

Short Story: Designing with Souls By Robert Reed

Last month we published one of Robert Reed's stories about the Native American boy named Raven. This month he gives us something very different, a look at the hottest trend to hit home design since the words "feng shui" were first uttered in the West.

Designing with Souls

By Robert Reed

"And beneath the grand staircase, inside this charming little bathroom, we've installed a young boy, a darling little fellow perhaps five or six years old, who once lived in Sussex and was taken—"

"Madam?"

"Taken by the Black Death—"

"Madam, I'm sorry," the director sputtered, one hand nervously pushing at his thinning hair. "My apologies, Madam ... but we have another problem."

A handsome woman in her middle forties, Madam Zane was tall and elegant, born from an assortment of heritages that had left her with a slender accent, skin that was a smoky gray, almond-shaped jade-green eyes, and rich lustrous black hair grown long but always tied into a tiny tight bun that served as a kind of trademark. With effort, she made herself stop talking about her darling little boy. Glancing at her crew and director, then at the proud new homeowners standing in the hallway, she said nothing. Yet her irritation was obvious. Her mouth narrowed and her eyes widened, hinting at a smoldering rage. This had not been an easy assignment. Unexpected glitches had already caused several ugly outbursts. But the crew learned long ago: If their cameras were working, or at least pretending to work, the good Madam would swallow her rage, feigning manners and poise so long as any recording was being made.

Calmly, almost coldly, she asked, "And what is wrong now?"

"It's the microphones," the director reported. "Both of them ... they went dead suddenly."

"Not by accident, I presume."

"Probably not."

"Is it the boy?" Then she shook her head, telling the only working camera, "Turn yourself off." And when the red light vanished, she remarked to nobody in particular, "It isn't him, is it? It's the grandmother again."

With grateful honesty, the director said, "I really don't know."

Madam Zane threw an accusing glare at the young couple. But of course it didn't matter who was responsible. Like all things spiritual, there were technical solutions that would make every problem vanish.

"Boost and shield," she told him. "Can't you boost and shield?"

The director and his two tech-stallions had already boosted the signal strengths and applied every useful shielding to the equipment. But their boss was notoriously ignorant about modern electronics and impatient with rational excuses. Whatever force was able to circumvent their collective cleverness was going to prove difficult to the very end. Not that it was unbeatable, of course. But if these incidents

persisted, they'd force the rest of the shoot to stretch far beyond the allotted time and every budgetary projection.

"We'll change things up," the director promised. Then with a snap of the fingers, he pulled his crew out of the little bathroom for a quick huddle and to escape their boss's immediate wrath.

Madam Zane stood beside the gleaming white toilet with its gold-embossed handle and the tiny puddle of perfumed water. For a long moment, she stared at what seemed like a random point on the wall. Behind the Italian tile was a piece of old lumber—a scavenged lump of oak uncovered by bonded spirit hunters—and wrapped around that treasure were an assortment of quantum manipulators and resonators and the registered ID tag that was required by the new Codes of Thanatological Decency.

To the wall, she whispered, "You'd better not be the trouble, young man."

Closing her eyes, she muttered, "Cause me grief again, and I'll personally rip you out of that wall and burn you to nothing."

As the most popular web-cast in a competitive genre, *Designing with Souls* had its pick of the living and their various dream houses. With Madam Zane at the helm, the fortunate few experienced the talents of someone who was arguably the best in the world at this very new trade. Tom and Tina Lynch possessed all the essential requirements: They were building a beautiful but not overly magnificent shelter, since viewers liked to be impressed but not feel poverty stricken; they were willing to pay the show's robots and colorful human overseers for the privilege of assembling their new home; and of course the Lynches had a keen interest in employing souls. On a whim, they contacted DWS. One slot was available, they were told, and like a thousand others, they filled out the appropriate forms and invited background checks, delaying construction in hopes of being chosen. But eventually an intern with the show called them. With a flat quick voice, he explained that another project had been selected. Which was perfectly true. A San Francisco condo project was scheduled between a boathouse in Belize and the haunting of a Georgian Bay bed-and-breakfast. The Lynches were understandably disappointed, perhaps even bitter. But weeks later the San Francisco project collapsed beneath a sudden divorce. The show's producers needed an instant replacement, and that kind of luck, sweet or sour, was why Tom and Tina found themselves thrust suddenly into the front ranks of candidates.

