Haunted Architecture: Ghosts Guiding Design
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Every site is haunted by its history and memory; some are said to be haunted by the spirits of the dead. Artists will live and work in an isolated and haunted environment on Devil’s Island, in the Halifax Harbour, Nova Scotia. Using its ghosts to anticipate future forms of architecture ensures that the past is always evident in the present and will be part of the future. Artists can draw inspiration from a haunted state that they give back to through the installation of their art. Site mapping documents the characteristics of the ghosts and give them place on the site. Models derived from fiction and non-fiction literature will experiment with the characteristics of haunted architecture.
Thesis Premise: Ghosts as Traces of Time

The term ghost, as defined for this thesis, takes on two different but interrelated meanings. The first definition is common to literature and folklore. Ghosts are the immaterial presence of dead people or animals but can also be machines or objects as well. They supposedly appear as apparitions and regularly visit or haunt particular places. Believers and non-believers alike understand what this form of ghost means. A ghost is also the trace of something that used to be. In architecture, a palimpsest is referred to as a ghost or shadow of something that has been moved, removed or remodeled. These two meanings can exist separately but complement each other when they exist in proximity. A ghost as an apparition can be a form of palimpsest. In both definitions, the term ghost describes something leftover from the past that remains in the present. The ghosts of any site should help to anticipate the future.

This thesis refers to a site that is haunted in written and spoken folklore. In John Potts’ essay, *The Idea of the Ghost* he writes: “Even if the ghost only exists in popular imagination, in folklore, it is keeping alive the memory of the past.” (Potts 83) The importance of ghost stories to architecture and development is that they can inform the designer of the site’s history, its purpose and its people. New architecture should use these stories to lead the design especially when it has become rooted in the popular imagination of the present day. To make a site livable, instinct may be to ignore the haunted nature of a site. This is impossible, as every place will always remain true to its topography as an expression of the past, existence in the present and anticipation for the future (Leatherbarrow 249). Every place is haunted through memory.
Primary Area of Study: Ghosts and the Uncanny in Architecture

Anthony Vidler’s book *The Architectural Uncanny* explains the history of the term *unheimlich*, which for the purposes of this study is best described by philosopher Schelling as “…the name for everything that ought to have remained…secret and hidden but has come to light” (Vidler 26). Ghosts are usually not seen for what they are. This creates a circumstance where a space is familiar but at the same time foreign, which is part of Freud’s definition of the Uncanny. Fear of the uncanny is “…a peculiar kind of fear, positioned between real terror and faint anxiety.” (Vidler xi) Ghosts relate to the uncanny, as described in Vidler up to this point. However, Vidler uses the word uncanny as a metaphor for an unlivable condition. Ghosts do not necessarily create an unlivable condition. We know from the many supposed true ghost stories that people live and work every day where spirits have been brought to light.

There are physical qualities and arrangements in architecture that create a haunted or uncanny feeling on a site. In Gaston Bachelard’s book *The Poetics of Space*, he describes the fear we associate with the attic and the cellar. The attic we can rationalize because we see it in the day but the cellar is underground, surrounded by dirt and always in the dark. (Bachelard 18) Dark spaces and shadows hide the image from the viewer commonly triggering a fear for the unknown. Haunted houses in literature from authors such as Dickens and Poe exude typical characteristics of what scares us in architecture, usually enhancing the unfamiliar or the unknown, often playing out in dark spaces. These and other physical and sensorial characteristics, with the knowledge of the folklore of a site, justify ghosts in our imagination.
Program: Artist Colony, Boat Launch and Park

The uncanny nature of a haunted site can make people feel fear, discomfort, mystery, and intrigue among other emotions. The artists can use this condition to generate their art, be it visual arts, sculpture, photography, or literature. The colony will be a permanent residence for one chief artist and will provide 10 other temporary residences for visiting artists. In addition, the program will include four shared studio spaces, a dark room, two exhibition spaces and a meeting room. The design should allow for flexibility and expansion in the program.

Artists are not strangers to the thesis site, Devil’s Island. In the 1970s it was the home of two Norwegian artists. The neighbouring McNabs Island, has one resident, an artist Anthony Publicover, who says that the isolation is “Heaven”. The idea of establishing artist colonies on both of these islands has been discussed by interested parties, including Bill Mont the owner of the island, but never seriously pursued.

In Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, the home is the centre of the author’s study of perception of space. “Great images have both history and prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience and image directly.” (Bachelard 33). Indeed every memory is a personal experience that is influenced by ones surroundings and architecture plays an important role in this. Art too is personal, but draws from public images. The artists can take inspiration from the haunted site and in turn give-back to the island by a direct (eg. physical installation) or indirect (eg. piece of literature) installation of their artwork.
Site: Devil's Island and Hartlen Point, Nova Scotia

Devil's Island is situated at the mouth of the Halifax Harbour. The island is approximately 30 acres of grassy land, a rocky coastline, and no trees. The island was once occupied by up to forty homes of fishermen and their families. Today, the only existing structures are an abandoned home, and a lighthouse presently owned and operated by the government. The site currently has no running water or electricity. It is accessed by boat, often not easily because of the rough waters and lack of a dock. The lure of Devil's Island, besides its isolated nature in close proximity to an urban centre, is of course, the ghosts. Island folklore tells many stories of spirits haunting the island (Vernon, Creighton). Reports of lights and fires seen from the mainland add to the mystery of the site.

