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I Want to Live inside This Monster: Haunted Houses and Ecological Design

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In the 2009 Norwegian film Hidden (Skjult), the protagonist Kai returns to the house he grew up in, which is somewhere between psychologically and supernaturally haunted, and gets set to burn it down. Such a move is (in the rules of horror films) unthinkable, as it upsets the stability of the house, and the tenants who stay there. The house must remain and the inhabitants cannot simply leave. Kai only stops because he is interrupted by the police (an officer who is also an old friend) and events soon take a course that pulls him away (but always back to) the domicile of his abusive upbringing.

The haunted house’s popularity is no doubt tied to the reasoning by which a haunted house cannot be easily abandoned or destroyed. This is due to the simple fact that houses are places of rest, safety, and general non-weirdness. The haunted house’s being is a coincidence of opposites—an overly close weirdness resulting from the unfamiliar and the familiar. Uncanniness is equivalent to unhomeishness. This coincidence of opposites is further torqued by the tautological nature of homeness (“this is our home, we belong here” and so forth). This is not to ignore the house as a sign of long-term economic stability (or was at one point) but home (or being home) once you’ve settled in, is the core of one’s quotidian safety and sanity.

But it becomes difficult to articulate what makes a house a home besides being where the heart is. Haunting seems a bit more straightforward as the normal (i.e. non-noticeable) functions of the house are disrupted as some trauma is unresolved and the previous tenants cannot move on, cross over, and so on. Something happened in the place of no-place, of safety, which then disrupted the house’s future function as a house: future tenants have their living—in sutured to a living—with unbeknown to them. Living in (or living in general) is always better than living with, there is something unappealing about with-ness. Withness can be sustained with the familial and the romantic, with other human entities, but we do not care to mix with-ness and objects.

Following this line of thought, it is possible to see how the haunted house and the ecological house are less than alien to one another. Green architecture in house design can come off as a forced with-ness, upsetting the inness or onness humans are accustomed to with inhabiting the earth. Furthermore, the greenness of green housing brings the demands of far wider exteriors to the interior of
the home. Eco-houses uncomfortably bring in the corrosiveness of the outside. The house is weirded by its operational split between being for its inhabitants and being for the outside.

A more in-depth analysis of haunted houses, and their green counterparts, is necessary in order to fully make sense of some kind of ecological hauntings or architectural with-ness.¹

¹. There is also the related but different phenomenon of the automated house and its horrific apparition in Demonseed. In the film a sentient computer wanting to do unrestricted research on man instantiates himself in an automated house and eventually impregnates the ex-wife of its inventor residing there in order to give birth to a new species. A large part of the program’s impetus to do the research is its disgust resulting from humanity’s ecological restlessness.
If hauntings de-familiarize the home or the house, they do this through an imperfect or impartial construction of affect space passing on knowledge of a past wrong or forgotten grief, or injustice. That is, some psychical disturbance infects the house as a passive structure with the house, depending on the time of its haunting, being complicitous to varying degrees. While the ghostly or spiritual can be justified as the persistence of the spiritual or some ghostly substance, it is more often a personality (soul, specter, ghost, and so forth) that refuses to leave—that is as attached as the new tenant (or the investigator) to remaining.

Films and other narratives about haunted houses can simply indicate hauntings within a house, merely the localizing of the seemingly unlocalizable (the spectral) or can mean that a house participates in various degrees in the haunting process. Here we can take a brief look at three films: *Burnt Offerings, The Haunting,* and *The Legend of Hell House.*

For the sake of house–ecology, these films are addressed for their differing level of haunting–participation. In *Burnt Offerings* the entire house seems to be a living entity. In the film, a young family rents the house for a summer with the only stipulation that they must care for an old woman living upstairs named Mrs Abrydice. Strange happenings begin to occur in the house but their causes are never seen and the actions are blamed on various characters. Mrs Abrydice isn't seen until the husband, at the end of the film, attempts to enter the room and sees that his wife is (or has become? Or always was?) her. He then dies (as does their son presumably) and the house which has seemed to be falling apart along with the withering landscape suddenly appears to be in the prime of its existence.

*The Haunting* is a bit more suggestive as things happen without a determined cause, though they could be natural or supernatural: unexplained breezes, hot and cold spots, etc. It could be the nightmare most of us have of ecological living, of having no environmental control of our houses. A fear which is of course unfounded but rooted in living in a green house and living in a faulty, broken-down house. One step towards living outside.

