul* is a mere architectural representation of typical French architecture transplanted in a foreign environment.

In much the same way as the colonies obtained “independence” in name alone, it is a park by name only, and not necessarily a public gathering place. Although people are not seen gathering in the park, it is still a “public” space in that each person who crosses the park is under the scrutiny of the Other who may be watching from the window of his or her embassy residence: the vice-consul watches Anne-Marie walk to the tennis courts; Peter Morgan watches the vice-consul on his balcony; the lepers wait in the shadows. The character crossing the park becomes a sort of exhibit, and the park, not unlike Jacques Copeau’s “tréteau nu de vrais comédiens” (cited in Borie 257), a stage stripped of its décor, where the actor becomes the primary focus. One may well be introduced to a particular culture through performance; a pavilion in a park may legitimately represent a particular nation and culture, and through its architecture, educate the public as to the culture and heritage of its people. However the notion of a “culture within a culture” when taken literally, as the transplanting of the French garden within the French Embassy of Calcutta, may provide little opportunity for the interaction of various cultures, perhaps a more effective means of pedagogy. Literature becomes a viable means of addressing these questions, and can inform environmental design by providing the strong-rooted underlying concepts by which to create the foundation of the design. For instance, the notion of the “hybrid” can manifest itself conceptually:

The hybrid has been adopted by postcolonial theorists, such as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Salman Rushdie, as a powerful subversion of colonialism’s binary oppositions: the opposition of colonizer to colonized, of civilization to savagery, of white to colored. The phenomena of syncretism, creolization, and other forms of cultural mixing have a central place in

postcolonial theory as a counter to the rigid lines of identity and culture drawn by colonialist discourse. (Morton, "A Study in Hybridity," 366)

The genius of Duras's novel is the portrayal not of the fundamental differences of culturally diverse characters, but of the similarities in the struggles they all face within their environment. Within the fluid narration of the path and the park, the beggar-woman, the vice-consul, and Anne-Marie Stretter are all victims of colonization and "transplantation." The paradox of the path whose "fluid" elements are rigid, and the park which separates as opposed to gathering people, forming a rigid barrier as opposed to a fluid path, will be expanded with the element of the *grille*. In turn, the *grille*, simultaneously rigid and fluid, shall assist in developing a psychological analysis of these three characters in their environment. Their reactions, both physical and psychological, to their environment, will reveal in greater depth the architectural as well as literary reflection of social consciousness in the post-colonial era.

Part III: Grille

grille [mid 17th century] This word meaning ‘grating’ is from French, from medieval Latin, *craticula*, a diminutive of *cratis*¹ ‘hurdle’ (*The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories*, 2002)

1. a. A grating; an arrangement of parallel or cross bars, or structure of open metal-work, used to close an opening or separate one part of a room, etc. from another; *spec.* a grating in a door through which callers may be observed or answered without opening the door; the grating which separates visitors from the nuns in a convent-parlour; the screen in front of the Ladies’ Gallery in the House of Commons, etc. (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989)

grillage n.m. (1328) 1. treillis, le plus souvent métallique, qu’on met aux fenêtres, aux portes à jour, etc. *Les mailles d’un grillage. Grillage en bois des fenêtres arabes* ⇒ moucharabieh. Clôture en treillis de fils de fer. 2. Treillage bouchant un étang (pour y retenir des poissons) (*Le Petit Robert*, 2002)

grille n.f. (1508) I. 1. assemblage à claire-voie de barreaux entrecroisés ou non, fermant une ouverture ou servant de séparation à l’intérieur d’un édifice. *Grille d’une cage de fauves. Grilles aux fenêtres d’une prison. La grille d’un chateau fort* ⇒ herse *Grille d’égout. Un trou, “grille d’une grille en fer à barreaux entrecroisés”* (Hugo). *Grille d’un confessionnal*, séparant le pénitent du confesseur. *Grille du parloir d’une prison*, séparant les détenus de leurs terrains. 2. Ouvrage de ferronnerie servant à enclore un terrain. *Grille d’un square, d’un jardin* ⇒ portail [. . .] II. (1864) Carton à jours conventionnels pour la lecture des textes rédigés en langage chiffré “*Comme on ajuste sur les papiers diplomatiques la “grille” qui isole les mots vrais*” (Claudel). *Quadrillage pour le chiffrement et le déchiffrement des messages* ⇒ cryptographie. FIG. *Grille de lecture*: interpretation (d’un phénomène) faite en fonction d’une idéologie (*Le Petit Robert*, 2002)

¹ *crātis* 1.b. (as used to make temporary walls or partitions, esp. in sheep-folds) [. . .] d. (as a rack on which fruit, etc. was dried) e. (as a basket) [*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1976]. Sanscr. *kart*, to spin [. . .] a hurdle with which criminals were covered, and on which stones were thrown [. . .] *The ribs of a shield*: *umbonum*, Virgil. [. . .] = *testudo*, the interlocked shields of a rank of soldiers, Lucanus [. . .] *the joints of the backbone* [. . .] *favorum*, *honey-comb* [. . .] *cratem facit vitis, grows confusedly*, Columella (writer on farming, 1st cent. A.D.) [*A Latin Dictionary*, 1975]

Through an analysis of the *grille*, we delve into an investigation which offers a more personal, human, and “anthropological” view of the post-colonial conflict evidenced through *Le Vice-consul*. In this analysis, we focus primarily on the French definition of *grille* as an “assemblage à claire-voie de barreaux entrecroisés ou non, fermant une ouverture ou servant de séparation à l’intérieur d’un édifice.” The *grille* functions on both the literal and symbolic levels, in both instances as either a form of separation or protection. On the literal, or physical level, it is a barrier which separates the consulate from the indigenous peoples and lepers outside the embassy. On the island where Anne-Marie sojourns, the *grille* reappears as a similar hierarchical shield separating the *Prince of Wales* hotel from the native village below. On the edge of the sea and within the sea, the *grille* protects against sharks. On a symbolic level, the sharks correspond with the “isotopie” (network of related and recurring “signs”) [Bergez 127] of animals, reducing the human to its primitive, “animal” form. In an unattributed remark, the members of the Consulate view the lepers as dogs: “— Mais des lépreux ou des chiens, est-ce tuer que de tuer des lépreux ou des chiens?” (94). The Other, in this instance the poverty-stricken and ill among the natives, are seen metaphorically as something to be feared, as a pack of wild dogs, a logical explanation as to why the Vice-consul would randomly shoot at the lepers in Lahore: “elle [la femme du consul d’Espagne] se rassure, croit avoir découvert enfin quelque sentiment familial chez le vice-consul: la peur” (113).

Through these multi-layered images of the *grille*, Duras suggests the intricate psychological layers of her characters. One need only reference, for example, the

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1,100 designs from *Fontes de fer de toutes espèces*, a catalog published by the L. Denonvilliers firm of Paris, circa 1900, to appreciate this analogy between the elaborate detail work of the *grille*, and the intricacies of the human psyche. The *grille* serves as an appropriate metaphor for the human psyche: when we trace the opposition of rigid versus fluid from path, to park, to *grille*, we notice the distinction that the *grille* is a feature simultaneously rigid *and* fluid. The graceful curvature in Denonvilliers' designs create an aesthetic "fluidity" of the *grille*, while the material itself — cast and wrought iron — displays its rigidity. Metal, wrought iron, steel, or wire denote the material composite and function of the *grille* as a barrier, while the gaps between the metal create a "fluidity" of open space. The *grille*, unlike a solid wall, either "mocks" what can be seen beyond (and what cannot be had), or exposes what one might prefer to hide from his or her conscience (the destitution of the neighboring peoples). For example, the *grille* separates the beggar-woman from the world of "les blancs," where she can see her infant being tended to, and a life both alien and unattainable to her: "Il doit être possible de voir: au bout de l'allée, du côté opposé à la grille, il y a une véranda couverte. Elle est séparée de cette véranda par vingt mètres d'allée" (60). Separated both physically and mentally, she wanders in circles of delirium around the villa: "C'est la même grille, le même homme blanc qui sort. Elle croyait être loin de la villa" (67). The perspective, evidently, depends on which side of the *grille* one is on. Twice, the father of this white family is noted as passing by the beggar-woman "sans la voir" (64, 67), whether physically not seeing her or subconsciously voiding her from view. The *grille* thus assumes its Latin

diminutive of *cratis*, meaning “hurdle” (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989), as both a physical and mental barrier. Duras weaves the three separate stories of the beggar-woman, the vice-consul, and Anne-Marie, into an indistinguishable medley of three humans as they face the “hurdle” of the life they endure in a colonial era.

anthropology n. the study of humankind [...] ■ [...] the comparative study of societies and cultures and their development ■ [...] the science of human zoology, evolution, and ecology (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002)

In terms of an “anthropological” interpretation of the *grille*, its function as a barrier as well as a hierarchical symbol separating native and foreigner becomes a “comparative study of societies and cultures” between that of the French Consulate in Calcutta, and the Other (natives, lepers, beggar-woman). According to McNeece, “Duras explores the question of the subject and its relation to culture and the Other in the exotic context of an imaginary India” (49). A human “zoology” is evidenced in the very cage-like nature of a *grille*, which lends itself automatically to the division between those on one side as “spectator” and those on the other side as “exhibit,” or vice-versa. Like the notion of the park where each person who crosses is under the scrutiny of the Other who may be watching from the window of his or her embassy residence, the *grille* also offers a vantage point of secure surveillance. Each character is not unlike a zoological exhibit. Ironically it is the Europeans, the foreigners residing at the Embassy, who are “caged,” as opposed to the beggars and lepers:

The Europeans in the novel languish in pre-monsoon heat, unable to adapt to either the stagnant air or their regulated leisure. Surrounded by lepers, beggars, and dogs that cluster along the edges of the Ganges and around the gates of the French embassy, the Europeans are apprehensive about their

immunity from the disease and squalor that they know are indifferent to political ideologies. (McNeece 50)

As the park acts as a defensive “buffer” rather than a gathering place, so the *grille* also serves as a line of defense and shelter from both the pre-monsoon heat (by dispersing the sun’s rays) and the lepers, beggars, and dogs. This shielding function of the *grille* is evidenced in the Latin origin of the word itself, “cratis”, meaning “ribs of a shield,” or “interlocked shields of a rank of soldiers” (*A Latin Dictionary*, 1975). However, this etymological provision of “shelter” and “security” offers little connotation of comfort when we realize that the word *grille* is also derived from a method of execution: “a hurdle with which criminals were covered, and on which stones were thrown” (*A Latin Dictionary*, 1975). The languid imagery of the novel in conjunction with the word origins themselves illustrates the “caged” perspective of the Europeans in India and implies feelings of guilt (“criminals”) and hopelessness.

As mentioned in regard to the park, rectilinearity is but a false impression, an illusion of the “order” maintained by imperialist power. The park is not a place of gathering but rather a symbolic barrier, a landscaped “void” separating at least three cultures as defined by the Other. Just as the park gives a false impression of order where there is disorder and unrest in the minds of the Europeans, so the *grille* serves as a form of denial or mental barricade against the “disease and squalor” of the outside world. According to Ashis Nandy, psychologist and cultural critic, colonization dehumanized the colonizers as much as it brutalized the colonized. As evidenced in the path and the park, where the Europeans avoid not only contact with

the beggars and lepers but also with themselves (namely avoiding the Vice-consul, whose behavior is incomprehensible to them), the *grille* reinforces this separation: “Peter Morgan quitte vivement le boulevard, se dissimule derrière la grille du parc, attend” (30).

