Hauntings

Monica Degen and Kevin Hetherington,
Guest Editorial

All cities are geological: you cannot take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We move within a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us towards the past. Certain shifting angles, certain receding perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. In other words, we are in the presence of a not (Taylor, 1993). Better to call that not by its more familiar name—a ghost. When we speak of haunting we recognise that the city, or any space, does not just exist in the present. Its ghosts problematize the issue of time as well as space and bring the materiality of space into play as a ‘speaking subject’. Not only do its human inhabitants have memories, anxieties, hopes and dreams, so too do the walls.

In putting together this collection, we seek to illustrate a concern with occurrences in social spaces that are not immediately ‘there’ but are either present in their absence or absent in their presence. Such an approach acknowledges in advance the need to challenge some of the representational conventions of social science. In particular, we concern ourselves with the momentary revelations often just ‘felt’; immutable qualities hardly obvious to the eye, described most of the times as an atmosphere, a mood; or... the uncanny, that surround us. We feel that the notion of ‘hauntings’ encapsulates some of our concerns here and opens up ways of understanding social space not yet fully investigated.

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Social science is often too literal, too caught up in the metaphysics of presence to pay much attention to ghosts (see Derrida, 1994; Gordon, 1997). Since Freud wrote about the uncanny (1953-64) it has been left to psychoanalysis, or those informed by psychoanalysis, to pay attention to ghosts and their haunting presence. For Freud, the notion of the uncanny links objects with subjective experiences and thereby creates a new form of expressive spatiality:

\[\ldots\] the ‘uncanny’ is not 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 disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming (Vidler, 1996: 11)

And yet haunting can be about more than just the uncanny. In fact, none of the papers presented here adopt a psychoanalytic framework directly: they are more daring in their approach to representation alone (or its discursive inscription by the subject) and we use the term haunting effects, or affordances (Gibson, 1986), sometimes in themselves, independently of our unconscious lives and interpretive work. We want to acknowledge other forms of present absence and their material form, sometimes in conjunction with interpretations that people make of haunting effects, or affordances (Gibson, 1986), sometimes in themselves, as expressions of our unconscious lives and interpretive work. We want to challenge approaches that see only the opposition between subject and object, or reduce the material to representation alone (or its discursive inscription by the subject) and we use the figure of the ghost to open up that space between subject and object. As a Quasi-object/subject, (Serres, 1991) the ghost brings a message from a space outside of our conscious and unexpected juxtapositions. We want to acknowledge other forms of present object to explore that space between: the dialogical experiences found between subject and object, presence and absence, past and future. This is often described as the ‘agora – phobia’ that the city extends towards them in its bracings against their presence. For Hetherington it is the issue of the ghostly voice found not only in the phantasmagoria of the city (pace Benjamin) but also in its phantasm-agera that allows the materiality of the city to speak a language outside of representation and in advance of the subject. For Edensor haunting is in the material memories of industrial ruins that uncomfortably haunt the refurbished post-industrial city, their ‘seething presence’ reminding that civilizations crumble. Degen, meanwhile, understands haunting in terms of the gestures and affordances that cities evoke even after they have been put through that sanitizing processes of regeneration and redevelopment. Fortuna likewise understands haunting as the disembodiment that the sounding city provides with its layering of soundscapes from past and present, local and global. While for Miles it is in the clashing of narratives of place encountered in urban development projects where different social groups claim and fight out their hopes for the city.

Such effects hit us in an untoward manner, creating a stop in the ordinary structures of daily life (see Appelbaum, 1995). The ghost presents itself as a gesture, as an expression of feeling, as an unfinished, unspoken movement disrupting the present time and place – it affords an un-structure of feeling. Consequently, for Reeve haunting is accomplished through the disturbance that a once only ‘happening’ of live art provokes by challenging a complacent audience to re-think their being – in – place, by unsettling the comfortable position of the passive viewer. Similarly, for O’Neil haunting comes to the fore through displacement – the destabilizing quality of objects out of context to blur boundaries and question common held assumptions. Thus, analyzing ghostly matters is about discovering the work of hidden, often unspoken forces and acknowledging that agency is not simply the property of human subjects alone. It is an effect of social spaces – something that we can respond to, have to respond to, if we want the haunting to go away or to settle (see Derrida, 1994).

