

SPECTERS AND SPECTACLE

Performing the Haunted House of Woodneuk/Tyersall

by

Lim Xin Yi Dawn

HT095854H

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Abstract

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This dissertation seeks to examine the idea of *'haunted-ness'* as a performative, rather than an essentialistic characteristic of a *'haunted house'*. Through the domestic sphere of the Woodneuk/Tyersall house, which is rumoured to be haunted, this paper hopes to challenge the assumption of the haunted house as a singular and permanent physical entity.

Empirically, the validity of ghosts and the paranormal simply cannot be justified. Therefore, my aim is not to determine if the house is truly haunted, but rather, to investigate the spatial and architectural; formal and tectonic; performative and eventful dimensions of the haunted house. Through these dimensions, I hope to understand how *'haunted-ness'* is performed through spatially structured events that shape our perception of haunted spaces; and how the *'domestic uncanny'* surfaces from the performatives of these spaces.

The notion of the haunted house tends to be loosely objectified and generally associated with the *'ghostly'*. Thus, my questions are: Does the ghostly need to be fundamentally grounded in space – a physical setting or particular spatial environment – before it is able to manifest itself? Between the existence of a commonplace house and the point at which it becomes haunted, how does this object of familiarity become so feared? Freud's theory of the uncanny is able to explain how the *'heimlich'* (homely) becomes to mean *'unheimlich'* (un-homely), clueing us in on how the safe and the familiar and can also suddenly become unsafe and unfamiliar. But more importantly, it is crucial to know when and how exactly does the singular entity of *a house* begin to take on the identity of *a haunted house*.

Through three related themes of performance structured within the Woodneuk/Tyersall -- the pre-performed configuration of the homely; the spatial performance shaped by the play between memory and experience, and the homely objects that enable the acknowledgement of ghostly existence -- I propose the idea of *'haunting' as a performative action and the 'haunted house' as a performance space*. Setting the house like a stage, I seek to observe how the architecture of the *'haunted house'* *performs* to magnify haunting and the existence of specters.

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CHAPTER ONE

PRELUDE



[1] Prison Cell, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum

(source: Lee Junxian, July 2006)

To me, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum was disturbing because suddenly, torture and extermination in a secret prison is associated with the familiar and daily entity of a school -- a place related to happy children, laughter and new hopes.

CHAPTER ONE: *PRELUDE*

Learning to Fear Ghosts

My mother told me that growing up in a village, she was never afraid of ghosts. She walked alone in darkness to get to the lavatory in the middle of the night; she walked alongside shadowy lalang fields on unlit streets; she slept soundly even as frightened stray dogs cry in the night (the adults used to say that dogs cry when they see spirits). But it was being alone in the hotel rooms of Japan that made her believe that ghosts do attach themselves to people and places. *Do not place your shoes neatly side by side, these 'things' will attempt to mess them up*, she was told. One morning, she woke up to find her shoes flipped and lying in opposite ends of the room. *Coincidence*, she thought, *I must have been too tired to arrange my shoes last night*. Gradually, she learnt to anticipate un-easefully the sounds of running taps and foreign tongues, and grew suspicious of images of angry *kabuki* warriors on the walls. She began to associate these images, sounds and feelings with hotel rooms in general; eventually, the idea of being alone in them simply became unappealing to her. *Despite all these strange experiences, I have never seen any real apparition*, she told me. *But hotel rooms still make my hair stand anyway*.

Blood and Classrooms

I was walking alone around the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh because I had lost my travelling companions. Strangely, I spent two hours inside the museum without encountering a single human soul. So alone, I peered into the dim classrooms that housed prisoner cells and looked at photographs of tortured prisoners. All that I had read about the

Khmer Rouge and the genocides fed me the narrative I needed to accompany the images on the walls. But it was not just the accounts and images that disturbed – for the physical setting of the prison museum also fueled my over-active imagination. The prison cells, the bed frames and torture equipments were left preserved as they were when the Khmer Rouge last left these spaces and objects in 1979.

What left one most unsettled though, was the fact that the S21 was never designed to be a prison – it was converted from an existing school complex of Tuol Svay Prey High School. Without the barbed wires and exhibits, the closed concrete stairways, long classroom corridors and the open courtyard looked nondescript. But upon careful observation, the everyday functions of an ordinary school had been converted to the demands of a torture lair – the unassuming holes at the end of the walls were created so that blood could be easily drained off the stairwells; unfamiliar components were attached to original playground structures, once used to crucify the prisoners; hot metal torture equipments laid indoors alongside classroom chalkboards.

The Window is more 'Ghostly' than Ghosts

Sometimes, we set out to believe that all that should be imaginary will always be imaginary and what exists physically in space cannot be anything else but. I am confident that my house is not haunted, but working through supernatural accounts and romantically haunting photos of abandoned buildings in the dead of the night found me developing the paranoid need to shut my bedroom door and draw my curtains

It was the 'ghosts' that we always thought we are afraid of. But might it not be that doors and windows that have a bigger ability to frighten than the apparitions themselves supposedly

invite? I am suspicious of my walls and ceiling because I know they are responsible for delivering the persistent knocking sounds into my bedroom at night.

To my mother, the singular entity of a hotel room is uncomfortable to contemplate because they speak of possible apparitions that relate to the common functions in most hotel rooms.

To me, the Genocide Museum was disturbing because suddenly, torture and extermination in a secret prison is associated with the familiar and daily entity of a school -- a place related to happy children, laughter and new hopes. My house has always been the safest and most familiar place, but I can't help imagine it otherwise, alongside the accounts of unfortunate residents of haunted HDB flats.

The Haunted House

When we were children, we drew our houses in tangible geometries – a triangular roof sitting atop a rectangular block with a rectangular door and square windows. A house is therefore, simply a house. How do you convince someone that a house is not really what we know of our houses? How do we even tell if a house is haunted or not, if gut feelings do not suffice? Can one simply slap on the label “haunted house” onto any abandoned house?

By observing how spatially structured events shape the way we perceive a haunted space, this dissertation hopes to identify the performative dimensions of the haunted house and discover what the singular entity of the “haunted house” represents.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HAUNTED HOUSE AND THE DOMESTIC UNCANNY



[2] *Haunted House on Guernsey*

Victor Hugo, June 1866

*When we were children, we drew our houses in tangible geometries --
a triangular roof sitting atop a rectangular block with a rectangular
door and square windows.*

A house is therefore, simply a house.

Image source: Anthony Vidler, 'Unhomely Houses', in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), p.16.

CHAPTER TWO: THE HAUNTED HOUSE AND THE DOMESTIC UNCANNY

Ghost/ n [C]: The spirit of a dead person believed by some to visit the living and sometimes represented as a pale, almost transparent picture of the dead person.¹

Definitions of the Ghostly and the Invisible

When I was looking up the definition of “ghost”, the meanings that I managed to obtain were not the least bit surprising nor were they groundbreaking clues to what seemed like a difficult subject or object to acknowledge. I might even feel skeptical about how serious a ghost might have been interpreted – “pale, almost transparent picture of the dead person” – it was how “ghost” has been loosely described, carelessly objectified and generally assumed which invited my inner sneer.

The true existence of “ghosts” is still questionable. If one searches for “ghost” on the internet, he will mostly likely chance upon a doctored image of a translucent figure titled ‘Railroad Crossing Ghost’² – hardly convincing an image but the message is implicit. A ghost is unfamiliar for those who have not seen one, and therefore do not know it. The interesting thing is, they are equally familiar to us by virtue that we can immediately understand what it means for the ghostly to be described as “pale, almost transparent”.

Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization*, defined madness as a “phenomenon of civilization” – something “constructed” by society. Like all things unknown or unexplainable to

¹ Definition from the Cambridge International Dictionary of English.

² An image of ‘Railroad Crossing Ghost’ can be found here:

<http://paranormal.about.com/od/ghostphotos/ig/Best-Ghost-Photos/Railroad-Crossing-Ghost.-050.htm> (accessed 10 June 2009).

the world, modern men attempted to “objectify” the concept of madness, turning it into a “mode of scientific enquiry”³. Eventually, ‘sanity’ and ‘insanity’ simply became thrown off as ‘reason’ and ‘unreason’. In a similar light, the paranormal and the supernatural are unexplainable and unjustifiable by science. But humans insist on defining and reasoning with this intangibility, so much so that related visions and apparition simply become associated with something of hysteria. To non-believers and scientists, such sightings and occurrences are mere hallucination occurring within the mind of those who claim to have sighted ghosts or specters.

With that said, this dissertation does not aim to define what is ghostly or to determine the validity of paranormal existence. What it does attempt to achieve is to recognize that the invisible, the invalid and the ghosts of things do not exist merely as apparitions and to acknowledge their physical non-existence as an existence on its own, for they may bring to light other crucial issues worth studying. In the case of the haunted house – the issue is this: what makes us afraid of something we cannot see? In other words, does the “ghostly” need to be manifested in *space* for it to exist?

If we think of ‘ghosts’ as forgotten existences, memories, passing rumors and the imagined; and the ‘house’ as pure form, space and light, the ‘ghost’ and the ‘house’ do not create haunting individually on their own. However, when the two entities begin to feed off each other, they provide a certain atmosphere and theatricality, which we may associate with the phenomenon of the ‘ghost-house’.

³ Michel Foucault, ‘Introduction’, in *History of Madness* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.3.