The *grille* pushes the interplay of fluid versus rigid one step further: different from the fluidity of either the path or the park, its fluidity is such that we can *see*, but not *traverse*. While attempting to “screen” the outside world from view, the mind internalizes the images seen through the *grille*. “In *Le Vice-consul*, Duras begins to unravel the material that shrouds the exotic Other and screens the subject from its own mortality” (McNeece 51). The trap focalizes inwardly, as opposed to just physically, and eventually leads to death, as Duras herself states “La mort est partout dans *India-Song*” (Porte 78). Somber, oneiric, and barren images of solitude and suggestions of death pervade the novel: “Elle [la mendiante] rêve: elle est son enfant morte, buffle de la rizière, parfois elle est rizière, forêt, elle qui reste des nuits dans l’eau mortelle du Gange sans mourir, plus tard, elle rêve qu’elle est morte à son tour, noyée” (70). Here again we see the image of the beggar-woman connected to nature, this time metaphorically: “elle *est* rizière, forêt.” In an anthropological sense of comparative study, the culture of the beggar-woman is more closely tied to nature. The natives work in the rice fields, on the fishing boats, or in the market squares, and live in “les paillotes” (straw huts) in stark contrast to the living environments of “les blancs”: “La sonnette de la porte. Une domestique vient ouvrir. Un homme blanc entre. . . Ils rentrent à l’intérieur de la villa. La véranda reste éclairée. Le calme

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revient” (64). The doorbell rung, we enter into the world of servants, electricity, shelter, and renewed calm, whereas the world of the beggar-woman is constantly subject to the outside, the wide expanses, the natural elements of rain, heat, monsoon. The natives are more directly linked to the material means of sustenance, shelter, and survival.

Gwendolyn Wright’s *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (1991) illustrates this architectural distinction between the living environments of the natives versus civil servants in colonized nations:

Colonial civil servants also perceived culture in a more anthropological sense, as values, as ways of living which varied from one group to another, even within a single city. They observed the ways which existing streets and buildings accommodated attitudes toward public life, or the separation of the sexes, or religious beliefs. These social conventions, acted out in public and private space, formed a complex ritual of order.

Administrators hoped that preserving traditional status-hierarchies would buttress their own superimposed colonial order. Architects, in turn, acknowledging that resistance to new forms is often based on affection for similar places, tried to evoke a sense of continuity with the local past in their designs. Both groups extolled traditions — often, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, “invented traditions,” which relied on pageantry or other symbolic expressions of a rigid social order, resuscitated and dramatized by the European authorities. Such artificial revivals inevitably indicate a break in continuity: the forms could not have the meanings they once evoked. In essence, the apparent respect for other cultures involved European efforts to legitimate colonial power, thereby facilitating the process of economic modernization, and parallel efforts to give modernist aesthetics both sensuality and a sense of locale or place. (9)

The glimpses of vantage points from civil servants that we are given in Duras’ novel, in Peter Morgan’s account of the beggar-woman, the commentaries of the guests at the reception, the dialogues between the Vice-consul and the Director, or the history of Anne-Marie, offer no direct evidence that these civil servants offer solutions to

their “superimposed colonial order” as do the Administrators described above by Wright. We do notice, however, a similarity in the way that Peter Morgan attempts to “invent traditions” in his reinvention of the story of the beggar-woman by his own standards and thus “legitimate colonial power,” as a way to explain his own place in Calcutta. The culture of the natives remains an enigma throughout the novel. The resulting insanity of the beggar-woman at the end of the novel, an outward expression of the same psychological struggle of the Europeans in adapting to colonial society, becomes horrifying to the European:

Le poisson guillotiné remue dans sa main. Elle doit s’amuser de faire peur, de donner la nausée. Elle avance vers lui. Charles Rossett recule, elle avance encore, il recule encore, mais elle avance plus vite que lui et Charles Rossett jette la monnaie par terre, se retourne et fuit vers le chemin en courant” (205).

No direct indication or mention of the social state and hierarchy on the part of the Europeans appears in the novel, where Duras addresses colonialism instead through sensory imagery and metaphor. According to McNeece, this omission of direct political critique is deliberate on the part of Duras:

“In *Le Vice-consul*, Duras explores the tendency of narratives that involve encounters with the unfamiliar to reduce rather than expand our exposure to concrete diversity by creating an illusion of transparency and identity, which Duras perceives to be a direct ally to patriarchal culture. This tendency is shown to be analogous to the colonials’ insistence upon formality and protocol as a means of denying the validity of aberrant behavior and unfamiliar phenomena.” (50)

The analogy created with the *grille* becomes meta-textual: Duras’ narration is like the air or water that can pass through a *grille*, just as the *nouveau roman* surpasses the restraints of the traditional novel. While Duras’ style in *Le Vice-consul* is unique in

itself, it also exhibits characteristics of the *nouveau roman* defined in Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963):

Si j'emploie volontiers, dans bien des pages, le terme de *Nouveau Roman*, ce n'est pas pour désigner une école, ni même un groupe défini et constitué d'écrivains qui travailleraient dans le même sens; il n'y a là qu'une appellation commode englobant tous ceux qui cherchent de nouvelles formes romanesques, capables d'exprimer (ou de créer) de nouvelles relations entre l'homme et le monde, tous ceux qui sont décidés à inventer le roman, c'est-à-dire à inventer l'homme. Ils savent, ceux-là, que la répétition systématique des formes du passé est non seulement absurde et vaine, mais qu'elle peut même devenir nuisible: en nous fermant les yeux sur notre situation réelle dans le monde présent, elle nous empêche en fine de compte de construire le monde et l'homme de demain. (9)

While acting as a barrier, the *grille* allows for visibility. Similarly, while the *nouveau roman* maintains certain defining characteristics as outlined above, it allows for "le mouvement de la description" (128) and "les déroulements temporelles" thus freeing the restraints of chronology and description imposed on the traditional novel which is nothing more than "un monde que le romancier paraissait seulement reproduire, copier, transmettre, comme si l'on avait affaire à une chronique, à une biographie, à un quelconque document" (126).

McNeece also reminds us that the setting for the *Le Vice-consul* is an "imaginary colonial enclave in Calcutta" (50). As with the park, Duras does not provide a concrete description of the *grille*. We must rely on the films which Duras made subsequent to the novel in search of "clues" as to these architectural elements of the French Embassy in Calcutta set in the context of the 1930's. We discover that the embassy envisioned in Duras's work is not an actual embassy in Calcutta, as evidenced through Michelle Porte's interview with Duras (1976). The author and

cinematographer addresses her film *India Song*, which incorporates the text of *Le Vice-consul*, informing us that the “embassy” chosen to represent the French Embassy in Calcutta is not an actual embassy, but the Château Rothschild:

Le décalage entre une véritable ambassade, une ambassade plausible, comme on l’aurait trouvée dans le commerce du cinéma et cette ambassade-là, cet hiatus-là, a marqué tout le film, il est dans tout le film . . . Je pense que c’est la fin du monde. . . Ce n’est pas seulement la mort de l’histoire qui est écrite dans *India-Song*, qui est dite dans *India-Song*, c’est la mort de notre histoire. Parce que l’adhésion immédiate que j’ai eue à ce château Rothschild, était telle que je n’aurais pas pu tourner ailleurs, j’aurais plutôt renoncé au film que d’y renoncer. Cette adhésion immédiate, elle ne peut pas seulement s’expliquer à partir d’un lieu de fiction. Autre chose parlait là. J’avais trouvé le lieu pour dire la fin du monde. Le colonialisme, ici, c’est un détail, le colonialisme, la lèpre et la faim aussi. (77)

A larger dimension, symbolizing the decline of Europe, explains the choice of setting for the novel *Le Vice-consul* and the subsequent films. Colonialism being “un détail,” it is no longer simply the question that Wright outlines of architectural design of foreign embassies succeeding or failing in integrating the styles of two or more different cultures. The question transcends colonialism and post-colonialism to the issue of “la connerie monumentale,” which might well be interpreted as surviving world “superpowers.” This interview was conducted in 1976 when there existed the two “superpowers” of the U.S.S.R. and the United States. However, the concern is still merited today, in the notion that without a proper respect and understanding of diverse cultures, such “superpowers” might efface the history and culture of other nations in their wake.

Duras mentions her instant “adhésion” to the château Rothschild (Figure A-3), which serves as the embassy in the film *India Song*. As Delphine Seyrig, who plays

the role of Anne-Marie Stretter, descends the monumental staircase followed by two of her male suitors, the grand estate posing ominously in the background, one can appreciate Duras' choice. Curiously enough, something in the aura of this château, set in the pre-monsoon heat of Calcutta, and along the edges of the Ganges, bears a resemblance to the architecture of Addison Mizner, whose palatial residences of Florida date from the same era as the setting of *Le Vice-consul*. His work ironically incorporates more elements of the Islamic architectural traditions brought to India in the 13th century, such as the horse-shoe shaped arch, the poly-lobed arch, the ogee arch, and Persian decorative detail, as evidenced (respectively) in the entrance to the Moorish tea house of "El Mirasol" Stotesbury Residence (1919); "Casa De Leoni" Glendinning Residence (1921) [Figure A-4] and the Rasmussen Residence (1926); "Villa Flora" Shearson Residence (1923); and the Everglades Club, including the Apartment of Paris Singer within the Club (1919), respectively. We also remark the grillwork of the Everglades Club, as well as the Spanish Gothic windows of the Cloister at Boca Raton (1925). The resemblance of these estates to the château Rothschild may simply arise from the fact that these images of the estates taken as photographs without people in them, create a similar sense of austerity as the solitude created in *India Song* against the backdrop of the château. Other monumental edifices, such as the Marble Palace (1835) and Victoria Memorial (1906), exist in Calcutta, but Duras expressly and fittingly chooses a French château. One might infer from the landscape of the château Rothschild that the park of the embassy mentioned in *Le Vice-consul* is assuredly of a monumental and ordered French style.

From an architectural perspective, we see the embassy evolve into an edifice that is more symbolic and monumental, while the *grille* also becomes something more than a *grille*, existing on a series of both literal and symbolic, physical and psychological, levels. Can there be a reading of the *grille* simply for its own sake as well? With what implications? In other words, can the *grille* function on yet another level, simply that of the architectural aesthetic? One might propose that the *grilles* at the embassy in *Le Vice-consul* are similar to the architectural grillwork of the château Rothschild in Duras's film — ornate and intricate, flaunting their steel, the material newly fashioned from the late 19th century's industrial age. Perhaps this ornateness further emphasizes the "supremacy" of the colonizer, yet we find examples of grillwork in the native architecture, in Cambodian and Indian temples, for instance, to rival its Western colonist. Perhaps craftsmanship could offer a source of solidarity among nations, just as the Bauhaus School pioneered in the early 1920's to "encourage the individual artisans and craftsmen to work cooperatively and combine all of their skills" (Flores 1). An appreciation of the aesthetic value and craftsmanship of grillwork is apparent in the Musée des Colonies of the 1931 Colonial Exposition: "The ornamental grilles on the windows at the gallery level and in the base were fabricated Edgar Brandt and Edouard and Marcel Schenck, respectively. These elements belonged to the subtly 'colonial' but primarily classical vocabulary of Laprade's building" (Morton, "National and Colonial," 367). "The decoration of the Galerie d'Honneur incorporated a decorative railing and fanlight with wrought iron and lamps by Raymond Subes, wrought-iron banisters on the stairs

leading to the upper floors by the firm of Baguès, and fabric wall coverings by Jacques Rodier” (Morton, “National and Colonial,” 369). While geography is “the scientific study of places,” human geography is “the study of humans within those places” (Buttimer 44) and architecture is “l’expression de l’être même des sociétés, de la même façon que la physionomie humaine est l’expression de l’être des individus” (Bataille 168). With a monument such as the château Rothschild still standing, imposing, with its ornamental grillwork and architectural detail of the French Renaissance style, is there really a threat of the “disparition de l’Europe” as Duras states? To efface culture, one must efface the rigid framework of its architecture. How can the “end of the world” be symbolized with such edifices still standing? “Every civilization produces a characteristic adaptation to its physical environment, manifested in the social forms or *genre de vie* (modes of life) of that civilization” (Morton, “A Study in Hybridity,” 79). One may argue then that architecture is the very symbol of civilization. “There are many written expressions of the profound meaningfulness of the inanimate environment to human *life*” (Lang 147, emphasis mine). Were *Le Vice-consul* set against a more stark, modernist-style building of Mies van der Rohe from the same era (1930’s), one might perhaps argue an analogy to the “end of the world.” In such a case, the absence of architectural detail might coincide with the void within the characters of the novel:

—Comment est mon visage, dites, directeur?

