

The Unhomely / Uncanny in Architecture: A Reader

“The uncanny is not simply a matter of fear, but of a disturbance of the familiar.”

— Anthony Vidler

1. The Uncanny: Origins in Freud (1919)

Sigmund Freud defines the *uncanny* (*das Unheimliche*) as **the strangely familiar**—something that *should* be comforting or known (*heimlich*, homely) but instead provokes unease because it reveals what should have stayed hidden.

Key triggers for Freud:

- **The return of the repressed**
- **Doubling** (doppelgängers, repetition, copies)
- **Animism** (inanimate things appearing alive)
- **Ambiguity** between reality and imagination, life and death
- **Over-literal realism**, where fantasy becomes too real

In Freud, the uncanny is fundamentally **psychological**, rooted in conflict between conscious and unconscious recognition.

2. Jentsch Before Freud (1906): Uncertainty & Animacy

Ernst Jentsch provides the first formal definition of the uncanny as **intellectual uncertainty**—not knowing whether something is alive, real, or animate.

Examples:

- dolls
- automata
- spaces whose agency is ambiguous

This anticipates the uncanny in **robotics and interactive environments**.

3. Heidegger’s “Unheimlichkeit” (1927): Not-Being-at-Home

For Heidegger, the unhomely is not about fear but about **existential displacement**: the sense of “not-being-at-home” in the world.

It arises when the everyday becomes exposed, strange, or unstable—when familiar structures fail to hold.

This gives the uncanny an **ontological** rather than psychological dimension.

4. Vidler's *Architectural Uncanny* (1992)

Anthony Vidler extends the uncanny from the psyche to the **built environment**, arguing that modern architecture repeatedly produces conditions of unhomeliness through:

- **Abstraction & estrangement** of modernist space
- **Glass, exposure, and surveillance** that collapse inside/outside
- **Domestic automation** that animates the inanimate
- **Technological environments** that behave unpredictably
- **Alienation** from scale, materiality, and embodied experience

Vidler frames the uncanny as a **cultural and spatial condition of modernity**, not merely a personal sensation.

5. Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Lacan, and Alfred Hitchcock: Domestic Space as Psychic Apparatus

Lacanian interpretations of Alfred Hitchcock—most notably collected in Slavoj Žižek's *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)* (1988)—have become central to theories of the uncanny. In films such as *Rear Window* and *Psycho*, ordinary domestic spaces function as structures of desire, surveillance, and anxiety. Familiar interiors remain intact, yet no longer feel safe or private. For architectural robotics, this suggests that responsive environments risk becoming uncanny not through excess intelligence, but by subtly watching, anticipating, or framing their users. David Lynch extended Hitchcock's unhomely by shifting from the gaze to atmosphere: spaces do not watch their occupants, but quietly absorb and amplify unresolved desire, memory, and loss.

The Unhomely in Robotic & Interactive Environments

Today, interactive and robotic architecture intensifies the unhomely through:

- **Over-attentive environments** (smart homes that know “too much”)
- **Invisible sensing** (pervasive but unreadable perception)
- **Perfect responsiveness** that erases human agency
- **Environmental animation** (walls and surfaces that move “too smoothly”)
- **Total immersion** (spaces that replace rather than support reality)

These produce the feeling that a home or room is **alive in the wrong way**—the core of the uncanny.

Designing Back Toward the Canny

1. The Unhomely Is Not the Opposite of Home.

Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* describes something that should feel familiar, intimate, or reassuring—but instead produces unease. The unhomely emerges not from total strangeness, but from familiarity gone wrong.

2. Automation Amplifies the Unhomely.

In automated environments, the boundary between object and agent becomes unclear. When a space anticipates needs, remembers habits, or responds emotionally, it risks unsettling its occupants by appearing too knowing or too alive.

3. Absence Can Be as Uncanny as Presence.

When interactive systems are removed, their absence can produce unease. A room designed to respond that no longer does so may feel emotionally vacant, neglectful, or even hostile.

4. Expectation Produces Unease.

Anthony Vidler argues that the architectural uncanny is often tied to modern expectations. Highly privileged users accustomed to abundance experience the failure of responsiveness as deprivation.

5. Scale Matters.

Oversized domestic spaces—especially when empty or inert—can feel unhomely. The mismatch between human scale and architectural scale intensifies emotional dislocation.

6. The Unhomely Is Productive.

Rather than something to eliminate, the unhomely can be used deliberately in design to provoke reflection, awareness, and emotional engagement.

To counter the unhomely, design can emphasize:

- **Legibility** over hidden automation.
- **Boundaries** instead of infinite transformation.
- **Visible mechanics** instead of magical responsiveness.
- **Negotiation** between user and system.
- **Imperfect, slow, and partial adaptation.**
- **Limited fidelity to “the real”** (hinting, rather than overwhelming)

The *canny* robotic environment is one that remains **recognizably architectural**, grounded in scale, materiality, and human agency—even as it adapts and transforms.