The mainland across from the island is named Hartlen Point. A strip of land runs between the road and the ocean as you approach the point. From this site, you see Devil’s Island in the distance, a small hump of land and its two lone structures, sitting on the ocean (Figure 1). On this site, you experience Devil’s Island, but indirectly, so the mystery of the site and its ghosts remains. This will become the site of the private boat launch for the artists and a public park. The ocean becomes a barrier for the public for whom the island will remain a mystery, part of the ghost stories they have heard. It is also the beginning point for the artists’ experiences on the island. The entire site of the island and the surrounding ocean is the main inspiration for the proposed thesis that ghosts must define the new architectural intervention. The specific parameters of the site that will be used for the program are outlined in Figure 2.
Mode of Production: Light Models and Site Mapping

Throughout this outline, I have referred to several characteristics that contribute to the haunted or uncanny nature of a site. As a secondary phase to the mode of production, I will make models that embody these characteristics as described in fiction and non-fiction literature. Natural and artificial light, shadows and lack of light, change our perception of ordinary spaces. Darkness hides what is in the spaces allowing our imaginations to decide for us. Closets, corners, basements, attics and hallways are all architectural elements that can make people uneasy (Troutman 145). They can be modeled at a smaller scale within the context of the home. Other more abstract models will play with water, glass, light and shadow to identify qualities of darkness (Figure 3). This mode of production will also be influenced by Vidler’s theories of dark space. He writes, “In every case “light space” is invaded by the figure of ‘dark space’…” (168).

Many architects create diagrams to record important site characteristics. Site mapping is an important way for this thesis to connect the ghosts to the site. Using models and drawings of the site, I will map the palimpsests as well as the supposed sites and characteristics of spirit hauntings. A quick example of site mapping of the old homes on the island, drawn by a resident in Eastern Passage near Devil’s Island, can be seen in Figure 4. A more precise mapping of the physical and experiential characteristics of the site will be accomplished over the upcoming summer 2008. This will begin with a broader survey of the many haunted sites in Halifax and what characteristics they have in common. Drawing on transparent sheets will be the medium used to document this, and layering of the maps will begin to blur the past into the present.
Conclusion: Shedding Light on the Ghosts

Ghosts are everywhere. Everyone can see traces of the past in the physical world of the present. However, not everybody sees the spirit of the dead that haunts the living, the other kind of ghost. Written folklore, legend and literature tell the stories of hauntings that are either fictional or true stories. They are usually descriptive of a particular settings that becomes associated with that story. One setting for ghost stories is Devil’s Island at the mouth of Halifax Harbour, known to be haunted by many different kinds ghosts. In this case, the site is haunted by legend, by the traces of the fallen buildings and by the nature of the site, surrounded by water, windy, and isolated.

The new artist colony design, to be developed for Devil’s Island, will celebrate the stories that the locals have heard and foreigners have read. The architecture will keep the qualities of the island that associate with the ghosts of the past as well as increasing the fear of ghosts by developing architecture with haunted characteristics. This will rely heavily on spatial conditions and shadows that give the ghosts a place to hide. It will also require program that allows the artists to add their own uncanny stories to the island through their own type of storytelling or art. Experiments in shadow and spaces will be done using light models. The specific site and its ghosts will be explored using site mapping documenting spirits, palimpsests, and other specific site characteristics. Time separated as the past, present and future should not exist in these site maps. The resulting architecture will create a narrative of the ghosts that haunt the island. The aim is to embrace the stories, create new ones and bring them together in the present to play out on the land.
List of Primary Sources:


Bachelard’s book explains space as we know it in our memories and our daydreams by examining the home and how we experience it. My research is aided by his analyses of the spaces in the home, in particular his attention early on in the book to what spaces we fear with analyses of the cellar and the attic. Near the beginning he writes, “…there does not exist a real intimacy that is repellent. All the spaces of intimacy are designated by an attraction” (Bachelard 12). My thesis challenges the notion that haunted spaces are repellent and aims to create an intimacy between the haunted state, the site and the users.


These essays explore the uncanny nature of spaces and architecture as they related to literature, philosophy, psychology and architectural theory. His study of the uncanny in the history of architecture from the haunted houses of the romantic period to the post-modern deconstructive architecture sets the philosophical and psychological groundwork of how the uncanny is addressed spatially throughout history. The chapters *Unhomely Houses, Dark Space, Transparency and Nostalgia* emphasize physical characteristics that should and should not be applied to this new design to maintain an uncanny nature.


First published in 1957, *Bluenose Ghosts* is a collection of maritime ghost stories told by famed Canadian folklorist, Helen Creighton. Near the beginning of her career Ms. Creighton, visited the island looking for folk songs. She found that and the many ghost stories that she recorded in this book. Bluenose Ghosts is one of the best known collection of Maritime Ghost stories. This book is extremely important in my thesis as it presents a good part of the collection of stories that I will generate site mapping from.
List of Secondary Sources:

Appendix: Figures

Figure 1. View of Devil’s Island from Hartlen Point
Figure 2. Site and Program
Figure 3. Light model. Electric light creating darkness, reflection and shadows.

Figure 4. Site mapping by a resident of Eastern Passage near Devil’s Island