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“Towns that go bump in the night”: Haunted Urbanity and Ghostly Narratives in the UK

Alexander Hay

Most if not all towns and cities in the UK have at least one haunted landmark, often several. Locations ranging from Southampton to York to Cardiff, for example, are host to a wide range of venues and locations, from industrial estates to haunted theatres, all said to be host to spectral presences of one sort or another. It is fair to say, then, that paranormal urban landscapes loom large in British culture and its urban experience. Given the sheer number of these occurrences, what does this reveal about how we relate to our towns and cities? Do our large number of haunted cities and towns reflect an ongoing narrative tradition in our popular culture, or do haunted sites instead reflect a sense of alienation and disillusionment with our surroundings, be it in the form of shuttered pubs, the London Underground, or the nondescript environs of a semi-detached house with its own poltergeist? Other areas of interest in this paper include how press coverage both reflects and disseminate urban ghost narratives, alongside the rise of housing inequalities and entrenched poverty that increasingly define British towns and cities. Whether these urban ghosts exist, of course, is another matter.

Keywords: city, ghosts, hauntings, homelessness, housing, media, news, town, urban



Hauntings, both in fiction and reported as real events, loom large in the British cultural imagination, if the seventeen year lifespan of the *Most Haunted* TV show and regular, sensationalist coverage in both the popular and local press—for example, *The Southern Daily Echo* covers day-to-day life and hauntings in Southampton with much the same editorial tone as the national tabloid press—is anything to go by. While audiences may imagine haunted rural houses and sites when thinking of haunted Britain, urban spaces have had hauntings of their own since the early modern period. What does this reveal about the

cultural imagination of the British, their relationship with urban environments and their history, and the role that towns and cities play in haunted place narratives? As a study of news coverage and similar primary sources alongside a broader discussion of the many-faceted role of “hauntings” reveals, the urban haunting is both common and revealing, a means through which our fears, preoccupations, sense of self, and hypocrisy are played out, and in a way that is not entirely within our control.

A Haunted Land

The English city of Southampton, it seems, is considerably haunted, with at least two haunted pubs. The 15th-century Red Lion, once used as an impromptu court, claims at least 21 resident specters (“City’s”). Toward the outskirts of town, on the long, winding Portswood Road, was the Talking Heads, another public house and live music venue, haunted, so it was claimed by its staff and owners, by a mischievous poltergeist (Carr). Elsewhere, the Dolphin Hotel claims its very own haunted bedroom and a ghostly chambermaid (Powell). It seems, in fact, that anywhere can be haunted in Southampton and its surrounding environs: museums,¹ Tudor houses,² Victorian houses,³ the city’s main theatre,⁴ and nearby country lanes⁵ all have their cases of paranormal activity, but ghosts seem to manifest anywhere. Southampton’s ghosts have been spotted in old brickworks⁶ and new-build shopping centers alike,⁷ as well as, perhaps inevitably, at locations connected to the Titanic, which started its ill-fated journey at Southampton, sites such as the Southwestern Hotel⁸ and a pub haunted by the shades of passengers and crew members.⁹ Even the many cruise ships that dock at the city are said to have ghosts.¹⁰ Nearby, the Isle of Wight has numerous haunted urban sites, in the form of both pubs and houses,¹¹ as does Winchester to the north, with its limping monk¹² and haunted newspaper office,¹³ alongside yet more haunted pubs and old buildings.¹⁴

In truth, all of the UK has haunted sites; York¹⁵ and Edinburgh¹⁶ leap first to mind, as do a multitude of locations in London,¹⁷ yet even apparently mundane locations such as Sunderland,¹⁸ Birmingham,¹⁹ Milton Keynes,²⁰ Hull,²¹ and High Wycombe²² have remarkably similar scenarios of ghosts haunting both physical locations and the living. Indeed, if the word “paranormal” denotes something strange and unusual, it is not appropriate to apply the term to any locations in the UK, given the haunted pubs, theatres, houses, former facilities that are now tourist attractions, and even a council flat²³ that are a common feature of our towns and cities.

As such, haunted houses and ghosts are an established part of mainstream culture in the UK. The recent dramatization and embellishment of the Enfield Poltergeist—previously featured in Sky Living’s 2015 series *The Enfield Haunting* and in *The Conjuring 2* is a case in point—but there is a rich and long-established tradition of ghosts in British fiction and media, ranging from the works of M. R. James to tongue-in-cheek TV shows such as *Rentaghost* and well-regarded, often disturbing productions such as *The Stone Tape*. Ghost narratives continue to appear in all sectors of print, broadcast and online news coverage, and in popular entertainment, specifically *Most Haunted*, a “reality” TV show that has continued in one form or another since 2002 and, while not having yet conclusively found a ghost or proof of its existence, cannot be accused of failing to make enough of an effort.