—Impossible encore, dit le directeur.

Le vice-consul, impassible, poursuit son discours (78)

The Vice-consul is portrayed as having an “impossible” visage; in other words, he disturbs the other Europeans in Calcutta by not conforming to their tacit “rule” where “rien ne se voit” (100). His response to this collective view of him is one of “impassivity,” acting as a *grille*, or barrier, shielding his inner psyche. One might also describe his demeanor as “impassable,” or rather, “impossible to travel along or over” (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002). At the same time, like the *grille*, he is “fluid” by means of what others say about him — “on dit” — in his absence. His “presence” remains in the conversations of others who are disturbed by their inability to understand him, or perhaps on a subconscious level, of their own desire to emulate him by attempting to confront their fears and anxieties rather than to be “caged” in the illusion of “rien ne se voit” (100).

In comparison to this style of characterization, the modernist architectural style of “form follows function” offers little in the way of analogy since the building façade, unlike the physiognomy of the Vice-consul, exposes the function which lies within. Even in the most simple or “stark” of built forms, there seems to be a “living” element that prevails. Aspects of architectural determinism, “the belief that the layout of the environment is a major determinant of human social behavior” (Lang 147), cannot help but be a factor in socio-political studies. Consequently, the architecture chosen in literature cannot merely be reduced to a symbolic meaning. Its literal, very real foundation must unavoidably be addressed. This determinism will enter further into play within the fourth part of our exploration.

For the moment, let us return to Duras's writing "strategy" in the *nouveau roman*. As stated earlier, Duras makes no direct political statement in *Le Vice-consul*. Instead, through the openings of a narratively fluid grillwork, she traces three stories of the human psyche through metaphorical imagery in order to evoke themes of love, separation, solitude, and death. Accordingly, the *grille* becomes much more than a *grille*; we delve into psychological interpretations to better understand this "comparative study of societies and cultures" and this "human geography." Each interwoven story — the beggar-woman, Anne-Marie Stretter, and the Vice-consul — involves an individual who trespasses the boundary "beyond" the *grille* to either lose herself — the beggar-woman who seeks "une indication pour me perdre" (9) — to establish an identity in an otherwise meaningless existence (the Vice-consul), or to cope with the harsh realities of one's role (or culpability) among a colonized people (Anne-Marie Stretter). Duras's allegorical approach to the study of politics and culture creates personas who transgress not only literary "boundaries" but socio-cultural barriers as well. Wright argues: "The essential question that needs to be posed concerns direct influence, rather than passive 'reflection,' between the two domains [politics and culture]" (8). While Wright is referring more to the architectural hegemony of imperialist nations within their colonies, the notion of "direct influence" versus "passive reflection" plays an important role in Duras's novel as well. Unlike Peter Morgan who impersonally reinvents the story of the beggar-woman who exists through third-person omniscient narration, both Anne-Marie and the Vice-consul transgress the boundaries of the *grille* by performing more direct or

aggressive acts, either by giving water and leftover scraps of food to the beggars and lepers outside the Embassy (Anne-Marie), or shooting at the lepers (the Vice-consul). Although they demonstrate the notion of “action over words,” there is a form of “rigid-fluidity” within their own behavior toward the native people. The degree of their transgression of cultural or political barriers is questionable: the Vice-consul only shoots *at* the lepers, and Anne-Marie requests that the left-over foods “doivent être donnés aux affamés de Calcutta” (36) — must be given — but are not given by her own hand.

The main instances where we see the *grille* — at the Embassy in Calcutta, and at the house of the white family who tends to the beggar-woman’s baby along her journey (a house in a district known specifically by the natives to be populated by whites) — clearly establish a social hierarchy. But nowhere does the *grille* divide as large a populace as between *Prince of Wales* hotel where it separates the whites from an entire native village below. The “mendiante” is the most “fluid” of all personas throughout the text, her physical strife mirroring the mental anguish of Anne-Marie and the Vice-consul. The beggar-woman portrays the harsh reality of survival in a “natural” and impoverished state different than Western standards of code and conduct. Representative of the Other, she is a pregnant child whose own mother must banish her because she is no longer useful as a source of labor in a family of already too many mouths to feed. As the beggar-woman appears and reappears throughout the novel, Anne-Marie and the Vice-consul adopt more “primitive” characteristics. As Anne-Marie grows progressively weak, thin, and pallid, we see her, for instance,

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sleeping during a trip to the islands through the rice fields, while the male diplomats speak of the beggar-woman, and it becomes difficult to distinguish the “elle” Anne-Marie from “elle” the beggar-woman. Likewise the Vice-consul, after leaving the reception at the Embassy, is heard crying out behind the *grilles* of the park — “derrière les grilles du parc” — like the beggars and lepers, in a primitive state.

What do the differing reactions of the Europeans to the beggars and lepers, in the particular cases of these protagonists, and the social hierarchy established by the *grilles*, do for us architecturally? The *grille*, although not a visible barrier, creates a mental barrier. Incorporating a *grille* in a design by its very nature establishes a social hierarchy, no matter how tenuous the material barrier. Consider for example the annual “People’s Fair” in Washington, D.C., held this past October along Wilson Boulevard in Ballston. The “fairground” (one city block) was demarcated by a thin yellow plastic tape; those who paid to enter the Fair on one side, and the non-paying observers on the other. Those unable to pay the entry fee for the “People’s” Fair were unable to participate. Are they any less valued than the people within the boundary? A thin strip of paper, no more than 2 inches thick, has greater socio-political implications than one might imagine. As mentioned earlier, in architecture “fluid” and innovative ideas in conceptual designs are always subject to the more often rigid physical constraints of site and building material. In relation here to the concept of the *grille*, we remark that within the rigid frame in architecture, the space between (as the space between bars of *grilles*) is essential. This space between is translated as what we see, and yet cannot traverse, for instance the view through a

window. While on a most basic and functional level of design a *grille* may be needed for security and privacy issues, how might the design still offer a “welcoming” aspect, as opposed to blatantly manifesting a social hierarchy or division? One perhaps might focus on the craftsmanship of the grille, or the *beauty*, over the *barrier*. Or would this simply be a denial, a falsification, like 19th century use of plaster to conceal the steel and exposed structure behind the façade? Do we also, like the Europeans of the colonial society, create a mental “*grille*” to hide behind? The unique aspect of the *grille*, as previously mentioned, however, is its simultaneously fluid and rigid nature: we are still in visible and auditory contact with whatever the *grille* divides physically. Rather than outline the cultural and political implications of the grille outright, Duras weaves into and out of the *grille*, like the path and the park, the story of certain characters and their behaviors. From this perspective, one might deduce that without a change in an individual’s own exposure, adaptations, and perspectives on other cultures (or the other side of the *grille*), change on a wider level cannot occur; all that can occur are the “blocs monolithiques. . . qui se regarderont dans un désert”(Porte 77). With this in mind, we will now focus more closely on one character, Anne-Marie Stretter, as we turn to an analysis of her island villa.

Part IV: Octagon

octagon n. ■ a plane figure with eight straight sides and eight angles.
■ an object or building with a plan or cross section of this shape.
(*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002)

From our analysis of the *grille* which separates natives from foreigners physically as well as *psychologically*, we arrive at the island villa of Anne-Marie on the islands. In the process, we can focus deeper on the psyche of one character while observing the effects of architecture on human consciousness. The means by which Anne-Marie copes with the suffering, poverty, and destitution witnessed in Calcutta illustrate the role of the environment in her process of “healing.” At the same time, the connection between the “salle octogonale” of the Embassy and island villa provides a motif in the structure, symbolism, and staging of climactic moments of the novel. By pursuing an architectural analysis of the story of Anne-Marie, we trace the role of the villa as an element of “healing,” and the octagon as a form of theatricality.

We choose Anne-Marie as our focus not only on account of her relationship to the villa, but also because she appears to be molded after Duras’ own heart. In an interview with Michelle Porte (1976), Duras remarks on her film *India Song*: “Ce qui est mis en scène, c’est ma fascination, l’amour que j’ai d’elle [Anne-Marie]. Je me demande si l’amour que j’ai d’elle n’a pas toujours existé [. . .] Je pense que c’était ça, elle, Anne-Marie Stretter, le modèle parental pour moi, le modèle maternel, ou plutôt le modèle féminin” (65). Anne-Marie does indeed appear to be a good mother to her two daughters: “Avec ses filles qui lui ressemblent, elle passe des heures

chaque jour, on le dirait [. . .] on dit qu'ils ont une enfance heureuse, Anne-Marie Stretter s'occupe beaucoup de l'éducation de ses filles" (94). Though still matronly, the woman has at the same time an emaciated appearance: "Aux approches de la vieillesse, une maigreur lui est venue qui laisse bien voir la finesse, la longueur de l'ossature. Ses yeux sont trop clairs, découpés comme ceux des statues, ses paupières sont amaigries" (92). Through random details we collect of her history, namely through scattered dialogues during the reception at the Embassy, we discover that she has been living abroad for at least seventeen years, married to the French Ambassador to Calcutta after having only just arrived several weeks earlier near the border of Laos, where her father held a position as a general administrator. This information is disclosed by means of the ambiguous "on dit" which represents the voices of reception attendees:

On dit: M. Stretter [. . .] est beaucoup plus âgé qu'elle, oui. Savait-on qu'il l'a enlevé à un administrateur général vers la frontière du Laos, dans un petit poste reculé de l'Indochine française? Oui, il y a de cela dix-sept ans. Il n'y avait que quelques semaines qu'elle y était arrivée lorsque M. Stretter y est venu en mission. Huit jours après elle repartait avec lui, le savait-on? (98).

We also learn that within her first year in Calcutta, Anne-Marie attempts suicide: "Que s'est-il passé à la fin de la première année de son séjour? Cette disparition que personne ne s'expliquait? Une ambulance au petit jour a été vue devant la Résidence. Tentative de suicide?" (110). Not only is she a foreigner having difficulty adapting to a new environment abroad, but also a "foreigner" in a sense among the other French consuls, being originally Venetian: "On dit aussi que vous êtes vénitienne" (110).

While Anne-Marie herself has great difficulty in adapting to a foreign environment, over the years she in turn becomes a sort of “sacrificial lamb” who helps incoming consuls adapt to Calcutta. It is interesting to note that just as Anne-Marie is of Venetian origin, her “entourage” consists of British rather than French citizens. The ambassador M. Stretter is not only aware of this “rite of initiation” of incoming consuls (the degree of intimacy of these relations is left to the discretion of the reader), but is the one to choose the inductees, guarding Anne-Marie as his “treasure”: “L’ambassadeur souriant regarde le trésor partir en automobile” (95). Michael Richard, George Crown, Peter Morgan, and the newest arrival Charles Rossett all travel with Anne-Marie to “les Îles” and the luxurious *Prince of Wales* hotel where she occupies one of the “petites villas compartimentées, annexes luxueuses et discrètes de l’hôtel” (89). M. Stretter’s advice to Charles Rossett to go to the islands seems to indicate the therapeutic aspect of such an environment:

Il faut aller aux Îles, conseille M. Stretter, il faut prendre l’habitude d’y aller si on veut tenir le coup à Calcutta. . . Ne serait-ce que pour passer deux jours dans le fabuleux hôtel du *Prince of Wales*, il faut aller là-bas. Il y a aussi le trajet de Calcutta au Delta qui est intéressant, il faut avoir traversé en voiture les immenses rizières du Delta, le grenier de l’Inde du Nord, voir l’archaïsme de l’agriculture aux Indes, voir l’Inde plus avant, voir le pays dans lequel on se trouve, ne pas se borner à Calcutta. Pourquoi Charles Rossett n’irait-il pas dès ce week-end? (44).

