There was a time when the Victorian facade was a prevalent status symbol in the United States. How did these houses go from celebrated to creepy?

By Krystal D'Costa on October 27, 2016

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It's the time of the year when much of the northern hemisphere is turning their attention to their final autumnal festivities. In the United
States, children have visited pumpkin patches (and their photos have been posted on Facebook), the Pumpkin Spice Latte is at the height of its power, and hayrides and apple cider abound. These things herald the coming of Halloween, which marks an unofficial end to Fall. And as the days grow shorter and colder, and we are drawn inward both physically and psychologically, we are more susceptible--and perhaps are more willing to be susceptible--to the dark. We celebrate haunts and look for scary stories. And in these experiences, the "Victorian-style" house has a recurring role. With their mansard roofs, gables and ornate pillars, these houses appear to loom and brood. They are the quintessential haunted house. It is in this type of home that Norman Bates lurks, for example, and where the weird but lovable Addams Family reside, and where Roderick Usher ultimately descends into madness. Strange things happen in these types of houses, but they were once the height of architectural fashion--as much as we desire open floor plans now, there was a time when the Victorian facade was a prevalent status symbol in the United States. How did these houses go from celebrated to creepy?
The latter part of the 19th-century was both a time of extreme prosperity and extreme poverty in America. Following the Civil War, the Northern states had entered into a period of growth. For the railroad tycoons and factory owners, this was a bountiful time, and as is often the case when people are doing well, they looked to accumulate material symbols to signify their prosperity. Home design during this period was dominated by Victorian aesthetics. Gables and towers and gingerbread became social signs of wealth for the upwardly mobile during this period. However, this was also a time of desolation. The Southern states were economically devastated following the Civil War. The memory of those who had died in the war weighed heavily on survivors, and veterans bore the experience of their service without support. Furthermore, the industrial boom in the North was largely supported by the influx of immigrants who were lumped together in tenement houses. These disparities made wealth a very visible
experience--and drew attention to the rampant corruption that was embedded in this system of growth.

As America entered the twentieth-century, the American Victorian home drew the ire of those seeking to criticize the bloatedness of the period. These homes quickly became the McMansions of this era as critics such as Hamlin Talbot decried the style as a blight upon the American landscape, labelling them "wooden monstrosities." This sentiment grew into the 1920s, following the aftermath of WWI where numerous disillusioned veterans and their families saw things in a new light: The cost of technological and economical advancement was dirty factories and poorly made mass produced goods. The world had become a corrupt, dirty place, and Victorian-style houses were a physical manifestation of this stain; they represented the persistence of corruption and thoughtlessness that was thought to have originated in the Gilded Age. Where they were once a symbol of material wealth, these homes were now a weight on the progression of the American soul.

It was time for a change and this readiness for a shift was captured in pictures. In the early 20th-century, artist Charles Burchfield released the "House of Mystery" (1924) which depicted a decidedly dark and unsettling house. Art Historian Sarah Burns writes that "the house is a craggy pile of jutting gables and narrow windows with dagger points that pierce its shabby facade revealed in the glare of moonlight and etched with zigzag shadows ... [the perspective triggers] unease and anxiety in the viewer" (1). And critics appeared to have agreed:

James Lane said the house looked ghostly and murderous (2).

Helen Appleton Reed spoke of a sense of pervasive evil and corruption tied to the house (2).
Elisabeth Luth Cary felt that it had "come alive" (2).

In 1925 Edward Hopper released "House by the Railroad," which appears stark and uninviting despite the elaborateness inherent to the architectural style. Critics found it desolate, ominous, inhuman, and haunted--responses that echoed the perception of the Victorian legacy overall.

Americans were moving as far away from the Victorian-style as they could. The Colonial-style was revived in the 1930s and 1940s as something pure and simple and open--and as something that embodied the American ethic. It was a statement against a particular form of excess, and a declaration that the public outlook was changing. The Victorian-style with its heavily curtained windows and darkened rooms had no place here. But it wasn't as if the Victorian homes that existed could be torn down en masse--though some critics suggested just that or taking a hammer to them to open them up a bit--these homes continue to exist and house people. It's during this time that the very experience of the home came under fire for representing outdated customs. For example, prior to rise of funeral homes, it was customary for the dead to be received at home, meaning it was a Victorian custom for the deceased to be laid out in the parlour of the home for viewing. For a society looking forward, this was another perversion that these home harbored. This feeling of wrongness was able to grow exactly because so many people of the time had experienced these things themselves: they had seen home funerals, they had watched the factories belch soot in their towns, seen the spread of poverty that served to support the economic advancement of a few.

And while these homes were gradually abandoned, they held a legacy of life within them. Families moved in and invested their histories within those walls, and then moved out and the cycle repeated itself. This was not something the newer constructions could claim and this history accumulated in the corners like cobwebs. These homes were
physical manifestations of the things that Americans wanted to escape. They gradually became haunted by the lives that were lived within them. Burns writes:

"the Victorian house became home to psychological demons. Each house was a vessel, a lid clamped down on a stew of powerful emotions, both personal and cultural--fear, dread, trauma, anxiety, disgust, repulsion, grief, guilt--meant to be shoved to the back of a dark closet and forgotten. What the house contained, thought, always threatened to seep out, no matter how strong the desire to subdue and repress it. Like Pandora's box, it exerted a perverse allure, roused the irresistible impulse to raise the lid, peer inside, discover the secret, penetrate the mystery. What haunted these houses were memories that refused to die." (3)

Popular media could not resist the urge to peek and probe. Drawing on a literary legacy of "bad homes" from the likes of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne that preyed on the well-being of the families within them, the trope of the evil house was so often repeated that it became "blank narrative," that is, as a media device, the Victorian house's reputation was enough that its mere presence implied something terrible was lurking within. Media and reality began to bleed into each other as these homes were abandoned by the wealthy for newer establishments leaving them to decay or to be divided and subdivided into rooming houses, which carried their own horrific experiences.

As with most things, the passage of enough time is enough to soften perspective. Such is the case here as the houses that remain are treasured by their owners and are in some cases lovingly and painstakingly restored--ghosts and all.
The House of Mystery 1924, Burchfield

House by the Railroad 1925, Hopper