My aim, of course, is not to prove or disprove the existence of ghosts. Rather, I will explore how these ghostly urban narratives are constructed, primarily in regional and sensationalistic newspapers but also, to a lesser extent, on television. I will conclude by addressing the social purpose that these ghostly narratives and the ghosts themselves seem to have acquired.

The Ghostly Archetype

How are these ghost narratives constructed? A 2014 news story from the *Liverpool Echo* provides an example:

A HOUSE in Toxteth reportedly haunted by a 135-year-old poltergeist that "lifted a woman out of her bed" is up for rent.

Situated in Pickwick Street, potential tenants will need nerves of steel to arrange a viewing of the three-bedroom terraced property.

There has been "significant paranormal activity" reported by previous inhabitants - with one expert saying it is haunted by a poltergeist from the 1800s.

Social housing group, Plus Dane, which owns the property, has confirmed reports of paranormal activity were first made in 2008 by the then-residents. (Parry)

Firstly, the ghost is not the primary focus in the first paragraph, though it is mentioned as the source of conflict. The focus instead is, curiously enough, the building itself. In the second paragraph, the reader does not find out more about the ghost, beyond it generating a need for "nerves of steel," but instead is told where the house is and some of its features. It is only in the third paragraph that the ghost takes center stage, with the term "paranormal activity" deployed as an allusion to the popular series of found footage horror films. The poltergeist is described in terms not of its appearance but of its provenance, with a second reference, "from the 1800s," reinforcing the description of it as 135 years old. An "expert" is introduced but not named, and then the final paragraph mixes mundanity and ghost story in a matter-of-fact fashion: a housing association dealing with its tenants is combined with the claim that the latter have been terrorized by a supernatural presence for at least a decade.

What is the news story doing at this point? Firstly, it is establishing the story, but it puts much of its effort into describing the setting, providing us with details that, as will be discussed later, "set the stage." The story is also

portrayed as being “true”; the quotation marks do not denote skepticism but instead surround a quote, though we do not at this point know from whom. Likewise, authority and thus credibility are introduced, although again, the expert is not named. While “paranormal activity” is mentioned, and is indeed the basis of the story, it is not detailed. The story is more about where events take place than about what happened. Pickwick Street is urban although it is not in the center of Liverpool; it contains a range of older, refurbished tenement houses, new builds, and old industrial buildings. The street could be found anywhere in the UK, especially in the North. Establishing this mundanity is key to the story. The ghost can only have an effect if it is in contrast with its ordinary surroundings.

As L. Andrew Cooper has noted, the modern ghost story continues a very domestic strain of Gothic fiction that began in the Victorian era; here, the horror is accentuated by the ghost “invading the modern routine” (119). In order for a story to be compelling, it must, paradoxically, be defined by contrast. Ghosts that could haunt your street are altogether more menacing than ones that haunt abandoned castles. Likewise, Cooper argues that ghost narratives (both those presented as true and those acknowledged to be fictional) need to create this normality to clash with the abstract weirdness of the ghost and accentuate the scenario (122). This contrast is an uneasy alliance between the two, the blandness of a housing association’s daily activities and the gothic menace of a poltergeist contradicting one another, so the news story has to strike a balance through authorial tone, a style of journalism that does not question but instead reports in an engaging and informal fashion to entertain and titillate. Reports of a woman being thrown out of bed, of course, meet a wide range of the needs of both reporter and reader.

There is also tradition at play here. From the late seventeenth century onward, sites of alleged hauntings started to become attractions not merely to the aristocracy

and well-to-do, who were already keen ghost tourists, but to the general population (Bath and Newton 1-14). If sites of haunting could become accessible to the public, why couldn't the public be haunted themselves? In that sense, the events on Pickwick Road fit into an established convention. Modern hauntings are a democratic process, where class or background is no bar to being haunted. The story continues: "On the market for £91 per week, anyone moving into the property will need to be aware of the potentially paranormal roommates they'll share the house with" (Parry). This is, of course, deliberately comical; the story wants us to be slightly unnerved but uses humor to lessen the effect. Yet again, an interest in place and location is demonstrated. The rental price of the property is mentioned; in a time of rising rents and property prices, it seems that the cost of the property might be as important as the ghost. Again, domesticity and the supernatural are juxtaposed in a deliberately disjointed fashion, as if the author wants us to weigh the pros and cons of affordable housing versus having to deal with a malignant spirit.

