

INTRODUCTION

Theorizing the Unhomely Anthony Vidler

Anthony Vidler has been writing on the sublime for at least ten years, prompted perhaps by his study of the visionary architects Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Étienne-Louis Boullée. In a series of lectures presented at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in 1985, the architect and historian began to exhibit an interest in the sublime's dark side, the *uncanny*. This Freudian and aesthetic category foregrounds the body and the *subject* in relation to the experience of architecture and the city. In particular, the uncanny permits Vidler to look at the sources, meaning, and impact of fragmentation on the individual, an important aspect of both postmodern historicist and deconstructivist architecture. This essay from Columbia University's architecture school newsletter introduces many of the ideas that sustain his book, *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992).

The argument presented for the significance of the uncanny in architecture is a fascinating synthesis of several different points of view, or thought paradigms. In addition to the influence of phenomenology, (ch. 9) which he acknowledges, Vidler is affected by the psychoanalytic model. As described by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay, the uncanny is the rediscovery of something familiar that has been previously repressed: it is the uneasy recognition of the presence of an absence. The mix of the known and familiar with the strange surfaces in *unheimliche*, the German word for the uncanny, which literally translated means "unhomely." Thus, according to Vidler, architecture (especially residential) has the capacity to raise "unsettling problems of identity around the self, the other, the body and its absence." The uncanny provokes haunting sensations, the idea of the double, fear of dismemberment, and other terrors. Vidler notes that a common theme of the uncanny is the idea of the human body in fragments. This uncanny is the terrifying side of the sublime, with the fear being privation of the integrated body.

Another aspect of Vidler's position emerges with regard to his aesthetic agenda. He writes:

Consideration of the theory of the uncanny allows for a rewriting of traditional and modernist aesthetic theory as applied to categories such as imitation, repetition, the symbolic, and the sublime.

Because he sees the uncanny as emblematic of modern estrangement and alienation, Vidler claims that it is useful for analyzing and interpreting modernity. Estrangement offers a way to reexamine the exclusion of segments of the population on the basis of gender, race, etc. This notion suggests a poststructuralist orientation in Vidler's work.

Since the uncanny cannot be deliberately provoked or planned, this theory cannot be prescriptive. In that it cannot be instrumentalized in design, Vidler's uncanny is similar to Peter Eisenman's grotesque. Both are components of a postmodern redefinition of the classical aesthetic conception of the sublime, begun by poststructuralist theorists in other disciplines. (See Derrida, ch. 3) The contemporary sublime, also receiving attention in art since the 1980s, is the most significant aesthetic development on the horizon. Whether articulated as the psychoanalytic uncanny or the aesthetic grotesque (tied to ideas of beauty), the sublime in Jean-François Lyotard's words, is "the single artistic sensibility to characterize the Modern."¹

1 Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *ArtForum* 20, no. 8 (April 1982): 38.

ANTHONY VIDLER

THEORIZING THE UNHOMELY

Impelled by a need to confront the uncanny qualities of contemporary architecture, its fragmented new-Constructivist forms mimetic of dismembered bodies, its public representation buried in earthworks or lost in mirror reflection, its "seeing walls" reciprocating the passive gaze of domestic cyborgs, its spaces surveyed by moving eyes and simulating transparency, its historical monuments indistinguishable from glossy reproductions, I have been drawn to explore aspects of the spatial and architectural uncanny as articulated in literature, philosophy, psychology, and architecture from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present. Taking as my starting point Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny," I follow the double route indicated by Freud himself, returning to the sources of the notion in the theory and practice of Romanticism, then examining the different ways in which the concept has been operative in modern culture.

Architecture since the Romantic period has been intimately linked to the notion of the uncanny. On an obvious level, architecture has provided the site for endless explorations of haunting, doubling, dismembering, and other terrors in literature and art. It has opened its labyrinthine spaces to the relentless gaze of the modern detective deciphering the countless mysteries of urban life. It has engendered and mirrored atmospheres, moods, and metaphysical states as its stable forms have offered a more or less reassuring key to reality amid the flux of parapsychological manifestations.

As articulated theoretically by Freud and embedded in the literature of the uncanny from E.T.A. Hoffmann to the present, architecture reveals the deep structure of the uncanny in a more than analogical way, demonstrating a disquieting slippage between what seems *homely* and what is definitely *unhomely*. Rooted by etymology and usage in the peculiarly unstable environment of the domestic, the uncanny necessarily opens up

the unsettling problems of identity around the self, the other, the body, and its absence: thence its power to interpret the relations between the psyche and the dwelling, the body and the house, the individual and the metropolis. Linked by Freud to the death drive, to fear of castration, and to the impossible desire to return to the womb, the uncanny has been construed as a dominant constituent of modern estrangement and alienation, with a corresponding spatiality touching all aspects of urban life.

