A n important aspect of the argument I have been making in The Sanitary Arts is that, by mid-century, the connection between art and dirt was topographically obvious. For reformers like Edwin Chadwick, art was dirty because its cherished environments were dirty: Venice, that revered paradise of aesthetic culture, was “pestilential and foul” in Chadwick’s assessment, and the art it contained and inspired must necessarily be degraded and contagious. Famous self-help authority Samuel Smiles even counseled his readers to shun aesthetic education in their quest for upward mobility, using a similar sanitary geography to argue that any belief in art as socially and individually improving was demonstrably false. If aesthetic beauty had moral value, Smiles wryly observes in his 1871 Character, “Paris ought to contain a population of the wisest and best human beings,” and Rome would not be so “inexpressibly foul.” For the rising British middle class, Smiles recommends soap and water instead of aesthetic tourism, insisting that “a little common education in cleanliness is much more improving, as well as more wholesome, than any amount of education in art” (Smiles 263). And in the less didactically obvious world of fiction, aesthetic travel is often scorned and even reviled by writers who learned from early sanitarians that the pleasures of the pictur-

---

**CHAPTER 3**

**Victorian Dust Traps**

The sky, with the sun in it, does not usually give the impression of being dimly lighted through a circular hole; but you may observe a very similar effect any day in your coal cellar. The light is not Rembrandtesque, usually, in a clean house; but it is presently obtainable of that quality in a dirty one. . . . [I]t is the aim of the best painters to paint the noblest things they can see by sunlight. It was the aim of Rembrandt to paint the foulest things he could see—by rushlight.

—John Ruskin, “The Cestus of Aglaia” (1865)
esque were often immoral and sometimes deadly. As Flora Potts and Elma Dean finally learn in *Artist and Amateur*, the picturesque pleasures of Italian travel undermine both artistic and bodily health.

Yet mapping the unsanitary status of distant European capitals was not the primary geographical effect of the sanitary idea. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have influentially argued, Victorian reformers like Chadwick and Henry Mayhew were instrumental in the invention of more local geographies, especially the ideological mapping of London for the Victorian middle class. By locating, exploring, and evocatively describing stinking slums, sewers, cesspools and other so-called “fever nests” for the fastidious bourgeois reader, Chadwick, Mayhew and other reformers engineered a city plan that drew imaginary safe, sanitary borders around middle-class shopping districts, neighborhoods, and finally, around the apex of cleanliness, the middle-class home. While critics like Mary Poovey, Nancy Armstrong and Catherine Gallagher have written extensively on the concept of the middle-class home as a self-contained moral universe, it is also the case that in the second half of the nineteenth century, Victorian domestic space was under increased pressure to appear hygienically inviolable, impermeable, and unassailable. For the bourgeois citizen, the domestic sphere was not only a haven in a heartless world: it was, as Stallybrass and White argue, a snug, hermetically sealed zone of middle-class comfort and smug, scopophilic pleasure in the filthiness that resided just around the corner.

Miasmatic theories of bad air, foul smells, and spontaneous generation continued to dominate sanitary discourse in the 1870s and 80s, but as germ theories entered circulation the impenetrable Victorian home became an increasingly anxious fantasy rather than a reliable domestic construct. Sanitary geographies of the city turned inward, eventually producing analogous geographies of the over-decorated, architecturally busy Victorian interior. Even purpose-built environments could contain pockets of potential contamination and illness; in fact, the architectural flourishes and decorative fittings so identified with mid-Victorian style became sites of suspicion and fear as the nineteenth century waned. In these new domestic geographies, I argue, the decorative “dust trap” rivaled the urban fever nest as a primary locus of pollution anxiety, emerging as a contested site of cultural value and meaning in a variety of Victorian texts. Dust has a complicated cultural history, as Kate Flint persuasively demonstrated in her writing about the paradoxical phenomenon of the airborne dust mote. When particles of dirt were illuminated by sunlight or other atmospheric conditions, Victorians could simultaneously experience the transformative beauty and the contaminating agency of dust. Dust specks, as Flint thus explains, were both powerful literary metaphors
and a “meeting point for the intersection of science, vision, and imagination.”

For Victorian home decorators and housewives that meeting point presented a set of practical challenges, as a beautiful home, decorated in the favorite styles of an aesthetically eager middle class, almost always proved to be a sanitary disaster. Even innocuous-sounding instructional manuals like the 1882 “How to Hang Pictures” approach home decoration as an inevitably contradictory and at times irresolvable set of choices for amateur householders, explaining that style and science do not often harmonize in the Victorian home: “If we hang pictures to slope downward, there would be a shelf above for porcelain, terra cotta, and the like, or condemned for being a ‘dust trap’ according as one were bitten with the aesthetic or the sanitary mania.”

Sanitary “maniacs” not only condemned the nooks, crannies, tunnels, dark rooms, narrow hallways, and turrets cherished by Gothic revivalists, they also dismissed the favored features of Aesthetic decoration—dadoes, decorative carving, shelving, cornices, tapestries, curtains and carpets—as “dust traps” or, in other words, “the forcing beds for disease germs.” Inside the dust trap an aesthetic philosophy became a material household canker; a site of sensory and physiological crisis, where the opposing claims of art and hygiene collided with potentially dangerous effects. More genteel addresses eventually ran afoul of sanitary regulators, and the decorative artist and architect joined the painter and fine artist as the suspected enemies of health, hygiene and cleanliness. By century’s end, this chapter concludes, the transition to a sleeker, more seamless Modernism in British art and architecture looked less like a purely aesthetic revolution than the collaborative effects of the Victorian cleanliness campaigns.