Not surprisingly, a recent survey, commissioned by the makers of the popular supernatural investigation show *Most Haunted*, claimed not only that a third of those polled had supernatural experiences, but, more tellingly, they also feared that having a haunting could slash the value of one's house by 20%—anathema to any right-thinking Briton, given the nation's often morbid obsession with property prices and home ownership (Cox).

The story now needs to establish its authority, so that the reader will continue to "believe" while also further establishing the threat and making it relevant to that reader's own experiences:

Local paranormal expert Tom Slemen has described the poltergeist as a "violent spirit" that previously lifted a former tenant out of her bed, and shook another house so much the owner thought it was going to collapse.

Mr Slemen says the ghost, known as the Pickwick Poltergeist, was first reported over 130 years ago.

He said: "There have been stories about a very unusual poltergeist on Pickwick Street that date back to the 1880s at least - unusual in the fact that it Join seems to get around.

"Most ghosts stick to haunting one property, but there are a rare few who flit from house to house, often in the same street, and the Pickwick Poltergeist is one of those." (Parry)

Slemen's expertise is vague: his primary qualification is that he is described as an expert, in the best traditions of circular reasoning, and, more significantly, that he is local. The story implies that this demonstrates his reliability. After all, if a "paranormal expert" is from the same area, he is, it is suggested, part of it and, thus, reliable by association. Slemen then provides the essential historical background and how long the ghost has been reported. Bill Ellis points out that folklore requires this rooting into everyday life or history so that the story can be given a past, present, and future ("Death"). Ghost stories are, after all, about the past refusing to go away, but also about establishing a sense of place and how these two news stories are unified into one narrative.²⁴

Slemen is thus recruited as not only the authority of the story but also the means through which the competing elements are brought together. He encourages belief in the ghost but also puts it into context. The ghost is made part of Pickwick Road and its history, part of that reality rather than an invasion of it. However, Slemen is also used to maintain the sense of menace that the story requires. This ghost is not merely part of the urban landscape but able to move through it. The reader is left asking "What if a ghost decides to haunt my house?" This has a certain poignancy, as many people living in cities will have moved into their current homes after others have left and find themselves in the midst of faint traces and echoes left behind by their

predecessors. The haunting on Pickwick Road is a classic example of this: the people move on or die, and the house is vacated, but the ghost remains as a reminder that history does not entirely go away (Holloway and Kneale 297-312).

Ghosts in the News

To recap, the Pickwick Road story does the following:

- It establishes the scene and location
- It establishes the mundanity
- It establishes authority
- It eschews skepticism
- It establishes the ghost as part of our environment.

This can be simplified in a parody of the Five Ws of Journalism: instead of “Who, What, Why, Where, When,” we have “Credibility, Horror, Location, Familiarity, Authenticity.” I will consider this model as applied to news coverage of ghosts as a whole.

Other examples show that this pattern is repeated regularly. One 2015 story from *The Mirror* claims that a ghost is vandalizing a Barnsley antique shop. The credibility is established via the owners of the shop, who are described as being “business partners,” implying a certain respectability. The location is the old industrial town of Barnsley, which establishes the very ordinariness of the urban setting and thus the sense of the everyday. Finally, authenticity is established by claims that the ghost’s activities, including pushing a skull off of a shelf for added gothic effect, have been recorded by CCTV (Roberts).

Another story, reported in *Wales on Sunday* in 2013, reports a spate of hauntings in small Welsh towns such as Pembroke, Haverfordwest, and Denbigh. Credibility is introduced via the fact that these were all reported to the police, suggesting that at least some of the callers were sincere enough to ring 999. The authority of the police is therefore co-opted in the process. A “supernatural tour

guide” is presented as an expert; again, the guide is an expert by virtue of being described as such. The locations are ideal for urban ghost narratives and also establish familiarity, being a cross-section of small, nondescript Welsh towns. The only deviation is towards the end of the story, where credibility is stretched to the breaking point as the story notes that witches, werewolves, and zombies have also been reported and a Superintendent is quoted as saying that “residents and visitors needn’t worry about a supernatural invasion just yet” before noting, with some annoyance implied, that “we’re still in the business of keeping South Wales safe from crime rather than zombies or werewolves” (Hughes 23). This, of course, is at the end of the story and at the point where many readers will have moved onto the next page.

Spirits in the Bar

Another particularly common sub-genre of these ghost narratives involves haunted pubs. A 2012 story in the *Birmingham Evening Mail* is typical of its type, where the landlord’s wife is menaced by the pub ghost. Credibility is established not only by the landlord’s testimony but also by a trio of electricians who had their own encounter with a ghostly tradesman in the pub cellar. As the landlord claims, “With the cellar incident, you have three people who stopped at the same time and said, ‘did you see him?’ Why would those three people all give exactly the same account—they had nothing to gain from it” (“Our” 13). Pub landlords, barmaids, and electricians, of course, denote everyday occupations and people, precisely the sort of persons who are not, according to received wisdom, given to flights of fancy.

