

The Historic Dimension Series

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“There is... a stillness which has its counterpart in the calm preceding a storm, an ominous lull... void, inhuman. These dead American houses — Victorian in architecture generally, ugly, whimsical exaggerations in tortured wood — are haunted.”
-Lloyd Goodrich (Burns, 6)

Splinters and Ghosts: A Rejection of Second Empire Architecture

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Huddled in a desolate landscape, the ominous Psycho house peers over a quiet world as its mansard roof juts into the empty sky. Perched on the top of a distant hill, the Addams family’s residence seems to dare any outsider to approach, its tall and thin windows only adding to the massive, stretched bulk of the outer facade. Lightning flashes, thunder cracks, and bats screech as they fly in front of a spooky, dilapidated, and overgrown mansion— right before Scooby-Doo’s groovy 1970s theme song begins to play. All of these houses are meant to evoke a sense of dread and unease — and all of these houses are the same exact architectural style. What are these towering and incredibly distinct buildings, and why do they seem so intrinsically tied to ghostly haunts or foreboding presences?

The architectural style is called Second Empire, and these mansions were the height of architectural fashion between 1860 and 1880. These buildings are clearly defined by their unmistakable mansard roofs that slope upward and create, effectively, another usable floor of space. Molded cornices and decorative eaves add further to the distinct style. However, they slowly became less popular during the end of the 1800s. After the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of American architects considered Second Empire homes to be completely obsolete and offensively ugly.

Second Empire buildings’ close ties to haunted spaces are unique; they are now nearly always portrayed as negative spaces

when shown at all in the media. How did this particular style slip into obscurity and emerge as the favored appearance for ghoulish hangouts? To answer this question, three main topics must be explored: America’s ties to French architectural influences, a purposeful reshaping of American-built identity, and the long-lasting mental effects of the past on perceptions of the world’s built environments.

The Rise and Fall of a Second Empire

In the mid-1800s, the United States watched its ally, France, with curiosity as the European country’s population struggled to define their political identity. Dramatic upheaval and political unrest resulted in the reestablishment of a monarchy and the installation of Napoleon III, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, as an emperor in 1852. This Second Napoleonic Empire represented an uncertain cultural shift as France teetered between an old world and a new future. As detailed by historian Roger Price (2007), Napoleon III ordered for Paris’ medieval streets to be restructured and for many historical buildings to be torn down. He replaced them with ordered thoroughfares and neat lines of buildings to ease transportation and access throughout the city. As a result, his new Paris took on distinct architectural qualities throughout his reign.

American architects and artists alike held a fascination with French culture in the nineteenth century, and architect Alfred B. Mullett was no exception to this trend. Historian Lawrence Wodehouse stated that Mullett, who traveled through Europe



Fig. 2: New Jersey State Hospital for the Insane— known as “Greystone” — main building entrance, 1905.

during his studies, became enamored with the new Second Empire architectural stylings and brought his love of the unique and massive constructions back to the United States. There, he served as the supervising architect to the Department of the Treasury beginning in 1865. Inspired by the popular European trends, Mullett designed over 30 Second Empire federal buildings in America, significantly contributing to the growth of the style in the U.S. — especially during and after the construction of his State, War, and Navy Building in Washington, DC. Construction began on Mullett’s massive project in 1871; it would not be completed until 1887.

As Mullett toiled over his massive governmental administrative buildings, the popularity of Second Empire architecture continued to spread throughout the country. Second Empire influence extended into private homes, businesses, and even grander projects — such as the increasingly popular Kirkbride insane asylums constructed across the country sponsored by state governments. One such example is the New Jersey State Hospital for the Insane in Morris Plains, nestled away in the northern half of the state. Historian Carla Gianni examined the history of the hospital, dubbed “Greystone” due to its rough outer facade and construction materials. Following the then-popular Kirkbride floor plan for mental health facilities, architect Samuel Sloan implemented Second Empire architectural features to suggest an



Fig. 3: The west facade of Mullett’s State, War, and Navy Building in Washington, DC.

imposing and luxurious environment. Opened in 1876 during the peak of the architectural style’s popularity in the United States, Greystone represented the ideal use of the flamboyant detailing and elaborate additions. Still, European visitors were less impressed by the appearance; during an 1875 visit to the building, English mental health specialist Charles Bucknill questioned if Americans placed too much value on the outward appearance of their mental health facilities. Greystone, however, would not be the largest of the United States’ massive Second Empire constructions. Mullett’s labors in Washington, DC, had finally resulted in a completed building — and the scale of it was like nothing the country had ever seen before.