I. Sanitation and Decoration

Perhaps because London had few pastoral pleasures to offer, its artists were often accused of finding beauty in the urban features it did have in abundance: soot, smoke, fog, architectural decay, wastewater, mud, and ordinary dirt. “The London atmosphere is never free from moisture or mist,” architect William White mourned in an article called “Undrained London: A Fog Factory” that appeared in an 1882 issue of The Builder; “David Roberts painted it, and I am credibly informed that Mr. Ruskin admires it.” In the same issue of The Builder, Sir Frederick Leighton felt compelled to deny such charges in his own essay, “An Artist’s View of the Smoke Question.” The “smoke pest fastens upon us artists just as it does upon the rest of you,” Leighton insisted, “we wheeze, we cough, we choke, and occasionally we fairly flicker out like
Like Wyke Bayliss and other late-century artists, Leighton was convinced that art could only be produced in clean countries and cities, and that the revival of true art in England would require its own version of sanitary reform. “Are you going to help us against this great enemy?” Bayliss demanded of his audience of sanitary engineers, “Are you going to clarify the air of London, Liverpool, and Manchester, and the other dark places of the Earth? . . . If you will enable is to see London, I promise you that Art shall make it beautiful to look upon.” Indeed, by the last decades of the nineteenth century, the urban sensibility of many Victorian artists had adapted itself to the sanitary aesthetic, and Bayliss joined the likes of Ruskin and William Morris in calling for a transformation of England into an environmental utopia, that aesthetic “City of Hygiea” as it was called by Richardson in 1876.

As we already know, Ruskin’s sanitation of fine art first required a recognition and refusal of the aesthetic values represented by the Renaissance Old Masters. The Old Masters were dangerous and degraded because the pictorial worlds they revered—sunless, filthy, environmentally compromised—threatened to contaminate the aesthetic values of British painting. Certainly the yellow-brown tones of the dirty Old Masters could only have been inspired by the most unsavory, unhealthy shades of local color, and, as we can see in the quotation that serves as the epigraph to this chapter, for Ruskin these colors were clearly indicative of a domestic setting especially reviled by the Victorian middle class: the dirty house. While Ruskin’s “Rembrandtesque” house is a distinctively graphic and specifically middle-class variation on the fever nest, it existed not only as a descriptive metaphor. Mellowed by time, warmed by a fine golden tone, paintings by the “brown” and even “black” Renaissance masters imposed a formidable aesthetic standard on both pictorial art and the still-life of home decoration favored by late-Victorian aestheticism. Although Ruskin is often identified as the founder of the aesthetic movement, aestheticism generally favored art that had the power to make life not more moral but more beautiful, with Walter Pater’s notion of “art for art’s sake” standing as the unofficial motto of Aesthetic practitioners. While Pater never mentions Ruskin in his idiosyncratic, solipsistic aesthetic manifesto, The Renaissance, Ruskin’s distaste for the pagan darkness and moral indifference of the fifteenth century is critiqued and rejected on every page.

As Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades explain, “aestheticism’s interest in artifice, intense experience, the mixing of beauty and strangeness, and the desire to experience life as an art” easily yielded an artistic concept of decadence, “with its fascination with the unnatural, death, decay, the body, and the exotic other.” Not only did Pater’s theories revive aesthetic interest in the Renaissance, they reanimated some of the dirty interests Ruskin had
found so appalling in art criticism written at the end of the eighteenth century, especially the notion that beauty could be found in the contemplation of dirt, disease, or even death. The child Florian in Pater’s famous aesthetic narrative, “The Child in the House,” has the enlightened soul of an epicure, and “does not hate the fog” that nightly rises from the city streets because “it is false to suppose that a child’s sense of beauty is dependent on any choiceness, or special fineness, in the objects which present themselves to it.”

14 Much like the Romantic idea of sublimity, aesthetic and decadent philosophy valued art for its ability to allow the viewer to achieve a personal transcendence untrammeled by moral, social, or even sanitary feelings.

For Ruskin and Morris, art ceased to be beautiful when it ceased to be useful; Pater, on the other hand, had no use for use. Art, for Pater, was “always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material” (The Renaissance 88). Consequently, at its most decadent, the aesthetic design for living was highly ornamental, artificial, and above all Rembrandtesque. Dirty browns, muddy yellows, and livid greens were favorite shades for household decoration, and these unsanitary colors had corresponding human hues; because the most exquisite feelings were usually sensations of sorrow, fatigue, or pain, sickly, sallow complexions were considered more expressive of aesthetic “intensity” than the robust faces of health.

As Mr. Chaloner, the villain of Broughton’s satiric Second Thoughts explains, in barely exaggerated Paterian language, “There is nothing so beautiful as the passionate pulsations of pain!”

15 Obviously Victorian sanitarians had little patience with the decorative choices of the aesthetically inclined. “Most houses in London are dark naturally and helplessly,” Mrs. Florence Caddy explains in her 1881 novel and home design guide Lares and Penates, or The Background of Life. “People generally regret this, but some affect darkness and even increase it to gain ‘tone’ and ‘repose;’ which are often euphemisms for dirt and idleness.”

16 As the narrator of Lares and Penates visits a series of aesthetically noteworthy houses, she creates a sanitary map of London and its suburbs: at Alford House near the South Kensington Museum, she satisfactorily notes bright lights and colors, but in South Hampstead, the “younger rival” of South Kensington, Mrs. Caddy finds red brick houses clustered like “carbuncles,” and in the home of Belinda Brassy, she discovers colors like “a symphony in boiled vegetables,” and “spinach in an advanced state of decomposition” (Caddy 172). Conversely, at the suburban house of sanitary architect and engineer, Mr. Newbroom, the narrator is able to inspect an alternative background for life. “We don’t allow any dust here,” said Mrs. Newbroom, “None of your matted paint and embossed papers—all of them dust-traps” (Caddy 244). But while Mr. New-
broom's house is light, bright, and polished to a high gloss, our reporter admits that something more intangible and less sanitary may be missing:

The beds were curtainless, of course, and the floors, equally of course, were uncarpeted. The partequeterie floors were waxed to icy slipperyness; the very rugs only stood still by being buttoned to the legs of the bed. . . . Life in this house may not be beautiful—it is not, indeed—but it is cleanly. It is scarcely even comfortable; the air is too freely changed, and too much according to rule, not allowing human nature to indulge a weakness, one petted sin. It is no grovelling, dust-coloured life, but one of perpetual stimulant, a mental pepper. (Caddy 254)

In Mr. Newbroom's house, cleanliness has defeated beauty, and constant circulation has banished stillness and repose. “But what would the disciples of the tone school say to you?” our narrator inquires of the architect, “Poets and Artists enjoy the peacefulness of dust.” “Were I an independent man,” Newbroom replies, “I should call them a pack of savages . . . it is modern sanitary science versus dust, or choked knowledge . . . and your art work is most of it a dust-trap” (Caddy 243–46).

The dusty corners of Victorian middle-class houses were thus important nodes of sanitary and aesthetic controversy, simultaneously places of artistic imagination and filthy accumulation. This ideological battle is distinctly visible in Charlotte Mary Yonge's 1873 The Pillars of the House, where an apparently simple argument about wallpaper is transformed by sanitary rhetoric into a controversy about dust traps. Of the orphaned Underwood siblings, two—Cherry and Edgar—are painters, trained by Romantic-era art criticism to appreciate the dark sublimities of Renaissance art. Wilmet, their practical elder sister and housekeeper, has just repapered the parlor in a pattern her brother calls “Philistine”; Edgar deplores the domestic incarceration of sister Cherry “among the eternal abortive efforts of that gilded trellis to close upon those blue dahlias, crimson lilacs, and laburnums growing upwards, tied with huge ragged magenta ribbons.” 17 Edgar, a fledgling Bohemian, and Cherry instead wax rhapsodic about the old wallpaper “which could only be traced by curious researches in dark corners,” and the color which was “soft, deepening off in clouds, and bars, sunsets and stormclouds, to make stories about.” “Where it was most faded and grimy!” Wilmet replies in Ruskinian recognition of aesthetic pretensions, “It is all affectation not to be glad to have clean walls.” “Clean!” cried Edgar. “Defend me from the clean!” 18

By the 1880s, due in part to evolving ideas about germs, it was apparent that sanitation consisted of more than adequate plumbing and good venti-
lation; cleanliness was an aesthetic and architectural decision that had converted the ephemera of taste into the science of health. Hefty instructional manuals appeared throughout the decade, containing design tips that could have been penned by Mr. Newbroom himself. Architect Robert Edis’s contribution to the 1883 volume *Our Homes and How to Make Them Healthy* was called “Internal Decoration,” and it contains the clearest call for a modern collaboration between decoration and sanitation:

> For many years, we have been content to cover the whole floor surface of the rooms with carpets, under which dirt and filth naturally accumulated, to exclude light and air by heavy fluffy curtains, to form resting places for blacks and dust by the use of internal Venetian blinds, and to fill our rooms with lumbering old-fashioned furniture, with flat or sunken tops, which formed dirt and dust traps, rarely cleaned out. We have covered our walls with papers absolutely deleterious to bodily health, and have had but little regard to the mental effect of jarring colours and patterns, or the nervous irritability which is almost unknowingly is excited by the use of badly designed furniture, incongruous and staring decoration, and vulgar anachronisms in household taste, all of which, I believe exercise to an important degree an influence equally damaging to our mental as bad drainage and improper ventilation do to our bodily health.59

According to Edis, old-fashioned colors and contours could produce both physical and mental disease; indeed, anachronism itself was a trap where much filth could fester. Joint Art and Health Exhibitions began to be held all over England, with artists, scientists, and doctors together hosting discussions on “Healthy Furniture and Decoration,” “Dress in Its Relation to Health and Climate,” and “The Hygenic Value of Colour in the Dwelling.” Moreover, architects, engineers, and furniture designers like Phillip Webb, Norman Shaw, and E. W. Godwin joined Edis in an attempt to invent the “Healthy House,” a modern living environment that eliminated architectural nooks, decorative crannies, and the dust-trap anachronism.

Edis’s 1881 lecture, “On Sanitation in Decoration,” followed a William Morris doctrine of utility in furnishing, advising that

> everything in the House should be made useful; all ledges and unnecessary dust spaces should be carefully avoided, and everything so arranged that may be cleaned with as little labour or trouble as possible. All furniture which has superfluous carving or moulding should be avoided, and simplicity and utility should take the place of excessive ornamentation. . . .
There is no reason why we should convert our homes into pest houses by a style of furnishing which renders accumulations of filth not only likely but positively inevitable.\textsuperscript{20}

At the same conference, Dr. Alfred S. Carpenter agreed, adding that “carpets, curtains, and comforts of all kinds retained the debris from our skin and our pulmonary membranes,” and that “the excreta from our sweat glands are allowed to settle on our uncleaned windows, on out of the way cornices, useless ledges, and so-called architectural and upholstering ornaments.”\textsuperscript{21} Such decorative dust traps were perceived as the hiding places of diseases from typhus to measles to scarlet fever; as the editor of Our Homes and How to Make Them Healthy, Shirley Forster Murphy, explained in his introduction, poisonous disease particles could live indefinitely in the beautiful borders of the Victorian home. “It may be enclosed in woolen materials, it may be concealed in adhesive material, on the walls, in the ceilings, on the floors . . . it may be a solid particle, and dried up as mere dust, it retains its poisonous properties.”\textsuperscript{22} Murphy goes on to tell story after story about people who bought new houses in suburbs and soon died from design-related pulmonary disease. This wasn't surprising to architects Percival Gordon Smith and Keith Downes Young, who devoted their own chapter in Murphy’s anthology to the modern practice of wallpapering rooms with papers and pastes “almost entirely composed of vegetable substances . . . and, frequently, not of the purest description” adding that “the readiness with which a mass of half a dozen layers decays and ultimately becomes putrid is easily understood.”\textsuperscript{23}