"We want a few ghosts," Tom explained at the preliminary meeting. "Nice ghosts. Pleasant ghosts."

"We don't call them ghosts," Madam Zane warned.

"I realize that," the young man allowed.

"Because there's no such creature," she continued as though he hadn't spoken. "What we employ are the residues of once-living people. Their souls happened to leave an imprint on some compliant substrate. More like a photograph than a presence, really. The machines let us magnify and clarify whatever the residues contain."

"I know that," Tom replied.

Tina took her husband's hand, adding, "We've read everything we can find on the subject."

"Very wise of you," Madam Zane purred.

The couple held hands carefully, plainly impressed with the celebrity sitting before them.

"We call them remnants," she said again.

"Not souls?" Tina inquired.

"That's just the show's title." The famous woman dismissed the issue with a shrug. "In my mind, I'm designing a home for your two souls."

That brought happy nods.

"Which brings up another key issue," she added. "I know you have ideas about what's proper and right. But I don't work on small scales. I'm not a designer who's going to be satisfied with a few old relatives kicking around in your attic."

The nods ended.

"You have your say, of course. You may have heard stories, but don't believe them. I can be open to someone else's suggestions, provided that they're reasonable, timely suggestions."

There was a pause.

Then Tina remarked, "I have a grandmother—"

"Yes?"

"Had a grandmother," she corrected. Talking about the dead, her eyes stared off into the distance. "I was awfully close to Grammie Dawson. She was a strong woman, and very smart, and she practically raised me. I've always loved her, and since we have three children, including the baby—"

"In the nursery, I presume."

"Pardon?"

"Is that where you want your grandmother?"

Tom squeezed his wife's hand. For both of them, he said, "We're really set on having Grammie. I'm sorry."

"There's no need for sorrow." Then with a professional tone that made her seem both reassuring and relentless, Madam Zane told them, "What I do in my work ... I build a community of residues. Through my people—spirit hunters whom I trust—I'll collect residues from around the world, and with all of the available tricks, I'll enhance them to where they can become important features in your home and life ... and yes, if your grandmother can be found as some quantum impression, I will gladly include her...."

Why argue with the clients? Their show was on a strict timetable. Residues were relatively rare phenomena. Odds were that the grandmother didn't even exist anymore, save for some old photographs and digitals that could be happily hung above the baby's stuffed animals.

That was the good Madam's logic.

"Oh, but she still exists," Tina replied with a giddy joy. Then she pulled a small glassy brick from the bottom of her purse. "She died just last month. Ninety-nine years young. This is her trap. She had it in her hospital room, tucked right under her bed—"

"A sink-hole enabler," Madam Zane muttered, impressed by this state-of-the-art machinery.

"Grammie is here," Tina promised, stroking the brick fondly. "And she was very insistent at the end. She wants to be close to her great-grandchildren, to watch over them and help them. She really is about the

most caring, decent person that I've ever known!"

The grandmother was dead, dead, dead.

Thought Madam Zane.

But she nodded and smiled, remarking quietly, "Well. I guess this makes things easier, now doesn't it?"

Fat old-fashioned microphones proved too cumbersome to feel quantum hanky-panky, and the digital cameras were set outdoors, viewing the interior through long optical cables and secondary lenses. But even with those fixes in place, the bathroom ate up the rest of the morning. The dead boy was the problem now. He refused to emerge on command, which made for lousy entertainment. The tech-stallions had to tinker with the resonators, heightening the quantum signal, and when that brought only minimal results, Madam Zane ordered the lights turned down and everyone else out of the little room. Then she quietly said, "I see you."

She couldn't see anyone. But like any small boy, this one was easily fooled. Assuming that he had been caught, he allowed himself to emerge—a silky image wearing rags, his red hair tousled and his big eyes staring at what must seem to be a very odd world. He wasn't a real boy, of course, nor was he a genuine soul. Simply stated, here stood the subtle impression of a complex neural network that had been trapped as it failed, and the remnant looked as it did because this was the dead boy's image of himself.

"Why are you hiding?" she asked. Then she lowered her head, placing her blazing green eyes even with his pale white eyes. In her best Medieval English, she said, "The woman told you to hide from me. Didn't she?"

He grew pale again, but the resonators wouldn't let him vanish.

"Grammie Dawson?"