Completed in 1887 after sixteen years of construction, Mullett’s State, War, and Navy Building cost the government \$10 million, the monetary equivalent of approximately \$272 million today. Almost all of Mullett’s governmental buildings were extravagantly large, but the State, War, and Navy Building was a culmination of his over-the-top constructions. According to the White House’s website, the interior area of the State, War, and Navy building was the equivalent of eleven and a half football fields (just over 15 acres). It held over two miles of hallways, and the building had only 76 fewer steps than the Empire State Building. The U.S. Office of the Historian states that it was the largest office building in the world upon its completion.

While its grandiose appearance stunned many, Mullett’s architectural magnum opus quickly fell under scrutiny by his peers. Critics derided its flamboyant, extravagant, and massive facade; Mullett’s contemporary, historian Henry Adams, referred to the building as the “architec-



Fig. 4: Portrait of Alfred B. Mullett from the National Portrait Gallery.

tural infant asylum next to the White House” (Green, 382). As Mullett’s beloved Second Empire buildings slipped rapidly out of style, the criticism would only continue. After he brought multiple lawsuits against both the U.S. government and private clients, Mullett’s finances began to spiral. On October 20th, 1890, Alfred B. Mullett took his own life; he was only 56. Mullett’s gigantic, boisterous, and unique style would fall by the wayside as Richardsonian Romanesque and Gothic Revival buildings took their place. Mullett’s life signaled the growth of Second Empire, while his suicide marked the distinct style’s descent into obscurity and revilement.

Those Strange and Dated Foreign Buildings

The decline of bombastic federal buildings like Mullett’s State, War, and Navy Offices directly tied American architects’ purposeful push to reject European styles in the United States. From 1900-1915, architects across the country called for their students to cease studying in Europe, and specifically, to stop emulating French styles. In 1909, architect William L. Price wrote an article for *The Craftsman* magazine titled “A Plea for True Democracy in the Domestic Architecture of America,” begging his peers to reconsider houses as “expressive envelope[s] for human desires and sentiments” rather than a means to display “vanities and borrowed plumes” from outside influences (Price, 251). Price’s lambastment of his peers only continued as he decried wealthy Americans for defining their success by their ability to purchase European-inspired mansions, stating:

Quit building the silly, sham palaces that demean your powers even though they do express your dollars. The idea of a live craftsman like [early twentieth century steel magnate] Mr. [Charles] Schwab, who really does things, building a dead French chateau in New York would be



Fig. 5: An example of a Second Empire-styled private residence.

hilariously funny if it were not pitiful. Mr. Carnegie, who has built up a great American industry... scatters over our country library buildings that are in design essentially European and unmodern. If only he would insist that they be American architecture... (Price, 251)

This attitude and purposeful rejection of European influences would only continue. A later *Craftsman* article from 1912 stated that the country’s love for foreign art and culture was “very bad for America, but extremely satisfactory and beneficial to France” (*The Craftsman*, 319). The National Cut Stone Contractors’ Association’s journal, *Stone*, revealed that by 1913, recent construction already reflected this societal change in attitude. French visitors to the United States remarked on the simplification of new buildings in New York and the substantial reduction of Gothic and Renaissance-inspired constructions. Architects and artists alike reinforced the death knell of Second Empire architecture in the United States as it became associated with an undesirable past, un-American sentiments, and undemocratic philosophies from a bygone era. The style fell to the wayside almost entirely, and many would be torn down in favor of less flamboyant and aggressively styled facades. Proponents of house beautification services advocated for stripping dramatic features from older homes; one example from 1912 emphasized that “the cupola may always be removed to the betterment of the house” (Squires, 1913, 250).

While viewed with disdain before, many U.S. architects of the 1930s viewed Second Empire buildings with abject disgust. In 1936, architect Thomas E. Tallmadge referred to American attempts at the style as “architectural colic” (Tallmadge, 151). He poked fun at the over-the-top nature of the buildings and questioned why so few



Fig. 6: Greystone burns on May 6, 1929.

remained— though he failed to mention their purposeful demolition throughout the country.