It may be the case that some of the anxiety about hidden pockets of putrescence in the Victorian home stemmed from a desire to prevent the middle classes from encroaching upon decorative styles previously reserved for the upper classes. Improvements in mechanical reproduction made rich tapestries and flocked wallpapers much more accessible to homeowners on a budget; however, as Rhoda and Agnes Garret advised in their 1877 Suggestions for Home Decoration, even if a middle-class family could afford to purchase such furnishings and fittings, they would not be able to afford their sanitary upkeep. “Now nothing compensates in a house for dirtiness,” the sanitary sisters warned, “and for moderate incomes it is therefore better to have the walls and ceilings treated in such a manner that they may take their turn to be cleaned and done up without any very serious outlay.”\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, it is clear that many Victorian home decoration guides were meant to harness the potentially wayward tastes of untrained middle-class domestic designers, especially in the choice of wallpapers, and that the pedagogical mechanism used to produce aesthetic taste was often sanitation reform. Even if a threat
to the body could not actually be discovered in deleterious dyes or rotting glue, a threat to the mind was always immanent if an individual was forced to perpetually contemplate the horrors of bad design. “When we choose wallpapers,” advised William White, FSA, “those that are the most beautiful in form and colour are to be preferred. We should, however, satisfy ourselves that the patterns on the papers with which our rooms are hung have not a look of motion. Nothing is more distressing than to be in a room where the pattern of the paper seems always to be moving like a drop of dirty water under the microscope.”

Interestingly, germ theory surfaces here in the rhetorical image of water under a microscope, but only long enough to provide a suitably ugly and disturbing simile for unhygienic wallpaper patterns. It is also an image that allows White to introduce that other aspect of health perpetually threatened by dirty art: psychological health. Edis too discouraged the choice of strongly repetitive or monotonous patterns in wallpaper on the grounds that “such patterns would be a source of infinite torture and annoyance in times of sickness and sleeplessness, would materially add to our discomfort and nervous irritability, and after a time would have a nightmare effect upon the brain.”

Badly designed wallpaper causes sensory crisis and literally makes you sick, so the Garret sisters add that a good choice of pattern is especially important for the bedroom of an invalid: “select a paper that has an all-overish pattern that cannot be tortured into geometrical figures by the occupant of the chamber, who, especially in hours of sickness, is well-nigh driven to distraction by counting over and over again the dots and lines with endless repetition before his aching eyes” (Garrett and Garrett 69). With this kind of advice, mental hygiene became a new frontier of cleanliness for aesthetic principles to discipline through design.

II. Architectural Anachronism: The Haunted House

In the context of such testimony, it is impossible to resist revisiting Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1892 “The Yellow Wallpaper” as neither ghost story nor feminist protest, but as a psychological revolt against bad design. Our already depressed American protagonist is initially struck by the “repellent, almost revolting” color of the wallpaper in the upstairs room she is placed for post-partum “rest” by her doctor-husband: she describes “a smouldering, unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.” Our heroine also tells us she knows something “of the principle of design,” and that not only is the
furniture in her room “inharmionious,” but the wallpaper is “committing every artistic sin” by not adhering to “the laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of” (Gilman 9). Gradually the wallpaper begins to torment her already strained nerves. She sees morbid images (broken necks, bulbous, unblinking eyes) in the paper, and eventually fancies the ugly trellis design to be a prison or cage, from which a creeping woman is trying to escape. While this “debased Romanesque” wallpaper has been read as a metaphor for patriarchy and as an icon of psychological entrapment, it is also the case that within the nineteenth-century concept of the healthy home, this wallpaper is a sanitary menace. Although the protagonist is ostensibly assigned this room at the top of the house because it is the most healthy, the sulphurous paper not only stains the clothing of all who go near it, it gives off the “subtlest, most enduring odor” in damp weather, an odor the heroine can only identify as “like the color of the paper! A yellow smell” (Gilman 15). Even though she cannot identify the exact smell given off by the rotting wallpaper, a sanitary investigator of the miasmatic school would be more interested in the fact of the smell itself: “When you perceive a bad smell,” explains Florence Stacpoole in her 1905 tract A Healthy Home and How to Keep It, “something unclean, and perhaps poisonous actually touches you.”

Importantly, the house featured in “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a colonial mansion, an old, hereditary estate “empty for years” that the middle-class Doctor has been able to lease for his wife’s recovery because it is mysteriously cheap. The protagonist wonders briefly if it is haunted at the beginning of her stay, and perhaps the answer to her question from the perspective of sanitary design is yes. The presence of unclean spirits in many fictional Victorian homes may, in fact, have more to do with anxieties about domestic contamination that were unevenly circulating at the time, than with any cultural interest in the supernatural or the occult for its own sake. Sharon Marcus has already noted that the Victorian ideology of the home as an “impenetrable, self-contained structure” was galvanized by public health warnings about overcrowding, and has argued that ghost stories proliferated in the late nineteenth century because anxieties about “mixed” lodging houses and semi-detached villas suggested that even newly built middle-class residences were already too populated with “souls.” Marcus adds, “in many stories, illness and death follow as consequences of seeing a ghost” (Marcus 125), and while this is certainly true, I would argue that overcrowding is just one public health anxiety that might be written into such fatal Victorian ghost stories. As I have already mentioned, one of the most controversial aspects of germ theory was its denial of the miasmatic, or spontaneous generation of disease, the intellec-
tual bedrock of environmental sanitation efforts prior to Pasteur’s discovery of microbes in the 1860s. Progressive scientist John Tyndall explained in his 1883 book *Essays on the Floating Matter in the Air* that previous generations of sanitarians “believed epidemic diseases arose spontaneously in crowded hospitals and ill-smelling drains. According to them, the contagia of epidemic disease are formed *de novo* in a putrescent atmosphere.” Transmissible by air and detectable by smell, disease was believed to be generated *de novo* by organic dirt and decay, and therefore could be banished by the systematic application of principles of hygiene and cleanliness.

