

## Are Abandoned Malls a Twenty-First Century Gothic Space?

In many communities, there stand large, abandoned structures with miles upon miles of empty cracked concrete parking lots. They contain empty rooms, graffiti, leaking ceilings, crumbling furniture, broken glass, moldy carpets, and items left behind that have no value. Abandoned malls, specifically the Century III Mall in West Mifflin, PA, are the Gothic Space of the 21st Century. While malls are public capitalist spaces and the traditional Gothic setting, like a castle or abbey, is a private space reserved usually for a family, they share many similarities. In this essay, I will be comparing the ancestral homes found in *Mexican Gothic* and *The Haunting of Hill House* to the setting of abandoned malls, to the Century III Mall. Both spaces contain many rooms, secret doors, and are surrounded by an eerie isolated environment. The hallmark of the ancestral home is “that it has housed the same family for multiple generations and become the repository for that family’s sins, secrets, and sense of identity ([www.thegothiclibrary.com/gothic-settings-ancestral-homes/](http://www.thegothiclibrary.com/gothic-settings-ancestral-homes/)”). The Century III Mall was never the home for a family, but the space contains the memories of many generations of people who visited it. Manuel Aguirre writes in the paper “Geometries of terror”

The Gothic universe is likewise one of spaces, and of doors opening (often in spite of its occupants) to other spaces...Gothic can be said to postulate two zones: on the one hand, the human domain of rationality and intelligible events; on the other hand, the world of the sublime, terrifying, chaotic Numinous which transcends human reason (but which need not be the supernatural).

The abandoned mall, like a gothic space, can occupy both of the spaces of human rationality and intelligible events/the word of the sublime. For the space of human rationality, the mall is just a physical space that has been abandoned. But, for intelligible events, it does still occupy a space in the memories of the people who have been there.

*The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* defines gothic fiction as “A story of terror and suspense, usually set in a gloomy old castle or monastery (hence ‘Gothic’, a term applied to medieval architecture and thus associated in the 18th century with superstition).” The roots of the Gothic genre can be traced back to Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, which is a ghost story that takes place in a medieval inspired castle. This story included classic gothic tropes such as, “Pictures begin to move and doors close by themselves, whilst a giant knight can be heard - and occasionally glimpsed - in the halls” (“The Castle of Otranto: The creepy tale that launched gothic fiction”). Despite being created over 250 years ago, the gothic form is still widely used in popular media from *Twilight*, *The Shining*, *The Haunting of Hill House* (Netflix Series), etc. Gothic literature explores what is deemed morally good and normal in society. These stories generally focus on a family who used to be successful in a different time, but have fallen on financial and reputational hardships. In *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*, Allan Llyod-Smith writes:

Hallmarks of the Gothic include a pushing towards extremes and excess, and that, of course, implies an investigation of limits. In exploring extremes, whether of cruelty, rapacity and fear, or passion and sexual degradation, the Gothic tends to reinforce, if only in a novel’s final pages, culturally prescribed doctrines of morality and propriety (Llyod-Smith 5).

Gothic fiction pushing of the extremes and exploration of what society deems normal is the reason why I believe abandoned malls make the perfect setting for a gothic space. In today's times, with people falling into financial hardships and the advent of cheap delivery services, many of America's malls are closing their doors. Now many communities are stuck with enormous empty structures that used to supply jobs and goods to communities. In their place, are warehouses, unemployment, and more isolation. The abandoned malls of today are looking more and more like the failing ancestral home, abbey, or castle found in a traditional gothic story.

The Century III Mall was built in 1976 in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania. At the time, it was the third largest shopping mall in the world. The first section of the mall opened its doors in October 1976, and included two department stores and 75 restaurants and stores. The second section "included a three-level Montgomery Ward [Department Store], 46 tenants, 'Pittsburgh Reflections,' a sculpture by Doug Pickering that depicted 'the strength and vitality of the people of southwestern Pennsylvania,' Olde Pittsburgh, a recreation of a Pittsburgh street scene from 1890, and 'The Courtyard,' a three-level panoramic food court ("abandonedonline.net/location/century-iii-mall/")." At this stage in Century III's history, the mall looked like the stereotypical mall montage scenes found in movies and television shows like *Stranger Things*, *Clueless*, *Mean Girls*, and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Towards the late 1990s, the mall began its slow decline with the opening of the Waterfront Open Air Shopping mall and the smaller Bethel Park mall. Century III quickly declined in value, "As recently as 2006, the mall was assessed at a value of \$150 million before dropping to \$27 million by 2012 ("Century III Mall")." In October 2020, JC Penney was the final store to close its doors. As of July 2022, the Century III Mall stands abandoned.

The gothic horror novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) by Shirley Jackson about a team of paranormal investigators searching the 80-year-old Hill House that is rumored to contain ghosts. Jackson writes, "This house, which seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying together into its own powerful pattern under the hands of its builders, fitting itself into its own construction of lines and angles, reared its great head back against the sky without concession to humanity. It was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope (Jackson 373 of 2998)." The Hill House resembles what many people imagine when they hear of gothic horror. It is massive, with the inside almost maze-like. Nobody lives there and it is isolated from the town it is a part of. The current state of the Century III Mall closely matches Hill House. Seeing the Century III mall is a surreal experience. The entire mall is massive, as it was the third biggest mall in the world the year it was built. The inside is maze-like and difficult to navigate without light, recognizable stores, or a mall directory. The filmmaker Dan Bell showcases Century III's surreal qualities in his youtube video "DEAD MALL SERIES : CENTURY III MALL Ft. Music by Dan Mason ダン・メイソン." In this video, he walks around the mall before its closing with eerily music in the background. Throughout the entire video, he only comes across a few people, despite the mall being massive.

In the gothic horror novel *Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia, a socialite Noemí Taboada must help her cousin who thinks her husband is trying to kill her. *Mexican Gothic* is an unusual gothic novel for multiple reasons. It is a new novel, as it was published in 2020. The story is based in Mexico, which is also uncommon for a gothic story. I choose to include this

book for this paper because it is a great example of a modern gothic story. Her cousin's husband's home is located in the mountains outside of Mexico City near a small town. The home is known as the High Place. When Noemí first sees the High Place, she describes:

The house loomed over them like a great, quiet gargoyle. It might have been foreboding, evoking images of ghosts and haunted places, if it had not seemed so tired, slats missing from a couple of shutters, the ebony porch groaning as they made their way up the steps to the door, which came complete with a silver knocker shaped like a fist dangling from a circle (PG 31).

This description is similar to the current state of the Century III Mall. Road winding down to the mall is covered in potholes. Graffiti covers everything from the signs on the side of the road to the walls of the mall. There is nobody in sight. The entire mall looks dirty and is crumbling.

Prior to the mall's development, the land was used as a slag dump. Slag is a byproduct of steel production. At this point in time, the land was known as Brown's Dump, and "the slag hardened as tough as concrete and grew to encompass 70 million cubic yards of slag 200 feet high and 410 acres in size (["abandonedonline.net/location/century-iii-mall/"](http://abandonedonline.net/location/century-iii-mall/))." In order to develop this land, they had to remove "five million cubic yards of slag." Similar to how Century III was built on a slag dump, Garcia writes "Many formerly thriving mining sites that had extracted silver and gold during the Colonia interrupted their operations once the War of Independence broke out. Later on, the English and the French were welcomed during the tranquil Porfiriato, their pockets growing fat with mineral riches. But the Revolution had ended this second boom." In *Mexican Gothic*, the High Place home was built off the success of the mining operation and it is the revolution that leads to the economic troubles of the Doyle family. The Century III Mall was built on the success of steel production, being developed by the United States Steel Corporation. Malls became immensely popular after their conception in 1960. The business insider article "The rise and fall of the American mall," found, "by 1975, malls and shopping centers accounted for 33% of all retail sales in America" and this rate continued to increase throughout the 80's. Yet in many ways, the downfall of the Century III Mall was due to a revolution. This was a revolution in the way people shopped due to the Coronavirus pandemic. New York Times Journalist Sapna Maheshwari writes,

Most malls took a hit during last year's pandemic shutdowns and have struggled to attract customers back to the great indoors. A slew of bankruptcies, including J.C. Penney and Brooks Brothers, fueled closures. And healthy retailers decided to shutter their least-profitable stores, causing another exodus. More than 12,000 stores were announced for closures in 2020, according to CoStar Group, a data provider for the real estate industry ("State of the American Mall").

Online shopping, different shopping malls, new economic conditions, and the failure of the big box stores all lead to Century III's abandonment.

On the surface, over the years, Century III has gone through a transformation of nature reclaiming the space. Mold, weeds, vegetation, water, and animals are some of the forces that have been repossessing the space. As Noemí lives in the High Place, she dreams of the house changing:

The house had metamorphosed in the dream, but it was not a thing of meat and sinew on this occasion. She walked upon a carpet of moss, the flowers and vines crept up the walls, and long, thin stacks of mushrooms glowed a pale yellow, lightening up the ceiling

and the floor. It was as if the forest tiptoed into the house in the middle of the night and left a part of itself inside. (PG 153)

In *Mexican Gothic*, the villain and patriarch of the High Place, Howard Doyle, is a monster that used to be a man. Hundreds of years ago, Howard was sick and sought help from a spiritual group of people. Through the golden mushrooms and a few human sacrifices, Howard was able to reach a state of immortality by storing his memories in them and transferring his consciousness to another member of his family whenever his current body gave out. These events fall into the space of intelligible events. While Century III may not have memory storing mushrooms growing inside of it, the memories of the space are retained in all of the people that have visited the space in both the past and present. *Mexican Gothic* presents us a dichotomy between what the Hill House used to look like, a fancy thriving rich household, and how it looks in the present, a run down, falling apart mansion. The Century III Mall shares this dichotomy with the Hill House. When it was built, it was a thriving place to be and had zero vacancies. Now, it sits abandoned with zero tenants.

Gothic spaces are traditionally imagined as an ancestral home, like a castle, abbey, or manor. Around the time these stories were written, the barbaric rituals and governance of feudalism was in the not so distant past. As a society, we are existing in a late stage capitalist society that is failing to meet many people's basic needs. Overdevelopment and the exploitation of resources and labor have left behind damage to the planet. Abandoned malls are a great gothic representation of our capitalist society.

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