

Why is the Barbie DreamHouse so creepy? An expert in the uncanny explains

[Joana Jacob Ramalho](#) Published: July 6, 2023 2.20pm BST

A mass of hot pink emerges violently amid the green foliage, palm trees and shrubbery. Located in Malibu, the oceanfront Barbie DreamHouse [created by Airbnb](#) is the latest in a series of global marketing stunts to promote Greta Gerwig's new film [Barbie](#), the first live-action adventure movie about the iconic Mattel doll.

A closer aerial shot of the video – uploaded to Twitter by photojournalist John Schreiber – reveals a curved slide, with a small square pool at the bottom. On the pink and white wall behind the water slide, the [Barbie logo](#) has been graffitied over with Ken's name.

The image then cuts to an infinity pool where a set of three giant custom pool floats spells "KEN". The bird's-eye view allows us to spy the deep shadows that each letter, swaying gently in the breeze, casts onto the bottom of the pool.

[This article is part of Quarter Life](#), a series about issues affecting those of us in our twenties and thirties. From the challenges of beginning a career and taking care of our mental health, to the excitement of starting a family, adopting a pet or just making friends as an adult. The articles in this series explore the questions and bring answers as we navigate this turbulent period of life.

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Aerial footage shows the pink palace in stark contrast to the neighbouring white mansions. The video ends with two [crash zooms](#), a cinematic technique typical in horror films. The camera zooms in rapidly before quickly zooming out and resuming its god-like surveillance of a house seemingly devoid of human life.

Has Ken killed Barbie?

Airbnb’s life-size DreamHouse, as captured in the video, has a very different feel to trailers for the upcoming Barbie

movie. Its unsettling aesthetic is a sharp counterpoint to the thoughtfully curated [architectural wonderland](#) that production designer [Sarah Greenwood](#) and set decorator [Katie Spencer](#) painstakingly created for the film.

Ken's logo can be seen written over Barbie's in the grilling area. Joyce Lee

My immediate reaction upon watching the footage was: "What has he done with the body? Where has Ken buried Barbie?"

The ominous K, E, N, letters floating aimlessly in the deserted pool – Barbie's silencing through the desecration of her signature, a key [marker of her identity](#) – and the terrace furniture enveloped in pallet wrap do not bode well for Barbie.

Airbnb's [official press release](#) confirms that Ken has taken over Barbie's house, going as far as letting guests check in for free while she is "away". The reader is not privy to Barbie's opinion or consent on this matter.

The Barbie DreamHouse bedroom. Joyce Lee

Airbnb classifies Ken's starring role in this endeavour as a "twist", because "Barbie is everything, and he's always been 'Just Ken' – until now!" A fitting tagline for a revenge horror film.

The grim wording of the press release appears unintentional. Indeed, Airbnb is making a charity donation

along with the opening of the DreamHouse “to honour girls’ empowerment”. Why, then, do some of us react to that pink haven with a frisson of anxiety?

Uncanny matters

Airbnb’s topsy-turvy iteration of the DreamHouse evokes uncanny emotions. The uncanny – a state of fear and unease – has been defined in a variety of different, albeit overlapping, ways.

German psychiatrist [Ernst Jentsch](#) (1867-1919), thought the feeling arises from the seeming animation of the inanimate or, conversely, the apparent lifelessness of a living being.

Psychologist [Sigmund Freud](#) (1856-1939) saw the uncanny in the resurgence of repressed childhood fantasies and primitive beliefs – such as animism, the attribution of a living soul to inanimate things – which challenge adult worldviews.

Japanese roboticist [Masahiro Mori](#) coined “[uncanny valley](#)” in 1970 to denote the point at which human-like automata (such as [robots](#) but also [CGI characters](#)) become too lifelike. Uncanny feelings are triggered by their failure to act in a recognisably human manner, despite their appearance.

Through its myriad revisions over the years, the concept’s core idea has remained unchanged: the defamiliarisation

of the familiar generates ambiguity and temporary disorientation, eliciting a sense of creepiness, dread or horror.

In this sense, Barbie's Malibu beach house (in both Airbnb's and Gerwig's versions) evokes the uncanny. However, the film relishes its artificiality and uses the uncanny playfully. "Her environment isn't always three-dimensional, and the scale of everything is a bit off. Barbie is a little too big for her house," [Gerwig told Vogue](#).

Ken's gym in the Barbie DreamHouse. Joyce Lee

Set decorator Katie Spencer [told](#) Architectural Digest that she and production designer Sarah Greenwood "adjusted [the] rooms' quirky proportions to 23% smaller than human size". It reminded me of American writer Shirley Jackson's [Hill House](#), which she described as "chillingly wrong in all dimensions".

The candy-coloured mansion is an extension of Barbie and vice-versa, central to her identity. Odd proportions, decals paired with three-dimensional objects and the [vivification of dolls](#) paint a portrait, both seductive and unsettling, of Barbie Land. Despite its surrealism, Barbie Land is coated in a fairytale veneer that prevents it from becoming terrifying.

Architectural Digest's tour of Greta Gerwig's Barbie Dreamhouse.

On the other hand, Airbnb's garish dwelling annexes more

troublesome elements of the uncanny. It blurs the lines between [doll and human](#) along with the boundaries between the real world of California and the fictional realm of the magical dollhouse.

Barbie's bright pink plastic fantasy is a disquieting inversion of [the gothic Addams Family mansion](#), rising darkly above the white suburban picket fences. The real-life DreamHouse discloses our borderline vampiric appetite for consuming a piece of someone else's life – even a doll's. As children's literature scholar [Anna Panszczyk has](#) observed, "we can never fully occupy the space of our dolls" – but that hasn't stopped us from trying.