While the beggar-woman’s journey through the rice fields from Cambodia to India requires ten years of hardship, the journey through the rice fields for the Europeans offers a weekend of “healing.” The path through the “archaic” agricultural methods of India may also be the colonizers’ attempt to justify their intrusion in the country as

a means of technological progress. Traveling to the *Prince of Wales* on the weekend is also quite simply a form of “protection”: “Dès l’après-demain samedi, Calcutta va se vider de ses Blancs anglais et français” (45). The white population migrates to the *Prince of Wales* enclave on the weekend, which offers safety as well as repose. The notion of “habitude” surfaces in the ambassador’s advice as well: “il faut prendre l’habitude d’y aller si on veut tenir le coup à Calcutta” (44). A guest at the reception elaborates on this idea of adaptation through habit:

— Vous comprenez, dit la femme d’une voix douce, tout le monde a des débuts difficiles à Calcutta. Moi, j’étais tombée dans une profonde tristesse — elle sourit —, mon mari se désolait et puis, petit à petit, jour après jour, j’ai fini par m’habituer. Même quand on croit que ce n’est pas possible, on s’habitue. À tout. Il y a pire que ça, vous savez. (114)

Is it the environment on the islands, the routine of going there, or both that play a role in the process of adaptation and healing?

Focusing more closely on the environment of the islands, we follow a linear progression (not unlike the “horizon plat” followed by the beggar-woman) from the most open to most closed of spaces: India (its countryside and ricefields), to the islands, to the grilles of the *Prince of Wales*, through an alley and gardens to the door of Anne-Marie’s villa, and into her bedroom. The progression also flows from the most public to most private of spaces: “personne ne sait ce qu’elle [Anne-Marie] fait dans la villa des bouches du Gange” (96). The villa takes form as the Englishmen approach its center:

Michael Richard ouvre une grille, ils traversent un parc. Un perron est éclairé, à gauche une fenêtre ouverte, un mur blanc. C’est de là que vient la musique. Ils s’arrêtent tous les deux dans une allée d’eucalyptus géants, il y a

aussi des oiseaux endormis. Le bruit de la mer est dans leur dos. Il doit y avoir une plage, l'allée et la mer font une ligne continue et il y a des chocs sourds suivis de silence, là au bout de l'allée.

— On la dérange quand elle joue du piano? demande Charles Rossett.

— Je n'ai jamais su, mais je ne le crois pas. . . pas tellement.

Des vérandas à colonnes partent du perron et entourent la villa. (187-188)

On entre dans la chambre d'Anne-Marie:

C'est sa chambre sans doute. Il y a peu de meubles. Sur le piano il y a des piles de partitions en désordre. Le lit de cuivre est recouvert d'un drap blanc. La moustiquaire n'est pas baissée, elle fait une boule neigeuse au-dessus du lit. Une odeur de citronnelle, blanche odeur, flotte dans la chambre.

— C'est la meilleure façon d'éloigner les moustiques si on supporte cette odeur. (188-189)

Such descriptions of the island "refuge" do not lend themselves to the typical notion of "therapeutic" in the sense of "having a good effect on the body or mind" (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002). The odor of "citronnelle" warding off mosquitoes hardly offers a sense of repose and tranquility. Likewise in describing the *Prince of Wales* we are presented with a less than inviting image: "Quand le soleil se couche, le ciel, dans l'océan Indien, est rouge, c'est souvent ainsi, et sur les chemins de l'île il y a de longues barres sombres, dans la lumière rouge, les ombres des troncs des palmiers." (89). Long, somber paths set under a red sky seem less than soothing.

Yet Duras' unique and very *real* details of the island villa testify to the integrity of her writing and the literary freedom to express a paradoxical view of what is "soothing." The descriptions, if not traditionally idyllic, are uniquely symbolic. The description of the *Prince of Wales* demonstrates the social hierarchy of colonizer versus colonized:

Le hall a quarante mètres de long, de très grandes tentures bleu marine sont tirées devant les baies. Dans le fond il y a un dancing. De-ci de-là, séparés par des rangées de plantes vertes, des bars. Il y a surtout des voyageurs anglais. . Des vendeurs de pacotille passent et repassent. Dans les vitrines, des parfums. De grandes salles à manger blanches donnent sur la mer. Sur les buffets, du raisin. Un personnel surabondant en gants blancs et pieds nus, circule. Les plafonds ont la hauteur de deux étages. Il tombe des lustres, du creux, du faux or une lumière dorée. . .Le luxe est profond et éprouvé.” (178)

The contrast in description between the showiness of the *Prince of Wales* hotel and the humility of Anne-Marie’s villa perhaps suggest symbolically Anne-Marie’s authenticity, her more profound connection to India, the woman who makes certain to leave food and water for the lepers and beggars outside the Embassy, the woman who steps outside the bounds of European convention and cultural imperialism.

The few characters, namely Anne-Marie and the Vice-consul, who venture outside convention in attempts to understand their own existence in a foreign culture are bound in a tacit understanding, suffer for their courage. As a testimony to this struggle, certain ironic motifs circulate throughout the novel: smiles within an atmosphere of distress, and comfort derived from the tears of Anne-Marie Stretter. At the reception, we count numerous smiles within a somber atmosphere: “Elle relève la tête et sourit aussi” (107), “un sourire dans les yeux” (110), “elle sourit” (111), “Ils se sourient” (113), “elle sourit” (114). These smiles are bittersweet, perhaps a shield, a form of disguise in a world where “Rien ne se voit” (100). The other seeming irony, the act of Anne-Marie crying as a source of solace to others, is evidenced in the reaction of the Vice-Consul as well as the four men who accompany her to the islands. Having heard that her “amants” say that Anne-Marie is often sad, the Vice-

consul decides “Je la [Anne-Marie] prendrais par la tristesse” (80) and is happy to discover that it is he and not Charles Rossett who has made Anne-Marie cry: “Charles Rossett bredouille quelque chose, il se trompe, ce n’est pas lui, il en est sûr, qui a fait pleurer Anne-Marie Stretter. Le vice-consul le regarde, il souri avec indulgence, il est heureux” (171). The Vice-consul’s happiness stems not from malice but rather from a passionate experience lived vicariously through words, based on the brief yet profound verbal exchange between the Vice-consul and Anne-Marie during their two dances at the reception. They have connected through the same feelings of pain and exile. The four “amants” of Anne-Marie who travel to the island villa are also connected to Anne-Marie through a profound “tristesse.” The men are seen gathering around Anne-Marie as she lies lifeless on her bed in the villa:

Charles Rossett s’est levé à son tour et il se tient près de Michael Richard, ils la regardent. Les paupières larges frissonnent, les larmes ne coulent pas.

Il y a toujours le bruit de la mer la-bas, au bout du parc et celui de l’orage qui est venu. Elle regarde l’orage à travers la fenêtre ouverte, toujours allongée, entre leurs regards. Charles Rossett se retient d’appeler. Qui? Elle sans doute. Quel est ce désir?

Il l’appelle.

Je pleure sans raison que je pourrais vous dire, c’est comme une peine qui me traverse, il faut bien que quelqu’un pleure, c’est comme si c’était moi.

Elle sait qu’ils sont là, tout près, sans doute, les hommes de Calcutta, elle ne bouge pas du tout, si elle le faisait. . . non. . . elle donne le sentiment d’être maintenant prisonnière d’une douleur trop ancienne pour être encore pleurée. (198)

Anne-Marie becomes not merely a self-sacrificial “prisoner” but a matriarchal figure who “absorbs” all the grief of the others, and in the process, exhausts her mind and body: “Son corps allongé paraît privé de son volume habituel. Elle est plate, légère, elle a la rectitude simple d’une morte” (197). The sensuality of the scene of Anne-

Marie lying on her bed surrounded by her “amants” also evokes her femininity and the void Anne-Marie fills for the men who miss their women from back home, “ — Les femmes, disent les hommes, de les revoir comme en France, même la plus insignifiante ici, celle que là-bas on ne remarquerait pas, ah! quel effet cela fait. . .”(100-101).

We thus return full-circle to Duras’s creation of Anne-Marie as the “modèle maternel, ou plutôt le modèle féminin” (Porte 65). It is only fitting then that Anne-Marie’s fate is as “therapeutic” as her role in Calcutta, thus giving closure to her story:

Elle ne va pas jusqu’à la plage, elle s’allonge dans l’allée, la tête sur la paume de sa main, accoudée sur le sol, dans la pose d’une liseuse, elle ramasse du gravier et le jette au loin. Puis elle ne jette plus de gravier, elle déplie son bras, elle pose son visage sur ce bras allongé et elle reste là. (199-200).

According to Duras, there is really no other choice of ending for Anne-Marie:

Oui, mais je ne sais pas si c’est un suicide. Elle rejoint comme une mer. . . elle rejoint la mer indienne, comme une sorte de mer matricielle. Quelque chose se boucle avec sa mort. Elle ne peut pas faire autrement. Je pense que c’est un suicide complètement logique, qui n’a rien de tragique. Elle ne peut pas vivre ailleurs que là et elle vit de cet endroit-là, elle vit du désespoir que secrète chaque jour l’Inde, Calcutta, et de même elle en meurt, elle meurt comme empoisonnée par l’Inde. Elle pourrait se tuer autrement, mais non, elle se tue dans l’eau, oui, dans la mer indienne. (78)

Duras’s forthright style of speaking of her work parallels the writing itself. The rather matter-of-fact description of the death as a “suicide complètement logique, qui n’a rien de tragique” dispels any sensationalism. Whereas in the film *India-Song* Anne-Marie’s death is evident, in the novel *Le Vice-consul* her death is merely suggested and left open to ambiguity. A third-person narrator assumes the point of

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view of Michael Richard, suggesting, “Elle doit nager maintenant derrière les grands grillages. . .elle nage, maintient au-dessus de l’eau, noyée à chaque vague, endormie peut-être, ou pleurant dans la mer” (201). The fluidity of Anne-Marie’s plunge into the ocean parallels Duras’ fluid narration. The spatial relations are as ambiguous as the characters’ thoughts (“On dit,” “On pense,” “On entend,” “On songe”) [137], culminating in the indeterminable death of Anne-Marie. The descriptions are unique, and the fluidity of spatial relations and discourse allow for interpretation. The “therapy” seems to derive from an emotional “cleansing” through tears, through the ocean, and through the more abstract fluidity of thought. Again, the theatrical notion of Copeau’s “tréteau nu,” where the “corps sur la scène” is the primary focus becomes applicable. The characters themselves become symbolic, and an indirect form of political critique. In this way, Duras claims that Anne-Marie *is* Calcutta:

Je pense qu’Anne-Marie Stretter a dépassé l’analyse, voyez, la question. Elle a dépassé tous les préjugés à propos de l’intelligence ou de la connaissance, de la théorie. C’est un désespoir, il s’agit là d’un désespoir universel, qui rejoint au plus près un désespoir politique profond, et qui est veçu comme tel, avec calme. J’ai dit qu’elle était Calcutta, je la vois comme Calcutta. Elle devient Calcutta, il y a un double glissement, Calcutta va vers la forme d’Anne-Marie Stretter et elle va vers la forme de Calcutta. Et pour moi à la fin du film elles ne font qu’un. (73)

Anne-Marie becomes, in a sense, a secular Mother Theresa. If Anne-Marie truly does “dépassé l’analyse,” then let us shift focus to another important aspect of the island villa.

One particular detail of the villa stands out in its connection to rest of novel: “La lumière de la fenêtre éclaire une fougère transportée ici de la salle octogonale”

(188). The “salle octogonale” referred to here is the octagonal ballroom at the French Embassy in Calcutta. This ballroom plays an important role in the reception, which is the main point of intrigue within the novel. In short, it is “where all the action happens.” This octagonal room stages drama: pre-planned by Anne-Marie and the Vice-consul, whereby the latter cries out that he will not leave, only to be escorted out: “Le jeune Peter Morgan rattrape le vice-consul qui ne sanglote plus et le mène vers la porte du salon octogonal” (147). Connected by a similar sense of pain and exile, Anne-Marie and the Vice-consul are limited to the passion of words; to go any further would be too painful. What they can allow themselves is a parting, a scene to be remembered and understood only by them: “Dans la rue, criez fort” (144) Anne-Marie says to the Vice-consul. The octagonal ballroom thus becomes setting for most climactic moments of the novel. The ferns transported from the “salle octogonale” offer a connection from the Embassy to the villa, where another “crise” of the novel the moment right before Anne-Marie’s death is staged.