The Haunted House on Guernsey: Architecture as Specter

While he was on exile on the island of Guernsey, Victor Hugo was fascinated with an abandoned house in a village, located in the English Channel just off the coast of Normandy.⁴ When he wrote “Toilers of the Sea”, the ‘haunted’ house that the protagonist, Gilliatt, resided in was inspired by Hugo’s Guernsey house. In the novel, the house took the name of Bu de la Rue and looked like many of the “ghostly houses” commonly seen in the Channel Islands. To the inhabitants, these houses were peculiar. Hugo’s “haunted houses” in the narrative was described as such:

In the islands of Jersey and Guernsey... you will come upon a house the entrance to which is completely barricaded. Holly bushes obstruct the doorway, hideous boards, with nails, conceal the windows below; while the casements of the upper stories are neither closed nor open, for all the window-frames are barred, but the glass is broken... Sometimes a broken jug may be noticed on a shelf. Such houses are considered to be haunted.⁵

Anthony Vidler, in *The Architecture of the Uncanny*, gives a description of the sketch Hugo had personally made of the Guernsey house:

Drawn in brown ink and wash, this small, two-story stone cottage seemed to have little out of the ordinary about it. With its four windows, walled up to the ground floor, its single door, pitched roof, and chimney, it seems no

⁴ Information obtained from ‘Guernsey’, *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernsey> (accessed 4 June 2009).

⁵ Victor Hugo, ‘History of Bad Reputation’, in *Toilers of the Sea*, Book I, Chapter I (Oxford University, 1866) An online copy can be found here: <http://books.rakeshv.org/html/toilers/toilersch2.html> (accessed 4 June 2009).

more than the archetypal 'child's house', a commonplace compilation of the fundamental elements of the dwelling.⁶

First of all, from Hugo's description of the island's abandoned houses, this specific imagery of a haunted house was a universal image of haunted residences which one would have encountered on the covers of horror books or in the movies. The Bu de la Rue, was just one of the unoccupied houses that the neighbours passed by day in and day out. However, because it was left unoccupied for such a long time, one no longer questioned the reason it was unoccupied in the first place. Perhaps, there was an urban legend or two that was circulating around the neighbourhood, but soon enough, such groundless suspicions would have transcended into a general belief of residing evil. This house was not haunted "by some imaginary family spirit, but by virtue of the superstitions of the islanders."⁷

When Vidler had to explain what exactly could have been so peculiar about a house that looked "no more than an archetypal child's house", so much so that it earned the reputation of being haunted, he attributed it to the "silence and emptiness" which gave it the "aura of a tomb".⁸ By stark contrast, what was most singular about the house was also the fact that "the deserted site, almost entirely surrounded by the sea, was perhaps too beautiful."⁹ In the simplicity of its nondescript stonework exterior, it could suggest infinite possibilities and mysteries. The island's inhabitants did not fear it because it was a prison, a madhouse or a physically horrible place altogether – it was feared because it was a house, like the ones that they all lived in, or as Vidler recounts, "disquieting an abode."¹⁰

⁶ Anthony Vidler, 'Unhomely Houses', in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), p.19.

⁷ Vidler, 'Unhomely Houses', p.19.

⁸ Vidler, 'Unhomely Houses', p.20.

⁹ Vidler, 'Unhomely Houses', p.19.

¹⁰ Vidler, 'Unhomely Houses', p.20.

Uncanny and the Abject: Fearing the Familiar

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection.

-- Julia Kristeva¹¹

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the “uncanny” can be defined as:

1. Seeming to have a supernatural character or origin : eerie; mysterious
2. Being beyond what is normal or expected : suggesting superhuman or supernatural powers

However, the Freudian theory of the uncanny suggests more than a character, an origin or simply the superhuman or the supernatural. Freud’s uncanny has to do with the idea of a strangely familiar *event* or “an instance where something can be familiar yet foreign at the same time, resulting in a feeling of it being uncomfortably strange.”¹²

In relation to this, Jacques Lacan’s theory tells us how the world around us becomes ‘familiarized’ when we are delivered from the mother’s womb into the world. He explains that a child is only able to deal with others once he enters into “language”, that is, when he learns the way of expression. Yet, to express is to also accept the rules and dictates imposed upon him by the society. These rules constitute the Symbolic order, which according to Lacan, always works in tension with the Imaginary order and the Real. To explain this relationship as concisely as possible, the Imaginary Order is like a reflected image of the Ego of a person. It is

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, ‘Approaching Abjection’, in *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.4

¹² Definition obtained from ‘Uncanny’, *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Uncanny (accessed 10 June 2009).

the mode which one depends on when he needs to express himself. It involves images and imagination to “deceive” perceptions of other people. This Ego is structured by the Symbolic Order, which serves as a “signifier” that is governed by certain laws of understanding the physical world. Finally, the Real is understood to be the oppositional of the Imaginary, but it also lies outside the Symbolic, because it does not fall into “language”. It resists symbols and is what it just is: the Real is “the impossible”.¹³

To extrapolate this concept, a haunted house lies within the realm of this Symbolic Order. There are things that we fear in some spaces which we can't quite put a finger to. A haunted house is one of such spaces and its 'haunted' identity becomes the easiest way for one to express why a space is so fearful. Such familiar recognition of feared spaces sets itself to fall into the aforementioned “language”. For one to express fear, he may say, “There is something wrong with this house; I think it is haunted.” This expression belongs to the Imaginary Order and is structured by our understanding of “haunted-ness”. The Real then, constitutes a completely ungraspable realm of alienation and anxiety that arises out of the space. It can only be “deceptively” expressed as “haunted”.

Expanding on Lacan, Kristeva's theory of the abject explains why standing in front of, and looking at a corpse (something that is cast out of the Symbolic order but not recognizable as the Real, which Kristeva calls the 'Abject') results in an adverse reaction.¹⁴ This is because the corpse as a sign of insistent materiality threatens our pre-conceived notion and knowledge of

¹³ The Real has no structure or language which one can depend on for expression. Only the fetus in the womb, untainted by language, is conscious of the Real. Yet, the paradox of this is that the fetus does not have the ability to express the Real anymore and by the time that it gains the skill or knowledge to do so. The Real would have been submerged by language. That is why Lacan argues that the Symbolic is always in tension with the Imaginary and the Real. For further reading, see: Sean Homer, 'The Real', in *Jacques Lacan (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp.81-83.*

¹⁴ Anne-Marie Smith, 'The Semiotic and the Symbolic', in *Julia Kristeva: Speaking the Unspeakable* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p.29.

death.¹⁵ In ghostly sightings, specters are also a kind of 'materiality' by virtue that they can be perceived. Yet when perceived, they resist the definition of 'materiality' which we subscribe to. As Freud would explain of "the uncanny":

... (We) once believed... that they actually happened. Nowadays, we no longer believe in them... but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something... confirms the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny... 'So the dead do live on and appear...!'¹⁶

He goes on to explain that this particular experience of seeing the living-dead is scary because "there are doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in-animate".¹⁷ To understand the origins of uncanny, he further dissected the German words '*heimlich*' and '*un-heimlich*', for which '*unheimlich*' is the same semantic equivalent to the English word 'uncanny', and logically, an antonym of '*heimlich*'. However, amongst the various definition of '*heimlich*', which was used firstly to refer to something belonging to the house, familiar and homely, one of its modern day meanings eventually became merged with its formal antonym, *unheimlich*:

This reminds us that this word '*heimlich*' is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas... the one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden.¹⁸

¹⁵ Karen Piper, 'The Signifying Corpse: Re-reading Kristeva on Marguerite Duras', in *The Kristeva Critical Reader*, ed. John Lechte and Mary Zournazi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), p.102.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 17., trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), p.247-248.

¹⁷ Freud, 'The Uncanny', p.226.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p.132.

As the idea of homely becomes increasingly ambivalent, 'unheimlich' and 'uncanny' came to mean "everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open."¹⁹ Freud concludes that the uncanny is in some ways a species of the familiar.²⁰ This can also explain how the eeriness of haunted hotel rooms, disguised schools, and the house on Guernsey stem very much from our long-standing assumptions that houses, hotel rooms and schools were supposed to be clean and secure abodes. And it is precisely because they are safe and familiar that they can also suddenly become unsafe and unfamiliar.

Haunted House as Spectacle: Architecture as Event

With the loss of their great visionary, the Imaginers debated over the design concepts of the haunted mansion, such as whether the haunted mansion experience should be scary, or funny.

-- Artist, Ray Keim, on Disneyland after Walt Disney's death²¹

A "haunted house" is never designed or built with the intention of inviting haunting. From this perspective, its "haunted-ness" though perhaps an added value, is decidedly earned through specific characteristics of its spaces and the events surrounding it, and in this case, secondary to the intended built form. Homely or un-homely, safe or threatening, what kinds of spaces and events become reference points for such feelings? It is difficult to say which was here first – the ghostly or the house, and neither is there much value in trying to judge. But before people believe there are ghosts and haunted houses, there are definitely stories and signs. It

¹⁹ Freud, 'The Uncanny', p.132.

²⁰ Freud, 'The Uncanny', p.134.

²¹ 'Mansion's History', from the website *Haunted Dimensions: A 3D tribute to Disney's Haunted Mansion*, <http://haunteddimensions.raykeim.com/index335.html> (accessed 4 June 2009).

may be an abandoned black magic site, a carcass of a tortured cat, or crude graffiti. These signs lie on the bare walls and floors that frame an abandoned space, a crime scene -- the home of specters.

In the article, *As the Wind Blows and the Dew Came Down*, Carole Faucher described haunted sites as “performance spaces”, where “one can go on specific days and at specific times with an eagerness to experience some of the emotional remains of historical drama”. She wrote this in reference to the observation that “the most popular haunting locations in Singapore are the ones that commonly bore witness to a dramatic and/or sudden death that can be associated with collective trauma” – like the massacre sites of the Japanese Occupation.²²

Therefore, following an earlier question: *Does the ghostly need to be manifested in space for it to exist?* If the haunted house, as a haunted site, can be regarded as what Faucher calls a *performance space*, how exactly does the space or the architecture of a house “perform” to magnify its haunted-ness? If deemed as a site of performance, how are the performatives of haunting limited by the site’s environment?

