

The Archetype of the Haunted House, Winchester Mystery House and *Crimson Peak*

by Jeannette Ng

The words haunted house conjures up certain images in the popular imagination, a sort of amalgum of *Scooby Doo* episodes and halloween attractions wrapped up in a sprawling Victorian exterior.

But where does it all come from?

Winchester Mystery House (as it is now titled) was built by Sarah Winchester following the death of her husband and infant child. She started building in 1884 and as popular legend would have it, didn't stop for the next thirty eight years. Because only the sounds of constant construction could keep the ghosts at bay.

But it's notable that the Winchester Mystery House experience opened within five months of Sarah Winchester's death, shortly after the house was deemed worthless and sold off (for a still tidy sum) to an entrepreneur who ran theme parks. And after thirty years of breathless, prying speculation from the tabloid presses, the very private Sarah Winchester was a ready cipher for them to project their great money-spinning myth onto.

Many other places have written about Sarah Winchester's other properties (all of which are very "normal" in their design) as well as her love for architecture, being a subscriber to multiple journals on the subject.

But I'm most interested in the aspect of design itself of the mansion and how its features have been othered over time. Her mansion may be extravagant and eccentric, unfinished in many places but there's also a lot to be said about how so many of the "mysteries" of the house are simply conveniences and comforts for an old woman.

It's not strange, not weird, just not built for ableds.

The narrow passages, the low ceiling, the winding ramps and shallow steps, the three elevators, the many fireplaces (warmth soothes arthritis), the very low shower, the myriad skylights and solars: all of this paints a portrait of a tiny old woman who was admittedly eccentric and very into architecture and keen to experiment with all the latest trends, but above all: she built for herself and no one else.

Also interesting is how much the writing of domestic servants out of history feeds the myth. The idea she slept in a different bedroom every night (to avoid ghosts, of course) almost certainly comes from people noting that the house has something like 30 bedrooms and floundering to explain why a woman who lived "alone" and had no visitors would need quite so many.

But the whole of third floor was for her servants, her retained carpenters and their families. Her cousin who worked as her secretary also lived with her and has a splendid suite of rooms within the mansion. All 30 something bedrooms would have easily been occupied without Sarah Winchester needing to have nomadic sleeping habits.

Winchester House is almost always described as list of its rooms and corridors, often seeking to seem larger and more labyrinthine than it is. When I visited, the guides said that no blueprints or maps existed of the interior because it was simply too big and complicated. The itemisation approach also has a way of othering it when most people aren't used to thinking about houses that way. It is always described as having "47 fireplaces with only 17 chimneys" as though that is an odd number. House has four stories. That's 2.7 fireplaces per chimney. It is a completely reasonable number, especially noting the house's modular design.

I wonder a little if the American eye is just less used to seeing these seams, these layers of history in a single house. Thus see it as disquieting. Needless to say my home of Durham is replete with such, even student house I lived in in had a Victorian core & modern extension as the kitchen.

A lot of Winchester House's infamously odd features can also be explained by the 1906 earthquake, which toppled the tower and also trapped Sarah Winchester in one of the front rooms for hours. She scaled back and altered her plans considerably after the trauma of this, scraping the ambitions for the top floors and deciding to no longer work on the front of the house.

So the stairs to nowhere used to lead somewhere (the aforementioned scrapped top floors, the house originally had seven and now only four) and likewise the door that now opens to a drop. Anyone who has seen balconies that have been sealed up into rooms should be familiar with such design methods.

Sarah Winchester innovated in fascinating ways in her house, such as in the zinc floor of the North Conservatory, which is built at a slight angle. This is to allow the runoff from the watering of the plants to be directed and then collected. Others have noted on the efficiency in the design of her laundry rooms, which feature porcelain tubs with inbuilt soap tray, washboard and ringer.

She was very keen on new inventions, installing one of the first standing showers (made for her own stature, of course). Hers was also likely the first private building to have an Otis elevator.

Anyway, the myth grew and grew. Houdini showed up and made some grand claims of it being a warning against being addicted to spiritualism and attempting a seance in the Witch's Hat, a room with wonderfully echoic acoustics due to the sloping shape of the walls. Which also explains why it is the most haunted room in the house.

Walt Disney famously visited Winchester House and is said to have based the Haunted Mansion ride of Disneyland on it. And it does very much show, to me. A lot of the details of the archetype that make little sense have since snapped into place for me after visiting Winchester House. It's that sense of wondering why a trope is the way it is and then seeing its founder.

Through Disney, Winchester House became the archetypal haunted mansion. Everything became reconfigured and remade through that lens. What the early promoters spun has now become true. The winding steps that are there because an old woman wanted the independence of movement through her own house is now evidence of an unquiet, rambling mind and Escher-ian thinking.

Haunted houses have conservatories partly because it gives an excuse to change up the tone, but I suspect Sarah Winchester's love for plants and her excellently designed glass rooms are at the root of it.

A repetition of motifs throughout a house is really quite common, even today as a design technique. Any interior design magazine worth its salt would have a spread about such, but in the spooky manor, it's all about how Sarah Winchester's obsessed with the number thirteen and spider web patterns (also the daisy, but only because it has thirteen petals). Ever wondered why spooky elevators recur in haunted houses? Despite the fact that they were incredibly uncommon in Victorian houses? It's very likely from the Winchester House, which is indeed unusual for having three. They were likely a prominent features of early tours.

Creaking archaic cage lifts have thus become a staple of the haunted mansion genre. It's also in *Crimson Peak*, which I think draws far more heavily on Winchester House than any English manor I know despite being described in the film as ancestral & ancient. No part of it seen in *Crimson Peak* has that air of modular modification onto medieval structures, it's all aggressively late Victorian.

Crimson Peak does have a recurring theme of the new and the old, especially with Tom Sharpe's thwarted attempts at modernisation and obsession with his machine.

But it's notable that the manor has latest in gas lighting and elevator, all of which is cutting edge tech for the era the film is set in, without any of it looking bodged in. Despite the sense that the house is constantly under repair, there is no love for the seams of modification. And the birdcage elevator isn't framed as a modernity. Many of what would be very modern Victorian features are framed as old and decrepit in the film. It banks on the audience's associations with them as old.

The missing roof, the skylights and the sheer sense of unfinished renovation are all deeply reminiscent of Winchester House.

The motif of the red clay on the snow and the basement of *Crimson Peak* reminded me a lot of the dark red-brown stains on the floor in the coal cellar of the Winchester House, which is

a result of water running in and mixing with the coal dust (imported, with a high iron content) forming a staining mud.

Thus I'm left thinking big thoughts about the origins of tropes and how sometimes seeing their origin, giving them a name and a face can help one move past them or at least provide new inspiration, so it's all Quite Interesting to me.

Especially here as I feel like I can pick out a story of how abled people misunderstand and see as creepy things that aren't meant for them, the collapsing down of a long history into a single self-contradictory moment, as well as the disquiet (horror?) of not being the center of universe being a very lovecraftian sentiment.

There also a lot of be said about how the Disney aesthetic is based on what are themselves unrealities. The iconic castle being based on those built by Ludwig II to have settings to do Wagner cosplay in. Copies of copies, dreams of dreams. It's not for nothing that Umberto Eco titled his essays on *America Faith in Fakes*.

As is probably also evident in this thread, I'm very into the visible seams of eras and aesthetics in old buildings, it's like being able to read tree rings. Some of my thoughts on forgeries and seams and history of buildings make their way into [Under the Pendulum Sun](#), described by some as straight up architecture porn, so if you're into that, my gothic novel exists and you can buy it [here](#).

This blogpost began life as a [twitter thread](#).