Destroying the Outdated Past

Throughout the United States, the now-outdated Second Empire buildings once so positively received were now viewed with disdain by both the general public and professional architects. Alfred B. Mullett's six most massive Second Empire constructions no longer inspired a sense of awe amongst the general populace; local populations and city planners tore down all but two of his creations. Attempts to demolish the post office he designed in St. Louis, Missouri, continued until the 1970s— the building was saved thanks to the efforts of historic preservationists. Builders and architects also worked to reformat or restructure Second Empire buildings, stripping them of their signature Mansard roofs in favor of more traditional, subdued stylings. One such example of this was at Greystone Asylum.

On May 6, 1929, a fire spread quickly throughout the complex's main building before it could be extinguished by Morristown firefighters. Afterward, the annual report of the asylum reveals that the board of directors and architects chose to purposefully leave the Mansard roofs out of the building's reconstruction plan, both due to the costs of reconstructing the distinctive feature and because it was considered stylistically unnecessary. While the main cupola of the central tower remained, the wings of the administration building never recovered their mansard caps. Similar trends would follow around the country.

Further, a new moral concern following the end of World War I arose amongst veterans and civilians alike, as discussed by historian Sarah Burns. The war left Americans traumatized and reeling from a bloody con-



Fig. 7: Greystone's wings without Mansard roofs, 1944.

flict, and a frenetic energy to grow and change as a nation took hold. The future seemed to hold more promise than the unwelcoming past. With Second Empire houses already associated with the fall of Napoleon III, negativity only increased. In his 1931 book, historian Lewis Mumford stated that the tall windows, dark facades, and mansard roofs of Second Empire buildings belonged to what he called the "Awkward Age" during architectural "Brown Decades" of depression and ugliness (Mumford, 3). The United States' historic houses now seemed to be a part of a bygone era sandwiched between the Civil War and a World War; a new sense of unease coated the facades of these buildings.

By the 1930s, Second Empire architecture had gained yet another negative connotation as scholars lambasted the crumbled Napoleonic monarchy as an early example of facism. While the decline of the Second French Empire had negatively impacted the perceptions of the architectural style when Napoleon III was deposed in 1870, its new associations with a growing danger in Europe continued to alienate the unique American buildings left by the failed monarchy's influence. Considered unseemly, outdated, and alien, Second Empire architecture faced heated scrutiny from all sides. Many houses sat abandoned after two economic crises in 1873 and 1893, and even more fell into disrepair after the Great Depression struck in 1929. The former estates and mansions previously used to display wealth and social class were left to decay and rot away almost entirely.

Scars of the Past

As the exteriors of Second Empire houses became dated, so too did the interiors. Parlors represented a room that had been falling out of style for decades; memories of family members' corpses laying out for family viewings permeated memories and represented a Victorian social practice no longer performed. Death within a family home became increasingly rare as those in poor health



Fig. 8: George P. Colt Mansion, left abandoned after the owner's death in 1908. Photo from 1933.

moved to care facilities outside of residences. Suddenly, death was a stranger, a presence that did not belong inside of a house. If someone passed away within the walls of their family's residence, it was unnatural. New constructions of the 1900s likely did not witness as much death as their Victorian predecessors; the shadows and corners of homes that displayed corpses in parlors began to grow increasingly ominous.

World war veterans reflected on childhoods in a time before bloody conflicts and economic collapses. Soldiers and civilians alike wondered what their parents' generation had done so wrongly to warrant the violent and unforgiving world of the 1910s and 20s. A country shaken by past generations' failures warranted increasing amounts of introspection and a rejection of any nostalgic feelings for Victorian homes—as the grand houses of the late 1800s represented the ideals and lingering presence of the past. New methods of expressing frustration and hatred for years gone by arose through the artistic representation and interpretation of houses from the late 1800s. As women like printmaker Mabel Dwight broke into the public sphere, representations of Victorian houses also served as vessels of oppression when reflecting on the constrained and limited lives of women during past decades. Victorian ideals haunted the memories of the next generations, and the houses that remained carried emotional scars and associations that would never truly heal.

