

HERITAGE THRESHOLDS - GHOST HOUSES

BY ALEX TEMPORALE OAA, FRAIC, CAHP

OVER THE YEARS, I have been involved in designing several residential projects and I associate the term *threshold* to residential construction, although it applies to many things and many types of buildings. Arriving “home” is a very personal and primal experience that began with the cave dwellers and remains so today. Our front doorway leads to safety, security, family and friends. As the threshold to a hidden interior world, it provides inspiration for poets, artists and photographers.

I believe, however, that the threshold between our private world and the public domain cannot be defined by the line at the door. The transition between interior and exterior should include another layer of experience, before and after the doorway—a series of transitional spaces. It is always unsatisfying to reach the entrance to a residence that provides no gateway, landscaping, steps or canopy before reaching the door.



The experience between the sidewalk and the doorway is an indication of the experience to follow. When there is only a simple door in the wall providing a threshold between two worlds—existence and whatever lies beyond it—is like a nightmare or horror movie.

The most traumatizing for me are those entrances to abandoned buildings. I remember my first projects as a young intern architect assigned to work on rehabilitating heritage buildings. Entering a vacant, two-storey building adjacent the St. Lawrence Market, now the LCBO store, we clung to the edges like flies on a wall—the centre of the building was like a crater that had swallowed the floors from the second storey to the basement—a giant hole beckoning careless young designers into its dark pit.

Heritage doorways are thresholds between the present and the past, life and death. They stimulate anxiety about what lies beyond. Today, when I cross the threshold of an old building, I often find the experience a sad one. What was once a home filled with life is now in ruins. It’s unbelievable sometimes, the condition and remnants left behind. In many instances, it appears that every one of the inhabitants’ possessions has been left behind, in a radioactive end-of-the-earth scenario in which a gale-force wind has entered the house and belongings have been piled in giant heaps in corners. Pots and pans are left on the stove, to speed the flight from the coming disaster. I’ve never been attacked by the mutant zombie or wild beast living in an abandoned home, but a staff member on opening the door to a basement almost plunged into a void filled with water, just as the flashlight revealed that the blackness was water and not just a dark basement.



Homes have histories too. Sometimes these abandoned properties have stories of ghosts and spirits that haunt the remains. Perhaps crazed by some of these experiences, our firm has attempted to go one step beyond, venturing out at night. But the ghost hunts to document paranormal activity have not been fruitful. Most participants have been happy with that outcome – no shocks to the senses.

Each threshold in an old house is a step toward discovery and exploration. Just like time travelling, the threshold links the apparent reality of the present, with the intangible experience of times past. ■

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