That alone is the reason, perhaps, that haunted pub stories are so common—there were over 50 such news reports in UK newspapers during 2015 alone—but the often-storied nature of these buildings also provides a certain ambience. These are buildings, sometimes dating back to

the Tudor period and often at least a century old, with distinctive architecture and their place as part of urban landscapes long established.²⁵ Generations upon generations of drinkers will have used them and shared their folklore. Pubs, especially those that retain their more traditional fittings and names, are ideal venues for ghost narratives, a useful combination of everyman, history, and shared experience (Chatterton and Hollands 175). Even the growing number of shuttered and abandoned pubs, as noted by Rick Muir, maintains this: these decaying yet still distinctive structures and desolate, dark and empty interiors are perfect places for the darker side of the imagination to populate with strange events, inexplicable feelings, ghosts. As Marvin A. Carlson notes, “Physical locations, like individual humans beings, can by the operations of fame be so deeply implanted in the consciousness of a culture that individuals in that culture, actually encountering them for the first time, inevitably find that experience already haunted by the cultural constructions of these persons and places” (135). This of course is an excellent description for a pub; often older than its most seasoned regular, its reputation and what it has come to represent, with or without ghosts, often precedes it. Many “locals” are familiar to those who have not even entered a pub but live in the same neighborhood and amongst the same networks that congregate there.

Returning to the Birmingham pub story, another notable aspect is the rationalization of the hauntings by the landlord: he claims that many of the ghosts result from fatalities in the 19th century due to “Health and Safety” not being “a big thing” in those days, adding that “we talk about binge drinking today, but the Victorians were quite partial to a tipple” (“Our” 13). Here, contemporary concerns are explored and contrasted with the past. In a perverse way, it is progressive, the landlord noting that today’s conditions are much better than the so-called good old days. Yet it also, once again, juxtaposes the outré with the mundane. This is

why the story has appeal. The daily concerns and controversies of readers co-exist, surprisingly comfortably, with the sublimity of ghosts.

Another common feature of these stories is that the chief witness or everyman claims that he was a skeptic before his experience only to convert after the event. One example is a 2001 news story regarding the Ostrich Inn in Colnbrook, Berkshire. This is a formerly rural pub dating back to the 14th century, the surrounding “village” now all but assimilated by Slough to the west and West London and Heathrow to the east, making it a surprisingly urban haunting. The story follows a familiar pattern: the ordinariness of the witnesses is emphasized, as is the ghoulish past of the venue, as local legend claims that the original landlord murdered guests by boiling them to death. The “specialist experts” are summoned to investigate the building, but little further detail is given; their implied expertise is all that is required in this narrative. The manager points out that the pub now attracts foreign tourists who have heard of the ghosts. The supernatural activity is described in eerie detail: strange noises, doors opening of their own accord, lights turning themselves on or off, and a sinister black figure. Yet the main point of interest is that the manager claims, “I never used to believe in ghosts but now I’m not so sure. I haven’t seen anything myself but there have been an awful lot of unexplained occurrences here in the last few months” (McQueeney).

Similar examples of skeptics turned true believers are common. Whether it is an entire street in Hackney that is haunted,²⁶ a Newcastle household that has grown attached to its specter²⁷ or a skeptical office worker turned keen amateur parapsychologist,²⁸ non-believers who experience damascene conversions are part of what contributes to the story’s credibility and are examples of an established convention, what Peter Lamont, Claudia Coelho, and Andrew McKinley refer to as “the avowal of prior skepticism” (690). This serves a variety of narrative purposes: “An

avowal of paranormal belief leaves the speaker open to accusations of incompetence (e.g. gullibility) and stake (e.g. wishful thinking), and an avowal of prior skepticism not only heads off such imputations but also aligns oneself with the ‘positive’ traits of skepticism (e.g. critical thinking)” (690). In other words, the avowal serves to both establish credibility and counter the most immediate response that can be levelled at the individual making these claims, that she is foolish or delusional. This ensures authenticity but also horror: the readers must be assured of the “ordinariness” of the witness not only to trust her but also to be troubled with the possibility that perhaps a similar situation could also befall them. As Ellis also argued in 1994, the “thrill” of reading urban or modern legends results from how fictional scenarios are effectively integrated into our daily lives, though his subsequent claim that the audience can walk away from these stories (“Hook” 70) is flawed; part of their effect, after all, lies in the uncomfortable thought that ghosts can haunt anyone. Yet, as I will now argue, ghost narratives serve a further purpose.