Art historian Sarah Burns examined how artists of the 1920s and 1930s viewed Victorian homes, noting the prevalence of negatively portrayed historical buildings from artists like Edward Hopper. Second Empire mansard roofs loom menacingly, and open windows act as eyes staring out at the viewer. Burns also notes



Fig. 9: Edward Hopper, Haskell's House. Note the washed-out and sickly color choices.

the use of color in these images, suggesting that even though they may be bright, the colors used are paired to create a sense of anxiety and discomfort. The houses are not meant to be welcoming, and their imposing presence is meant to create a sense of dread. One of Edward Hopper's friends and contemporaries stated that "These dead American houses—Victorian in architecture generally, ugly, whimsical exaggerations in tortured wood—are haunted. Whether Hopper produces this consciously or not, I cannot say." (Burns, 6) Such sentiment towards houses of the late nineteenth century influenced many other artists, especially as associations with death, decay, and historical oppression continued to grow.

Finally, as the rich began to abandon or move on from their Victorian homes during the twentieth century, Second Empire and Queen Anne houses became increasingly repurposed by working-class landlords as boarding houses or transient spaces—if they were not abandoned entirely. Once symbols of grandeur and luxury, the houses now represented a dead past, almost entirely isolated from their contemporary interpretations during this period. Decaying woodwork and poorly maintained elaborate exteriors added to a sense of unease that many felt towards the large residences, and their presence in the public mind became increasingly negative. The alien nature of Second Empire houses made them easy targets; while Queen Anne architecture also faced scrutiny and negative attachments, Second Empire houses had already been marked for condemnation by both the general public and professional architects for decades. Their increasing rarity only added to the sense of oddity about the structures; while Queen Anne houses remained fairly well-represented in towns across America, Second Empire structures struggled to continue their existence at all. By the mid-twentieth century, the architectural



Fig. 10: The Addams family mansion from the 1991 movie adaptation of Charles Addams' comic.

style beloved by Alfred B. Mullett and Napoleon III would be nearly forgotten.

Ghostly and Ghoulish New Tenants

Of course, "nearly forgotten" does not mean completely gone. In fact, nearly forgotten ideas, images, or memories often flit at the corners of memories and surprise even the least sentimental people at the strangest of times. Second Empire architecture was no different, and in the mid-1900s through today, it found a new life—as a home for the dead. Film historian Barry Curtis (2008) stressed that from the late 1800s into the twentieth century, new technology spurred public interest in the occult or supernatural. Photographs and film encouraged the exploration of strange occurrences or nearly-forgotten pockets of the past. Curtis stated that this period also saw a separation between ghosts and religion as they began to represent more secular, non-denominational ideas separate from personal religious beliefs.

In 1923, *Weird Tales* magazine published its first issue. The famous serial included stories written by authors including science-fiction legend H.P. Lovecraft (who frequently contributed to the publication) and republished classics from Edgar Allen Poe. *Weird Tales* celebrated the strange, occult, and unnatural, capitalizing on a public fascination with the macabre. It would be far from the last series to explore the ghoulish interests lurking within the United States. Comic artist Charles Addams sold his first illustration of the Addams family to *The New Yorker* in 1938, a series that would go on to spawn several TV shows, movies, animated series, and countless other adaptations. The macabre but loving family always lived in a dark, decrepit old mansion—one that is generally represented by Second Empire architecture in nearly every interpretation. The Addams family was odd, strange, and incredibly different from an average American family, and their house served as an expres-



Fig. 11: A cover of "Weird Tales" proudly bears a creepy mansion with a mansard tower and gothic features.

sion of this idea. Second Empire architecture was a visual tool to signal an unnatural and foreign "otherness."

Cinema continued to build on this visual language, especially as horror movies gained popularity in the 1920s. The public's interest in moving images captured a new potential to reflect on the possibility of other planes of existence. Originally, a fascination with Gothic architecture dominated horror productions, especially during the early emergence of horror as a genre. As modern perceptions of nineteenth century houses grew increasingly negative, their representation as haunted houses and evil spaces reached entirely new heights. In 1947, *Weird Tales* magazine ran an issue with a Second Empire mansion prominently featured on its cover with the tagline, "A Haunted House... A Haunted Life;" it would be a harbinger of an onslaught of haunted Second Empire homes.