The ferns establish not only a connection to the Embassy and the villa, but also to France. “La salle de bal est octogonale, en marbre vert Empire, à chacun des angles de l’octogone, fougères fragiles venues de France. Sur un panneau du mur, un président de la République, sur sa poitrine le ruban rouge, à côté de lui un ministre des Affaires étrangères” (93). The octagon room is, in essence, a symbol of France, a reminder of home for the consulate, in much the same way that Anne-Marie is a reminder of “les femmes [. . .] comme en France” (100). Ironically, France is traditionally known as the “hexagon,” owing to the geographical shape of the country

itself. As previously mentioned, several primary actions take place within the octagon or in reference to the octagon: 1) the separation of Vice-consul and Anne-Marie, the only two who lead “authentic” lives in sincere attempts at understanding their identity in India, and 2) the physical and mental exhaustion of Anne-Marie, symbol of Calcutta itself, at the island villa. Set within the backdrop of a transplanted image of France and images of its heads of state, one might argue this is another of Duras’s indirect critiques of imperialist Europe. The opulence of the green marble and fragility of the ferns transported from Europe create a stark contrast with the beggars and lepers starving outside the Embassy.

Several other secondary events take place within the octagon. Anne-Marie distributes roses to the women as they leave the reception:

Anne-Marie Stretter est arrivée dans la salle octogonale et distribue aux dames les roses arrivées dans l’après-midi du Nepal. On se recrie qu’elle devrait les garder pour elle. Elle dit qu’elle en a trop, elle dit que demain les salons seront vides et que les roses. . . non, qu’elle n’aime pas beaucoup les fleurs. . Elle fait vite, un peu trop vite, comme pour se débarrasser d’une petite corvée. Une dizaine de femmes l’entourent. (140)

This scene perhaps foreshadows the “fading” of Anne-Marie and her death outside the island villa (“demain les salons seront vides et que les roses. . .”). It portrays also her matronly, generous nature (“elle devrait les garder pour elle”) yet at the same time a carelessness and wastefulness “comme pour se débarrasser d’une petite corvée.” Again, like the ferns transported from France, we have fresh flowers transported from Nepal. In a subsequent instance (“Dans le salon octogonal trois hommes soûls dorment dans des fauteuils”) [145], again we remark the discrepancy between the

opulent lifestyle of the Europeans and that of the beggars and lepers waiting outside the gate. Lastly we see Anne-Marie with her “amants”: “Devant le buffet vide de la salle octogonale, George Crawn dit: . . . Pendant la chaleur, oui, un conseil, il ne faut boire que du thé vert brûlant. . .” (163). It is also at this moment that Michael Richard decides that they should all spend the weekend at the *Prince of Wales*.

The octagon brings us back to the contrasting theme of rigid versus fluid. While consisting of eight straight sides, the octagon, with its eight angles, approaches the form of a circle more closely than a square or a hexagon are able. While the *grille* either “mocks” what can be seen beyond (and what cannot be had), or exposes what one might prefer to hide from his or her conscience, the octagon “mocks” the natural inclination to want to create a full circle; more sides with the same angles will approach the form of a circle, yet still remain rigid. Perhaps the architectural form offers yet another indirect critique of colonial Europe by representing the “superficiality” of imperialist Europe in giving the appearance of “pure” form approaching the “freedom” of the circle while remaining rigid. The movement of the characters from the octagon room to the adjoining rooms mimics this paradox of fluid versus rigid. Although they may move freely through the rooms, the temperament of the occupants, their covert looks and criticisms, makes for a rigid stagnant, austere environment: “Le vice-consul jette un coup d’œil dans la salle octogonale” (103); “Dans un coin désolé du salon octogonal, il n’y a plus de fleurs [. . .] On part toujours, de tous les côtés on part. Elle [Anne-Marie] est dans le même coin du salon octogonal, dit quelque chose à son mari, serre des mains. Dans l’autre salon il

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semblerait qu'il reste un peu de monde" (141). The straight lines of the octagon reflect the rigid, stagnant atmosphere of the embassy where "rien ne se voit" (100).

The analysis of the octagon is further developed through consideration of historical precedent, which offers evidence that the form of the octagon is not a novel feature in design. In its "pure" mathematical form, the octagon falls under the category of "order" according to Vitruvius' *Book One on Architecture* dating from Antiquity: "Architecture depends on Order." Subsequently, in the Byzantine era, a number of churches assumed the form of the octagon:

Byzantine architects were eclectic, at first drawing heavily on Roman temple features. Their combination of the basilica and symmetrical central-plan (circular or polygonal) religious structures resulted in the characteristic Byzantine Greek-cross-plan church, with a square central mass and four arms of equal length. The most distinctive feature was the domed roof. To allow a dome to rest above a square base, either of two devices was used: the squinch (an arch in each of the corners of a square base that transforms it into an octagon) or the pendentive. ("Byzantine Architecture," *Brittanica Concise Encyclopedia*)

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of the octagonal form in the Byzantine era is the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy (Figure A-5), comprised of two concentric octagons:

...the "double-shell" plan comprised a domed octagonal core, with wedge-shaped piers framing two-storied, apsidial columnar screens, with a deep chancel running off to the east... The outer shell as well as the inner were octagonal so that the aisles and galleries comprised a series of uniform trapezoidal spaces... and the sides of the octagonal core were uniformly apsidial. The feeling of strictness was reinforced by the taller, more 'erect,' proportions of the interior, and by the regular shape of the cloister-vaulted dome. The exterior, too, embodied precision in design and execution, with a bold buildup of crisply articulated and beautifully proportioned volumes that were surely more than a mere reflection of the interior. (Trachtenberg 175)

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, an early Islamic monument (c.684), also exhibits an octagonal plan. Likewise, with the Christian church-building in the fourth century A.D. arose baptisteries containing octagonal baptismal fonts, the number eight symbolically representing, among other examples, the number of beatitudes of the sermon on the mountain, the number of sentences in the Magnificat or Hymn of Mary, the number of steps leading to the external square of Ezekiel's temple, and the number of persons saved from the Flood in Noah's Ark. In these early churches, the baptismal font "took the form of a basin which was either entirely below the level of the baptistery floor or was partially raised above it by a low curb of masonry, over which the neophytes passed by steps, in going down into the water [. . .] These fonts were either circular or octagonal in form" (Peterson 2). Through this descent and immersion in water, one is reborn in Christ. The octagonal form of these early baptismal fonts is of particular interest in the context of *Le Vice-consul*, in which both the octagon and water involve a different form of "rebirth." Anne-Marie's gradual "descent" from an octagonal ballroom, a journey to the Delta, and a "full immersion" into the Indian ocean represent a form of "release" in which Anne-Marie, who we have called a "secular Mother Theresa," drowns herself, not tragically ("un suicide [. . .] qui n'a rien de tragique") [Porte 78] but in a reunion with "la mer matricielle" (78).

After appearing as a prominent form in baptisteries, the octagon reappeared during the Italian Renaissance and became a feature of the subsequent Italianate Revival of the mid 1800's, such as the Octagon House (c.1854) in St. Johnsbury,

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Vermont. The form extended to the Holy Roman-German Empire where architect Santino Solari designed “the Octagon” along with the Banquet Hall of Hellbrunn Palace (1612-1615) in Salzburg. In the early 19th century, the form crossed the Atlantic, appearing in the United States with Thomas Jefferson’s design of over fifty buildings with an octagonal feature. Mount Vernon does not escape the form of the octagon, either, where it is found in the design of the garden schoolhouse on the estate. At the same time, the Octagon house (1799-1801), designed by Dr. William Thornton, completed Pierre l’Enfant’s plan for the city and was admired as a “seminal presence” (“The History of the Octagon”). The octagon in turn became a style of architecture proposed for house-building in the late 1840’s by Orson Squire Fowler, a phrenologist, lecturer, and amateur architect whose book *A Home for All, or the Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building* (1848) influenced the construction of at least one thousand buildings across the United States. Examples include the Zelotes Holmes House in Laurens, South Carolina (1859-1862); the Stetson House (1855-1863) in Otselic, New York; and the Octagon House (c.1880) on Lighthouse Avenue, St. Augustine, Florida. The octagon design was believed to hold several advantages, including being more beneficial to one’s health:

The eight-sided house was more than an architectural invention to Fowler -- he extolled it as the pathway to a healthier lifestyle. The former medical student described an octagon house in his 1848 book *A Home for All; or the Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building*. Such a building, he argued would be better ventilated (through a cupola) and lighted, and thus healthier. . Some benefits were more apparent: the houses provided a greater volume of space than a square or rectangular house and rooms were easily accessible from a central stair hall. (Holmes 1)

The notion of the octagonal house paving a “pathway to a healthier lifestyle” offers an interesting correlation to Duras’s novel. Anne-Marie’s island villa, with its ferns transplanted from the octagonal room of the embassy, is a place of “therapy” in adapting to Calcutta. Accordingly, we have seen the French ambassador to Calcutta advise one of his new cultural attachés to frequent the islands: “Il faut aller aux Îles [...] il faut prendre l’habitude d’y aller si on veut tenir le coup à Calcutta” (44). The villa is also the location where Anne-Marie goes to die, in the ocean, following the path outside the villa and into the water. The “place of healing” and “place of dying” seem to be one in the same, as Duras depicts Anne-Marie’s death: “Elle rejoint comme une mer. . .elle rejoint la mer indienne, comme une sorte de mer matricielle [...] Elle ne peut pas faire autrement. Je pense que c’est un suicide complètement logique, qui n’a rien de tragique” (Porte 78).

The connection between the octagon and Anne-Marie’s death appears, admittedly, rather tenuous. As far as any direct link or historical precedent between the octagon and the architecture of southeast Asia, one example does stand out: the Museum of History in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Built in 1929, the octagonal-shaped museum, with its roofs of traditional decorative lines, was designed after the Indochinese style by the French architect M. Dalaval. Whether Duras chose the octagon according to its Western or Asian architectural influence is unknown. Perhaps, in the spirit of the *nouveau roman* as defined by its initiator Alain Robbe-Grillet in his treatise *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963), the octagon simply exists as the author’s choice of what works best within the reality of her novel: “L’écrivain doit

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accepter avec orgueil de porter sa propre date, sachant qu'il n'y a pas de chef-œuvre dans l'éternité, mais seulement des œuvres dans l'histoire [. . .] Il [l'écrivain] supplie qu'on le croie, qu'on lui fasse confiance. Et lorsqu'on lui demande pourquoi il a écrit son livre, il n'a qu'une réponse: 'C'est pour essayer de savoir pourquoi j'avais envie de l'écrire' " (Robbe-Grillet 10,13). The octagon may be a reflection of the "chimerical" nature of the *nouveau roman*. This very presence of the form of the octagon in the *Le Vice-consul* is in tune with the nature of the *nouveau roman*: "Car la fonction de l'art n'est jamais d'illustrer une vérité — ou même une interrogation — connue à l'avance, mais de mettre au monde des interrogations (et aussi peut-être, à terme, des réponses) qui ne se connaissent pas encore elle-mêmes" (12-13). The reader becomes an active participant, reading a novel marked by "le déroulement même d'une histoire qui n'avait d'autre réalité que celle du récit, déroulement qui ne s'opérait nulle part ailleurs que dans la tête du narrateur invisible, c'est-à-dire de l'écrivain, et du lecteur" (132-133). The reader contributes to the meaning of the work:

Car, loin de le négliger, l'auteur aujourd'hui proclame l'absolu besoin qu'il a de son concours, un concours actif, conscient, *créateur*. Ce qu'il lui demande, ce n'est plus de recevoir tout fait un monde achevé, plein, clos sur lui-même, c'est au contraire de participer à une création, d'inventer à son tour l'œuvre — et le monde — et d'apprendre ainsi à inventer sa propre vie" (134).

