Architecture of a Haunted House

By
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What are the typical architectural elements of a haunted house? And why are they frightening?

First of all, we have to picture a haunted or really scary looking house in our minds. Think of the Norman Bates home behind the Bates Hotel in the Paramount movie Psycho, or the Haunted House at Disneyland, or perhaps the Queen Anne’s cottage at the County Arboretum on a moon lit night, or maybe the old Grey Mansion that once stood across the street from Alhambra High.

Do you see a trend developing? Victorian houses typically fit the bill of a haunted or at least a downright frightening looking house. Victorian homes have steep roofs, elaborate detail in their roof ornaments, wooden facades around the porches, and bay windows.

So how does a Victorian home lend to scaring us?

Victorian homes are usually two or more stories high and have a very vertical appearance. This vertical appearance is accentuated by stairways leading up to the porch and towers and turrets incorporated into the design. This creates an imposing mass and subliminally establishes the thought of something much larger than ourselves. The steeply pitched roofs of a Victorian home make it seem all the larger and create the illusion of power and control.

And consider the entrance to a Victorian home. An entrance is significant in that it let’s you in and once you are in the house, you may not be able to get out.

A Victorian home has a porch which is often large and may even wrap around the house. And here is an important way a Victorian house starts to “toy” with us.

A porch is in itself an entrance to a house. Once you are standing on a porch, you already are partway into the house. Sure, you haven’t knocked on the door yet, but the roof of the house is above you and the railings on the edge of the porch have boxed you in. The porch of a Victorian home has already captured the person who ventured onto it.
The front doors to Victorians typically have beveled glass. Beveled glass takes light and bends it in strange directions. As the light is refracted, it has a disorienting effect on the individual seeing it.

Once inside, Victorian homes typically have high ceilings. This is another illusion that makes the individual feel smaller. And as one feels smaller, one feels they have less control over the situation.

The high ceilings play another trick on us. High ceilings lead to a larger volume in the room and consequently this disperses light. As light disperses, the room appears dimmer. And as a room loses its light, it becomes all the more difficult to see what is around us.

The flooring of a Victorian supports the spooky feeling through sound. Victorians will have wood flooring on a raised foundation. With this often a creaking sound occurs. As a person hears the creaking sounds, they can only wonder…. is all of this sound merely coming from themselves…. or maybe from something else.

Other architectures besides Victorian homes can be frightening. Large Gothic cathedrals can be scary. Gothic Cathedrals, such as the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris are huge, dimly lit, have step roofs, employees with back problems, and an abundance of gargoyles.

The association of a well known deceased person can give a home, estate, or monument a frightening feel also. Although Elvis has been sited all over the world, the most frequent sightings have been at his Graceland Mansion in Tennessee. And the mausoleum for Leland Stanford Junior on the Stanford campus has an uneasy feel to it.

Houses that seem haunted or frightening play to our senses. And as our senses become more acute in our fear, we then make these structures all the more frightening through our own imaginations.

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