As I have discussed, such sanitary optimism was difficult to extinguish. Through the last decades of the nineteenth century, germ theory met with enthusiastic repudiation from anti-contagionist doctors like B. W. Richardson, on the grounds that “no one has ever seen a germ.” Disease was still a matter of matter for Richardson, most particularly that matter out of place still accumulating so fouly inside overlarge middle-class houses with unused rooms and untrodden passageways.

In many private houses, houses even of the well-to-do and wealthy, streams of devitalized air are nursed with the utmost care. There is the lumber-room of the house in which all kinds of incongruous things are hidden away and excluded from light and air. There are dark understairs closets in which cast-off clothes, charged with organic debris of the body, are let rest for days and even weeks together. There are bedrooms overstocked with furniture, the floors covered with heavy carpets in which are collected pound upon pounds of organic dust. There are dressing rooms in which are stowed-away old shoes and well-packed drawers of well-worn clothes. (*Diseases of Modern Life* 211)

While Richardson attempted to keep the medical gaze on diseased houses rather than people, his descriptions of unused clothing and furniture are haunted by human traces, invisible particles of absent breath and departed bodies. Festering in spare rooms of wealthy houses, the detritus of material human life found a spectral and dangerous existence, making it especially interesting that Tyndall also used a definitively gothic discourse to describe the superstitious beliefs of elder sanitarians: prior to Pasteur, he explains, “they believed in the existence of a deleterious medium, rendered epidemic by some occult and mysterious influence which was attributed the cause of disease” (Tyndall 18). Given that miasmatic, *de novo* beliefs about illness were widely referred to as “occult” theories of disease, it is strongly possible that the haunted houses flourishing in mid- to late-Victorian literature borrow
from an already sensationalized discourse of disease to invest older models of
gothic horror with a new sanitary hysteria.

Certainly that hysteria is more than evident in William Bardwell’s 1873
book *What a House Should Be, versus Death in the House*. Here we are warned
that “the pabulum of disease lies festering in unremoved heaps” inside even
the wealthiest, single-family homes, and that the untimely deaths of whole
families in a single residence are less mysterious than most people suppose.32

Look again how the members of families in certain streets gradually disapp-
ear, until a forlorn survivor is left to transport his pining frame to another
quarter, and give room to a fresh family supply, which in turn feeds the
domestic demon—an unhealthy home. If you care to examine the com-
ponent parts of this monster, you will find prominent the fatal soil pipe,
the water closet, the sink and rotting boards, and tainted wall papers, the
dust-bin, filled with decomposing vegetable and animal matters, or defec-
tive and trapped drains; all or any of which send up deadly emanations to
poison the air in the house. (Bardwell 5)

A home may indeed be cursed, Bardwell warns, and as an architect and sani-
tary engineer, he is quick to locate the domestic demon in the “fatal” bowels
of the Victorian house. Nooks and crannies, bins and toilets, wet apertures
and decaying decorations, are deadly from a sanitary rather than superna-
tural perspective, causing a house itself to spring to life as a vengeful monster.
Less impervious to environmental influences than middle-class inhab-
ants assumed, houses themselves respired like fiendish organisms; indeed,
according to fellow architect William White, “almost every dwelling house”
in London was constantly giving off and taking in the city’s poisonous vapors

Given this gothic architectural discourse, it seems likely that the unclean
spirits of many unlucky, abandoned and rotting nineteenth-century haunted
houses in fiction are essentially the foul emanations of the dirty decorating
styles associated with upper-class waste and bourgeois excess: indeed, as one
Captain Arrows declares to the new owners of Myst Court in A. L. O. E.’s
1876 novel *Haunted Rooms*, “It appears to be a law of nature that whatever is
useless becomes actually noxious. . . . That closed chamber, into which the
sun never shines, will tend to make the dwelling less healthy, as well as less
cheerful.”33 But after we learn that the haunted room at Myst Court has been
sealed by codicil ever since old Uncle Myers died of hydrophobia inside of it,
we suspect that organic decomposition is also, somehow, to blame. Sealed-
up rooms and stagnant air become prime sites of *de novo* infection, disease,
hysteria, and madness in nineteenth-century fiction, but in working out the material source of these troubles, the supernatural surfaces repeatedly as a narratological vehicle and red herring. In J. E. Murdock’s 1887 *The Shadow Hunter: The Tragic Story of a Haunted Home*, Miss Tryphena Sabine inherits the ancient family mansion of her former (rejected) suitor, an old eccentric named Mr. Jerrald. From the moment she crosses the threshold, she is seized with “unaccountable” shuddering; the house is in a state of general dilapidation, it smells moldy, and most of the rooms are sealed up. Soon after their arrival, Tryphena and her sister Flo begin hearing dripping noises, and seeing gauzy vapors and spots of blood. Both women get nervous, irritable, and eventually ill, and a doctor is called in for consultation. Dr. Trapmore is not superstitious, and is less interested in the bloody floating head Tryphena claims she sees than in an apparently bricked-up part of the wall, which he advises her to tear down. His advice goes unheeded, Flo and Tryphena become sicker and finally die, and Dr. Trapmore inherits the haunted estate. The first thing he does is tear down that suspicious false wall, and he discovers a sealed-off room at the center of the house from which emanates an odor “peculiarly sickening and foetid.” The aptly named Trapmore discovers that the “place was a charnel house” with two dead bodies festering in the very spot Mr. Jerrald had bludgeoned and decapitated them. At the end of the tale, Trapmore decides that the only way to purify the house is to raze it, and the Doctor accomplishes sanitation and exorcism simultaneously.

