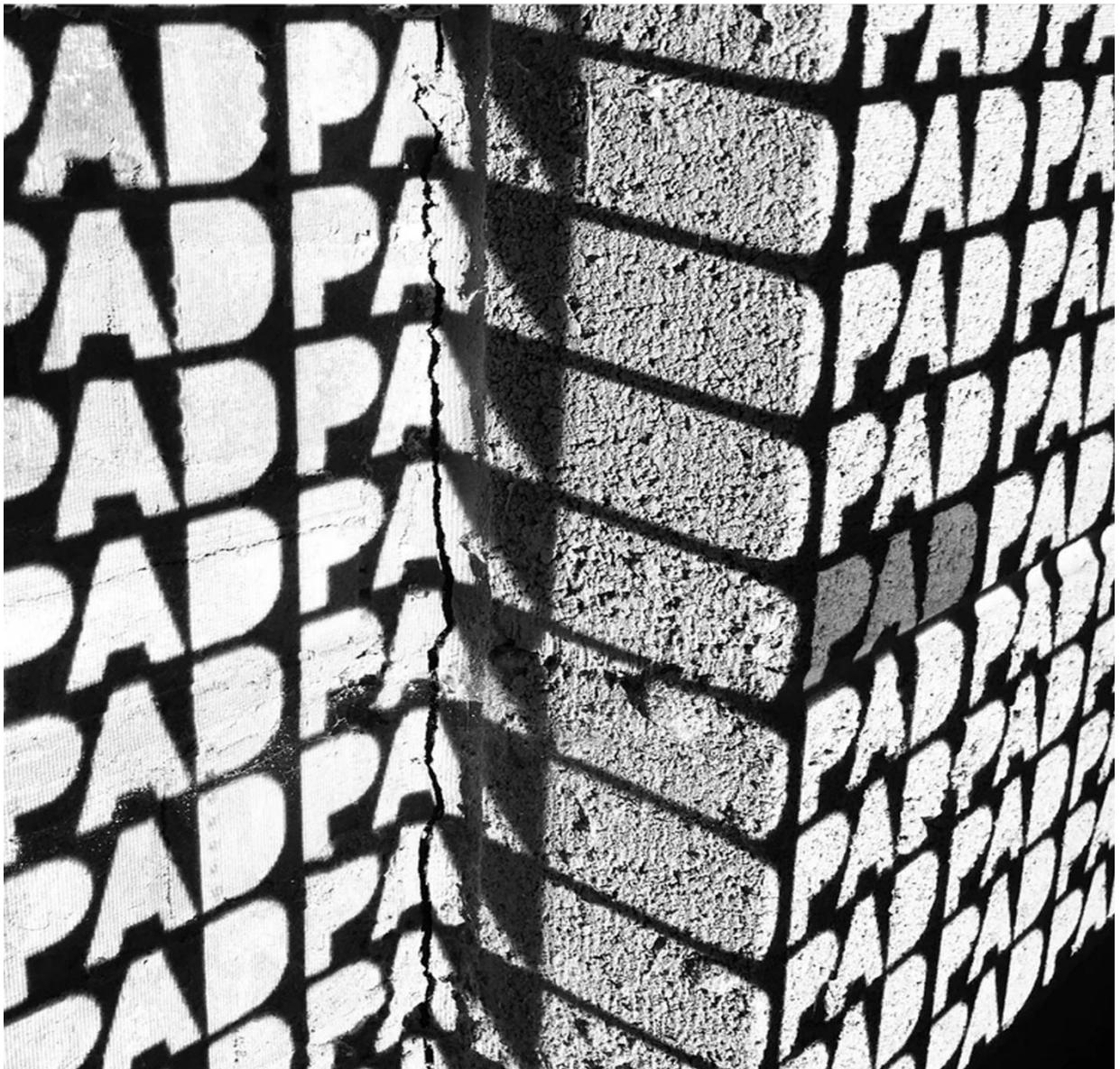


The Spectre of the 'House' in the Human Psyche

Jenny Batchelor, MA Art, Culture & Curation, 2025



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“A house is family. A house is history. A house is a body.”

Kirsty Logan, ‘Things We Say in the Dark’

The ‘House’ occupies a space that is both temporal and spiritual. At its most utilitarian it functions purely as shelter and safety - though even this description invites poetic interpretation. The animal need for these two necessities is so deeply ingrained in the human psyche that as their provider the house has taken on an identity that is almost sacred. Tenants rarely simply occupy their spaces clinically and sparsely but adorn them with pictures, paintings, tchotchkes - turning them into shrines to their family and history. When a person, or a collective of people, is given a space to decorate as their own it blurs the line between functionality and self-expression in much the same way as one’s body does. Our houses are the places we most often perform the more bestial aspects of our routines as well as the most soul-enriching, actions like cleaning oneself, having sex or cooking a meal fall into both these categories – serving as both the fulfilment of a physical need and ritual at once. In these practices, the house - as their set and setting - becomes a part of the ritual, further tightening the bind between the Soul, Body and House. Perhaps this is why the ‘House’ pervades throughout art and literary history as a source of both comfort and anxiety. The threat of a haunted house hits harder than, say, a haunted bank because at its heart it isn’t the haunting alone that frightens us. What frightens us is the violation of our space and by extension the violation of us.

From the cold hostility of Jackson’s Hill House to the sickeningly impossible architecture of Danielewski’s House of Leaves there is a legacy of artists tapping into an anxiety of a house ‘going bad’. Hill House serves to attack the identities of its unfortunate inhabitants, laying bare their flaws and worst impulses. In her time at Hill House the idealistic persona that protagonist Eleanor has built for herself through a series of lies is stripped away – revealing her mousiness, her lack of independence and her inexperience.

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All the things she is most ashamed of in herself. The house on Ash Tree Lane poses a much more physical threat to its own prey – breaking bones and severing limbs with its shifting hallways. Though neither of these events exist outside of fiction they do correlate neatly with the social and physical dangers that come with the loss of a safe home. The fear of homelessness is the fear for one’s own physical safety and fear at the perceived loss of dignity. The increased physical risk that comes with homelessness is clear but just as dangerous are the threats to identity. To become unhoused is to become a social pariah – cut off from identity by the deliberately averted gazes of those living within society’s limits.

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