His eyes grew larger and more real.

"You know who I mean, don't you?"

A crisp nod.

"Is she here now?"

He shook his head.

"Do you like Grammie Dawson?"

The wispy face seemed confused by the question.

Madam Zane turned on her microphone. An instant later, the cameras were working again, absorbing and enhancing the light produced by this very small apparition.

"What do you think of this room, my boy?"

The boy looked at the marble sink and then at the toilet bowl.

"Watch," Madam Zane said. Then she touched the gold handle, starting the quiet flush of scented water.

Fascinated, the boy watched the bowl empty and fill again.

"I selected you," she told him. "Out of a thousand candidates, I picked you for this very special place."

He seemed heartened by the news.

"You're a sweet boy, and this new family will love you," she continued. "Wouldn't you like to meet your family now?"

How much he understood, she couldn't tell. But the face nodded amiably, and when the Lynches' son came into the bathroom—a moment entirely prearranged, and nearly perfect—the dead boy smiled brightly, the soft beginnings of a voice whispering, "Hello."

"This is Joshua," said Madam Zane.

Hearing his name, the Lynch boy smiled.

Madam Zane urged him on with a crisp nod.

Joshua took a breath, and then asked the apparition, "How's my Grammie? Have you seen her?"

The Madam managed to contain her fury for another few moments, giving the dead boy enough time to ask, "Drink water, yes...?"

"No," the living seven-year-old proclaimed. "You don't drink this stuff."

"Drink not?"

"No, it's for peeing into."

Then Joshua gladly unzipped his pants, dug out his little penis, and proudly showed the spellbound ghost what nearly a thousand years of technological wizardry had brought to the world.

The nursery had been finished yesterday.

"I don't see the problem," Madam Zane said to the stuffed koala and the butterfly wallpaper and the mobile composed of big-eyed circus animals floating on the ends of invisible nanofibers. Then with a touch of the room's controls, she caused the blinds to lower and close, choking out the midday sunshine. "This is what your granddaughter wants. To appear on my little program, with her happy family. To show off the things that make her feel exceptionally proud. Her children. Her new home. And of course, you."

Silence.

Into the darkness, she said, "Grammie."

A motion without substance caught in the corner of an eye. But she knew better than to look straight at it. Even when the cold brushed against her skin—the false chill caused by the stilling of molecules drifting in the air—Madam Zane did nothing but hold her position, allowing the residue of a very old woman to brush against her. Then with a soft laugh, she told her adversary, "The dead can't scare me. But I do, on occasion, scare the dead."

The cold retreated. With the slowest possible motion, Madam Zane turned her head, allowing her eyes to lose their focus, allowing the apparition to display itself inside what only looked to be a column of cold silvery smoke.

A young woman stood before her.

The living woman gave a little start, and then laughed again. Grammie Dawson was dressed like a visitor from the last century—a thirtyish woman in an ugly pantsuit ensemble, her hair long and a surprisingly pretty face glowering at the unwelcome visitor. “So this is how you see yourself,” Madam Zane remarked. Then with a dismissive shake of the head, she asked, “What do you want, young lady?”

Subtle modulations inside the silvery smoke formed a sound, and the sound resolved itself into a youthful voice, dead for nearly seventy years now. But that didn't matter. With weight and a scalding fierceness, the residue said, “Leave us alone.”

"Why should I?"

"Go," the apparition spat. Then it lifted its apparent arms and drifted closer, the sudden cold kissing living flesh.

"You can't scare me," Madam Zane repeated.

Then without any visible trace of fear, she thrust her arm into the chest of her opponent, and grinned, and said, “You feel my heat worse than I feel your cold, you know. Because you're no more substantial than a fart, my dear.”

Grammie retreated, reformed.

"Do you know what I was? Before I was Madam Zane, I mean."

The young face became more real, the illusion of solidity causing the rest of her form to appear thinner, worn out.

"I was an archaeologist. Cindy Zane, Ph.D." She laughed for a moment, the gesture carefree and sentimental. “Back when these technologies were new, I'd find traces of the dead in organic substrates. I brought them into the open to study their appearance, and when the resonators improved and grew cheap enough, I could interview them. In a limited fashion, of course. The sum total of a mind is enormous, and what remains behind ... well, it's like the impression of a dirty hand....” She lifted one of her hands, saying, “That's what you are. A handprint. Full of details and useful clues, and probably better defined than most, since the sink-hole enablers are designed to make residues. But even still, you're just a kind of quantum dirt ... a smudge that always fades with time.”