Wilkie Collins’s 1878 story “The Haunted Hotel” also features foul smells that emanate from an ancient family mansion, but this haunted house is a damp, moldy Venetian palace with a bloody history of Inquisition-era crimes. The palace is destined to be turned into a lavish hotel by a group of English speculators when Lord Mountbarry, his new wife, the former Countess Narona, and her brother, the Baron Rivar, rent it for several months. Lord Mountbarry dies suddenly while in residence, the Baron and the Countess emigrate to America, and though a series of plot twists the remaining members of the Mountbarry extended family are the first guests in the new hotel. The only two rooms in the hotel that have escaped renovation are the bedchamber where Lord Mountbarry died, and the Baron’s bedroom directly above. These rooms are the most luxurious in the hotel, with original fittings and sumptuous antique furnishings, but each Mountbarry family member who attempts to sleep in the dead man’s room fails to rest comfortably. First Henry Westwick loses both sleep and appetite to the room, and decides that something in the room must be “unhealthy.” Mrs. Norbury, Henry’s sister, falls asleep but has frightful dreams that feature her dead brother: “she saw him starving in a loathsome prison; she saw him pursued by assassins, and
dying under their knives; she saw him drowning in immeasurable depths of
dark water; she saw him in a bed on fire, burning to death in the flames; she
saw him tempted by a shadowy creature to drink, and dying of a poisonous
draught” (Collins, “The Haunted Hotel” 172). Mrs. Norbury moves upstairs to
the former bedroom of Baron Rivar, but is pursued by the same nightmares.
The hotel Manager changes the number on the dead man’s room, but Francis
Westwick, another Mountbarry brother, is driven from it by an offensive odor.
Finally, Agnes, the dead Lord’s jilted lover, wakes in the night to a vision of
a bloody head floating in the air above her bed, and a sickening smell that
penetrates the entire room. Henry Westwick opens an investigation, and dis-
covers that Baron Rivar’s room contains an ornate mantelpiece with a hidden
cavity; the doors of the cavity spring open when the heads of two sculptured
Caryatides are pressed. Inside the cavity is the source of the foul odors: a par-
tially decomposed human head, eventually identified by false teeth as Lord
Mountbarry’s. Like the mansion in The Shadow Hunter, the Palace Hotel is
a charnel house; Henry discovers that the rest of Lord Mountbarry’s body
was mutilated and hastened to decomposition by chemicals in the Baron’s
vaults, and that the unclean spirits that haunt the palace are the putrid gases
of organic decay.

Importantly, the Palace Hotel is haunted by both evil deeds and bad taste:
while the hiding-place in the Room of the Caryatides dates from the bloody
days of the Inquisition in Venice, the mantelpiece itself is a degenerate design
of the eighteenth century “and reveals the corrupt taste of the period in every
part of it” (Collins, “The Haunted Hotel” 208). In late-nineteenth-century lit-
erature, bad designs of previous centuries habitually appear as hiding-places
for a variety of contaminants. Corruption, decay, and disease all fester in the
dust trap anachronism, as Jane Ellen Panton, the well-known purveyor of
healthy domestic decoration agreed. In her 1893 Hints for Young Household-
ers, Panton uses the language of supernatural uncleanness to describe her
memorable visit to the former home of Thomas Carlyle and his wife Jane.

I penetrated with awe into the dirty, dark chamber of horrors which had
been sacred to the master, and I climbed up into the so-called drawing-
room, where even the glass in the windows was obscured to hide the view,
such as it was: where the drab paper and paint gave me the horrors as I
thought of dark November and December afternoons and evenings and
thought how much better they might have been had pink or blue replaced
the drab; or a cheerful yellow brought sunshine into the nest of murky
cobwebs; and when I saw the bedrooms, where the ghastly ghosts of all
their sleepless nights seemed still to linger; and as I contemplated them,
and finally descended into their damp, stone-floored awful kitchen; I quite understood why there were so many domestic catastrophes, and so much ill-health, low-spirits, ill-temper, and dyspepsia, for no one could have possibly been well or happy in a house which was arranged and decorated . . . as that one was.16

Here, Panton clearly links bad health with the familiar accoutrements of gothic anxiety; dirt and darkness, murky cobwebs, and ghastly ghosts all reveal the Carlyles’ mid-Victorian townhouse to be a medieval “chamber of horrors,” replete with the dusty decorative anachronisms that are the obvious cause of so much bad temper and disease.

The other important point Panton makes in *Hints for Young Householders* is that houses absorb the personality, the “individuality,” even the psychology of the people who have lived there. The sanitary inspector can only test the drains and the dustbins; it is not his task to discover the pedigree of the house, or to determine if it has a healthy record. Panton insists that it is crucial for young home seekers to find out “whether nice, really nice, people have lived there before; for only by such findings can one insure peaceful and healthful possession of it . . . what a bad name may be given to any place where horrid people have been living, and where they have stamped forever their individuality upon it” (Panton 8). This kind of warning is especially instructive within novels that are less explicitly sensational or supernatural, but still stimulate gothic anxiety about the inheritance of old houses that are somehow haunted by past occupants and owners. For example, in Thomas Hardy’s 1881 novel *A Laodicean*, Paula Power inherits the ancient De Stancy castle from her father, an enormously influential and wealthy railway engineer, who purchased it from an aristocratic family in economic and moral decline. For our romantic hero, architect George Somerset, Paula represents an exciting new spirit of eclectic modernism coupled with a return to the physical development of the Greeks: she outfits her ancient castle with both a telegraph for rapid communication and a gymnasium for healthful exercise. But Mr. Woodwell, the Baptist minister who keeps trying to baptize Paula according to the deathbed wishes of her father, suspects prolonged residence in the medieval walls of the De Stancys will corrupt the “indomitable energy” of the Power family.37 Woodwell warns Somerset that “The spirit of old papistical times still lingers in the nooks of those silent walls, like a bad odour in a still atmosphere, dulling the iconoclastic emotions of the true Puritan” (Hardy 64). For Woodwell, the entire castle is a dust trap: the ancient Catholic heritage haunts the De Stancy mansion like an unsanitary smell, collecting in the Gothic chinks and gaps and producing spiritual dullness in the reformed Christian inhabitant.
Indeed, thoroughly modern Paula soon begins to believe that “feudalism is the only true romance of life” (Hardy 92). Moreover, when the dispossessed De Stancy heir begins to court her in an attempt to regain lost family land and monies, Paula is struck by his romantic resemblance to a portrait in her picture gallery, and begins to desire a legitimate place for herself upon the venerable yellow walls.