In America, haunted houses are important entities to Halloween. People create haunted houses as interactive attractions:

The attraction is usually decorated with spider webs, bones, and other relics traditionally associated with haunted houses. Guests are led through the

²² Carole Faucher, ‘As the Wind Blows and Dew Came Down: Ghost Stories and Collective Memory in Singapore’, in *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity*, ed. Ryan Bishop, John Phillips, Wei-Wei Yeo (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.192.

structure and are exposed to eerie sights and sounds. Volunteers, hiding within the house, often appear and frighten the guests.²³

As aforementioned, the “haunted house” is never an intended or designed entity. The attraction of the interactive haunted house becomes interesting because this is one house that is actually constructed to be “haunted”. Based on what they know of haunted spaces, students convert schools into unknown and ambiguous spaces of constructed specters, parents convert their own homes into haunted attractions. Despite the cliché of relics and effects like spider webs, bones and eerie sounds, and despite the thrill seekers’ knowledge that the haunting is nothing but their own school or house, they nevertheless anticipate themselves to be frightened.

Thus, the way that architecture performs to bring out elements of haunted-ness has very much to do with an event of reference, and all events take place in a space. Regardless of what the space is, it has to be spatially structured. Even an empty room is spatially structured. It is important to consider this structured space because it provides an image, or a context for the performative to take place – like the haunted houses of Halloween, where fearful details clearly make a reference to the general impression of houses that threaten. It is this idea of re-appropriation that aids the performance.

In “Media as Modern Architecture”, Beatriz Colomina compares artist Thomas Demand’s reconstruction of crime scene photos, and Bernard Tschumi’s re-appropriation of Villa Savoye’s image as a decaying modern architecture. Demand builds life-size models of crime scenes based on the use of on-site forensic images. To mirror the original forensic images, he

²³ Quote taken from ‘Haunted House’, *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haunted_house (accessed 11 June 2009).

first photographs the sets, and after which he destroys the model. The physical space is gone, but the event which the space provides remains in the photographs.

Tschumi, on the other hand, adds on to the existing image of Corbusier's building in a series of "advertisement posters". In one of Tschumi's posters, there were the texts, "*The most architectural thing about this building is the state of decay in which it is*".²⁴ This message is essentially a critique of the decaying image of modern architecture, in which "the Savoye is the canonical symbol".²⁵ Colomina observes as such:

While Demand lifts an architecture out of a media image only to destroy that architecture immediately after the photograph is taken, Tschumi constructs a new architecture out of the moment an earlier one collapses. More precisely, if the Villa Savoye was designed to produce a certain image for the media, the decay of the building is the decay of that image.²⁶

The architecture in the image, at the particular point in time that it was created, is now eternalized for as long as the photographs exist. Yet what the photographs capture are only events, thereby implying that "it is not the building in the images that makes them architecture but the event".²⁷

Perhaps our question of *when and how exactly does an ordinary house become "haunted"* can be understood in the same light. In creating the haunted mansions of Halloween or amusement park attractions, one takes the existing image of what one knows of ghosts and haunted-ness to create a new set-up, re-appropriating images of decaying feudal castles and

²⁴ Quote as taken from poster series: Bernard Tschumi, *Advertisements for Architecture*, 1976.

²⁵ Beatriz Colomina, 'Media as Modern Architecture', in *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), p.70.

²⁶ Colomina, 'Media as Modern Architecture', p.70.

²⁷ Colomina, 'Media as Modern Architecture', p.70.

old Victorian houses, in the same manner that Demand re-invents media into physical spaces. Yet, as Tschumi's idea of the decay of the image proposes, this re-appropriated architecture is only a constructed image based on event; its validity holds only as long as the image which sustains the event lasts. Similarly, the house is only spatially haunted when its participants have the haunted images in mind -- the haunted house then, becomes the *alternative* architecture of itself.

When one of the houses on Guernsey Island became the *Bu de la Rue* in *Toilers of the Sea*, it became "haunted" under Hugo's pen. When paranormal thrill-seekers mark an old abandoned house as an investigation or adventure spot, it becomes "haunted" through their intentions. In that instance which it takes on its new haunted identity, the house becomes feared. "Haunted-ness" is as temporal as the ghost stories that evolve and float from hearsay to hearsay. While a 'house' and its haunted space are architectural, a 'haunted house' is framed more as an architectural event than an *a priori* entity. Its architectural function is to provide a performance space, where the anticipation and imagination of the invisible and the ghostly are able to manifest and build their presence spatially.

CHAPTER THREE

PERFORMING THE 'GHOST-HOUSE' IN THE TYERSALL/WOODNEUK



[3] The Battalion's 'Last Stand'

A view of the Istana Woodneuk (erroneously indicated as Tyersall Palace) in 1942, as documented in *Makan*, the official Journal of the 2/30th Battalion Australian Imperial Forces Association.

Precisely what performance accomplishes and how it accomplishes this can clearly be approached in a variety of ways, although there has been general agreement that within every culture there can be discovered a certain kind of activity, set apart from other activities by space, time, attitude, or all three, that can be spoken of or analyzed as performance.

-- Marvin Carlson

'Performance of Culture,' in *Performance: a critical introduction*
(New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p.13

Image source: 'A Brief History of the 2/30th Battalion A.I.F.', *Makan* No. 192a,
<http://www.230battalion.org.au/index.htm> (accessed 20 August 2009)

CHAPTER THREE: ***PERFORMING THE 'GHOST-HOUSE' IN THE TYERSALL/WOODNEUK***

As established in the previous chapter, the perception of a haunted house is linked to one's encounter and re-appropriation of the common ghostly – by identifying a space as haunted, picking up on its context and details, and then 'performing' the space. Because this space has to be 'performed' and the ghostly has to manifest from within, the presence of the ghostly and feelings of haunting is not definite. Rather, such presence is produced out of the configuration of a space, dependent on how one sees it at a particular moment. And thus, the 'domestic uncanny' that stems from the ghostly recognition is also not essentialistic of a haunted house.

To understand how haunted-ness is performed through space, we have to understand that the idea of performance is not solely associated with theatre per se; rather, it is deeply intertwined with social practices and rituals. Richard Schechner defines this non-theatre 'performance' as "behaviour heightened...twice-behaved behaviour... cunningly masked and folded into the expected."²⁸ By this, he refers to behaviour that has been practised before, and can be repeated or restored for an unlimited number of times. Such performance exists in a range of activities, from rehearsed professional conducts, like a surgeon performing surgery; to everyday rituals like brushing the teeth in the morning or a weekly social dinner with friends. Thus, life is akin to a social theatre, where people follow culturally written scripts for ritualized activities.

However, I will like to give a slightly different reading of this notion of restored behaviour. In the context of the haunted sites, a twice-behaved behaviour takes place in the manner that coded performances of horror are replayed through the site. Carole Faucher notes that local

²⁸ Richard Schechner, 'Introduction: Jayaganesh and the avant-garde', in *The Future of Rituals: Writings on Culture and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1995) p.1.

paranormal groups routinely organize night outings to haunted sites. They share their experiences on discussion websites that offer “an amalgamation of information in the form of historical facts, well-known eyewitness versions of massacres, and descriptions of some of the most popular haunting locations.”²⁹ In one internet account, the group expressed their intention for visiting a particular beach in Singapore, which was historically a massacre site during the Second World War:

We walked near to the seashore...and mostly we wanted to sense about *[sic]*
the dark ambience of the beach where innocent men were slaughtered...³⁰

One who chances upon such information will perhaps make the same attempt to go to the seashore in the night, so that he can relive the same memory of the site as the others have done. Therefore, the script has already been written for him. Yet, even with a script, the exact experience will differ from person to person, and the sense of the unfamiliar is constantly renewed. In other words, the first behaviour of this performance occurs through the history and memory that has been accumulated and encoded into the site; and the second behaviour follows an experience in the present site that will always be different and de-familiarized. Within this disparity between memory and experience, the sense of uncanny arises.

Victor Turner clues us in on how haunted sites are able to ‘renew’ itself through activity.

Quoting Marvin Carlson, who interprets Turner’s references to such activities, as those that have the ability to:

²⁹ Carole Faucher, ‘As the Wind Blows and Dew Came Down: Ghost Stories and Collective Memory in Singapore’, in *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity*, ed. Ryan Bishop, John Phillips, Wei-Wei Yeo (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.198.

³⁰ Faucher, ‘As the Wind Blows and Dew Came Down’, p.198.

...mark sites where conventional structure is no longer honoured but...(are) much more likely to be subversive, consciously or by accident introducing or exploring different structures that may develop into real alternatives to the *status quo*.³¹

This means that the said activities create 'new sites' within the original site. If haunted houses are seen as such 'new sites', the *transformation* from the site of a 'house' into a site of a 'haunted house' could also mean that architecture has been borrowed as a setting for alternative narrative to take place.

Perhaps the *process* of this transformation is more uncanny than the house itself. Carlson suggests that "performance by its nature resists conclusions, just as it resists the sort of definitions, boundaries, and limits".³² Thus, when the haunted house is performed, it continuously slips between its identities -- as a fragment of history, a natural domestic setting, and a supernatural object -- itself not sure of when it would take on a particular role.

In the following sections, I will explore how the performative aspects of haunted-ness exploit the existing spatial elements of the abandoned Tyersall/Woodneuk house in Singapore. This house is endearingly known as a historical spot, and a favourite haunt amongst photographers and urban explorers. Yet, it is also notoriously rumoured to be 'haunted'. But there is substantial reason for the house to take on such an identity -- its decadent atmosphere and homely desolation do evoke a sense of haunting. Through the occupant history of the Tyersall/Woodneuk house from the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century, we observe

³¹ Marvin A. Carlson, 'Performance of Culture', in *Performance: A critical introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.19.

³² Marvin A. Carlson, 'Performance of Culture', in *Performance: A critical introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.206.

the domestic spatial configuration of these houses. It is through such determined configuration that the present state of *unheimlich* can manifest itself and allow the 'haunted house' to be played out in context and in space.



[4] Tyersall Estate

(source: Google Earth, August 2009)

Satellite image showing the present-day Woodneuk lying on the Tyersall Estate and bounded by Holland Road. The Botanic Gardens is on the right.

*H. H. the Sultan of Johore can now safely say that he has, in
"Tyersall," the best residence in the Malay Peninsula.*

-- 'The Sultan of Johore's Singapore Residence'
The Straits Times, 5 December 1892, p.2.

Tyersall

I used to travel along that particular stretch of Holland Road adjacent to the main gate of the Singapore Botanic Gardens on my daily journey to school. Most distinctive about the road are the accompanying dense trees along the road that leads deep into an unknown landscape. Historically, this road was once known to the Hokkien dialect group as hue hng au, which translates as “behind the flower garden”.³³ If one ventures further into the heavily forested plot next to the road, he will realize that what really resides behind the flora and fauna of the popular tourist attraction is a huge abandoned estate. This estate was once upon a time the grand palace of the Sultan of Johore.³⁴ When I first discovered the site, I only knew of it as a popular ghost haunt through a local paranormal website. Thus, my thought: how is it that this beautiful and serene house could possess such pervasive ghostliness?

The sixty-seven acres estate emerged in history in 1854, the year that William Napier built his house on a little hilltop. Around the year 1860, the Sultan Abu Bakar of Johore bought over the estate, demolished Napier’s Tyersall and built a new mansion which was to become the Tyersall Palace.³⁵ In 1892, the local press featured the opening of the Sultan’s “splendid new residence”:

On Saturday afternoon...a large and select company attended the formal opening of “Tyersall”...His Highness received each guest on arrival in the

³³ Victor R. Savage and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Toponymics: A Study of Singapore Street Names* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), p.150.

³⁴ Lee Kip Lin, ‘Tyersall’ in *The Singapore House 1819-1942* (Singapore: Times Edition [for] Preservation of Monuments Board), p.174.

³⁵ Lee, ‘Tyersall’, p.174.

*verandah, immediately beside the portico, and shortly after 3 o'clock, the formal ceremony of the opening took place.*³⁶

In the Sultan's opening speech in the same article, it was indicated that the plan of the house was approved by the Sultan's respectable consort, Sultanah Fatimah, who had died a year before her home was completed. Lavishly planned by the Sultanah, the building "had been constructed regardless of expense".³⁷ The sheer size of the house alone was beyond the imagination of any modern day urbanite. It was "210 feet long and 174 feet deep" and had "no less than 420 doors".³⁸ The house was also highly regarded because it was entirely powered by electricity and adopted extensive use of lighting. Undoubtedly, the Sultan and Sultanah took pride in this house, which was designed to accommodate frequent parties and guests visits.

The Tyersall Palace, the "best residence in the Malay Peninsula" as it was known, was reportedly destroyed by fire in the early morning of September 10, 1905.³⁹ The house was not rebuilt until nearly thirty years later.

³⁶ 'The Sultan of Johore's Singapore Residence', in *The Straits Times*, 5 December 1892.

³⁷ 'The Sultan of Johore's Singapore Residence'.

³⁸ Lee, 'Tyersall', p.175.

³⁹ 'Fire at Tyersall', in *The Straits Times*, 11 September 1905.



[5] Istana Woodneuk with the collapsed roof

(source: Ella Yuhui, October 2008)

At the moment the Sultanah and her husband are finding endless pleasure in putting the final touches to Woodneuk, their beautiful house in Singapore, built on the site of an older house.

-- 'Her Highness the Sultana Helen: Intimate Portraits by a Friend'

The Straits Times, 16 September 1935

Woodneuk

After the death of the Sultan Abu Bakar in 1895, the palace grounds were conveyed to his successor, Sultan Ibrahim, in 1934.⁴⁰ Sometime within the following year, Sultan Ibrahim and his Scottish wife, Sultanah Helen, had rebuilt an existing house on the Tyersall estate. It was called the Istana Woodneuk.⁴¹ Woodneuk lay in a quiet corner within the Tyersall estate, adjacent to the ill-fated Tyersall Palace. Before it was rebuilt, the original house was bequeathed to Sultan Abu Bakar's second wife, where she resided till her death in 1904.



[6] A visitor's map showing location Istana Tyersall and the adjacent Woodneuk.
(Source: George Murray Reith, *Handbook to Singapore with Map*, 1907)

⁴⁰ Melanie Chng, 'State of Johor and Another v Tunku Alam Shah ibni Tunku Abdul Rahman and Ors.', in *Singapore Law Reports*, vol.4, ed. Singapore Supreme Court, Great Britain Privy Council and Singapore Court of Criminal Appeal (Singapore: Butterworths Asia, 2005), p. 383.

⁴¹ An Anglophile, Sultan Ibrahim frequently travelled the European states, where he became acquainted with, and eventually married, the divorced wife of his personal physician. A Scottish by birth, the newly enthroned Sultanah Helen followed her husband back to Malaya where they settled down in the Woodneuk. Information source: 'Sultan Ibrahim of Johor', *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sultan_Ibrahim_of_Johor (accessed 12 August 2009).

Like Sultanah Fatimah who played a significant role in the design of the Tyersall Palace, Sultanah Helen “who always had a flair for interior decorations” took charge of most of the planning and decoration of the new Woodneuk. Thus, it seems like the architecture of the Tyersall and the Istana Woodneuk was significantly related to its line of mistresses. They were given the first say as to how the houses should be planned and built, and not just decorated, when authority over matters of this nature would have been expected to preside in the hands of a male sovereign. It was because Sultanah Helen took pleasure in the details of the Woodneuk, that the house still retains some of its domestic characteristic today. The intricate details of the house represent the domestic ideal, as I will demonstrate in the next section. The subsequent sections will discuss how the domestic idealism of the house from the past forms the foundation for a future haunted performance; and how the remaining inventory of domestic objects configured in the space of the present-day house heightens the sense of anxiety in its visitors.



[7] Istana Woodneuk with the blue roof
(source: Limerances, October 2007)

Pre-performance: Spatial Configuration of the Homely

Sultanah Helen had dedicated much of her time to giving Woodneuk a much admired intricacy of a home. The overall aesthetic was one of a quiet and restful homestead. An article in the local press published a detailed description of the house for the first time:

No pen can really give an idea of this beautiful home in Singapore planned and furnished entirely by the Sultan and Sultanah of Johore, for so much of its charm depends on the colour schemes, carried out so minutely.⁴²

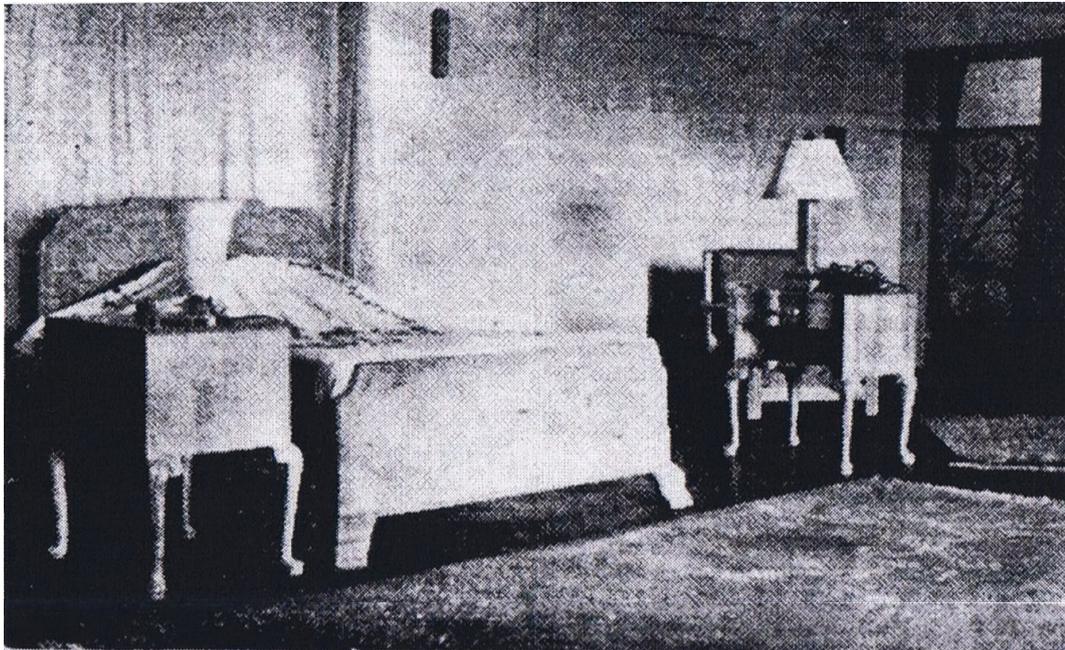
If we recall the Hugo's haunted house on Guernsey in the previous chapter, which was a commonplace house, with the "fundamental elements of the dwelling" located on a magnificent site, we begin to see how the once-beautiful Woodneuk and Tyersall estate can take on such haunting qualities.

Together with its serene surrounding of well-kept gardens and vast open green, the Woodneuk residence resembled the houses found in the countryside of the Sultanah's Scottish homeland. Through the descriptions, one could imagine the exterior of the house in its heyday, which was one of rectangular "brick and stone... coloured dark cream and grey, with a roof of lovely blue Devonshire tiles" -- reminiscent of the roofs of English country houses. The colour of the roof would repeat itself in the main hall and the first encounter of the house, which was said to have a parquet floor that accentuates the "soft shade of pastel blue" of the room's walls. The Sultanah had personally selected all the furnishings and accents for the entire house, most of

⁴² K. Savage Bailey, 'The Home Beautiful for Sultan of Johore', *The Straits Times*, 12 September 1935.

the time in the most gentle of shades and the warmest of tones. When wood was used, it was also in a “soft fawn” or “plain wood”.⁴³ The author of the article remarked:

The first thing which strikes one on entering the central lounge is the atmosphere of rest and peace pervading the whole house... Woodneuk is essentially a house in which to rest and dream of pleasant things, and a house to be made into that very rare thing – a home.⁴⁴



[8] A Sultan's restful bedroom, Istana Woodneuk
(Source: *The Straits Times*, 12 September 1935)

Today, the Istana Woodneuk still retains much of its tranquility, only more desolately so. Like the house on Guernsey, Woodneuk seems completely habitable, yet the magnificence of its site, its architecture, and possibly even its historical value, is out of place with the urban

⁴³ Bailey, 'The Home Beautiful for Sultan of Johore'.

⁴⁴ Bailey, 'The Home Beautiful for Sultan of Johore'.

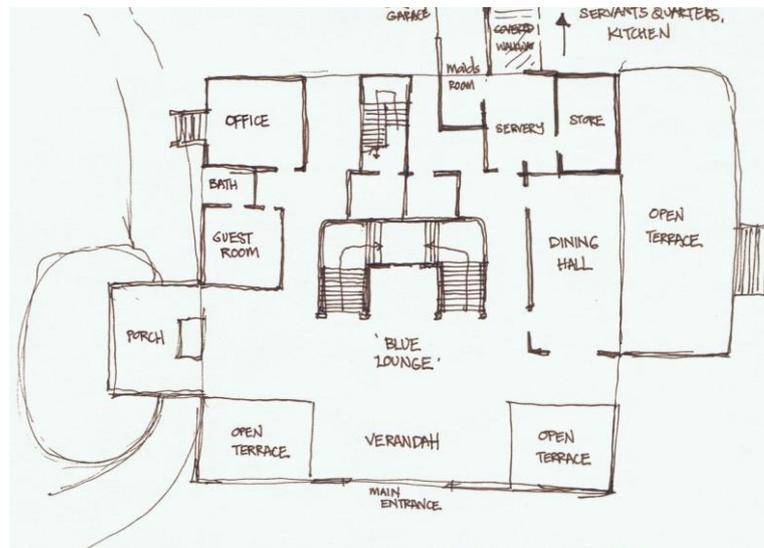
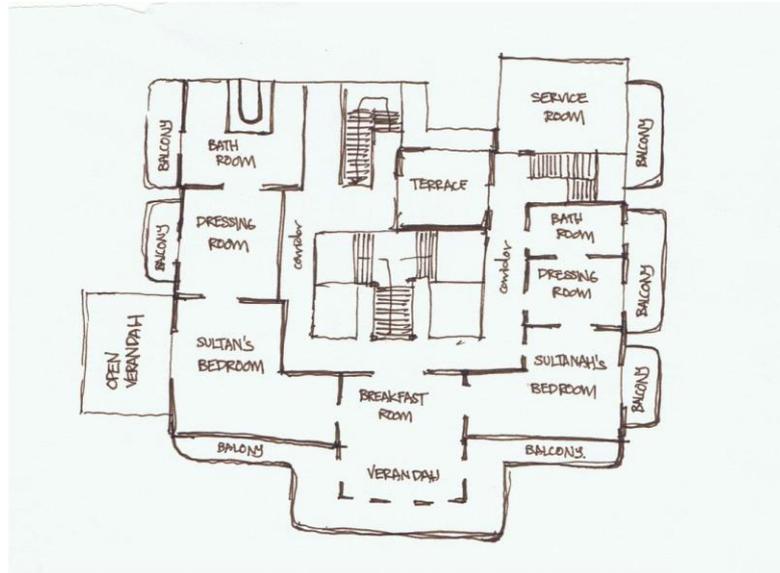
environment outside of this private domain. We are reminded by Vidler that it is because the house is “too beautiful” that it can also become “consequently sinister”; its enigmatic air can be likened to “the aura of a tomb”.⁴⁵

Although the new Woodneuk was not as big as the previous house (it only contained two suites and three bathrooms on the second storey as compared to the Tyersall Palace with over a hundred doors), it was nonetheless elaborately planned and ostentatiously furnished. The lower floor of the house consisted of a main entrance hall, a dining hall on the right to facilitate the reception of guests, and a guest-room on the left. A corridor connected the reception space to the kitchen and the rear-side of the house, where it was the servant’s enclave, divided into female and male domains. The rear had its own stairway so that the circulation between the master and the servants can be differentiated. The upper floor of the house was much more intimate, because it was the resting domain of the master and the mistress. It was led up by a double-winged grand staircase, into a lounge area which opens up to a verandah. On the two sides of the lounge were the separate suites of the Sultan and the Sultanah. Each suite had its own bathroom, dressing room and a private balcony that faced the private garden at the back of the house.

The house of the Sultan and Sultanah was as much of a home as it could have been, and perhaps, more ‘homely’ than the old Tyersall Palace on the adjacent site. While the palace boasted of large grounds, endless rooms and frequent congregations of important figures at parties, the Woodneuk should pride itself as befitting of a comfortable home – it was in the right scale of a domestic domain; the spaces were dedicated and differentiated between the master and servant, public and private, and the male and female; the objects in the house

⁴⁵ Anthony Vidler, ‘Unhomely Houses’, in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), p.19-20.

were carefully matched and coherently planned. To borrow the term from Catherine Ingraham, it was “proper” of a home.



[9] Upper and lower floor plan sketch
(Source: Dawn Lim)

Ingraham explains that the “proper” is inextricably tied to ‘property’ and ‘propriety’ – the possession of land and the appropriateness of its use -- and this relationship means that the “proper” is intrinsically part of an architectural idea. Spaces and buildings are “proper” because they insist on maintaining “certain ideas of propriety, ownership, real estate and

exchange value”.⁴⁶ In this way, terms and conditions of architecture and building become “familiar” and “typological”. She explains:

The familiarity of the terms of discussion, as in, say, the *master bedroom*, is a familiarity that is not given or natural but is proper to particular moments in architectural history and culture.⁴⁷

In other words, to be “proper” is to have something given a name; to own a space is to maintain an “identity of the body in space”.⁴⁸ As a protection to this name, body and identity, the individual believes he needs to be housed in a proper manner. From such stems a kind of defensive nature towards one’s home and the individual’s notion of safety becomes very much tied to “the safeguarding of the interior space, the house, which is both an emblem for and an extension of the body that is under protection.”⁴⁹

To protect something, one would naturally desire to nurture it, just like a mother who cherishes and feeds her child. Likewise, the mistress of Woodneuk’s meticulousness in detailing and accenting the interior was not solely an effort made to flaunt her eclectic taste in furnishing. An expatriate in the British colony, she had a penchant for modern French furniture, as well as Chinese decorative elements.⁵⁰ This was possibly propelled by both a longing for home and a curiosity towards the novelty of a foreign and exotic Malayan culture. Her effort made the house “proper” in every sense of the word.

⁴⁶ Catherine Ingraham, ‘What is Proper to Architecture’, in *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p.31.

⁴⁷ Ingraham, ‘What is Proper to Architecture’, p.31.

⁴⁸ Ingraham, ‘What is Proper to Architecture’, p.34.

⁴⁹ Ingraham, ‘What is Proper to Architecture’, p.34.

⁵⁰ In the main hall such eclectic mix of style was most apparent -- a screen with Chinese carving was paired with frosted glass; “a cabinet of severe style...show(ed) off the china inside”; and “two low round tables (were) made to hold eight old china (with) sambal dishes.” For a more detailed description, see: Bailey, ‘The Home Beautiful for Sultan of Johore’.

Thus, the abandoned Istana Woodneuk can be said to be once a house of homely ambition. It was a comforting private space in a foreign land and culture; it was stately enough to house high profile guests; and it was a personal gallery of impeccable taste. Colm Tóibín in his essay for Gregor Schneider's live installation, *Die Familie Schneider*, says that "(h)ouses are full of faded hopes".⁵¹ This statement was made with reference to Tóibín's aunt and how she was so determined to transform "the house she was born and brought up in" into a space "she had imagined". Yet, he argues that such an ambition only sustained a personal fulfillment, not necessarily sympathized by others. With time, some of these aspirations continue in the space, but sadly, a big part of it would become neglected or forgotten.

Even without the knowledge of what life used to be in the Woodneuk, one can still make out the ceremonious lifestyle the Sultan and the Sultanah must have led in the 1930s. Walking through the rooms of this house, observing what is left from the past -- furniture fittings, the markings on the walls, the loose pieces of homely possessions -- one is impelled to re-invent the Woodneuk story for himself. Perhaps such inclinations to re-narrate stems from residing insecurities: the fact that there is nothing in the house at the point of being in the present which can ascertain what exactly is happening, thus we have to make things up to set rest our doubts. I will quote Anthony Vidler, who explains how such tension develops between estrangement and the need to affirm:

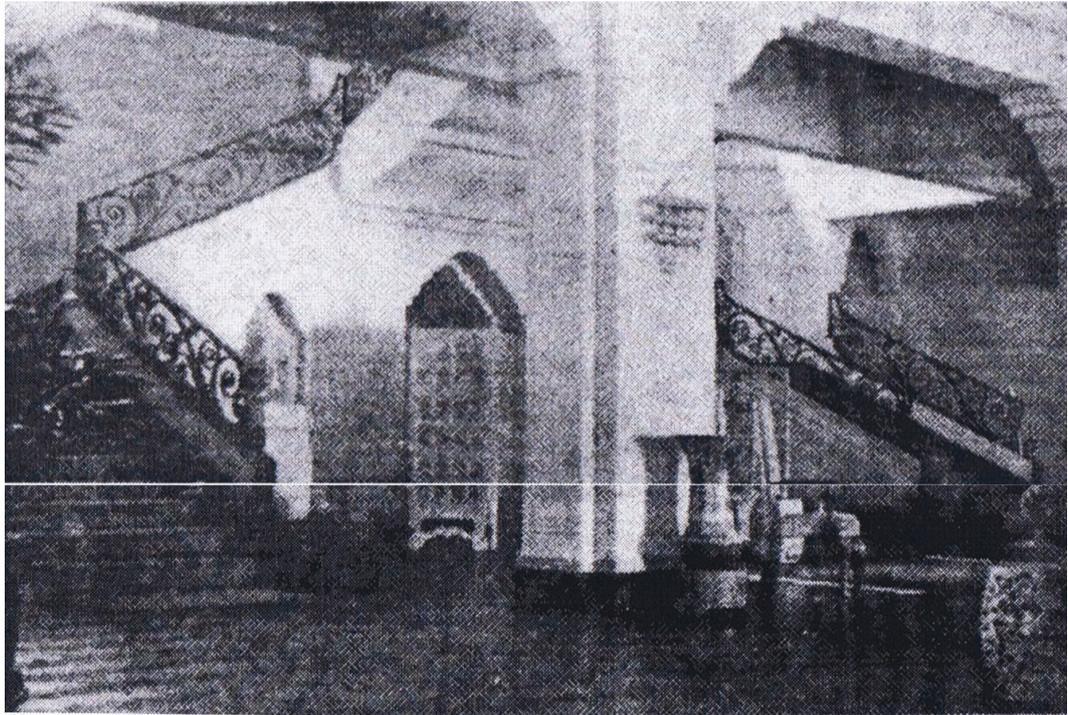
The remedies to such uncertainty... (are) tied to the inhospitable context of the here-and-now at the same time as imagining the there-and-then. This anxiety of time...was accompanied by the fascination of time's errors – the

⁵¹ Colm Tóibín, 'Two Houses', in *Die Familie Schneider*, ed. Gregor Schneider (London: Artangel, 2006), p.162.

dystopian effects of unwonted interference with the natural development of things... and the psychological effects of past and future shock...⁵²

Thus, what the domestic domain of the past offers is a *pre-performance*, or preparation of the space for the present house to take on the role of the 'haunted house'. The history of domestic ambition and purposefulness in the configuration of spaces becomes the primary setting for our ability to narrate through the house, and as such, allows the 'haunted' performance through its spaces.

⁵² Anthony Vidler, 'Introduction', in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), p.5.



[10] **Blue Lounge, Istana Woodneuk**
(source: *The Straits Times*, 12 September 1935)



[11] **Blue Lounge, Istana Woodneuk**
(source: *Sabine Fink*, November 2008)

Performing Spaces: 'Doubling' of Memory and Experience

At the entrance is a beautiful screen of light wood, with panels of old Chinese carving... In the blue lounge alone are three of these screens. The furniture...ultra-modern in design, has more of this carving worked into the settees and into the legs of some of the smaller tables...In the centre, there stands a cabinet of severe style ... (the) bigger chairs are upholstered in pastel-blue brocade with tiny flowers worked into it... The parquet floor forms a good back-ground for the soft-coloured Persian rugs... Large standard lamps with formal shades, the palest Rose Dubarry...

-- The Straits Times, 1935⁵³

Today, as I stand in the grounds of the Tyersall, I am experiencing the beautiful quietude of the Woodneuk as I have been prepared for. But this quietude is different from the tranquility and serenity of a restful home. It is filled with abandonment -- a stately house without its inhabitants, its servants and the coherence of its once luxurious appointment. After a case of fire three years ago, most of its blue roof has collapsed into a bed of blue tiles, leaving much of the upper floor completely exposed and the ceiling of the lower floor black and charred.

The 'blue lounge' and much of the lower level survived the fire, though it still looks as if a typhoon has just swept through the house. What barely remains in this room is a structural centerpiece – an elaborate double-winged staircase with iron scrollwork handrails which leads to the upper level.

⁵³ Bailey, 'The Home Beautiful for Sultan of Johore'.

I vividly recall from the photographs of a column standing between the two wings of the staircase. It had an elaborate chandelier mounted on it and there was a Chinese painted vase standing against it, amongst other ornamental objects that were thoughtfully presented in this central space. Yet from where I observe, there are no beautiful screens, modern furniture, or Persian rugs which once filled this blue lounge so opulently; only loose timber plies from the broken shutters of the folding front doors, lying in all directions across the once-parqueted concrete floor. Despite the room's glaring lack of things, I keep seeing these imaginary objects and envisioning how they should be spatially configured -- the way I have registered the space to look like from the old photographs. It is particularly a discomfoting feeling as I match these imagined objects to their supposed locations. In this strange unfolding of logic through memory and space, past and future, I am experiencing the space in a haunting manner.

Andrea O'Hagan had a similar response when he visited 14 Walden Street, one of the two houses of *Die Familie Schneider*:

On leaving the houses behind, I found that I hadn't left them at all: these dwellings were dwelling in me and I kept adding things I was sure I had seen there.⁵⁴

Die Familie Schneider is Gregor Schneider's live art installation of two adjacent and identical-looking houses with the addresses 14 and 16 Walden Street, situated on an ordinary street in London's Whitechapel. The installation requires that visitors go into the houses alone by letting themselves in on borrowed keys, one house after the other. The route can be briefly summarized: visitors will first pass through the kitchen and the living space on the ground floor,

⁵⁴ Andrew O'Hagan, 'The Living Rooms', in *Die Familie Schneider*, ed. Gregor Schneider (London: Artangel, 2006), p.157.

followed by the “claustrophobic bathroom and bedroom with no windows” on the upper floor and lastly, down to the dingy basement.⁵⁵ Walking through the spaces, they will encounter the inhabitants of the house -- the mother staring out in space as she is washing her dishes in the kitchen, the father performing a compromising private act in the shower and the child in a bin bag cowering in the corner of the bedroom. All the inhabitants go about their own business and make a point not to interact with, or acknowledge the presence of the visitors. The same process is repeated in the next house, where the spaces, people and events are exactly alike, right down to the minutest details.

As the houses are nondescript enough, the visitors may enter each house just like it is their own home, but soon, the consciousness of intruding into someone’s home and another family’s life surfaces. Stepping into 14 and 16 Walden Street, the houses “brought on conflicting feelings of attraction and repulsion, of wanting to go further in, and wanting to get out.”⁵⁶ More importantly, the *doubling* of experience is meant to invoke “a philosophical enquiry about memory and experience” as the visitors are forced to “match what he or she was seeing with what they remembered just having seen.”

In an eccentric way, the experience of the houses of family Schneider can be identified with that of the Woodneuk, even though they are not haunted houses per se. The haunted space of Woodneuk is enticing enough, as I recall the elation I felt when I realized that I had the liberty to roam about freely from room-to-room. It was like a treasure trove of objects, all of which was free for me to pick up and contemplate on their place in the house. But after some time, I began to feel self-conscious of my own presence. It was a feeling of non-belonging and my short visit did not deem me a rightful occupant. As much as this house is beautiful, it is not

⁵⁵ James Lingwood, ‘By Appointment’, in *Die Familie Schneider*, ed. Gregor Schneider (London: Artangel, 2006), p.154.

⁵⁶ Lingwood, ‘By Appointment’, p.154.

one which that an individual can comfortably occupy forever. On hindsight, I wonder if the ‘inhabitants’ of the house were hiding in the closet the whole time that I was there: I might be violating a private sphere in a way, but it could also turn around to threaten me.

Also, to be “adding things” to the space of Schneider house, to “the living room (that) had no people in it, but had the treat of life”, O’Hagan was also questioning the implications of ‘things’:

The doily under the ashtray is a piece of evidence; the books...the patterned rugs; these unspeaking people are caught in the middle of their lower-middle-class lives, and each room offers a narrative of limited aspiration... I realized that as I stood in the living room and looked at the fireplace: there is nothing in life so cold as a cold fireplace.⁵⁷

Perhaps I am hit by similar thoughts as I walk through the spaces of Woodneuk. It gives me a feeling so dreadful I have never felt anywhere else before. As I attach the photographic memory of an imaginary chandelier to the column, a rug onto the floor, I look at an abandoned house seemingly lived-in, yet very apparently lifeless. The current Woodneuk has become *unheimlich*, which means a lack of homeliness in a literal sense, but more so, it also means a lack of aspirations and familiar ambitions of a home – the homely presences are “defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream.”⁵⁸

Through such an act of *doubling* (of matching memory to experience), we recall the “twice-behaved behaviour” which Richard Schechner refers to. Dwight Conquergood echoes that it is

⁵⁷ O’Hagan, ‘The Living Rooms’, p.157.

⁵⁸ Vidler, ‘Introduction’, p.7.

the “performance that realizes the experience.”⁵⁹ In the family Schneider house, “every decision as to whether to open a door, or to take a step or two into the rooms was an acutely conscious one.”⁶⁰ Likewise, in the Woodneuk, every object I see and every turn of the corner is a heightening of sensation sparked by constant guessing and second-guessing.

The pre-performance of the domestic sphere in the inhabited Woodneuk has evoked an experience, and in turn, this experience evokes the performance of the current space as “haunted”. It is a feeling that is difficult to grasp and one that is estranged, because such a relationship between experience and performance is “reciprocal”, multiplicative and therefore infinitely intertwined and complex.⁶¹ The messages are constantly mixed between the primary signs (the physicality of the existing space) and the secondary signs (the memory of what the space used to be). Perhaps even the hierarchy between the primary and secondary signs is a continuously shifting one – making it difficult to ascertain the difference between the *real* spatial experience and that of the imagined.

⁵⁹ Dwight Conquergood, ‘Between experience and meaning: Performance as a paradigm for meaningful action’, in *Renewal and revision: The future of interpretation*, ed. T.Colson (Denton, TX: Omega, 1986), p.36-37.

⁶⁰ Lingwood, ‘By Appointment’, p.155.

⁶¹ Madison and Hamera, through Victor Turner, discuss how “(p)erformance evokes experiences, just as experience evokes performance”. For further reading, see D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, ‘Introduction: Performance Studies at Intersections’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2006), p.xvii.



[12] The yellow armchair in the dining hall, Istana Woodneuk
(source: Daniel Cheong, August 2007)

Performing objects: Returning the 'Human Gaze'

The human will is translated into things and in which things in turn work as delegates which relay back to us these configurations of human will.

-- John Frow, 'A Pebble, a Camera, a Man Who Turns into a Telegraph Pole'⁶²

Moving further into the house from the 'blue lounge', I happen to catch a sudden glimpse of a lone yellow armchair, sitting prominent and unmistakably real in the adjacent dining hall. I think to myself: Is the chair a figment of my imagination? And why is its presence so discomfoting?

The act of doubling heightens the sensation of being out of place the moment I step foot into the Woodneuk. Further adding to this distorted experience of doubling, is the fact that the house has been emptied out. The empty spaces highlight inconspicuous objects and details which one will have otherwise not noticed, like a shriveled-up carcass of a dead lizard, or a bunch of intentionally-cut wires sticking out from a wall. As such, the pale yellow armchair appears unexpectedly like a second stranger in this house. It is a pleasant surprise at first, and then the knowledge of such a presence gradually becomes sinister. I realize that such fear stems from a sudden uncanny cognition: I am clearly the observer in this room, yet I am also being watched. It seems that as I am staring at the armchair, it is also staring right back at me.

⁶² John Frow, 'A Pebble, a Camera, a Man Who Turns into a Telegraph Pole', in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 356.

I am not being metaphysical in drawing upon such an experience -- this feeling takes root from a fundamental insecurity about existence and a kind of self-consciousness. It is like walking alone in the night and suspecting that footsteps are following behind you. The armchair is not staring at me in a literal sense, but I *feel* like it is. John Frow, in discussing the 'being' in the singularity of things, explains this strange phenomenon. He argues that the singular object, in all its lack of self-consciousness and in being what it just is, has the ability to "return the human gaze". He refers to such singularity as the 'thingness' of things, like a pebble with a "pebbly meaning", and because things are "posited in themselves, in their distinctness from intention, representation, figuration, or relation, (they) are thereby filled with an imputed interiority."⁶³

In reversing the role between the observer and the observed, this 'human- thing' relationship is also inversed to "make us a subject" instead. To be precise, more than just an inversion of roles, Frow argues that such a hierarchy in the observer-observed role is negated altogether. Without human consciousness, we are just like 'things'; and by looking at these things, we are essentially looking at ourselves:

...the true role of Things, of underlying thingness, is to be the mirror of our souls...that makes us real. That's why the auratic thing returns my gaze: it is myself that I see, looking back in astonishment at *its* mirror image, myself.⁶⁴

This is why Frow refers to human beings and things as "partly strangers and partly kin".⁶⁵ In the absence of the impositions and suppositions of the human world, 'persons' could drop their consciousness and the worldly 'meanings' to return to 'being'. As I am looking at the

⁶³ Frow, 'A Pebble, a Camera, a Man', p.348.

⁶⁴ Frow, 'A Pebble, a Camera, a Man', pp.348-349.

⁶⁵ Frow, 'A Pebble, a Camera, a Man', p.352.

chair, I am looking at myself: a state of self that I cannot recognize, so much so that it begins to invoke a sense of insecurity and fear.

From the perception of my 'human-ness' and all the meanings that follow, a chair is a piece of furniture that rightly belongs to a home. However, I am looking at the yellow armchair in a once homely house, now devoid of homely objects. Without its 'homely companions', the chair immediately loses its meaning as a piece of furniture and returns to its first nature of being what it just is – a 'thing' in its 'thingness'. Without its owner and the complete setting of the house, the lone chair is being removed from the language of 'home'. Thus, in *returning my gaze*, it is also throwing whatever perception I had of it (as being part of a larger something, a furniture, and part of the house) right back at me. It is at this point that the "sheer singularity" of the chair -- "nameless, almost indescribable"⁶⁶ -- begins to feel foreign and strange. At this moment, the chair is incomprehensible to me because it does not have any kind of self-reference or encoded identity.

Sultanah Helen gave the Istana its ensemble of homely and serene comfort. She had also specially designed most of the furnishings herself, right down to the drawers of the dressing table, so that "the table can be opened inwards in such a manner that all (her) requirements come directly under the hand". Each piece of furniture was specifically situated according to her desire and was dependent on the placement of all the other objects. Each object had a "precise logic" in design and intention.⁶⁷ The chair that was handpicked by the Sultanah had a role in that room, which can be said to be part of the haunted pre-performance. Therefore,

⁶⁶ Frow, 'A Pebble, a Camera, a Man', p.356.

⁶⁷ John Frow, 'A Pebble, a Camera, a Man Who Turns into a Telegraph Pole', p.346.

already encoded in it were its “potential uses...that map(ped) its intended purposes”, long before I came into the room and rendered it alien.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ John Frow, ‘A Pebble, a Camera, a Man Who Turns into a Telegraph Pole’, p.357.



[13] Green-tiled bathroom in the guestroom, Istana Woodneuk
(source: Rachel Balota, September 2006)

The Red Chair and the Bathtub: The Ghost of Existence

“Room 217,” commented someone on a photograph of a bathtub in one of the bathrooms of Istana Woodneuk. The room number alludes to the sinister haunted room in Steven Spielberg’s original novel, The Shining, where a rotting corpse of an old woman appears in a murky bathtub and comes alive.⁶⁹ If one has any knowledge of the storyline, he will be able to draw the parallel between the photograph and the horrifying scene almost immediately.

In the green-tiled bathroom of the Woodneuk, I look fixedly at a bathtub, with the image of the rotting living corpse in my mind. My focus is intently drawn to the hollowed-out space of the empty bathtub, semi-expectant that something may violently emerge from inside; and the red chair facing the bathtub -- why is its strategic placement such a daunting setup? This room is full of specters, sitting, standing and hiding, as I wonder what kind of conversation they are having – the one sitting on the chair and the one in the bathtub.

Some of the rooms in Woodneuk are devoid of objects; in these rooms, I keep “adding things that I am sure I have seen there.” On some occasions, when an object happens to appear, I render it out of place and question its validity. This particular green-tiled bathroom, however, is filled with objects – a broken cistern, a dislodged shutter, a red chair and a built-in bathtub. Yet, even when it is filled, this space does not feel any homelier than the other spaces of the house. Nothing in this room quite makes sense – the red chair in particular, poses a disruption to the domestic order of a common bathroom. The objects of this green-tiled bathroom become “efforts of comfort which only conveyed discomfort”.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Stephen King, *The Shining* (Essex: Signet Publishing, 1978).

⁷⁰ O’Hagan, ‘The Living Rooms’, p.158-159.

In the Capp Street project in 1987, Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio constructed a domestic set, where the logical placement of domestic objects is deliberately violated:

...the space of each object is remapped as dining table and chairs are lifted in the air, beds and chairs are split in two... Objects now act out beyond their proper domains: chairs are attached to tables by locks and swings that emulate the presence of human arms; chairs are bisected by the locks of doors – all connected in ways they should not be, in order to reveal their sinister interdependence in the domestic system.⁷¹

Anthony Vidler pointed out acutely that this setup looks like it is left as “an obsolete and already abandoned technological space”.⁷² The displacement of the familiar objects also “reveals the banal and everyday nature of the *unheimlich*” and as such banality implies, the objects have lost their bound context of domesticity, returning to being “ordinary”.⁷³ Vidler continues to argue that the effect of such a setting does not amount to the uncanny, and certainly not something familiar. Instead, these “ordinary” objects now embody a “potential uncanny”:

(Although these objects begin) as a ready-made, the unmade object is itself subjected to a subtle transformation and mutation that points not only to its internal nature but also to its expanded field of operation, its relation to the body.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Anthony Vidler, ‘Homes for Cyborgs’, in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), p.161.

⁷² Vidler, ‘Homes for Cyborgs’, p.161.

⁷³ Vidler, ‘Homes for Cyborgs’, p.164.

⁷⁴ Vidler, ‘Homes for Cyborgs’, p.159.

Returning to the context of the bathroom in the Woodneuk, the ability of the chair and the bathtub to evoke the sense of uncanny is dependent on their relative contexts to everything around them. There is nothing wrong with the domestic set of Diller and Scofidio being in the house; but the fact that it is suspended immediately removes the 'homely' from home. Likewise, the chair and the bathtub are not scary on their own by any means. However, when they are placed together -- as if 'in conversation' -- their 'potential uncanny' becomes unleashed.

Summing up, the uncanny is something that is event-based and not entity-based, and echoes what I have laid out at the beginning, that such a characteristic is not essentialistic of a haunted house. The illogical displacements of objects in Diller and Scofidio setup, as well as the displaced red chair in the bathroom of Woodneuk, are the *events* that release the unfamiliar characteristics of familiar objects. From the particular event, the haunting atmosphere of the space is enabled.

As emphasized, the contextualization of objects in space is also crucial to this discussion. Rachel Whiteread's sculptural series of bathtubs, *Ether* and *Untitled Orange Bathtub*, shows how the dis-ownership of things ejects the affirming materiality of these things themselves, thus rejecting familiar contexts. In the two works, she intentionally casts the space surrounding a Victorian bathtub, rather than the tub itself, to show a sculpted 'negative space'. Whiteread's objective is to demonstrate the ghostly presence of discarded objects: by inverting the material form into a hollowed-out imprint, the function of the domestic object is removed. The resemblance of the cast to the form of a coffin also alludes to death – the death of the function of the object, and of what it used to be.



[14] Rachel Whiteread "Ether", 1990, plaster, 35 x 80 x 43 in.

[15] Rachel Whiteread "Untitled (Orange Bath)", 1996, Rubber and Polystyrene, 32 x 82 x 43 in.

More than just rejections of function, the two works show how domestic objects are very much linked to the human body, through the way one owns and occupies objects. Catherine Ingraham reminds us that the house and its interior space are “built around bodies as individual enclosures of some kind” and people own things to surround themselves with homely elements as a comforting protection.⁷⁵ The bathtub, as a single entity, becomes a metaphor for the material domain of the house and the accompanying idea of being housed. The common form of the bathtub, by cradling the human body, is anthropomorphic; it verifies and certifies the presence of the body, becoming an extension of the body. The ‘negative space’ produced by the imprint of the bathtub, as Linda Nochlin notes, is a remembrance to “what has been left behind with the departure of the human body”; the sculpted space “materialize(s) absence” and magnifies what is not there.⁷⁶ Yet, as the body dies, it leaves behind the ‘ghost’ of itself and its memories -- the uncanny stems from such “insistent materiality”.

⁷⁵ Ingraham, ‘What is Proper to Architecture’, p.34.

⁷⁶ Linda Nochlin, ‘The Man in the Bathtub’, in *Bathers, bodies, beauty: the visceral eye* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), p.146.

The green-tiled bathtub is the most intimate space in the Woodneuk, and its objects strike the deepest resonance with me. As one journeys from the main hall, through its corridors, into the private quarters and the intimacy of the bathroom, one feels himself being driven skin-deep into the house. In the way that one is able to roam into the private domain of the Woodneuk freely, this private space becomes “revealed as infinitely public...No longer sheltered from public surveillance by a well-defended private realm”.⁷⁷ And in the way that the domestic spatial logic of the Woodneuk can be re-narrated at will through one’s memory and imagination, its interior space is “now the interior of the mind, one that (knows) no bounds in projection or introversion.”⁷⁸

If the pre-performance of a commonplace house forms the foundation of our perception of what a homely place should be, then the narrative of the haunted house builds upon this foundation by subverting it and defying its logic. Through time, the Woodneuk remains standing. Embodied in its objects are events, translated into the placement and locations of objects at a particular moment that one is viewing them. Without a valid intention of home-building, the positioning of these objects becomes illogical, yet undeniably actual. This is what provoked the alien feelings towards the objects. The lone chair is just like a loose plank from a broken door now, unhinged from the structure of the house, and its logic taken to pieces.

⁷⁷ Vidler, ‘Homes for Cyborgs’, p.163.

⁷⁸ Vidler, ‘Introduction’, p.6.

CHAPTER FOUR: *CONCLUSION*

(Architecture) provokes people to imagine the nation-building process...in terms of a series of juxtaposed and disconnected periods and events embodied in selected preserved buildings... specters engage us in a scheme of continuity, intertwining their own wandering with undifferentiated glimpses of recent and distant pasts.

-- Carole Faucher⁷⁹

Can a haunted house be considered architecture? I anticipate an ensemble of voices in a resonating 'no'. While being a well-known historical building, the *haunted house* of Woodneuk is not by any definition, architectural. At the very least, it is not architecture of the formal and the masculine, defined by regulated lines, sheer mass and calculated proportions. On the contrary, it is the excess of details and objects which renders its specters and makes up the haunted space. Such a space is transient, unpredictable and amorphous. Yet this space of alternative nature is important – when we try to read into how the haunted space works, it begins to transform the redundant materiality of the everyday into conscious enquiries about the fundamental insecurities of human beings.

The first part of this dissertation shows us how the ghostly builds up around the elements of an everyday space through the house on Guernsey and horror-themed setups. Freud's

⁷⁹ Carole Faucher, 'As the Wind Blows and Dew Came Down: Ghost Stories and Collective Memory in Singapore', in *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity*, ed. Ryan Bishop, John Phillips, Wei-Wei Yeo (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.191.

uncanny then leads us to understand how *heimlich* can become *unheimlich*, and how the haunted-ness becomes a language in which we use to express spaces that are defamiliarized.

Further, we learn that architecture can be perceived as event and spaces are performed through spatially-structured events. Therefore, 'haunting' becomes a performative action and the 'haunted house' becomes the performance space. The uncanny which attaches itself to haunted-ness also becomes non-essentialistic of a space. As Vidler so poignantly explains:

...the 'uncanny' is not a property of space itself nor can it be provoked by any particular spatial conformation; it is, in its aesthetic dimension, a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming.⁸⁰

Lastly, through the domestic "proper" of Istana Woodneuk, we understand that for haunted-ness to be performed through space, the *unheimlich* must first be grounded by the pre-configuration of the *heimlich*. With the homely as a foundation, the lack of cognition between memory and experience, and between "things" and their spatial context, results in mixed signals between the real spatial experience and that of the imagined.

How is haunted-ness and the uncanny played up through space? How is this architecture?

When one enters the realm of a haunted house, his/her instincts are alerted by the setting of the house and he "withdraws from the world of senses...to become more attentive to the clear

⁸⁰ Anthony Vidler, 'Introduction', in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), p.11.

and distinct prescriptions of a priori ideas.”⁸¹ A ‘haunted house’ is not in itself haunted, but is essentially made up by those who acknowledge certain haunting elements within its space and render it ‘haunted’. Therefore, if the architecture of the house is driven by its own space, it can be said that its alternative architecture is driven by one’s reading of the space. In conclusion, specters (including the ghost of events in memories) in being physically undefined and amorphous can occupy any space. When one picks up their absence as presence, specters transform everyday banal spaces into architectural spectacles of haunted spaces.

⁸¹ Joan Copjec, ‘Locked Room/Lonely Room: Private Space in Film Noir’, in *Read My Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), p.165.



[16] Main gate, Istana Woodneuk
(source: Rachel Balota, September 2006)

I ventured into the grounds of the Istana Woodneuk with the simple romantic idea of reliving its nostalgic space. So I began by walking mindlessly through the house, enjoying every detail that catches my attention. The fungus in the cranny of a wall, a beer can under the staircase – every object found in this house has an alien quality about it. Without realizing, I was being drawn deeper and deeper into the house as one room led me to the next. Abruptly, I reached the bed of blue tiles from the collapsed roof and could venture no further.

Stepping out of the beautiful Woodneuk and trekking towards the gate where I began my excursion, I turned back a few times to make sure that it was a building that I was leaving behind (and hopefully, had entered).

The house gently falls into slumber as it prepares itself for its next visitor.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

[1]

Prison Cell, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum

[Source: Lee Junxian, *Untitled*]

[2]

Haunted House on Guernsey

Victor Hugo, *La Maison visionnée*, 1866

[Source: Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992)]

[3]

The Battalion's 'Last Stand'

[Source: 'A Brief History of the 2/30th Battalion A.I.F.', Makan No. 192a, <http://www.230battalion.org.au/index.htm> (accessed 20 August 2009)]

[4]

Tyersall Estate

(Source: Google Earth, August 2009)

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Istana Woodneuk with the collapsed roof

[Source: Ella Yuhui, *Untitled*, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ella-marie/2912146210/> (accessed 20 August 2009)]

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A visitor's map showing location Istana Tyersall and the adjacent Woodneuk.

[Source: George Murray Reith, *Handbook to Singapore with Map*, 1907]

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Istana Woodneuk with the blue roof

[Source: Limerances, *Original Woodneuk*, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/limerances/1477692408/> (accessed 20 August 2009)]

[8]

A Sultan's restful bedroom, Istana Woodneuk

[Source: K. Savage Bailey, 'The Home Beautiful for Sultan of Johore', *The Straits Times*, 12 September 1935]

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Upper and lower floor plan sketch

[Source: Dawn Lim]

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Blue Lounge, Istana Woodneuk

[Source: K. Savage Bailey, 'The Home Beautiful for Sultan of Johore', *The Straits Times*, 12 September 1935]

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Blue Lounge, Istana Woodneuk

[Source: Sabine Fink, *Istana Woodneuk*,

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/sabineinsingapore/3018142196/> (accessed 20 August 2009)]

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The yellow armchair in the dining hall, Istana Woodneuk

[Source: Daniel Cheong, *Tyersall House #3*,

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/danielcheong/364448802/> (accessed 20 August 2009)]

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Green-tiled bathroom in the guestroom, Istana Woodneuk

[Source: Rachel Balota, *Voyuerism*]

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Rachel Whiteread "Ether", 1990, plaster, 35 x 80 x 43 in.

[Source: Damon Hyldreth, http://www.damonart.com/myth_uncanny.html

(accessed 2 September 2009)]

[15]

Rachel Whiteread "Untitled (Orange Bath)", 1996, Rubber and Polystyrene, 32 x 82 x 43 in.

[Source: Damon Hyldreth, http://www.damonart.com/myth_uncanny.html

(accessed 2 September 2009)]

[16]

Main Gate, Istana Woodneuk

[Source: Rachel Balota, *Enter At Your Own Risk*]

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