In 1960, Alfred Hitchcock's groundbreaking movie *Psycho* burst onto the cinematic screen, with the Bates house proudly looming over the countryside bearing massive mansard roofs. The 1964 TV adaptation of the Addams family showcased a massive Second Empire mansion. Hanna-Barbera's animated series and smash hit, *Scooby-Doo: Where Are You?*, featured a spooky Second Empire house in its 1970 opening credits. The examples continue, and they are certainly not limited to decades past. In fact, the 2017 and 2019 movie adaptations of Stephen King's *It* features a decrepit, creepy, and dark lair for the titular monster—who lurks under mansard roofs and decaying Second Empire features at 29 Neiboldt Street.



Fig. 12: Portrayals of haunted mansions often use visual language like mansard roofs to suggest spookiness.

Conclusion

Second Empire houses are not entirely extinct, despite the efforts of architects and the public alike in the nineteenth century. They have a firm foothold in a “haunted” market, full to the brim of eerie stories and ghostly spirits. If asked to picture a stereotypical haunted house, the towering mansards and stout towers often dominate ideas and cultural associations with the otherworldly.

What originally started as a new, modern revitalization of Paris streets under Napoleon III’s Second Empire became a style connected to the uncanny, the forgotten, and the occult. Second Empire architecture did not have a long life span in the United States, popular for new constructions only between about 1865 to 1890, and completely obsolete by 1900. Ensuing generations viewed the ornate and elaborate mansions left behind as embodiments of the corruption and grandeur of their parents and grandparents. The houses’ negative connotations only deepened once professional architects began actively lambasting the buildings, labeling them as un-American and “foreign.” By the 1930s, historians of the period began to draw connections between France’s Second Empire government to fascism, only continuing to isolate the distinctive buildings.

The period also witnessed new tenants under the mansards—ghostly visitors and forgotten remnants of darker pasts. Generational fears and negative memories became embodied spirits within houses of the nineteenth century, and the broken remains of once-grand mansions lurked within neighborhoods across the country. With the growth of easily accessible photography and cinema, public interest in uncanny or unexplainable spiritual activity grew exponentially. With the secularization of spirits and ghosts, a more macabre and individual interpretation of hauntings quickly caught on in the United States. Second Empire houses began



Fig. 13: The demolition of Greystone Asylum and the destruction of its last remaining mansard cupola.

to reappear as epicenters of evil in media, and they still continue to serve that role today.

Many continue to strip Second Empire homes of their identities and defining features. In 2019, a horrified writer for the New York-based magazine *The Brownstoner* lamented over a new destructive trend: creating “modern” townhomes by ripping away mansard roofs from historical rowhomes. Others have been completely demolished. In 2015, Greystone Asylum, already missing most of its mansard roofs, was torn down, its famed architecture and imposing facade reduced to rubble.

Of course, not all Second Empires are doomed to a gloomy half-life. A *Boston Globe* article from 2005 tracked a new and growing interest in remodeling the unique homes. Historic preservationists are trying to save the few examples that remain.

The fate of remaining Second Empire homes continues to be uncertain as private buyers cover mansards with vinyl siding or completely destroy the struggling structures. These buildings have faced an identity crisis of the ages for the last hundred years, and it seems like only time will tell if the favorite signature style of Alfred B. Mullett will continue to exist in the United States. While many buyers now purchase historic homes to “modernize” their interiors and exteriors, there are still others who truly value the unique features of these nineteenth-century structures. Second Empire homes are certainly not gone; they haunt the city and the countryside alike, shining examples of a style nearly forgotten.

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Fig. 2: Courtesy of New Jersey State Library's digitized state hospital collections.

Fig. 3: Mullett's War, State, and Navy Building. Courtesy of the Library of Congress' digital collections.

Fig. 4: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Estate of Suzanne Mullett Smith.

Fig. 5: The John Garth House. Courtesy of the Library of Congress' digital collections.

Fig. 6: Greystone burns during a 1929 fire. Image from Asylum Projects.

Fig. 7: Courtesy of New Jersey State Library's digitized state hospital collections.

Fig. 8: Courtesy of the Library of Congress' digital collections.

Fig. 9: From the National Gallery of Art's online collections. Edward Hopper's *Haskell's House*.

Fig. 10: The Addams family house, 1991. Photo licensed from Photofest.

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The Historic Dimension Series is a collection of briefs prepared by UNCG students under the direction of Professor Jo Ramsay Leimenstoll. For information on other topics in the series please visit the website at go.uncg.edu/hds