Experiences of absence in presence are most of the time revealed when places are changing, transforming and when a debt is not being acknowledged in that transformation. The native burial ground under the newly built condominium with pool is a familiar trope from horror movies. But it can be more than that. For Verstraete it is the burial of the colonial visions of India, revealed in Kipling’s Kim. For Jaggeraite it is the figure of the mulata in the Rio cityscape and a complacent audience to re-think their being – in – place, by unsettling the comfortable position of the passive viewer. Similarly, for O’Neil haunting comes to the fore through displacement – the destabilizing quality of objects out of context to blur boundaries and question common held assumptions. Thus, analyzing ghostly matters is about discovering the work of hidden, often unspoken forces and acknowledging that agency is not simply the property of human subjects alone. It is an effect of social spaces – something that we can respond to, have to respond to, if we want the haunting to go away or to settle (see Derrida, 1994).

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and its mediated carnival that remains as both a present and absent source of the haunting presence of slavery within that city.

The contrast between times and places becomes more obvious in the spaces where physical objects, people and senses seem to be involved in a constant play of movement; a shifting between the senses, between visibility and invisibility and between semiotic codes, constantly evoking suggestions about who or what was there and what has vanished or is still to come. The betweenness of space is the habitat and the habitus of the ghost. Different times and spatialities overlap in the daily life of the city. The absent is not simply the 'not there' but a particular kind of blankness that attains a figural presence that leads to its recognition and often complex effects. This 'Banquo’s ghost effect' is often indistinct, not always perceptible and bears the resemblance of little more than a trace for most of the time. Some attention has been given to the effects to the past in this respect. Certainly, as Hetherington points out, Baudelaire, Breton, Aragon and Benjamin have been here before, recognizing how the past continues to have a haunting presence long after it has fallen into ruin. However, their orientation was often limited to how the future evoking the inevitable failure of such spatial dreamings. But it can also be from the future, an anxiety of what we are creating – a haunting future evoking the inevitable failure of such spatial dreamings.

The ghost is a nomadic figure, a wandering figure that flits in and out of presence in both time and space. It is a figure of the fold – the forgotten, overlooked, neglected, rubbish coming back to demand recognition. But it can also be from the future, an anxiety of what we are creating – a haunting that awaits us already in advance of our arrival at some point in time. A characteristic of our contemporary modernity is that we are no longer so blind to the failings of the utopics of progress, our dystopic outlook anticipates future hauntings. Perhaps nostalgia is the talismanic response that not only longs for a forgotten past but is held up to protect against and unsettling and ghostly future too. Yet, as Miles suggests, the settlement with the ghost does not have to mean dwelling in its nostalgic space and giving up on future hopes and visions. The papers in this volume seek recognition of haunting not simply in itself but as part of the settlement that is the basis for a means of moving on.

The aim of this issue, therefore, is to transform the obvious, even ordinary subject - such as an unmade bed – as O’Neill illustrates, into something strange by discovering its uncanny within social space but draw out the agency in haunting through ideas about affordance, gesture, atmosphere, live art, displacement… We can do that in words and we can do it in images. While the images used in this issue are linked to particular texts, they also stand outside of them too and speak for themselves. Not only are the individual texts in this volume in dialogue with each other, so too are the images.

To draw out these complexities, the papers in this issue investigate the transforming spaces and changing places that address issues of the entanglement of presence and absence. When we write with spatial binaries like space/place, city/country, public/private, centre/margin we should recognize three and not two signs are being deployed. We should not forget the ‘/’, the sign of deferral, the excluded third (Serres, 1991) and the ‘not’ (Taylor, 1993). Our concern is to consider what this in-between tensions consist of. As Robinson suggests in her paper, it is this tension that is the site/sight of haunting. We attempt to understand space that are marked by their indeterminacy and by an ongoing division without necessarily fixing them categorically as representable in advance. Our intention is not necessarily to ‘map’ such spaces by turning them into knowable places. Hence, we do not understand space merely as a fixed, physical environment but want to discover its overlapping topologies and their relationships with the social and cultural imaginary by analyzing places as ‘expressive meanings’ (Allen 1999).

Our basic premise is that past, present and future are never to be encountered as chronologically ordered but merge through the affordances of place, as Degen, Edensor and Fortuna indicate. While there has been a lot of discussion about change, transformation and flow in recent spatial theorizing, less attention has been given to new ways of thinking about the static - the stop (Appelbaum, 1995) - that which has remained motion-less over time and its role in the creation of temporal experience. The passing of time can also turn into the pausing of time in which there appears to be no absolute past or future, only a fold.

Spatial hauntmings, therefore, are about the ways in which invisible social relations are played out in everyday life. The unfinished disposal that is evoked by such presences – and the ghost is precisely a figure of unfinished disposal - hint at an active participatory of the material in the creation of experience. This calls for different ways of seeing (Gordon, 1997) and new imaginative styles of writing to capture the ways in which haunting becomes at least legible (Thrift, 2000). It is to that end that we offer the papers in this collection.

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