As they moved hither and thither, the various expressions of DeStancy’s face made themselves picturesquely visible in the unsteady shine of the blaze. In a short time he had drawn near to the painting of the ancestor whom he so greatly resembled. When her quick eyes noted the speck on the face, indicative of inherited traits strongly pronounced, a new and romantic feeling that the DeStancys had stretched out a tentacle from their genealogical tree to seize her by the hand and draw her in to their mass took possession of Paula. (Hardy 189)

The possession of Paula by the unclean feudal spirit of the De Stancy legacy draws her away from her suitor-architect, Somerset, who originally had been hired to restore the castle to its original state; eventually, however, Paula realizes that she has been deceived by false romanticism into a regard for William De Stancy, and returns to her slighted lover. But the strong personality of De Stancy castle still presents a significant threat to the possibilities of modernism, and must be burnt to the ground in the final pages of the novel. Somerset comforts Paula with promises of a new, “eclectic” home on the same ground, and the possibility that her infected mind will yet reflect the “modern spirit” in English life: “You, Paula, will be yourself again, and recover, if you have not already, from the warp given to your mind (according to Woodwell) by the medievalism of that place” (Hardy 431).

III. Architectural Exorcism: The Healthy House

The dust of ages was a deadly feature of ancient mansions, haunting, possessing, and infecting the healthy spirit of modern life. Yet the picturesque dust traps so inevitable in old castles had unfortunately been reproduced in the design of relatively new, suburban middle-class houses; indeed, one sanitary complaint that might be legitimately lodged against John Ruskin was that the critic’s impassioned reverence for Gothic architecture had inspired a mid-century revival of dirty medieval eccentricities in new construction. For Ruskin, Gothic architecture was a powerful ecclesiastical testament to medieval faith
and joy in individual labor. For mid-Victorian enthusiasts, on the other hand, the Gothic style was perfectly appropriate for shops, warehouses, individual residences, and even pubs. William Bardwell noted that many “model” cottages built for tenants on large estates reflected the designers’ “admiring of medieval architecture,” and “are irregular in plan and hence irregular in outline, from an idea of being picturesque; and hence all the chimneys are outside, involving loss of heat, and the roof all hips and valleys, and dormer windows requiring constant repair, and exhibiting an utter ignorance of the very first principles of a Healthy House” (Bardwell 8). But of particular concern were the pseudo-Gothic suburban villas that were springing up like our contemporary McMansions on the whims of speculative builders for middle-class families; then, as now, substandard construction materials and shoddy workmanship yielded Romantic decay and picturesque dilapidation much faster than anyone desired. Describing the construction of these suburbs, Robert Edis reported that the plaster was often mixed with trash, road rubble, and a wide variety of accidental impurities, and that the other fittings were similarly contaminated:

The woodwork is of the trashiest and most flimsy character, unseasoned and utterly unfit for its purpose, so that in a year or two all the joints are shrunk, leaving places for the lodgment of dirt and dust; the paint, and the oil with which it is mixed, of the cheapest and nastiest kind; the size used in the distempering of the walls and ceilings decomposed and stinking; the plumbing work of the cheapest possible character. . . . It is not to be wondered that in such houses there is constant sickness, and a general sense of depression fatal to any sound state of bodily or mental health. (“Internal Decoration” 310)

For Edis, such houses were bound to be filthy regardless of housekeeping efforts. At the 1881 Brighton Health Congress, he asked, “How is it possible to be cleanly or tidy in a house in which the walls are breaking out into patches of damp, the woodwork of the floors or doors opening into yawning cracks, resting places for dirt and dust, which no amount of cleaning should get rid of? How can floors be kept clean where the joints and crevices are filled with decomposing filth?” (“On Sanitation in Decoration” 319).

Under such heightened anxiety about dust traps in both ancient and modern Gothic homes, architects Norman Shaw and E. W. Godwin took on the design and creation of Bedford Park in 1875, an entire sanitary suburb constructed in modified Queen Anne style, without basements, carpets or curtains for the hygienically-conscious but aesthetically-minded middle class.
The community was financed by Jonathan T. Carr, who was closely associated with the new Grosvenor Gallery, and motivated by the idea that the domestic environment could provide ordinary, middle-class lives with backgrounds that were both beautiful and cleanly. As sanitary expert Dr. Richardson explained, “Hitherto, it has been generally supposed that perfect sanitary arrangements and substantial construction are inseparable from ugliness. But it is especially claimed for Bedford Park that it is the most conspicuous effort yet made to break the dull dreariness of the ordinary suburban villa.” A variety of tasteful William Morris wallpaper designs were available to be installed with cleanly pastes; matting was used instead of carpet, and decorative tile was the preferred substance for most flooring. When stained glass was used, it was used sparingly, and never when it could impede the emission of light. One of the first advertisements for the suburb pronounced it “The Healthiest Place in the World,” and proudly described the “gravelly soil” and “the most approved Sanitary arrangements” alongside the encouraging statistic that its “Annual death rate is under 6 per Thousand” (Fletcher 178). Despite its prosaic pedigree, painter Edward Abbey reported that walking into this Chiswick area suburb was just “like walking into a water-colour” (Fletcher 171), and writer Moncure Conway insisted in his 1882 Travels in South Kensington, that “the spirit of artistic inspiration had been preserved in this mecca of sanitation, “which had come into existence so swiftly, yet so quietly that the building of it has not scared the nightingale I heard yesterday, nor the sky-larks singing while I write.”