The Ghostly Stage

As I have demonstrated, one key aspect of urban ghost narratives is precisely the type of location in which they take place. In many ways, ghost narratives are a kind of performance; the ghost plays a particular role or series of roles, such as antagonist, McGuffin, comic relief, even sometimes protagonist. This is because the “haunted house,” or rather, the haunted setting, is an active participant in the plot (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 144). Naturally, the archetypal haunted house looks the part; a classic example is the setting of the alleged haunting now known as the Amityville Horror and its numerous cinematic spin-offs. Its arched, American Gothic structure and faintly foreboding, skull-like appearance combine to make for a haunted house

straight out of central casting. Perhaps inevitably then, the story was too good to be true and has been widely debunked (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 153).

Yet as we have seen with the ghost narratives previously discussed, a haunted terrace house, pub, or office is altogether more insidious, an altogether more convincing place for strange, if not always horrific things to happen. As Oscar Wilde noted in "The Decay of Lying," "Man can believe the impossible, but man can never believe the improbable," but as he also observed, "Life goes faster than Realism, but Romanticism is always in front of Life." An overtly haunted house, with dust, ragged curtains and furniture, creaking floorboards, and bats and ravens taking the night and day shift respectively to fly around it, has long since passed into kitsch (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 162). The Gothic, always so overwrought that it is constantly under threat of a lurch into self-parody, needs mundanity both as a contrast and an essential restraint. This is why that most urban of ghost narratives, the case of the Enfield Poltergeist, which is alleged to have taken place between 1977 and 1979, remains compelling: the supernatural activity was made more acute by it taking place in a slightly run-down council house, full of the faintly worn out and tatty decor and aesthetics of the period. One of the most notorious photographs of the case features the spectacle of the possessed teenage girl either hurling herself or being hurled by the poltergeist, and the image is made more horrifying through the backdrop, a bedroom she shared with her sibling, faintly untidy and chaotic, with posters of popstars stuck up, rather artlessly, over floral wallpaper. It looks like the Platonic ideal of the faintly shabby bedroom that working-class children and teenagers of the time dwelt in regardless of whether they lived in 284 Green Street, Enfield, or Sheffield, Aberdeen, or Truro. This could happen anywhere, the photo seems to say. It could happen to you. Your house could be next.

Naturally, then, the haunted house serves as an

excellent proxy for contemporary concerns and anxieties. The Enfield Poltergeist case echoed concerns about poverty, the family, and social responsibility, as the single parent and her four children limped on while parapsychologists, skeptics, and news reporters fought over them and the truth of the matter. Doubts about the case were widespread, but like the Amityville Horror, it made for good entertainment. In addition to the two adaptations mentioned earlier, the case also inspired the 1992 pseudo-documentary *Ghostwatch*, which made effective use of its two settings, a haunted council house and a TV studio, both made terrifying and alien precisely because of the certainties that they provided being subverted and ripped away by the supernatural. Again, a single mother and her children were the initial victims; families of this kind were common scapegoats in the press at the time (Thane and Evans 194), and the concerns over media exploitation were already well established and actively satirized by the show itself (Volk). Perhaps fittingly, then, the show caused a major controversy, as many viewers, unaware that it was fiction, were left traumatized. Here the ghostly narrative was only too convincing because it found the right stage on which to play out its horrors. As Diane E. Goldstein, Sylvia Ann Grider, and Jeannie Banks Thomas argue, “Reality exists outside of the haunted house. It is upon entering into the confines of the haunted house that the psychological landscape shifts and exposes us to the other-worldliness of the supernatural and the paranormal” (170).

Nonetheless, haunted urban buildings serve a multiplicity of purposes. Tim Edensor argues that the remnants and echoes of old buildings and the lives and communities that they represent constitute a kind of haunting in and of themselves, coming in the form of “involuntary memories” as well as uncanny absences left behind where a building once stood or even “lingering fixtures and features that provoke a homely recognition of that which was supposedly over and done with,” far removed

from the usual haunted house fare (327). “This focus on the spectacular diminishes the ubiquity of haunting,” he argues, “confirming that haunting is part of dwelling and being in place” (314). Perhaps fittingly then, the haunted Talking Heads in Southampton has now been converted into flats (*Planning Application*).