In the *Legend of Hell House,* physical manifestation is unquestionably supernatural, and furthermore the design of the house plays a large role. The house’s purported haunting...
tenant, Emeric Belasco, also known as the roaring giant, attacks, rapes, and possesses the investigative team. The team’s physicist, Lionell Barrett, uses a machine that appears to rid the house of specters, but this is eventually revealed not to be the case as Belasco had built a shielded room for his corpse, preventing the effectiveness of Barrett’s machine.

In each of these cases the construction, or liveliness of the house’s materials is at stake. That is, the architecture plays a larger role than in many other films where the house is simply a place where bad things happened. Or, in other words, we have a strange case of testing the relation of the human and the non-human, and of the living as non-organic—both as a vital energy (whether spiritual or not) and as the liveliness, to follow Jane Bennett for instance, of inorganic matter as such (2010). There is also the difficulty of mapping haunting or the psychological weirdness of the haunted onto a non-psychological manifestation, whether it be ectoplasmic, physical, audio visual, or otherwise.

Construction is of course different than the house’s haunting being linked to its location, with The Shining and Poltergeist being the privileged examples. Both houses are “architectural failures” as in The Shining the hotel is built upon an Indian burial ground whereas in Poltergeist it is built atop a gravesite.

As all these films rely on human characters to demonstrate the ghostly activity, a duality is set where manifestations are explained as one extreme (your mind is playing tricks on you, you’re stressed, the character has some personal flaw which explains their irrational behavior) or the other (it’s leaky pipes, shaky foundations, infestation, and so on). Somewhere between the purely mental and the purely physical, a state of haunting equilibrium is met, where signs of mental uncertainty feed into apparently non-mental phenomena and vice versa in order to reach a perfect state of “unhomeness” or the uncanny.
The initial treatment of the uncanny by Ernst Jentsch focused on the concept as a difficulty in thinking or navigating one’s environment, but he subsequently focused on automata with the privileged example taken from E.T.A. Hoffman’s tale *The Sandman*, which Freud engages at length in his piece on the Uncanny. Freud shifts the focus of the uncanny from automatons to the removal of eyes and the function of repetition in the story, eventually tying it to the concept of doubling as discussed by Otto Rank.

In his short essay titled “The Uncanny” Freud immediately sets up the uncanny as somewhere between affect and aesthetic, a feeling directly tied to not only the arts but the determinability of various forms of media (or maybe more openly expression) as it affects one’s sensibility (Freud 2003, 123). Freud then sets out to produce an exhaustive etymological excavation of *unheimlich* and *heimlich* as well as other terms he sees as related, picking up on one particular detail: that the heimlich can be that which is hidden from strangers in the safeness of the home (2003, 133). While I am not as interested in the Oedipal avenues Freud takes from this, it is worth noting that this association only concretizes the home as an in-ness, or as an entity a world apart from the environment, or from the possibility of an otherness infecting its walls.

Freud does not wish to dwell on the house as an example of the uncanny, despite its admitted potency, but moves on to the more general topic of our relation to death (2003, 148). But what is more interesting for our purposes here is the human sheltering in relation to exteriorized forms of life. While one can say that the house goes back to our primitive desire for shelter, how the house has become lived in (an evolution a long way from the cave as safe place) does not seem adequately approached by our relation to death.

This quick mention of the haunted house by Freud is taken up as the point of departure of the first chapter in Anthony Vidler’s *The Architectural Uncanny*. Vidler ties the uncanny specifically to Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* (to be discussed below). Vidler takes Freud’s uncanny (unheimlich) through different thinkers and into contact with various architectural constructions and critical trajectories. For the task at hand, Vidler’s discussion of Hubert Dreyfus’ translation of unheimlich as “unsettled” is particularly interesting (Vidler 1992, 7–8).
Unsettlement (coupled with unhomliness) makes a particular cause for the meaning of unheimlich in the United States. As Vidler notes, Poe is a central figure in the uncanny, and H.P. Lovecraft (whose texts will also be discussed below) makes a particularly strong case for the importance of Poe, especially as a creator of a particular genre in the States. In his impressive essay on supernatural fiction, Lovecraft notes that the great task of Poe was transplanting the gothic into the colonies—a difficult task given the lack of European history, which is a generational lack as much as it is one of architecture—no crumbling castles and no ghosts of mad kings.

This may in part explain the fascination with borders and the odd treatment of violence in early American literature such as George Lippard’s *The Quaker City*, and Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*. Both these novels are particularly weird in their manifestation of guilt, which is tied to historically inevitable but unnecessary violence. *The Shining*, which has been read by some as a comment about the disappearing (murdering, banishing, forgetting) of Native Americans, participates in this odd manifestation through unreliable narration (the father’s madness, the boy’s visions) particularly evident in the elevator of blood and the mentions of Indian burial grounds, Indian attacks, and white man’s burden.