While the novel suggests multiple interpretations, the purpose of the octagon within *Le Vice-consul*, then, is primarily twofold: 1) for the "salon octogonal" of the embassy, the "theatricality" of setting the stage for certain critical points within the novel, and 2) for Anne-Marie's villa, the role of the built environment in providing a

place of therapy or “healing.” In the first case, we can address the literary question of place in relation to characterization. Not only does the “salle octogonale” serve as the “stage” for the “performance” of critical points within the novel, but also offers an illustration of what Roland Barthes calls “une épaisseur de signes”:

Qu’est-ce que c’est la théâtralité? [. . .] c’est une épaisseur de signes et de sensations qui s’édifie sur la scène à partir de l’argument écrit, c’est cette sorte de perception œcuménique des artifices sensuels, gestes, tons, distances, substances, lumières, qui submerge le texte sous la plénitude de son langage extérieur (cited in Pavis, 358)

During the reception at the Embassy, for example, the dances in the “salle octogonale,” the implied polylogue of the guests through the use of the elusive “on dit” (137), and the “épaisseur” of the pre-monsoon heat itself all contribute to the “theatricality” of an atmosphere of languor within the novel. This atmosphere of languor is further realized in the film *India-Song* (1975) through the depressively slow movement of the characters into and out of view within the room (as well as their blending into and fading out of view from the mirrors within the room); the listless tone of the voice-over; the adagio tempo of the piano melodies; the fixation on various objects (a lamp, the piano); and the panning of the camera from within the “salle octogonale” to the outside views toward the Ganges. Ironically, the effect of these “fluid” panoramas serves to recreate the atmosphere of stagnancy of life among the foreign consulate in India in the 1930’s. From an architectural perspective, this “theatricality” translates to “event architecture,” the idea that a building is not “complete” without the occurrence of the event for which it is built. For example, a

stadium is not complete without the crowd in the stands and the first play. Without its occupants, the building is an “empty stage.”

This notion of the “empty stage” in relation to the occupant of a building (likewise to the spectator of film or theatre, or to the reader of a novel) leads us to the second interpretation of the role of the octagon in the novel, that is, for the purpose of addressing the impact of architectural form on one’s consciousness. In *Le Vice-consul*, the question arises as to whether time, habit, and the release of tears are sufficient “therapy” when one is “transplanted” into a different culture, or whether the environment itself has any impact. This type of question gave rise in the 1970’s to the argument for *architectural determinism*:

Determinism has been defined as the “doctrine that all events are the inevitable result of antecedent conditions and that the human being in acts of apparent choice is the mechanical expression of his heredity and environment” (Durant, 1926, p.399). The terms environmental determinism, physical determinism, and architectural determinism have been used synonymously in architectural literature. In this sense they all refer to the belief that changing the layout of the environment somewhat mechanistically leads to a change in social behavior. (Lang 147)

Another socially inspired theory may be found in the “spatial possibility” of the work of such architects as Herman Hertzberger (for example, his Experimental houses ‘Diagoon’ in Delft, the Netherlands, 1967-1970) where “architecture is used to provide a spatial framework through which users influence a building’s design” (cited in “Herman Hertzberger”). As in the *nouveau-roman* in which the reader becomes an active participant in the creation of the work, so the occupant becomes a participant in

the creation of the building's design. The building, as well as the novel, become "adaptable" to the occupant and reader.

In colonial times, European consuls had difficulty adapting to life in the colonies. Some never adapted, and some went mad, as evidenced in *Le Vice-consul*:

Celle avec laquelle il [le vice-consul] danse, la femme du consul d'Espagne, se croit tenue de parler coûte que coûte au vice-consul de France à Lahore. Elle lui dit qu'elle l'a déjà vu traverser les jardins, on est si peu nombreux qu'on se rencontre, qu'elle est là depuis deux ans et demi et qu'elle va bientôt repartir, que la chaleur décourage, qu'il y en a qui ne s'habituent jamais.

— Il y en a qui ne s'habituent jamais? reprend le vice-consul.

— Elle s'écarte un peu de lui, elle n'ose pas encore le regarder. Elle dira que quelque chose l'a frappé dans la voix. Elle dira: Est-ce cela une voix blanche? On ne sait pas s'il vous questionne ou s'il vous répond. Elle sourit gentiment, lui parle.

— C'est-à-dire... il y en a... rarement remarquez, mais cela arrive... la femme d'un secrétaire, chez nous, au consulat d'Espagne, elle devenait folle, elle croyait qu'elle avait attrapé la lèpre, il a fallu la renvoyer, impossible de lui enlever cette idée de la tête. (112)

Ironically, these same Indo-Chinese regions and former colonies have now become the ideal locations for the latest "holistic" architectural trend: the design of exclusive, exotic "wellness hotels." Unlike the *Prince of Wales*, these hotels are not a weekend "refuge" for foreigners assigned to work abroad, but specific, sought-after destinations. The Amarvilas (2001) in Agra, India; the Rajvilas (1997) in Jaipur, India; the Evason Phuket (2001) in Phuket, Thailand; offer a few examples of over thirty "wellness hotels" built within the past ten years in India, the Far East, Australia, and the South Pacific. Plants indigenous to these exotic regions, such as "eucalyptus géants" (187) seen in the alley leading to Anne-Marie's villa, become ingredients for "therapeutic" soaps and skin purifiers. The formerly colonized regions where foreign

diplomats had feared beggars and lepers now become desirable venues for skin and body “purification.” One wonders how “holistic” such lavish resorts are, and whether they provide for the well-being of the native inhabitants as a source of veritable income and employment, or whether they serve instead to perpetuate the social hierarchy pre-established in the colonial era. In other words, one questions the progress that has been made since Duras’s novel which warns us that “exotic stereotypes protect us from real knowledge and, in fact, confirm our familiar notions of self and world” (McNeece 50). “In *Le Vice-consul*, Duras begins to unravel the material that shrouds the exotic Other and screens the subject from its own mortality” (McNeece 50). Might there still be beggars lingering outside the *grilles* of the “wellness hotels” which “screen” the *unwell* from view? By focusing more closely on the development of Anne-Marie Stretter within the analysis of the octagon, we have only grazed the surface of Duras’ *nouveau roman* which serves to “mettre au monde des interrogations. . .qui ne se connaissent pas encore elle-mêmes” (Robbe-Grillet 13).

Part V: Study

study n. 1. the devotion of time and attention to acquiring knowledge on an academic subject, esp. by means of books. [. . .] ■ activity of this type as pursued by one person [. . .] 2. a detailed investigation and analysis of a subject or situation. [. . .] 3. a room used or designated for reading, writing, or academic work. (*The New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2001)

From the enclave of the villa we venture to the even smaller enclosure of Anne-Marie's study at her Embassy residence. Neither surrounded by guests at a reception or by her "amants" at the island villa, here we find Anne-Marie all alone. Based on Duras's portrayal of her, however, one might argue that she has always been "alone," if not physically then through emotional detachment. In her solitary refuge, however, she does not escape the eye of Charles Rossett, who we surmise must see her through the window of her reading room:

. . .il la voit dans un coin caché de sa résidence, dans un office abandonné, recroquevillée sur elle-même dans une pose extravagante, qui lit. Ce qu'elle lit, non, on ne voit pas. Ces lectures, ces nuits passées dans la villa du delta, la ligne droite se brise, disparaît dans une ombre où se dépense ou s'exprime quelque chose dont le nom ne vient pas à l'esprit. Qui dissimule cette ombre qui accompagne la lumière dans laquelle apparaît toujours Anne-Marie Stretter? (108-109).

In its fluidity, the narration of Charles Rossett's view of Anne-Marie in her study ("office abandonné") blends into an image of her nights spent reading in the villa. A curious combination of abandonment, extravagance, and disappearance interweaves within the imagery of these solitary lectures. Anne-Marie is described as "recroquevillée," — curled up in "une pose extravagante." In the same manner in which the fluid narration of the novel contrasts the rigidity of spatial boundaries (the

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sea, the horizon, the mountains), we find Anne-Marie in a rigid position — “recroquevillée” — which at the same time portrays a fluidity in the “extravagance” of the position. Charles Rossett perhaps catches a glimpse of Anne-Marie in this reading room in her dress “à double fourreau” (92), that is, form-fitting to the contour of her body, which is both rigid in its boniness and flowing in its sensuality: “une maigreur lui est venue qui laisse bien voir la finesse, la longueur de l’ossature” (92). While she is curled up, a straight line, perhaps the “fil droit” (10) of the horizon, disappears in the shadows. The same privacy and sense of mystery exists in the study as with the villa: “Personne ne sait ce qu’elle fait dans la villa des bouches du Gange”(95-96).

The type of reading in which Anne-Marie engages also remains a mystery. What is revealed is one of the gifts of Charles Rossett who provides Anne-Marie with books from Europe. We learn this when Anne-Marie thanks Charles Rossett at the reception: “Je vous remercie pour les colis de livres, vous me les faites porter très vite; si vous voulez des livres, c’est simple, dites-le-moi” (108). Like the ferns in the octagonal ballroom which are transported from France and serve as a reminder of the culture and style “back home,” these books also serve to maintain ties to European culture and literature. Anne-Marie’s attachment to the intellectual sphere of Europe bears a similarity to that of the protagonist in Mauriac’s *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927): “Thérèse dévorait du même appétit les romans de Paul de Kock, les *Causeries du lundi*, *l’Histoire du Consulat*. . .”(43). We see Thérèse as intellectually superior to her countrymen in the hamlet of Argelouse, yearning for the liberty of the Parisian

intellectual sphere as described to her by the young Jean Azévédo. She recalls, “Ses maîtres, ses amis parisiens dont il me rappelait sans cesse les propos ou les livres me défendaient de le considérer ainsi qu’un phénomène: il faisait partie d’une élite nombreuse, ‘ceux qui existent’, disait-il” (81). While Thérèse is physically locked within her own bedroom by her husband, Anne-Marie is a prisoner of her environment in a more figurative sense: “Elle sait qu’ils sont là, tout près, sans doute, les hommes de Calcutta, elle ne bouge pas du tout, si elle le faisait. . .non. . .elle donne le sentiment” (198). Whereas Anne-Marie is an exile in Calcutta, Thérèse feels like an exile in her own home town of Argelouse.

Such a feeling of imprisonment bears witness to Duras’ critique of the “patriarchal culture” (McNeece 50). According to Certeau, “La créativité du lecteur croît à mesure que décroît l’institution qui la contrôlait” (289) and one’s interpretations through reading can become a source of power. These well-educated female protagonists as the “modèle féminin” (Porte 65) still must suffer from a sense of abandonment. While Thérèse’s husband Bernard finally concedes out of necessity in allowing her to move to Paris, her fate is left open to interpretation when she is seen at the end of the novel walking “au hasard” (148). Her state of mind is no less delirious than that of the beggar-woman of *Le Vice-consul*, as mimicked by the atmosphere around Thérèse on her wedding day: “Ils dépassèrent, sur la route jonchée de fleurs d’acacia, des carioles zigzagantes, conduits par des drôles qui avaient bu” (50). This drunkenness serves not as a reflection of a typical jovial state of wedding guests, but of the confused psychological state of the protagonist whose wedding day

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is described as “le jour étouffant des noces” (49). The notion of a “suffocating” marriage is as paradoxical as Duras’ imagery of “curled up extravagance,” and raises a red flag as to the underlying meaning of such seemingly contradictory terms.