Grammie was beautiful in her youth, and even when she was nothing more than a patina of little wishes and lost tendencies, her lovely face was wrapped around smart, sure eyes.

"Yes," she whispered. "I know what you were. Before ... I know...."

Madam Zane continued with her story. “A few years ago, I saw an opportunity. I saw a new market, and real success. When you were a woman, making a living didn't matter. But that's not true today. I've always had to work to survive. My success has brought plenty of challengers and backbiters. But believe me, I've dealt with all of them. Just as I plan to deal with you.”

The apparition stared at her, speaking only with her scornful eyes.

"I don't care what you think of me, Grammie," said Madam Zane. “One more episode like this morning ... one little delay from any difficult residue ... and I'll personally rip your sinkhole out of that wall and bury you in the backyard until we're gone from here.

"Do you understand me, old woman?"

The apparition drifted nearer again. The mouth opened, and from somewhere deeper came the words, "Understand."

"You do?"

But then Grammie completed her response, saying, "This."

"Understand this," she meant.

And she shoved her right arm into Madam Zane's chest, letting the furnace of blood and muscle extinguish her own feeble existence, pushing her chilled self inside the living woman until the Madam's breath gasped and her heart bucked and from her mouth came a cold breath of vapor, invisible in the sudden blackness.

Yet the threat must have had its impact. For the rest of the afternoon, the work was nearly flawless. A Roman legionnaire stood guard at the front gate, shouting orders in Latin to the watching cameras. An English butler smiled agreeably in the front entranceway. The kitchen's apparition, a French servant girl from the court of Louis the Fourteenth, moved a few knives back away from the counter's edge. In the family room, a college music teacher managed to play the first chords of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata on the baby grand. Really, this was a wonderful assemblage of intriguing residues. Madam Zane felt a keen, slick pride in what she had accomplished—what her various agents had accomplished—with minimal time to work with. As evening fell, she pushed the resonators to their maximum, coaxing a twentieth-century astronomer to emerge inside the stately library. "The famous discoverer of a dozen asteroids and comets," she said to her fat microphone, introducing the residue to an audience that would hear nothing familiar in his name. "And this is Joshua, sir. He's very interested in space and the stars, sir." She smiled to the world, saying, "Come here, Joshua. Come on."

The Lynch boy walked in from the hallway.

"Say hello," she advised.

The boy had a presence, a real talent. Unconsciously aware of the various camera lenses and his future audience, he smiled at the apparition, saying, "Hey, I've got a telescope, too."

The dead astronomer seemed heartened by the news. He nodded, and a much-magnified voice said, "Good."

"It's big," the boy said.

"Good," again.

Then the apparition discovered an enormous reserve of energy. With the resonators running full-out, he could make himself appear almost real, and with a curiosity that hadn't been awakened for decades, he asked, "How large is your telescope? Three inches? Five—?"

"It's five kilometers across," the boy boasted.

Puzzlement swept across the unreal face.

Joshua's mother stepped forward, ready to explain, "We rented time on one of the Moon's telescopes, sir. For Joshua's birthday."

"If you want," the boy exclaimed, "I'll show you one of your own comets. Next year, when I turn eight."

I am dead, the apparition remembered.

But he absorbed that knowledge without fuss, as they usually did. He even began to smile, hands smoothing the illusion of a corduroy jacket as he prepared to say something wise and sweet. But he seemed to hesitate at the last moment. His mouth opened and then closed again, and he tilted his head as if listening to another voice. Then he abruptly turned toward Madam Zane, his face acquiring a crimson glow, and with a deep fury, he shouted, "Leave them alone."

Everyone in the room jumped backward.

"You awful bitch," he declared. Then he vanished.

"Leave who alone?"

Coffee made her shake, and nervous energy quickened her breath. If asked, she would claim not to feel scared, but the late hour and an ugly ending to the day had put her in an unfamiliar state of mind. With the lights down to almost nothing, she told the gloom, "Tomorrow, I'll finish. A couple days late, but who cares? You won't care, because I'm ripping you out of the wall myself. You won't bother me again, Grammie. Are you listening to me?"