Like Abbey and Conway, other proponents of sanitary architecture insisted that a smoother, shinier, seamless design for living was absolutely compatible with artistic inspiration and production; the narrator of Lares and Penates, for example, finds the ideal design for a fireplace in the Holland Park home of Pre-Raphaelite painter Lord Leighton: “a single slab of massive milk-white marble, one perfectly plain polished smoothness, with nothing to catch the dust, and no detail to worry eyes needing rest from study of form and colour” (Caddy 57). By continuing to link excessive decorative detail to ocular and psychological distress, supporters of the seamless, fully integrated aesthetic of home design not only banished the dust trap, they banished the fear of “permeability,” which Tamar Katz has identified as the defining dilemma of both the Victorian home and the Victorian subject. Moreover, the filthy Romantic concept of “tone” could be permanently divorced from the more desirable domestic and psychological effect of “repose.”

But as The Haunted Hotel, The Shadow Hunter, A Laodicean, and other works imply, environmental cleanliness also required a veritable exorcism of the psychological depth and architectural space inspired by the concept of
sublimity. While praising the cleanliness of Alford House in South Kensington, Caddy's narrator notes its thoughtful architectural design: “there is no loss of space, no bewilderment, as in our pseudo-Jacobean houses, no tracasserie, no labyrinth of shady passages” (Caddy 49). Indeed, E. W. Godwin had associated the revival of past historical periods in architecture with both filth and pre-enlightenment confusion, and had insisted that such architecture made “our modern houses already look weird, as if with forebodings of ghosts and haunted chambers.”41 As Juliet Kinchen argues, “Godwin's modern house was the enemy of secrets and possessions” because its transparency and easy circulation of air and people made gothic anxiety an architectural impossibility.42 Even Harriet Martineau lobbied for the elimination of decorative dust traps from the modern Victorian home on the grounds that hiding spaces concealed both ancient dust and gothic terror: “we in our tight houses, whose walls have no chinks and no cracks, may better hang our apartments with clean and light and wholesome paper, which harbors no vermin, screens no thieves, and scares no fever patient with night visions of perplexity and horror.”43 In the minds of such Victorian sanitarians, the connection between gothic architecture and psychological disease was clear, and so was its remedy: in order to evict the madwoman from the attic, you had to eliminate the attic. Banishing domestic nooks and crannies gave the pestilence of psychological and sensory distress nowhere to fester.

If we can acknowledge the complicated, collaborative work of sanitation reform and aesthetic development over the long nineteenth century, we can begin to understand, with art historians like Elizabeth Prettejohn, how the “rise” of Modernism is a more complex cultural event than early-twentieth-century art critics like Roger Fry and Clive Bell wanted to suggest. Prettejohn explains that Fry, Bell and other early champions of Modernism, deliberately put forth a rupture narrative of aesthetic development that may still obscure “the historical inheritance of Victorian aestheticism in the wish to effect a dramatic shift in taste.”44 I agree with Prettejohn's point that the history of Modernism is much less sudden and static than many critics, well into the late twentieth century, have implied, but I would add that the shift in taste heralded as a revolutionary remaking of visual and intellectual pleasure was also driven by those less exalted sensory imperatives mobilized by mid-Victorian sanitation reform. As we have seen in this chapter, a bad smell in a beautiful home may be the most powerful and effective agent of aesthetic transformation.

When Mr. Newbroom of Caddy’s *Lares and Penates* asks the narrator why she doesn’t “write whitewashing up as a fine art,” he cogently outlines the effects of aesthetic collaboration with sanitation reform: not only is white-
wash the most hygienic varnish for walls and ceilings, “lime has a natural affinity with the acids which cause diseases of body and mind. Let a gouty man try a day’s whitewashing and see if it will not draw the acids out of his joints” (Caddy 242). The sickly human body is as fraught with pockets of contamination and disease as the unsanitary house, but the performance of cleansing the latter will also heal the diseases and weaknesses of the former, becoming, in the process, a revolutionary understanding of “modern” art. As germ theories of disease gradually gained public acceptance in the last years of the century, sanitary scrutiny shifted from the environment to the individual, but beauty was still the stated goal of sanitary attention. When beauty is defined in G. K. Chesterton’s 1908 cult classic The Man who was Thursday, for example, it is a snidely physiological concept, and primarily a synonym for bodily health. In this novel, the poet Gabriel Syme makes his home in Saffron Park, a suburban artistic community modeled on Bedford Park that “never in any definable way produced any art.” As the product of a sanitarian mother and an artist father, Syme now believes “our digestion . . . going sacredly and silently right, is the foundation for all poetry. . . . Yes,” he exclaims feelingly, “the most poetical thing in the world is not being sick” (Chesterton 12). In this sanitized aesthetic philosophy of early Modernist culture, artistic inspiration is founded upon the healthy body rather than the diseased mind, and the best art is measured by its good effect on human health. But while the dark corners of the Rembrandtesque House had been thoroughly exorcised by the new Modern architectural style, John Ruskin might not have been entirely satisfied with the forms of beauty generated by late-Victorian attentiveness to physiology and material health. “These kidneys are delicious,” exclaims an Oscar Wilde–like Mr. Amarynth while feasting on organ meat in R. S. Hichens’s 1894 The Green Carnation. “They are as poetic as one of Turner’s later sunsets, or the curved mouth of the La Giaconda. How Walter Pater would love them.”