2. This is not to mention Lacan’s different take on the uncanny, which he ties to anxiety and perception of self.
A simple observation here is that houses are not supposed to live, they are supposed to bear the use of their owners (which, again, seems to suggest the kind of J-Horror film such as *The Grudge* where badness takes root somewhere and refuses to leave until it is understood and, even then, may continue to destroy). In this sense, a green house, a house which lives with its environment thereby forcing its tenants to live with it, is architecturally and anthrocentrically anathema.

In recent years, hauntings have moved from haunting specific locations to haunting people (as is the case in *Paranormal Activity*, and its sequel, as well as in *Insidious*). In the *Paranormal Activity* films, a woman is continuously haunted by a spirit despite those skeptical around her, whereas in *Insidious* a boy and his father’s astral projections go too far out (into a place called the Further) and gain parasitic spirits which then haunt their bodies.

Essentially, houses are supposed to be dead things that we fill with life and objects we’ve attached meaning to, houses are not supposed to live. Our attachment to houses is through the meaning we assign to them in terms of memory, because it is our house, because we belong there.

If there is one particularly memorable visual cue representing this tension it is the bouncing ball appearing in the aforementioned *Hidden*, as well as in *The Changeling*.

Yet, we need houses to become more and more like living things, to be haunted by the outside, the earth and nature beyond that.

In her very informative text *Green Gone Wrong*, Heather Rogers critiques the over-capitalization and industrialization of the green movement in the developed world. One aspect she examines is the feasibility of green, or zero emission housing. She focuses on the Beddington Zero Energy Development (or BedZed) in the London borough of Sutton. The high-density units have individual gardens, insulating vegetation on their roofs, solar panels for electricity and heat as well as their own waste treatment plant (Rogers 2010, 69–70). They use passive heating, living machines to process black water, and have biomass in their power plant (though several of these features have failed to have been properly maintained) (2010, 71). Rogers points out that BedZed is a welcome alternative to the divide between ecological living as being seen as living outside and high-end
apartments which are green only to the extent that they can claim it as a selling point (72). One aspect of BedZed that is particularly appealing is that it is constructed with some thought towards the region it occupies, like Gaviotas but to a lesser extent.

Arcosanti as an unfinished ecological ghost town, Synergia Ranch and many ecovillages do not seem to emphasize design but merely reduced impact; various ways of living off the grid. But this form of ecological separatism is shortsighted as living in cities (or at least compact smaller communities) is not only inevitable but more ecologically—as well as intellectually, technologically, culturally—beneficial (Owen 2010). But in some cases non-radical design makes for far better ecological living. As Rogers points out in the account of her visit to the ecovillage of Vauban, reduction in surface area drastically decreases energy usage, but this of course means pushing design into the unfamiliar and raising the specter of the uncanny, the “unhome” or worse, the non-home (82).
Here, I wish to briefly engage some stories which are not exactly haunted in the spiritual sense but are about structures disrupted by what one would call “unexpected forms of life”: Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, HP Lovecraft’s *The Shunned House*, and Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*.

The House of Usher is a house that appears to have a sentience, a malicious pan-psychist attachment to the twins who occupy it. There is a deep connection between the house and the inhabitants as well as the arrangement of the inorganic and the effect of the inorganic on sensibility.

The old Pyncheon house of Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* is, in a fashion not all too different from the House of Usher, portrayed as an organic entity, as being weathered by old age. Like that in *The Shining*, the house absorbs the injustices and violences committed by its owners and their descendants and the difficulty of leaving trauma behind. What separates Hawthorne’s tale from *The Shining* or Guy de Maupassant’s *The Inn* is that redemption (at least at some level) is possible, as nature itself, in the novel, brings forth flowers as a sign that the past can be forgotten. And, furthermore, as the elm in front of the house seems to do, nature makes the house a part of nature itself.

Finally Lovecraft’s “The Shunned House” works as a kind of mediation between these two houses, though some possibility of saving the house remains at the end as well. The house of Lovecraft’s tale is not haunted in the traditional sense but seemingly ruined by a strange organic presence. Lovecraft writes:

**The fact is, that the house was never regarded by the solid part of the community as in any real sense “haunted.” There were no widespread tales of rattling chains, cold currents of air, extinguished lights, or faces at the window. Extremists sometimes said the house was “unlucky,” but that is as far as even they went (Lovecraft 2008, 293).**

The house is described not as haunted but merely as unlucky due to the fact that so many people had died and there is something oddly peculiar about it.