Such imagery conveys the notion that neither books nor transplanted ferns can efface the sadness stemming from displacement. The foreigner searches for his or her identity in a zigzagging struggle of emotion where “le nom ne vient pas à l’esprit” (109), a feeling which cannot be described in words. Mechthild Cranston, editor of *In Language and In Love -- Marguerite Duras: The Unspeakable* (1992) devotes an entire book to the notion of the “unspeakable.” In the spirit of the new novel, the details left out become important. Perhaps in the case of Anne-Marie, reading is simply a way to pass the time during long days of unbearable heat of Calcutta, rather than a means of acquiring knowledge. Although occupied with the education of her daughters, reading may be a form of escapism, a transport into another world. Duras illustrates Anne-Marie’s sadness as a form of healing, in this instance within the private space in somber shadows, a place of contemplation and means of coping while devoured within a shadow. Her retreat to “un office abandonné” (108), an abandoned part of her residence, reminds us of the father’s office located in the far north corner of Alexis’ childhood home in Mauritius in J.M.G. Le Clézio’s *Le Chercheur d’or* (1985):

C’est une pièce où nous n’entrons jamais, sauf en cachette, non pas que ce soit expressément défendu, mais il y a dans ce bureau une sorte de secret qui nous intimidait, nous effrayait même un peu. En ce temps-là, le bureau de mon père, c’est une longue chambre étroite, tout à fait au bout de la maison, prise entre le salon et la chambre à coucher de nos parents, une pièce silencieuse,

ouverte au nord, avec un parquet et des murs en bois verni, et meublée seulement d'une grande table à écrire sans tiroirs et d'un fauteuil, et quelques malles en métal contenant les papiers. (61)

While the style of *Le Clézio* is more detailed than Duras, a similarity exists in the notion of the study as a place of privacy, secrecy, and refuge. In *Le Chercheur d'or* the father's office subsequently becomes a place of protection in his absence during a hurricane: "Nous nous réfugions dans le bureau de notre père" (85). After the hurricane, this north wing housing the office is all that remains of the house: "Nous vivons maintenant dans l'aile nord de la maison, dans les seules pièces épargnées par le cyclone" (89). The reading room of Anne-Marie is also a place of protection in a figurative sense in the way that solitude provides her with a sense of protection from the "outward conformity to standards of colonial decorum" (McNeece 59). McNeece offers a more political interpretation of the imagery related to Anne-Marie as a critique of colonial power:

The atmosphere of indolence that surrounds Madame Stretter, instead of signifying ease and luxury of colonial power, suggests oppression and the weight of society's impotence. Her languid silence, traditionally associated with female passivity and helplessness, begins to signify indifference and disdain for the elaborate staging of colonial power. Many of Duras' female characters embody stereotypical feminine traits such as madness, volatility, even promiscuity. As we shall see, asocial traits operate diagnostically to foreground the illness of the culture as a whole. By ascribing to her female characters — and to certain males as well — characteristics perceived as dangerous to the social body, Duras makes them symptoms of a deeper cultural malady for which they merely serve as surrogates. They are, in effect, the creations of a society too ill to recognize that its strategies of survival are slowly depriving it of life. (59)

Other than to raise socio-political questions through the elusive imagery of the novel, why has Duras included this single, specific view of Anne-Marie reading in an

abandoned corner of her residence? Unlike the path, the park, the *grille*, and the octagonal form, the study as an architectural element is perhaps the least prolific of motifs within the novel. However, in a literary sense, its significance is far-reaching and touches on the very premise of our discourse: the interdisciplinary study. “Study” plays on the notion of both the place and the act, as illustrated in its definition shown above. In the same fashion in which the form of the octagon, spreads like the tentacles of the octopus its wide range of interpretations, the study is also multi-faceted. The study returns us to the notion of fluid narration and the relationships between fluid and rigid parts of the novel. The play on words — Anne-Marie’s place of “study” versus “study” in the sense of “la lecture” — creates a *mise en abyme*. A character sitting in a reading room is the novel’s reflection upon itself, raising questions on the power of the written word.

Reflecting upon the style of *Le Vice-consul*, one questions the intentionally skewed frame of view. Like the beggar-woman’s zigzagging path, must all the symbols be so elusive? Must we have a knowledge of the innovations of the *nouveau roman* and Duras’ background to make sense of the text? As with Libeskind’s Berlin Museum, a work of art, whether it be literature or architecture, is by its own nature meaningful, regardless of whether we understand its background:

Yet to understand the building, it is not necessary to retrace the long path from its complex intellectual origins and back to the built result. The building speaks a very clear language, through the physical and material lucidity of its volumes and spatial configurations, and with the stance it takes with respect to its environment. (Schneider 38).

The same could be said for Duras' novel. Although a literary scholar may arrive at a greater number or levels of meaning within a novel than a reader with a less literary background, the fluid nature of this novel, in which details are not explicitly revealed and the reader becomes an active participant in the creation of the work, may allow for the possibility of a deeper and more enduring meaning for a more diverse range of readers.

Conclusion

In the introduction, we forecast the inevitability of architecture and literature achieving their ideals through interdisciplinary symbiosis. Whether to voice a political critique on the faults of Western imperialism or society's ills, or to offer solutions and "healing" to the human condition, both literature and architecture evolve with time, consistent with the philosophy of the *nouveau roman*, "Ce que propose l'art d'aujourd'hui au lecteur, au spectateur, c'est en tout cas une façon de vivre, dans le monde présent, et de participer à la création permanente du monde de demain" (Robbe-Grillet 143). From an architectural perspective, this evolution departs from traditional movements such as neoclassical, postmodern, and deconstruction in favor of a more sustainable architecture, which promotes the well-being of its environment and inhabitants. Such a purpose alone ought to make architecture awe-inspiring and enduring through the ages. However, the goal of architecture, along with that of literature and all the arts, is not immortality, as Robbe-Grillet suggests: "L'écrivain doit accepter avec orgueil de porter sa propre date. Sachant que'il n'y a pas de chef-d'œuvre dans l'éternité, mais seulement des œuvres dans l'histoire; et qu'elles ne se survivent que dans la mesure où elles ont laissé derrière elles le passé, et annonce l'avenir" (10). What "endures" in the great works of history are qualities which touch the human soul in universal proportions.

One of the quests, then, of a work of art — a building, a novel, a symphony — is an integration that encompasses the world of today. Each vision, for example Le

Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture* (1917), questions the status quo and proposes an improved quality of life through the design of the built environment. This thesis focuses on five architectural elements within Duras' novel — path, park, grille, octagon, study — in a deliberate search for parallels within the novel and the built environment, which offer strong design concepts. The sequence, like that of an architectural analysis, is one in which the elements tend to progress from an exterior site-related study (such as “path” and “park”) to an interior focus (an octagonal ballroom, an abandoned office study). Like the *nouveau roman*, the choice of elements in this analysis has not been regulated to certain words in order to fit within an established syntagmatic or paradigmatic framework, but rather, in the interest of the elements' unadorned correlation with both architecture and literature, free to “evolve” within the discourse where the reader participates in further defining or expanding these correlations. Each part begins with an etymological study of each element, drawing from the preceding element and paving the way for the succeeding element. The underlying thread woven into each element of this literary tapestry is the notion of “fluidity,” which enables a flow of thoughtful discourse.

The notion of “path” incorporates both the literary sense of “fluid” narration in Duras's *nouveau roman*, and the architectural sense of “circulation” through a building. The nature of the novel or the architectural design (and their success!), are in direct relation to the initial design purpose or concept. As we have seen, the zigzagging form of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin acts as a symbolic representation of the Jewish dimension of Berlin's history and provides the

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conceptual framework for the design: the origins of the elongated, sharply angled and folded building are themselves manifold and various. Libeskind derived the zigzagging contours in part from imaginary lines on the city map which connect the site with the street addresses of great figures in Berlin Jewish cultural history—Heinrich von Kleist, Heinrich Heine, Mies van der Rohe, Rahel Varnhagen, Walter Benjamin, Arnold Schönberg” (Schneider 36). The “fluid” ideas, in the sense of political or social commentaries behind the conceptual designs, are always subject to the more rigid physical constraints of site and building material representation. Within Libeskind’s museum, the void is the “substance that has no fixed shape” that acts as the symbolic “fluid” element of the journey through the building. Likewise, the fluid “circulation” through Duras’s novel provides an indirect political challenge to the constraints of traditional styles of writing.

The notions of the “park” and “grille” lead us into a social discussion of literature and architecture. We consider the “park” of the French Embassy in Calcutta in *Le Vice-consul*, and the circulation and interaction of the characters therein, in relation to the actual park of the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, revealing the way in which architecture can establish a social hierarchy among nations harmful to the development of multicultural understanding. The relatively unused space of the park in *Le Vice-Consul*, “ce parc qui entoure l’ambassade” (36), acts more as a moat than a gathering place, in the sense of a “defense ditch” (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002) whereby the European colonizing populace can shield itself from the poverty and problems of the colonized society. This gap, the separation between

the colonizer and the colonized, is further evidenced in the novel by the different ways the characters move through the park, and the struggles of the protagonists to “bridge” this gap for their personal reasons.

As mentioned previously with the park, rectilinearity conveys a false impression, an illusion of the “order” maintained by imperialist power. The park is not a place of gathering but rather a symbolic barrier, a landscaped “void” separating cultures as defined by the Other. Just as the park gives a false impression of order where there is disorder and unrest in the minds of the Europeans, so the *grille* serves as a form of denial or mental barricade against the “disease and squalor” of the outside world. As evidenced in the path and the park, the Europeans avoid contact not only with the beggars and lepers but also among themselves (namely avoiding the Vice-consul, whose behavior is incomprehensible to them), and the *grille* reinforces this separation: “Peter Morgan quitte vivement le boulevard, se dissimule derrière la grille du parc, attend” (30).

The design of the built environment might eschew social hierarchy by creating a more “human” order that is accessible to all nationalities and ethnic groups, making us receptive to different cultural expressions. The question of aesthetic order runs parallel to that of political order. We may also ask to what degree “order” needs to be imposed in the colonies and how much can be left “fluid” or, in more political terms, “autonomous.” This leads to the more fundamental and ethical question as to whether the West should be “imposing” its order on others, or offering an example of an alternative order to the pre-existing one. In other words, how can an awareness and

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understanding of diverse cultures be established to create a more harmonious global existence? Whereas the Musée des Colonies building of the 1931 Colonial Exposition had the practically impossible task of “evoking the colonial world in a metropolitan building” (Morton, “National and Colonial,” 364) and merely accomplished maintaining a social hierarchy as discussed earlier, a better approach for the designers might have been to focus more simply on the environmental aspects of the building site. When the built environment is a sustainable architecture in harmony with nature, this nurturing environment can then attempt to create harmony among different races. Without first having respect for nature, how will the built environment foster respect among peoples? This design ethic, however, must coincide with an open-minded attitude on the part of the builders as well.

