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Uncanny Places

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During the pandemic, many people reported that their familiar neighbourhoods, towns, and cities had transformed into strange places. No longer alive with the hustle and bustle of people going about their daily business, places seemed to take on new identities. Some likened once familiar places to an apocalyptic film set. The places we took for granted suddenly became noticeable, strange, even hostile. They had become uncanny.

Getty Images

Uncanny places

Lucy Huskinson explores...

It doesn't take a pandemic for places to become uncanny. The uncanny is lying in wait for you right now, ready to appear when you least expect it.

Simply put, uncanny places reveal a curious slippage or mismatch between our expectations of a place and our experiences of it. Uncanny places appear as if a slightly skewed copy or double of a familiar place. They make us feel uneasy because they undermine our confidence in all that is familiar and they challenge our prevailing assumptions about things, including ourselves. Uncanny places bring us to the daunting realisation that we are not in control of our environments as we had initially thought, and, worse still, an uncomfortable suspicion that the places we had come to trust may be in control of us. Uncanny places are anxious places. If you find yourself in one, you are likely to feel suddenly self-conscious. Perhaps you'll have a sense of foreboding or an uneasy anticipation of something or someone just about to make an appearance from around the corner. You know not what or whom, but they know you.

Mapping recesses of the mind

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) sought to discover the identity of this unknown presence. As the pioneer of psychoanalysis, Freud attempted to map the 'corridors' and 'recesses' of the mind in analogous manner to an urban geographer who surveys the physical and social terrains of towns and cities. Although Freud didn't concern himself with the nonhuman environment or to consequences of urban living for health and wellbeing, his psychological approach can uncover important features of the places we use and inhabit: not least, places that have become uncanny.

The term 'uncanny' was already widely used and psychologically scrutinised before Freud developed it into the idea that is recognised today. Freud's understanding of the uncanny is explored in his 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche* (The Uncanny). The German word *Unheimlich* is often mistranslated as 'unhomely'; a more appropriate translation is 'unconcealed', 'unhidden', or 'un-secret'. Freud defines it using words taken from the

philosopher Friedrich Schelling as an experience of something which 'ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light' (1919, p.224). In short, the uncanny for Freud is an experience of the 'return of the repressed'.

The uncanny achieves its curious double nature – as something both familiar and unfamiliar, alluring and repelling – because it expresses the return of a forgotten experience that has been recalled to mind but without the memory of its original content. It is familiar because it is a recollection of experiences from our own past, but it is unfamiliar because we have no memory of the occasion when we originally experienced it. To illustrate the repetitious element of the uncanny, Freud describes an occasion when he found himself lost within the labyrinthine streets of an Italian town. Every attempt he made to exit the town led him to return to the same street each time. Another example he describes is the occasion he found himself colliding time after time with the same piece of furniture when trying to find the light switch in a dark room. These uncanny places thwarted Freud's intentions and his expectations of them. In doing so they appeared to be playing a game with him, in accordance with their own undisclosed rules.

Freud often says that the conscious ego likes to regard itself as 'master of its own house' – having full control over its experiences. This it manages by discarding (through repression) all it considers inappropriate to its needs. Importantly, this neglected material is never completely eradicated. It doesn't just disappear, it lays dormant or unconscious, and when the conditions are right (and much of Freud's work explores and elaborates on what these conditions are), it seeks conscious recognition once again, and in the process of achieving this it inevitably destabilises or realigns the ego. The return of the repressed can be likened to an intruder in the ego's 'house', or in more extreme cases, it can threaten to evict the ego from its house, making it altogether homeless.

The 'double' nature of the uncanny can, then, be understood as a doppelgänger or alter-ego of a person or place. To experience the double is to feel the presence of an experience that had once been expunged from ego-consciousness and split-off from conscious awareness but has since returned, unsettling the ego in its attempt to be made conscious again. In our everyday experiences, we prioritise all that is familiar, coherent, certain, and stable, but when a place reminds us of specific ideas and feelings that we had once dissociated ourselves from, it gives us an opportunity to revisit these ideas and feelings, and by the same token, encourage us to experience the place and ourselves anew.

Key sources

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A house of several storeys

The most familiar of places, those that we feel most attached to and contained by, are fertile grounds for uncanny experiences. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that the place we call 'home' has its double in the most recognisable of uncanny motifs – the haunted house. The haunted house is a violation of the most familiar and welcoming of places by an unwelcome intruder of unknown origin who threatens to usurp the cosy domesticity of its inhabitants. A related uncanny trope is the dolls' house and its little mannequins who live within and whose simulated domestic arrangements are controlled by the playful mindset of the person who establishes the rules for the dolls' activity and behaviour.

Following in the footsteps of his colleague, Josef Breuer (1842-1925), Freud compared the mind or psyche to a house of several storeys, each of which corresponds to a different layer or strata of consciousness. The dark basement rooms (or attic space) came to represent the unconscious realm of the mind, for these rooms in our homes are rarely visited and they tend to be where we store our forgotten possessions (see also Box, 'Hidden rooms'). It is perhaps unsurprising that fictional depictions of haunted houses or of homes besieged by unknown intruders tend to locate the origins of the threat within the kinds of places or rooms of the house that Freud and Breuer associated with the unconscious – within the dark basement (The Babadook, 2014), in the otherwise empty spaces of cavity walls and crawl spaces under floorboards (Within, 2016), and in dusty attic rooms (Psycho, 1960). These fictional narratives like to explore the ambiguous nature of the 'double', playing with the boundaries between reality and imagination, often leaving the reader or audience uncertain as to whether the mysterious threat is of otherworldly origins, an actual person, or the projections of a disturbed mind.

Cities in transition

We could extend this metaphor to other liminal places that house unconscious conflict and incite uncanny experiences – to places that are out of sight, but which nevertheless provide support to the life of a neighbourhood, such as metro systems, urban sewers, breakers yards and cemeteries. Such places are often thought to invite acts of moral transgression, crime, corruption, and other insalubrious or 'underground' activities – which is to say, activities that we may prefer to turn a blind eye to, keeping them at a distance to our carefully cultivated egos or personas. Whole cities can also appear to take on a split identity or 'double' nature, such as those slowly recovering from political turmoil and social unrest. These are cities in transition,

struggling to reinvent themselves and stuck in a liminal state between uncertain futures and the haunting memories of former regimes.

Freud is just a starting point for exploring uncanny places. Other notable theorists shed light on our bewildering yet alluring experiences of the double nature of cities. German sociologist, Georg Simmel (1858-1918) in The Metropolis and Mental Life (1903), and French cultural historian, Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) in The Practice of Everyday Life (1980) define the city as having a split identity, which cultivates a mismatch between the inhabitants' expectations of what their city ought to be and their actual experiences of it. The cities of Simmel and de Certeau are most uncanny indeed. On the one hand, their cities present themselves as an organised, governed system of visible and calculated relations, which lead most citizens to believe that they are living within ordered and rationalised environments. But, on the other hand, these cities disclose to their citizens a cacophony of bewildering and unpredictable social experiences that often disrupt their personal lives.

Simmel's city is a paradigm of ego-functioning, an 'intensification of consciousness' as he describes it, where experiences are reduced to rational calculation (1903, p.326). In response, inhabitants develop what he calls a 'blasé attitude', where emotions and feelings are heavily defended against and ultimately repressed. This encourages people to focus more intently on the task at hand, which, he asserts, is to negotiate the intellectual challenges and 'intellectual shocks' that the city continually inflicts on them (1903, p.329-330). Simmel's city presents itself as a conglomerate of rational calculations, but its citizens engage with it from a position of irrational, dream-like bewilderment. The urban subject is profoundly alienated from their emotional self. They live in a place that is ripe for uncanny disruptions.

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For de Certeau, the double nature of modern cities is evident in the mismatch between the systematic organisation of its spaces and the lived experience of those who negotiate these spaces according to their own subjective needs. He alludes to the visible grid plan of cities, where space is compartmentalised into areas with prescribed meanings. The grid plan, he says, is an attempt to control and manage its citizens, directing them efficiently through designated pathways to where the city thinks they need to go. But contrary to this rationalised approach to urban living are the subjective movements of the city's inhabitants – of people who often cut across routes and cultivate their own short-cuts through the city, or who move through its spaces at an unregulated pace, perhaps stopping to chat or to look in a shop window before moving on again.

Simmel and de Certeau show us that uncanny places reveal an existential gap or mismatch between the city and citizen. Their cities cultivate double identities, seeking to supress aspects of human subjectivity while at the same time presenting themselves as the proprietors of normalcy. People who live in such places become doubles too. Divided and estranged from themselves and their environments, they are probably anxious and apprehensive as to what or who lies in wait at the end of the street...

A reset

Despite the anxious trepidation they elicit, uncanny places are places to embrace, not to avoid. Michel de Certeau famously remarks, 'haunted places are the only places people can live in' (1980, p.108). And he is right. The uncanny displaces us but it does so for good reason. The disclosure of neglected and repressed aspects of ourselves can enlarge and enrich our attitudes to life, and it can even overcome unhelpful prejudices that we had, till then, upheld. Uncanny places alert us to the fact that we have become overly familiar with ourselves and our environments and require a reset. It is only when our expectations are every so often ruptured that our imaginations are stimulated by new possibilities. Uncanny places wake us up to creative insights and challenge us to drop outmoded ways of relating to ourselves, to others, and to the places we inhabit.

And so, when you are next out and about, and especially when you are relaxing at home, spare a thought for the uncanny. It knows who you are, it knows your secrets and it is looking forward to meeting you.

Hidden rooms

In March 2021, when New York resident Samantha Hartsoe discovered a secret apartment behind her bathroom mirror, her exploration captured the imagination of TikTok and the media. 'I can't not know what's on the other side of my bathroom,' she said. Her familiar residence had become unfamiliar.

Carl G. Jung discusses the 'hidden room' in relation to the fairly common experience of dreaming of a version of one's own house or neighbourhood that appears strangely different. Jung often dreamt of hidden doors opening up to vast libraries, and famously, of a hatch in his hallway that led down stone steps to an archaic cellar. It was from these dreams that he developed his idea of the collective unconscious – which he describes as an additional storey to Freud's 'house of psyche', one below ground containing the bones and remnants of humanity's past (rather than just the person's own forgotten possessions).

While the uncanny is the 'return of the repressed', the experience of discovering hidden rooms is equivalent to the gradual acceptance and processing or integration of the repressed material. It represents for Jung the acceptance of the forgotten past, returning as if in a new form. The personality is enriched as a result – just as the house is enlarged with its new rooms.