Towards the end of the story, the protagonists dig in the basement of the house (hoping to find the cause of the house’s oddness) and find a horrific organic object in the basement:
Suddenly my spade struck something softer than earth. I shuddered, and made a motion as if to climb out of the hole, which was now as deep as my neck [...] The surface I uncovered was fishy and glassy—a kind of semi-putrid congealed jelly with suggestions of translucency. I scraped further and saw that it had form (Lovecraft 2008, 312).

To the narrator’s horror, he discovers that the object is an elbow from an ill-begotten creature, which he then buries in a deluge of acid. After “one of the earth’s nethermost terrors” is destroyed, the garden outside the shunned house begins to flourish and the trees bear fruit (313).

The organic nature of Lovecraft’s tale differs from merely the strangeness of inexplicably moving objects found in a classically Gothic tale of haunting such as Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto. In many ways, the difference between “The Shunned House” and Otranto could be seen in the biological in relation to the architectural, or what constitutes but upsets the system (the structure) and the desire for—and creation of—structure itself.

Returning to Vidler’s discussion of architecture, he brings up Kant’s architectonic (which functions as a kind of metaphysical or at least constitutive superstructure of doing philosophy) which, in the closing pages of The Critique of Pure Reason, is bothered by the unclean generative nature of the biological discussing maggots or lowly organisms.

These odd maggots of Kant’s text question whether the systematicity of life is ever in itself, self regulating, or whether it is merely a bound placed externally to try and make sense of it, to call a messy ecology of creatures a body.

Furthermore, the house of Usher is both the structural house and the family as an entity, which also draws up this tension between generation as structure and generation as uncontrolled growth. Vidler points out that E.T.A. Hoffman, the aforementioned inspiration and Freud’s central figure for the uncanny, was an amateur architect and that some of his other tales mock the idea of the architect in nature, or the “natural architect,” the figure who wonders into nature and sets the stones intuitively in the right place (Vidler 1992, 30).
Hanging in the background are the strange generations of thought leading to the uncanny, which Vidler traces back to Schelling’s later writings on mythology—thereby connecting Kant’s project to Schelling’s and to Hegel’s, winding through the psychological and physiological torments of Nietzsche, and ending up on the desk of Freud.

The generational house is a relic, a thing of the past. Who lived there before, what happened there is a horror, as the memories of unknown crimes, abuses and murders paint the walls. Blood comes down. The water drips and becomes non-water. We move elsewhere, build a new place. Spread out, go sideways, go off the grid not just in the sense of power but in terms of social work. Houses are built cheaply and quickly and are packed together, but packed together sideways with pools and lawns regardless of climate.

Living in generations means living close and it means living in a thing that can be overcrowded, and teeming in life in a way that has been often thought of as infestation or curse.
Economically, the house appears a less and less attainable goal, something integral to the American dream (and to economic “dreams” elsewhere, at least in the west or maybe anywhere global capitalism has sunk the teeth barely protruding from its fat lips) where they are being taken by banks from those who can no longer afford them.

Eco houses, or green living, invoke an odd collision of restricted and open economies in Bataille’s sense. Affordability seems to disavow any possibility of opening the house to the energetic outside, passive heat of the sun, or any odd form of life. It is better to have a house that cannot be afforded and cannot afford the outside but is slowly ruined by it as we reinvest energy into keeping the house’s aesthetic up to date and clean looking.

The technology exists to let in the outside and it is becoming less and less expensive. It is the status of the desire that is questionable.

We have to foster a desire to live inside which is actually a living with, we have to declare, not necessarily emphatically, that “I want to live inside this monster.” Or to put things a bit strangely, it may be required to “undomesticate” the house.

To return to the film Hidden, we cannot burn down the haunted house—not merely because of our affective or psychical investment in it, but because the house is an ecology, though it is high time to accept the pesky materiality of this ecology—that it is not merely an ecology of memory. And, for design, it is imperative to vivisect the aesthetic, to seriously question how much the aesthetic should (if ever) override the force of the materiality of the world.

One could imagine a weird ecological tale where an ambitious architect or designer buys an old house and begins to gut the inside, but as they start to install their new technologies or their pleasing appliances, a form of fungus or moss grows over: but the house functions, it functions better than it would have without it. In the end, can the architect be incensed when it comes down to an aesthetic difference, and not one of endurance, function, or rationality?

The purported hauntedness of our houses in relation to the demands for ecology adds an extra acidity to the following aphorism by Nietzsche:

The same old story! When one has finished building one’s house, one suddenly realizes that in the process one has
learned something that one really needed to know in the worst way—before one began (Nietzsche 2000, 413).

There are ecological ghosts attempting to tell us how to avoid the eternally distasteful too late (ibid.).

Works Cited:


