

# *Bridging Death's Distance via the Victorian Spiritualist Home*

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*In Victorian Britain and America, spiritualists privileged domestic architecture as a medium for the diminution of distance between two worlds: one material the other immaterial. These formerly divided worlds were populated, respectively, by living inhabitants and the “spirits of the dead.” This paper explains how—domestic architecture—specifically the home interior, its furniture, and contents—brought family members and the spirits of their deceased loved ones into intimate communication and contact in séance. The spiritualist home bridged the distance between heavenly and earthly life as disembodied souls inhabited and animated the domestic interior to bring solace and comfort to the bereaved.*

*Keywords: Spiritualism; interior; séance; animation; domestic architecture; consolation*

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Believers of Victorian spiritualism conceived that domestic architecture—namely, the home interior, its furniture, and contents—was not solely accommodation for living inhabitants. It was also a province for the “spirits of the dead.” Vibrating floors, illumined walls, and tipping, rapping, levitating furniture were thought to be communications from disembodied souls that had separated from the body after death. Thrill seekers and experimentalists from all walks of life coveted experiences of such “spirited interiors,” as I have termed rooms affected by spiritualist animations.<sup>1</sup> For some participants, spiritualist practices provided a novel form of entertainment. For others—particularly individuals who sought to temper the pain experienced in grief and mourning—spiritualism provided an effective way to connect with deceased loved ones in a way that was emotionally satisfying.

1 Vanessa Galvin, “The Soul-Crafted Interior: Governing the Domestic Inhabitant in Victorian Britain and America 1855-1885” (PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 2019), 65-96.

This paper’s relevance to the conference themes of distance, architecture, and historiography lies in interdisciplinary studies of architecture. In particular, I like to foreground studies of the interior in architectural histories. The refocus encourages novel insights regarding the home. In this paper I combine the study of the interior with a quasi-religious movement that historians of the built environment have largely overlooked: spiritualism. Spiritualist ideals privileged the drawing room and its furniture as vehicles for supernatural contact. Consequently, the drawing room took on a new significance as a place where families and the spirits of their deceased loved ones could reunite.

My doctoral research—of which this paper is component—provides a broader study of spiritualism at home that includes more detailed study of gender and domestic space. In the dissertation, I examine the practice of spiritualism at home as one of three inhabitational modes that highlight a shift towards the Victorian home’s more secular understanding and appearance. In addition, my research on the spiritualist subject shows how individuals with specific emotional needs formed meaningful relationships to their home environments. In the dissertation, the outcome helps to explain how and why we conceive of the home as a place of “spiritual” or emotional comfort today. As a subset of my broader study, this paper describes some of the ways that practicing spiritualists curated their domestic environments as a means to self-care, namely consolation in bereavement.

Importantly, the private expression of grief in the Victorian period, particularly as concerned women who were thought less likely to contain their anguish, made the home a prime locale for otherworldly contact. Some forms of contact occurred

spontaneously and were “unsought” by the home’s living occupants.<sup>2</sup> These kinds of interaction “mingled naturally” in daily life.<sup>3</sup> For example, British spiritualist, Morrel Theobald, describes how the spirits of his deceased children engaged in cheerful play, and carried out common household chores like lighting fires, boiling kettles and making tea.<sup>4</sup> Alternate forms of communication with the “other” world—like séances—were deliberate attempts to conjure spirits and required the home’s careful curation. This paper focusses on the latter form of spirit communication by describing how spiritualists manipulated their homes in séance. I will explain how spiritualists deployed their drawing rooms to lessen death’s distance by reuniting family members through meaningful contact. The paper begins with a brief overview of the spiritualist movement and its consolatory beliefs. This is followed by a description of the séance room and the conventional practices therein.

2 Morell Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle: An Autobiographic Narrative of Psychic Phenomena in Family Daily Life Extending over a Period of Twenty Years* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1887), 22 [emphasis in original].

3 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, 22 [emphasis in original].

4 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, 106.

## What is Spiritualism?

The modern spiritualist movement began in America in 1848 with the “Hydesville Rappings.” These were table rappings, interpreted by two young sisters, Kate and Maggie Fox, as the communications of a peddler who was rumoured to have been murdered in their home five years earlier.<sup>5</sup> This was a significant occurrence for two reasons. Firstly, it required an altered conception of the soul’s fate after death which obliged the bible’s reinterpretation. Heaven and hell were no longer the first and final destinations for disembodied souls as conventional Christians believed. Secondly, ordinary household furniture items, the common table in particular, had taken on a fascinating new role as a conduit to an immaterial world of spirit life. For spiritualists, the home was a credible realm for the soul that continued to live on after one’s death. The thought was comforting to those who were concerned for a deceased relative’s welfare, or to quell one’s own fear of death. British spiritualist Florence Marryat explained that,

5 The Fox sisters’ story prefaces many Spiritualists histories, including Henry Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, Second ed. (London: Clarke, Beeton, And Co., 1853), 7.

*Death should not be a “horror” to any one; and if we knew more about it, it would cease to be so. It is the mystery that appals us. We see our friends die, and no word or sign comes back to tell us that there is no death, so we picture them to ourselves mouldering in the damp earth till we nearly go mad with grief and dismay. Some people think me heartless because I never go near the graves of those whom I love best. Why should I? I*

*might with more reason go and sit beside a pile of their cast-off garments. I could see them, and they would actually retain more of their identity and influence than the corpse which I could not see. I mourn their loss just the same, but I mourn it as I should do if they had settled for life in a far distant land, from which I could only enjoy occasional glimpses of their happiness.*<sup>6</sup>

6 Florence Marryat, *There Is No Death* (New York: National Book Company, 1891), 264.

Spiritualist beliefs diminished death's distance and finality.

The Spiritualist home was the prime locale for otherworldly contact, a capacity which developed out of Christian norms. Daily routines, gendered identities, and relationships were revised and adapted to satisfy spiritualist ideals. For example, connections between the home as a place of family worship took on new meaning in the dimmed, silenced atmosphere of séance rooms. In this setting, personal and spatial synergies of the family and gender were appropriated for different ends. The family circle became the spiritualist circle and emotional bonds between kinsfolk were thought to attract the spirits of the deceased and bring them into common unity. In addition, traits that characterised the weaker sex like frailty, intuition, emotional responsiveness and empathy, were attributes that fostered women's availability as prime mediums.<sup>7</sup> The drawing room's feminine aspects intensified the interior's openness to spirit life. The following section describes the requirements for a successful séance room, and its associated practices.

7 Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), ii.

## The Séance Room

*Sit, positive and negative alternately, secure against disturbance, in subdued light, and in comfortable and unconstrained positions, round an uncovered table of convenient size. Lay the palms of the hands flat upon its upper surface. The hands of each sitter need not touch those of his neighbour, though the practice is frequently adopted...If the table moves, let your pressure on its surface be so gentle that you are sure you are not aiding its motions. After some time you will probably find that the movement will continue if your hands are held over, but not in contact with it.*<sup>8</sup>

Spiritualist séance involved the gathering of like-minded individuals who sought to communicate with the "spirits of the dead."<sup>9</sup> Usually, the type of animation experienced in séance was subtle and typified by "a sensation of throbbing in the table. These indications at first so slight as to cause doubt to

8 M.A. (Oxon), "Advice to Inquirers: The Conduct of Circles," in *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle: An Autobiographic Narrative of Psychic Phenomena in Family Daily Life Extending over a Period of Twenty Years*, ed. Morell Theobald (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1887), 315.

9 "Spiritualism and Its Recent Converts," *The Quarterly Review* 131, no. 262 (1871): 303.

their reality, will usually develop with more or less rapidity,” as medium Georgina Houghton explained.<sup>10</sup>

Cultivating an interior that might encourage similar events was a measured and considered undertaking. A successful séance required that the drawing room be manipulated or “harmonised” in a way that could amplify its mediumistic quality.<sup>11</sup>

Harmonising extended to both the room and its occupants since particular spatial but also personal states were considered to be more conducive to summoning the spirits. For example, Henry Vizetelly’s advice book *Table Turning and Table Talking* (1853) advised that “the temperature of the room should be moderate and dry ... perfect silence should be maintained ... [and] that thoughts should be concentrated upon *some* result.”<sup>12</sup> The room’s complete enclosure was also critical to the arrangement, as was a reduced light level. Darkening the drawing room was a “usual preliminary” as spiritualist Florence Marryat advised.<sup>13</sup> Likewise Houghton ensured that “Doors and windows were all carefully closed to exclude every particle of light.”<sup>14</sup>

Of equivalent value to darkness was the quality of relations between those persons in attendance; familiarity was a key trait. Victorian Spiritualist Catherine Berry wrote in her book, *Experiences in Spiritualism* (1876), that “by carefully selecting my sitters I have ensured the best manifestations. Sometimes when the conditions were particularly favourable, the spirits were able to do almost everything desired of them, and the power exercised by them has astounded all who witnessed it.”<sup>15</sup> Berry’s vigilant choice of attendees was determined by the interpersonal connections and social dynamics between them. Emotional bonds between members were known to produce spiritually heightened conditions in séance. An article in the *Medium and Daybreak* reads:

*Spiritualism is essentially a domestic institution ... Spiritual manifestations have been most successfully evolved in select companies, more particularly in the family circle, or where there is a kinship of spiritual development similar to true family affinity. Mediums have the greatest degree of power, the phenomena are of the most unmistakable description, and communications are purest, when presented in select and harmonious gatherings of which a well ordered family is the type.*<sup>16</sup>

The passage suggests that the addition of non-family members expanded the family. Advice from German spiritualists contained in Vizetelly’s book recommended that “it is advantageous so to place the experimentalists, that persons connected together by

10 M.A., “Advice to Inquirers: The Conduct of Circles,” 315.

11 Georgina Houghton, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance Prefaced and Welded Together by a Species of Autobiography* (London: Trubner & Co., 1881), 150.

12 Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, 133, 107.

13 Marryat, *There Is No Death*, 19.

14 Houghton, *Evenings at Home* 126.

15 Catherine Berry, *Experiences in Spiritualism: A Record of Extraordinary Phenomena, Witnessed through the Most Powerful Mediums* (London: James Burns, Spiritual Institution, 1876), 39-40.

16 Anonymous, *The Medium and Daybreak* VIII, no. 393 (1877): 649; Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 75.

relationship or friendship be placed together. Thus, husband and wife, and friends of the two sexes, should be next to one another in the magnetic chain.”<sup>17</sup>

17 Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, 132, 133.

The spiritualist circle’s extension of the family to include friendships held disadvantages. By not sharing an attachment to all circle members, new acquaintances to an established séance group often compromised the room’s conductivity. Familiarity between sitters was crucial to harmonisation. Houghton writes, “the first séance we had after her [Mrs Nicholl’s] return ... was composed of rather a changed circle, so that we could not, of course, expect equal results; but when I received permission to invite three fresh guests, I was warned that such would be the case, although ‘they’ concurred with me that the invitations must be given.”<sup>18</sup> Or, in Theobald, “we found that sufficient physical power does not exist in our present reduced home circle, for recently we have lost one or two *pro.tem.* [temporarily] from our family circle: this, where all are contributive [sic], involves weakened conditions.”<sup>19</sup>

18 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 148.

19 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, 295-96.

As a mirroring of the Christian family circle, the recital of litanies often featured in séance, although the reason for communal gathering was no longer to ensure individual salvation through common prayer. Rather, the purpose was to improve the interior’s mediumistic quality and thereby encourage “communication between the spirits of the departed and the souls of the living.”<sup>20</sup> Morell Theobald’s sister Florence wrote in her book *Homes and Work in the Future Life*, “the reliability of spirit-teaching, as coming through any medium, must depend on the state of the passivity of the circle ... the circle is harmonised by a spirit of prayer.”<sup>21</sup> Thus the “supernaturalist” orientation of attendees, or their belief in the unknown, was considered vital. Houghton explained of an acquaintance that “gradually doubts crept in, placing a cloud between him and the invisibles.”<sup>22</sup>

20 “Spiritualism and Its Recent Converts,” 303.

21 F.J. Theobald, *Homes and Work in the Future Life* (London: E.W Allen, 1887), 9.

22 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 146.

The necessary qualities of morality, familiarity, and faith were paired with a need for spatial intimacy in the séance room. The proper arrangement of furniture accompanied darkness and silence to create synergies. Relations between individuals were made hierarchical through seating arrangements. Those individuals possessing superior mediumistic abilities were seated closest to the table. Houghton recalls that “Miss Nicholl sat at the table, with her grandfather on her right, while I was on her left — there was then a space—Mr. Champernowne and little Turketine—again a space—and Mrs. Varley; thus making six at the table. The others were seated behind, forming as it were scallops to those at the table.”<sup>23</sup> Houghton’s considered seating

23 Houghton, *Evenings at Home*, 150-51.

arrangement maximised the room's sensitivity. Additionally, Vizetelly's guide suggested that "an uneven number of persons, which should seldom be above five, may better produce the movement than an even number ... The number, however, may be augmented according to the size of the table" (fig. 1).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, 132.

The most effective kind of table was also a matter for consideration. Vizetelly advised that:

*The tables which have hitherto produced the best effects are those called drawing room tables, of moderate size, and an oval form ... Tables having only one leg are also so much the better ... The table should be wooden, no matter of what wood or what form, for experiments on mahogany, deal, oak, or fir tables, round or oval,*



Figure 1. Henry Vizetelly, *The Turning Table*. Reprinted from Henry Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, 2nd ed. (London: Clarke, Beeton and Co. 1853), 99.

*have all equally succeeded. It is indifferent whether it be a folding one or not. Its weight is also a matter of no consequence ...*<sup>25</sup>

25 Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, 133.

Vizetelly also provided practical instructions from France for operations with objects other than tables. Successful interactions with spirit life had been attained through pendulums, hats, rings, puppets, and music stools (fig. 2).<sup>26</sup>

26 Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, 138-47.

There is a link between enclosure and a room's spiritual conductivity which possibly informed the rationalising of the space and furnishings within "spirit cabinets." Cabinets were introduced in the 1850s. For a time, cabinets were used by public mediums exclusively, but were soon a common domestic apparatus. They consisted of an area which was large enough for occupation. In these small, often portable spaces, public mediums emulated the intimate conditions of a séance room. Cabinets replicated the home's enclosure and, accordingly, its mediumistic capacity.

In the home, spirit cabinets increased the prospect of spirit interactions. Spiritualist Catherine Berry refers to cabinets extensively in her book which was published in 1876, and in which she claims that she was "the first person to introduce cabinet séances [at home] into this country [England]."<sup>27</sup> She

27 Berry, *Experiences in Spiritualism*, 85.

Figure 2. *Left*. Henry Vizetelly, *The Oscillating Puppet*. Reprinted from Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, 140. *Right*, Henry Vizetelly, *The Music Stool*. Reprinted from Vizetelly, *Table Turning and Table Talking*, 147.



provides a description of the cabinet, which was contained in a letter to the editor of the *Medium and Daybreak*, reporting an experiment undertaken in it by a Dr Dixon. It read:

*The recess is eight feet from front to back, and just wide enough for the two mediums. to pack themselves in a seat at the back; a small hinged wicket, as deep as from the chest to the lower part of the trunk, and furnished with a padlock, shuts them in closely, when seated, against the wall. On taking their seat, we (as "John King" wished the experiment to be under test conditions) locked the padlock and I kept the key. Then we closed the outer door of the cabinet. The mediums we knew could not move, and their hands could not reach the apertures in the outer door by three feet. The two apertures are about six inches square, and covered with small curtains of dark cloth. On our side, the room, about five paces square, was lighted by an ordinary taper, and we sat on chairs immediately in front of the door, a few feet from it. Presently through these openings emerged the coats, waistcoats, neckties, rings, and even boots of the mediums.*<sup>28</sup>

28 Berry, *Experiences in Spiritualism*, 86.

Likewise, Theobald describes that "on Sunday evening [in 1883] we all sat in our usual manner round the dining table, having extemporized a cabinet in one corner of the room, by means of a large clotheshorse covered with railway rugs and a pair of curtains opening in front."<sup>29</sup> This hyper-conductive effect produced "remarkable phenomena. As I recorded in *Light* at the time, sitting with our own family, with the addition only of two visitors, we had materializations of seven different spirits."<sup>30</sup>

29 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, 116. Houghton also describes a makeshift cabinet. She writes that "a capital cabinet was contrived in a little vacuum space between the sitting room door and the bedroom door, Mr. Guppy having made .an aperture in the door at an accessible height from the floor. The two young men were enclosed, and hands were almost immediately seen at the aperture, and extended within the room." Georgina Houghton, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance Welded Together by a Species of Autobiography* (London: E.W. Allen., 1882), 172.

30 Theobald, *Spirit Workers in the Home Circle*, 114.

## Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the spiritualist drawing room's new role as portal to the spirit world. The séance room was a place of heightened emotion, spirituality, and sensitivity to past life. It was highly co-ordinated in terms of the interior setting. It required complete enclosure, dimmed lighting, and a particular arrangement and type of furniture. Spiritualists also carefully considered the individuals in attendance. Synergies between family and friends, as well a belief in spirit life ensured a greater prospect of communication in séance. The possibility of otherworldly communication produced a hyperawareness of domestic surroundings as inhabitants looked for signs of their loved one's presence and wellbeing after death. Spiritualism's consolatory effect in séance, when intimate contact might be

summoned at will, offered a compelling antidote to the sentiment of irreplaceable loss. The Spiritualist home bridged the distance between heavenly and earthly life and offered consolation to the bereaved. These conclusions would not have been possible without extending the study of architectural history to “grey,” “interdisciplinary areas” like the interior and spiritualism.