The “octagon” and the “study” focus more closely on one protagonist — Anne-Marie Stretter — while exploring the contrasting theme of rigid versus fluid. Again, through literary analysis, we also uncover an architectural subtext. The ferns transplanted in the octagonal room of the French Embassy in Calcutta are a reminder of Western culture, just as the books a cultural attaché brings to Anne-Marie maintain European ties. These ferns are again transplanted in Anne-Marie’s island villa. The octagonal form of the ballroom may be coincidental, embodying the “esprit créateur” of the author, yet the architecture chosen in literature cannot merely be reduced to a merely symbolic meaning. From an architectural perspective, at least, its literal expression must unavoidably be addressed. The “study” creates a *mise en abyme*: through our “study” of Anne-Marie’s reading room, we become conscious of our own

“study,” and question the value of the literary analysis itself. This thesis becomes a design “manual” unique in its focus on the literary and architectural repercussions of the notion of “fluidity.” Just as Duras’ *nouveau roman* contains vague descriptions, “fragments de scène” (Robbe-Grillet 124), so the initial stages of an architectural design create loose sketches offering more freedom in creative expression. For example, rather than explain the cultural and political implications of the *grille* outright, Duras weaves into and out of the *grille*, like the path and the park, the story of certain characters and their behaviors. The interwoven story of the beggar-woman, Anne-Marie Stretter, and the Vice-consul involves an individual who trespasses the boundary “beyond” the *grille* to either lose herself (the beggar-woman who seeks “une indication pour me perdre” [9]), to establish an identity in an otherwise meaningless existence (the Vice-consul), or to cope with the harsh realities of one’s role (or culpability) among a colonized people (Anne-Marie Stretter). Duras’s allegorical approach to the study of politics and culture creates personas who transgress not only literary “boundaries” but socio-cultural barriers as well. In a similar way, the architect may “weave” the preliminary sketches into a strong design concept to unify the building, giving it a meaning beneath the surface. As Franco Borsi has suggested,

Utopia is no longer *beyond* mankind (its possibilities and tools) — it is beneath mankind. Apparently this old planet — cramped, irrational, contradictory, over-populated — is not to be entirely scrapped; human nature, although “bad in itself” as Renaissance commentator Francesco Guicciardini would have said, still has a rich store of humanity. (54)

This “rich store of humanity” is evidenced in “the humanities” in which architecture and literature are connected. Incorporating architecture and literature through an interdisciplinary study enriches not only each discipline, but offers an all-encompassing view of life. Voyaging through path, park, *grille*, octagon, and study, we have leapt over Certeau’s “bord de la falaise” where “Au-delà, il y a la mer” (125). We are in a rich sea of humanity sailing toward our next adventure.

the "richness of humanity" is reflected in the "humanity" in which
 techniques and literature are connected. Interdisciplinary and literature
 through an interdisciplinary study connects a study with other all-
 disciplinary study of life. Working through interdisciplinary and study
 can help you to learn to learn in a new way. It is a new way
 of life. We are in a new way of thinking about life in a new way.

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Earth Station 9: Relevance is Everything. 2003. Earthstation9.com website.
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Appendix

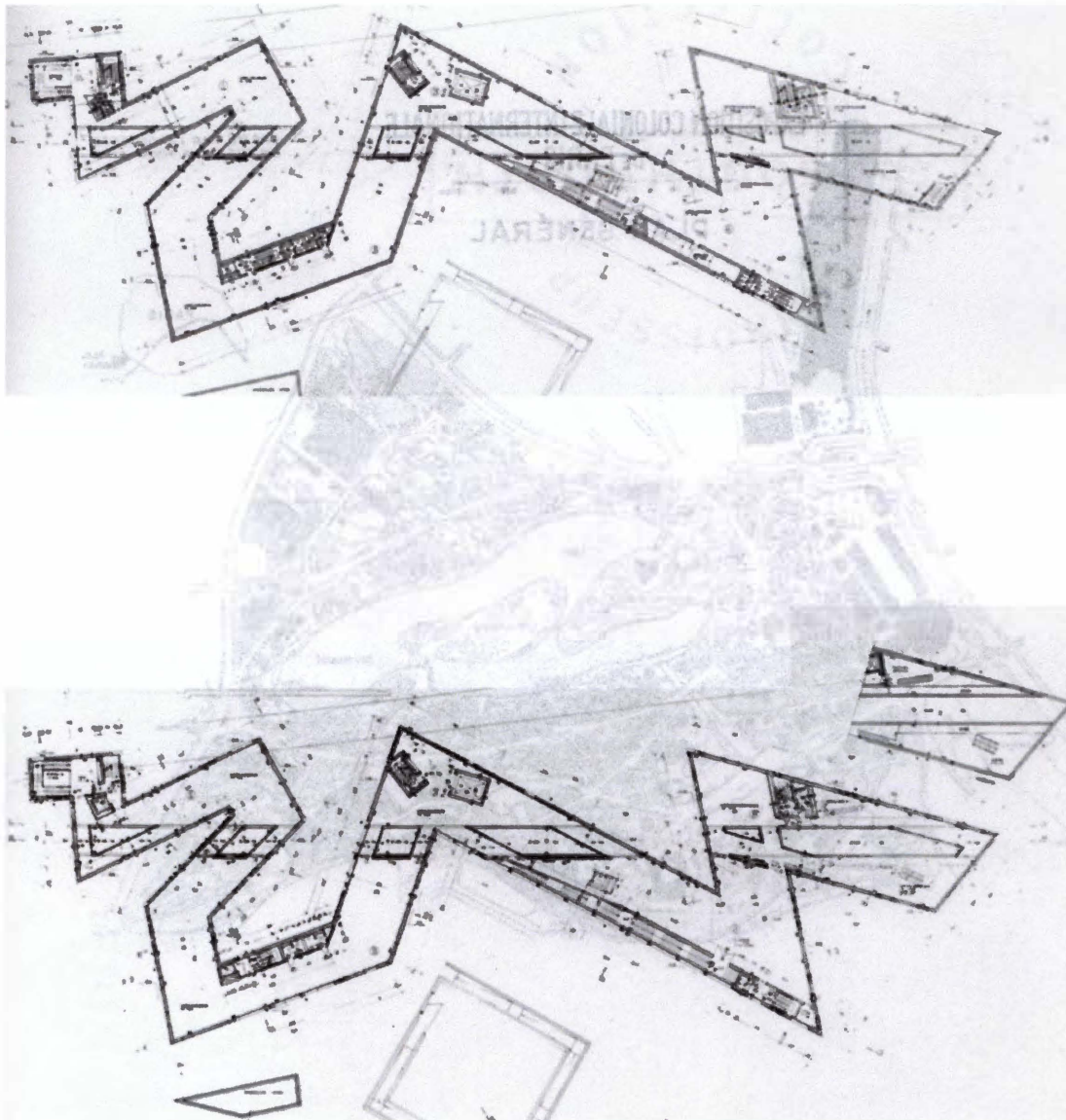


Figure A-1. Jewish Museum, Berlin. First and Second Floor Plans.
Architect: Daniel Libeskind.

Source: Schneider, Bernhard. *Daniel Libeskind: Jewish Museum Berlin: Between the Lines*. New York: Prestel Verlag, 1999, p.21.

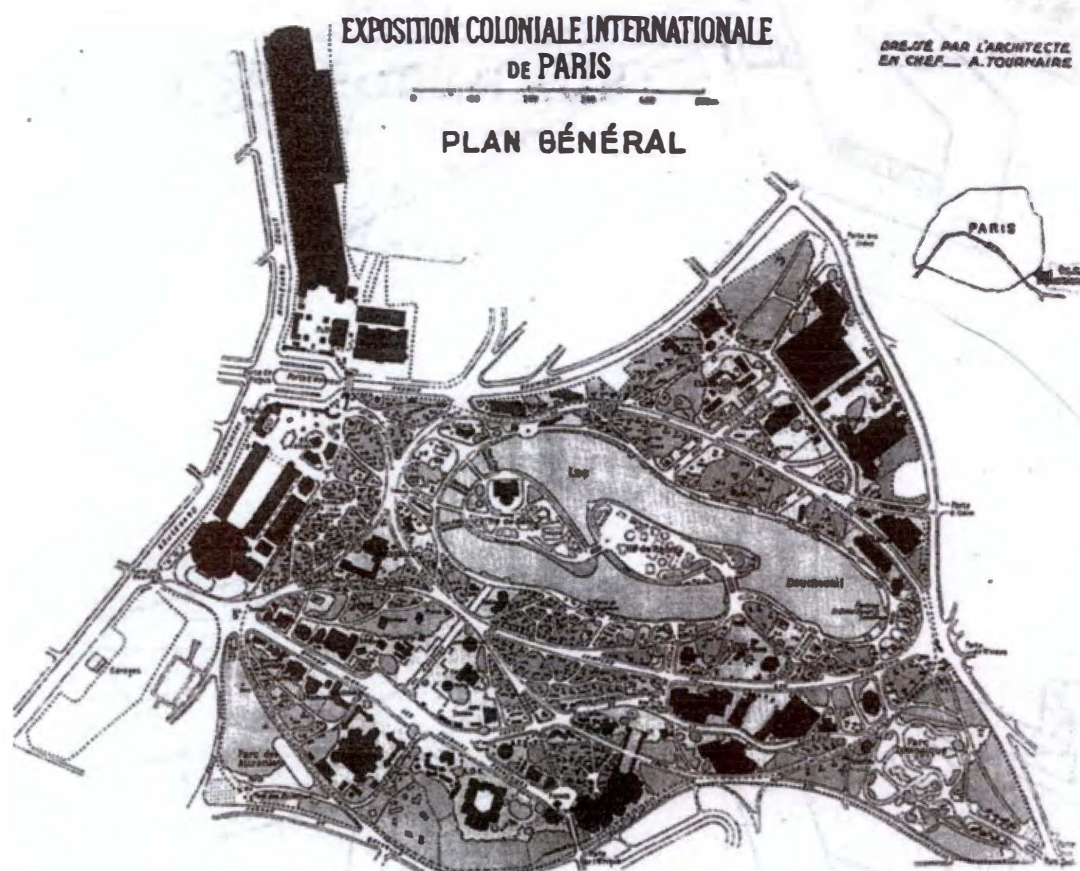


Figure A-2. 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris. Final Site Plan.
Project Architect: Albert Tournaire.

Source: Morton, Pat. "A Study in Hybridity: Madagascar and Morocco at the 1931 Colonial Exposition." *Journal of Architectural Education*. 52/2. November, 1992, p.78.



Figure A-3. Château Rothschild. Featured in the film *India Song* by Marguerite Duras (1973)

Source: Porte, Michelle. *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*. (Interview with Marguerite Duras). Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977, p.76.



Figure A-4. Glendinning Residence, "Casa De Leoni."

Architect: Addison Mizner.

Source: Curl, Donald W. *Florida Architecture of Addison Mizner*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1992, p.89.

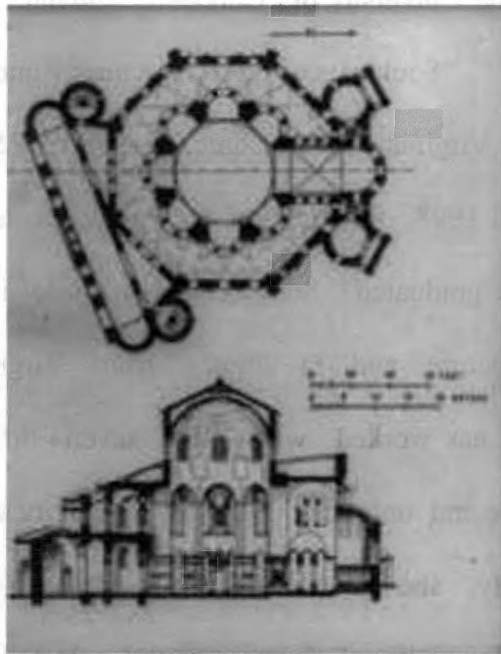


**Figure A-5. The Church of San Vitale, Ravenna. (c.532-48 AD)
Plan and Section.**

Source: "San Vitale, Ravenna (c.532-48 AD): Plan and section." *Byzantine Architecture*.
27 Dec. 2003 <http://intranet.arc.miami.edu/rjohn/ARC%20267/Byzantine_2002.htm>

Vita

Holly Ann MacDonald was born in West Palm Beach, Florida, on December 10, 1974. She has subsequently made over eighteen moves from birth through present, throughout the United States, as well as overseas (five years in Switzerland, one summer in Belgium), including spending a year abroad on an independent study in architecture at the University of Dundee, Scotland. She was the first student to arrange a "Soutenance," (Architecture Honors Thesis Review conducted in French) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech) in April 1998. She pursued an unprecedented cross-disciplinary study through which she graduated Summa Cum Laude in Honors with a double-major in Architecture and in French from Virginia Tech (B Arch, BA French, 1998). She has worked with over seven different architectural firms, gaining an extensive and unique range of responsibility and experience in the profession. Concurrently, she was awarded a French Graduate Teaching Assistantship from the University of Tennessee and selected as the first-choice candidate for the Graduate Assistantship for the University of Tennessee's Summer Study Abroad Program in France. While completing this phase of her postgraduate work, she is working as a freelance architect and preparing for her architecture registration exam to become a licensed architect.