Many British cities in the last few decades have undergone similar renovation, reconstruction, and gentrification. The benefits are debatable. Brutalism, for example, is both celebrated and condemned, having acquired its own haunting quality, a failed or controversial vision of progress that has been set aside for other visions of the urban future (Hatherley 108-109). Yet while contemporary town and city centers are notorious for sharing a similar, bland, and featureless look, remnants of what came before remain. Joining the ranks of these old or odd buildings are shuttered shopping centers, pubs, and shops, an urban desolation that has gathered momentum since the 2008 recession and which haunts our cities to this day. Harry Skrdla observes:

An abandoned building is rather like a theatrical set, still standing after the play’s end; not yet dismantled. The actors have gone, but the flats and painted backdrops are still standing. The residual smells of makeup and paint, of perfume and sweat, still hang in the air. We feel that if we could but call the actors back in, perhaps we could see the play that was missed. But everyone is gone, and it’s not within our power to bring them back. So the stage is empty and dark, but for the dim radiance of the one bare light bulb on a metal pipe stand at center stage. The fixture that theater tradition calls the “ghost light.” (21)

Again, a link between theatricality and haunting is suggested, which raises the question, if a haunted house is a performance, does this mean that it is a strange form of theatre? The many cases of haunted urban theatres,²⁹ all

following the convention of haunted urban narratives, suggest a clear link between the two. As Bath and Newton state, “If we talk of ghosts playing roles, we must also talk of them being cast in roles. It was down to those who wrote and compiled accounts to do the casting—and in examining the roles of ghosts we are ultimately gaining knowledge of the casters, and not of the cast” (11). Certainly, plays about ghosts have always been popular—ghostly melodramas had a boom in the 1820s, replete with convoluted and potentially dangerous stage effects that occasionally threatened to make their casts into actual ghosts (Saglia 269-293). Theatre itself is haunted by reused sets, old props, dressing rooms used by hundreds of performers over decades, and the historical roles played by theatres themselves in towns and cities. The earliest theatres in Greece were often built on the sites of temples (Carlson 138-139), and modern theatres are a part of the fabric of their surrounding urban landscape and its history, as ‘Theatreland’ in London and Broadway in New York demonstrate, their spatial context influencing how and why we respond to these places (Carlson 140). In many ways, then, a theatre may be considered a kind of haunted house with or without ghosts, and other locations of urban ghost stories may be seen as places of performance outside the theatre.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of this blurring of lines takes place in a news story from *The Daily Express*: the cast members of a Scarborough production of the popular ghost play *The Woman in Black* claim they are being haunted by an actual ghost, apparently that of a cleaner who fell to her death in the venue when it was a cinema (Branagan). Here we have all of the theatrical aspects of urban haunting brought together: a literal ghost haunts a building in turn haunted by its own past, while a cast of actors, haunted by the performance history of the roles that they play, perform in a play about a ghost. This complex web of relationships, meanings, and ironies is an ideal summary of urban haunting and the many levels on which it operates.

Hungry Ghosts

Perhaps fittingly, then, ghosts have become metaphors for people overlooked or ignored by mainstream society. As one news story puts it:

More people than ever are being forced to sleep on the streets of Aldershot, according to homeless men who say they feel like "ghosts".

Hidden in empty outbuildings, doorways and stairwells, people with no home to go to set up makeshift beds for the night and are now a common sight for those who know where to look.

Neil Robinson, 36, homeless since January, often turns to stairwells outside shopping centers or multi-storey car parks when no other shelter is available....

"You're like a ghost," said Mr Robinson. "It's a lonely old place and it can be a scary place too. You sleep with one eye open." (Bryant)

To put this into context, the last decade has seen the number of rough sleepers increase by 165% in the UK, according to government statistics (White and Maguire 1). As the report from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government notes, rough sleepers are certainly more visible in urban areas and so, the growing number of visible homeless in towns and cities has entered the public consciousness ("Rough Sleeping"). Growing in equal number is a political and social backlash where rough sleepers are stigmatized and marginalized even further (Sherwood), their ability to "bed down" made deliberately more difficult by measures referred to euphemistically as "hostile architecture" (Bocchialini). If society wanted to create a new kind of haunting, an ugly reminder of social failings, of Dickensian squalor in the midst of expensive modern buildings and conspicuous consumption, it could not have done a better job than how it has dealt with its homeless.

Compounding the issue, as noted by homeless charities such as the Society of St James and Crisis, is an overheated housing sector, where rents and mortgages are increasingly out of the reach of middle income earners, let alone the

homeless (“Why?”; Bramley). During the time that homelessness has increased, average house prices have increased by 137% (“UK House”) even as rents have also become increasingly unaffordable (Guibourg and Calver). Further aggravating this is how the “Rentier Economy,” a major cause of this issue, is all but institutionalized, as demonstrated by MPs voting down a bill in 2016 to force landlords to ensure that their properties are fit for human habitation (Perraudin). Many of these self-same MPs were themselves buy-to-let landlords (Williams). We are being haunted, then, by growing inequalities and the wretched sight of cities too expensive to live in and too callous to care for those who sleep in its alleys, parks, and shop doorways. By contrast, any house, regardless of its value, can be haunted, and so, therefore, anyone in those houses can be haunted in turn, democratizing the supernatural, if not the property market. By extension, anyone can also be forced to live in abject poverty or be left homeless, reduced to sleeping in a cardboard box, on a friend’s sofa, or in a dank B&B. No wonder the homeless are so discriminated against, then: they remind us that our circumstances are transient, and that we can end up as ghosts too. If being haunted is democratic, so is the possibility of becoming a ghost.