I do not intend an exhaustive historical or theoretical treatment of the subject; rather I have chosen themes provoked by a resurgent interest in the theory of the uncanny exhibited in literary criticism and, more recently, architectural theory. Beginning with an examination of the insistent recurrence of the uncanny in aesthetics and psychology from Friedrich Schelling to Freud, I explore the architectural uncanny as embedded in the myth of modern domesticity evinced in the writings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors including Freud's own favorite, E.T.A. Hoffmann. Selecting from the numerous "haunted houses" of the Romantic period, I then construct a phenomenology of the spatial uncanny, which I extend to the city as a locus of spatial fear through the reading of urban pathologists and sociologists from Legrand du Saule to Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin. Agoraphobia and its complement, claustrophobia, are discussed in relation to the notion of metropolitan estrangement, while the question of the temporal uncanny is addressed through theories of memory and its opposite, amnesia, in the writings of Maurice Halbwachs, Eugène Minkowski, and Jean-Paul Sartre. An examination of the uncanny as a characteristic of bodily projection, of architectural embodiment, and of the expression of movement, corporeal fragmentation, reflection, and absorption in a world dedicated to simulacra, spectacle, and the suppression of phenomenological depth follows. Here the long tradition of anthropomorphic embodiment in classical architecture is revealed to be broken, with uncanny consequences for the present. The last chapter considers the recent theoretization of cybernetic culture and its relation to the notion of domesticity; the concept of the cyborg, a being that knows none of the nostalgia associated with birth but that presents all the spectral effects of the double, is offered as a characteristic manifestation of the uncanny that continues to haunt contemporary culture.

As a concept the uncanny has, not unnaturally, found its metaphorical home in architecture: first in the house—haunted or not—that pretends to afford the utmost security while opening itself to the secret intrusion of terror, and second in the metropolis, where what was once walled and intimate, the confirmation of community—one thinks of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Geneva—has been rendered strange by the spatial incursions of modernity. In neither case, of course, is the "uncanny" a property of the 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.

In this sense, it is perhaps difficult to speak of an "architectural" uncanny as of a literary or psychological uncanny; certainly no single building, no special effect of design can be guaranteed to provoke an uncanny feeling. But in each moment of the history of the representation of the uncanny and at certain moments in its psychological analysis the buildings and spaces that have acted as sites of uncanny experiences have been

invested with recognizable characteristics. These almost typical and eventually commonplace qualities—the attributes of haunted houses in Gothic romances are the best known—while evidently not essentially uncanny in themselves, nevertheless have been seen as emblematic of the uncanny, as the cultural signs of estrangement for particular periods. An early stage of psychology even identified space as a cause of the fear or estrangement hitherto the privilege of fiction; for an early generation of sociologists, “spatial estrangement” was more than a figment of the imagination, representing precisely that mingling of mental projection and spatial characteristics associated with the uncanny.

From this point of view the architectural uncanny invoked here is necessarily ambiguous, combining aspects of its fictional history, its psychological analysis, and its cultural manifestations. If actual buildings or spaces are interpreted through this lens, it is not because they themselves possess uncanny properties but rather because they act, historically or culturally, as representations of estrangement. If there is a single premise to be derived from the study of the uncanny in modern culture, it is that there is no such thing as an uncanny architecture but simply architecture that, from time to time and for different purposes, is invested with uncanny qualities.

The contemporary sense of the uncanny, as I will attempt to demonstrate, is not simply a survival of a Romantic commonplace or a feeling confined to the artistic genres of horror and ghost stories. Its theoretical exposition by Freud and later by Martin Heidegger places it among the categories that might be adduced to interpret modernity. In *[The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely]* I explore those aspects of the uncanny's domain that touch on the spatial, the architectural, and the urban. As a frame of reference that confronts the desire for a home and the struggle for domestic security, with its apparent opposite—intellectual and actual homelessness—at the same time that it reveals the fundamental complicity between the two *das Unheimliche* captures the difficult conditions of the theoretical practice of architecture in modern times. As a concept that itself has recurred with differing effects in the last two centuries, it serves as an interpretative model that cuts through such historical periodizations as Romanticism, modernism, and post-modernism, providing a way of understanding an aspect of modernity that gives new meaning to the traditional Homeric notion of homesickness.

Consideration of the theory of the uncanny also allows for a re-writing of traditional and modernist aesthetic theory as applied to categories such as imitation (the double), repetition, the symbolic, and the sublime. More radically, questions of gender and subject might be linked to the continuing discourse of estrangement and the Other in the social and political context of racial, ethnic, and minority exclusion. The resurgent problem of homelessness as the last traces of welfare capitalism are systematically demolished lends, finally, a special urgency to any reflection on the modern unhomely.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

RAIMUND ABRAHAM is Professor of Architecture at The Cooper Union, and principal of Atelier Raimund Abraham Architect in New York. He has written numerous articles on architecture and is author of *Elementare Architektur* (1963). His work has been exhibited throughout the United States and Europe, and has won awards internationally. Abraham has been the recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Graham Foundation. His current projects include the new Austrian Cultural Institute in New York.

DIANA AGREST is principal of Agrest and Gandelsonas Architects, New York, and Adjunct Professor of Architecture at Columbia University and The Cooper Union. From 1979 to 1984 she was Director of the Advanced Design Workshop in Architecture and Urban Form at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies. Her books include *Agrest and Gandelsonas: Works* (1994) and *Architecture from Without: Theoretical Framings for a Critical Practice* (1991). Agrest graduated from the University of Buenos Aires in Argentina, and did post-graduate work at the Centre de Recherche and at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris.

TADAO ANDO, Hon. FAIA, is founder and principal of Tadao Ando Architects & Associates in Osaka, Japan. His work has been the subject of exhibitions in Europe, Asia, and America, and of numerous monographs, including *Tadao Ando: Buildings, Projects, Writings* (1984) and *Tadao Ando: Details* (1991). A self-taught architect, he has been Visiting Professor of Architecture at Yale, Columbia, and Harvard. He is the recipient of the 1995 Pritzker Prize in Architecture, the Mainichi Art Prize for the Mt. Rokko Chapel, and the Japanese Cultural Design Prize for his Rokko Housing.

GIULO CARLO ARGAN (d.1992) was one of Italy's preeminent art historians, whose writings on the baroque and modern periods were published widely. From 1939 to