Conclusion: Ghosts and Other Inconveniences

Let me conclude with a personal experience. One 2011 evening in London, when I was travelling home on the Northern Line, the train was heading towards Highgate when suddenly it screeched to a halt in the middle of the tunnel. The other passengers and I were caught off guard; given the 7/7 terrorist attacks and frequent stories of trains being stranded in tunnels all night, we were perturbed to say the least. But then the driver’s voice, unnerved and distracted, crackled over the speakers: “I’m sorry about that, ladies and gentlemen, I thought I saw something on the tracks. I-.” He stopped and the train began to move again.

The carriage was silent for the rest of the journey.

In many ways, the London Underground epitomizes the themes of this article. It seethes with activity and life yet can be desolate and empty. Its rituals, routines, architecture, and aesthetics set it apart from the city of which it is an intimate part. Its tunnels are dark and full of urban myths of ghosts, abandoned stations,³⁰ and lost rivers.³¹ Here, ghosts and suicides are reported, alongside the mundanity of daily commutes, cramped trains, and the lingering fear of terrorist attacks, disasters such as the 1987 King's Cross fire, or the bombing of Bethnal Green tube station in World War Two. Tube lines and the more recent Crossrail project cut through and reveal old graveyards and plague pits. It is an otherworldly place that is both an intimate part of Londoners' lives and a reminder that their city remains both uncanny and threatening in its strangeness, both a product of modernity and a reminder of the city's great age and often dark history.

As I have argued, urban hauntings serve a variety of purposes. They reflect an ongoing tradition of ghost narratives that adapt and adjust to progress while being always somewhat abstract from it. Consider the news story referenced at the start of this paper, in which a woman claimed that she had captured the spirit of her dead sister in a Snapchat conversation (White), or reports of ghosts clad in archaic clothes, stubbornly haunting modern, ever-changing cities in the 21st century.

Yet urban hauntings serve other purposes. They allow for reflection and folk memory and ensure a sense of continuity in ever-changing urban landscapes. Urban hauntings are a metaphor that allows us to explore social issues and challenges with a power that more direct discourse often lacks. They bring drama and mystery to often tedious and mundane streets, towns, and houses. Finally, they remind us that the urban experience is a kind of performance, a great stage where urban inhabitants play their roles and follow the script of their careers, personal lives, and social

expectations, but which can easily be disrupted by a ghost entering stage left, an old set design, or the reminder of older, half-forgotten performances. Hauntings are, in fact, essential parts of the urban landscape, without which there is no town or city, but just buildings and streets with no past, present, or memory.

Notes

1. See, for example, Michael Carr, "[Ghost Hunters Launch Year-Long Paranormal Investigation at Solent Sky Museum in Southampton](#)." *Southern Daily Echo*, 22 Mar. 2014, www.dailyecho.co.uk.
2. See, for example, Andrew House, "[The Tudor House Investigation](#)." *BBC News Online*, 16 Jan. 2004, www.bbc.co.uk.
3. See, for example, Gail S. Howell, "[Haunting Memory](#)." *Southern Daily Echo*, 8 May 2012, www.dailyecho.co.uk.
4. See "[Ghost of City's Past](#)." *Southern Daily Echo*, 31 Oct. 2002, www.dailyecho.co.uk.
5. See, for example, John Hanson, "[Strange Happenings in Swanmore](#)." *Southern Daily Echo*, 5 Sep. 2007, www.dailyecho.co.uk.
6. See "[Ghosthunters Head for Industrial Site](#)." *Southern Daily Echo*, 3 Jul. 2013, www.dailyecho.co.uk.
7. See "[Evening of Supernatural Investigation to Take Place at Southampton's Boutique Village](#)." *Southern Daily Echo*, 24 Feb. 2016, www.dailyecho.co.uk.
8. See "[Haunted House](#)." *Southern Daily Echo*, 30 Oct. 2012, www.dailyecho.co.uk.
9. See Dermot Martin, "[Landlords of the Anchor at Redbridge Think a Titanic Victim Haunts Their Pub](#)." *Southern Daily Echo*, 24 Mar. 2009, www.dailyecho.co.uk.
10. See, for example, "[Ghosts Seen Aboard Mary](#)." *Southern Daily Echo*, 1 Dec. 2001, www.dailyecho.co.uk.
11. See, for example, Henry Palmer, "[A Hooded Figure Whisks down an Alley](#)." *The Independent*, 18 Mar. 2005, www.independent.co.uk.
12. See "[Grim Tales Reveal County's Dark Side](#)." *Basingstoke Gazette*, 1 Feb. 2011, www.basingstokegazette.co.uk.

13. See "[Chronicle Ghost Returns.](#)" *Hampshire Chronicle*, 13 Dec. 2001, www.hampshirechronicle.co.uk.
14. See, for example, Charlotte Neal, "[Reliving Winchester's Past with Spooky City Tour.](#)" *Southern Daily Echo*, 18 Jul. 2014, www.dailyecho.co.uk.
15. See, for example: Mike Laycock, "[7 of York's Most Haunted Places.](#)" *The Yorkshire Press*, 30 Oct. 2015, www.yorkpress.co.uk.
16. See, for example, Sam Tonkin, "[Two Terrified Tourists Claim They Were Photobombed by an 18th century Ghost Dubbed the Watcher During a Visit to Edinburgh Vaults.](#)" *The Daily Mail*, 7 Jul. 2015, www.dailymail.co.uk.
17. See, for example, Jon Austin, "[Ghost of Black Death Victim? 'Phantom' Caught on Film in Tube Tunnel Near Plague Pit.](#)" *Daily Express*, 4 Jun. 2016, www.express.co.uk.
18. See, for example, Sarah Stoner, "[Wearside Echoes: Haunted Theatre Spooks Actors.](#)" *Sunderland Echo*, 6 Nov. 2011, www.sunderlandecho.com.
19. See, for example, Kelly McLaughlin, "[We Look at the Most Haunted Places in the West Midlands to Celebrate Halloween.](#)" *Birmingham Mail*, 16 Oct. 2015, www.birminghammail.co.uk.
20. See, for example, Anna Sexton, "[On the Hunt for Ghosts.](#)" *Milton Keynes Citizen*, 23 Sep. 2010, www.miltonkeynes.co.uk.
21. See, for example, Emily Chan, "[Is This Britain's Most Haunted House? Police Searched for 'Evil' Forces Lurking in the Seven-Bedroom Property After 'Children's Shadows and Moving Knives' Are Reported.](#)" *Daily Mail*, 4 Apr. 2016, www.dailymail.co.uk.
22. See, for example, Will Clarke, "[Ghost Researcher: Wycombe Is Most Definitely Haunted.](#)" *Bucks Free Press*, 6 Oct. 2013, www.bucksfreepress.co.uk.
23. See David Taylor, "[Mum Forced to Flee Haunted Flat Faces 100 Per Cent Rent Increase.](#)" *Daily Record*, 19 Jun. 2013, www.dailyrecord.co.uk.
24. See Robin Roberts, "The Untold Story': The Mediated Female Ghost in England's Blenheim Palace." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2015, pp. 35-51.

25. See, for example, Carmella de Lucia, "[Chester Ghost Stories: What's the Eerie Background Behind Chester's Pied Bull?](#)" *Chester Chronicle*, 30 May 2016, www.chesterchronicle.co.uk.
26. See Paul Baldwin, "Street Calls in The Inn Specters! Ghostbusters Believe They Have Found Britain's Most Haunted Street." *The People*, 30 Nov. 1997, p. 45.
27. See Mitya Underwood, "He's Not aBad Ghost. He Gives the Place a Nice Feeling," *Evening Chronicle*, 31 Oct. 2007, pp. 26-27.
28. See Cyan Turan, "It Happened to Me ... 'I'm a Real-Life Ghostbuster.'" *Fabulous (The Sun)*, 1 May 2016, p. 15.
29. See, for example, Steve Kelly, "[Is This a Ghost at Theatre? Spooky CCTV Footage Shows Chair Moving All on Its Own.](#)" *Daily Mirror*, 28 Jul. 2014, www.mirror.co.uk.
30. See, for example, Andy Dangerfield, "[The Lost Rivers That Lie Beneath London.](#)" *BBC News*, 4 Oct. 2015, www.bbc.co.uk.
31. See, for example, Bradley L. Garrett, "[Underground London: Adventures in the Secret City beneath Our Feet.](#)" *The Guardian*, 11 Nov. 2014, www.theguardian.com. See also Transport for London, "[Subject Guide No 6: Disused Underground Stations](#)," 12 Jul. 2012, Accessed 27 Feb. 2017.

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