The nursery made a soft sound, like a breath. Then a voice came from nowhere in particular, saying, "Them, I mean. The others. I want you to leave them alone."

"I'll finish tomorrow," Madam Zane repeated.

"But you won't, no."

She ignored the prattle. In one elegant hand was a titanium saw, fully charged and with its safety off. In the other, a carpenter's schematic of the room. Holding up a digital diagram, she determined her position and where the important wiring and weight bearing studs were hiding. Grammie Dawson was set two meters to the right of the main window, approximately level with her former center of gravity. From behind the sheetrock, the residue said, "Put them back."

"Put who back?"

"Them."

Madam Zane shook her head, laughing quietly. "Back where?"

"Where they belong."

The schematic was a handy tool. She had borrowed both it and the saw from a construction robot, and when she was certain about where she was standing, she marked the wall with a glow pencil. Then she paused one last time, saying, "I won't do this. If you promise to leave me alone tomorrow, I won't rip you out of the wall now."

A cold wispy woman appeared beside her. Her icy voice whispered, "I was never a stupid person, you know. I read everything and learned a few things, until the day I died."

Madam Zane shrugged, lifting the saw into position.

"I watched your little program, on occasion."

"Thank you."

"And I read your journal articles, too."

She hesitated now. A genuine incredulity caused her to laugh for a moment, and with a skeptical voice, she said, "No."

"The voices of the dead ... a fascinating subject..."

Again, "No."

"Your interview with that girl who died in the Pandemic of 1919...really, I thought that was very sad, and lovely—"

The saw's carbide blade began turning, humming sharply, and in a single motion, the living woman carved a neat horizontal line into the new wall.

"What was the girl's name?"

"Sarah," Madam Zane replied, almost without thinking.

"Your interview with her ... how long did it last...?"

"A few weeks, in all."

"And what happened to Sarah?"

"The flu killed her—"

"After your interview." The residue brightened, solidified. "Which client's home did you set her inside?"

No client's. But Madam Zane refused to answer, using the saw to slice the first of two vertical gashes.

"Sarah," the residue said. "A pleasant, pretty young girl."

"She was."

"You carried her to your laboratory, if I remember."

"The equipment was cumbersome back then. Her residue was inside a walnut floor. To study her—"

"And then you put her back again. Didn't you?"

The second vertical cut was finished, mangling part of the butterfly wallpaper. But it was an easy enough fix for the robots, and since machines didn't care about the hour, the room would look perfectly normal by morning. No difficult questions to answer, unless someone happened to come upstairs to chat with Grammie Dawson. And even if she was missed, so what? Madam Zane had intimidated, even browbeaten, more than a few clients in her day.

"You returned Sarah to where she had died. To her home."

"I put her residue back again, yes." With a frustrated nod, the living woman reminded her opponent, "She was a chunk of wood, and I had to repair the house some way."

"New lumber would have made a better patch."

Madam Zane set the blade into position, ready to make the final horizontal cut. And then she hesitated.

"My granddaughter and her husband are nice people," the voice reminded her.

Silence.

"I love them, but they can be ... well, can be rather ordinary. Subject to popular trends and little whims. And I don't always agree with them. Before I died, I told them I didn't approve of your program or what you did—"

"Because we shouldn't disturb residues. Is that right?"

"If they wish to be moved, we should honor their request. But as a rule, no. They should be left where they are."

Again, she turned on the saw.

A phantom's hand, cold as a glacier, clamped down on the red safety switch, applying just enough force to kill the motor.

"Don't," Madam Zane warned.

"Tell me," said Grammie Dawson. "Did Sarah ask you to put her back where she had died?"

Silence.

"She asked, and you complied with her wishes. Is that right?"

Madam Zane summoned up a shrug and a forced little laugh, confessing, "I was younger then."

"And, I think, you were a better person."

With her free hand, she slapped at the ghostly image, using her metabolic heat to dissipate what only pretended to be flesh upon bone.

Grammie Dawson retreated. Then with a tight quick voice, she said, "It matters to us, you know. Where our souls come to rest—"

Madam Zane turned on the saw, and with one hard shove sent the whirring blade into the bright image of a monarch butterfly, and behind the butterfly, a nest of wires full of fire and fury.

No cameras were watching as she stepped slowly through the front door, soft green eyes gazing up the length of the grand staircase. Everyone assumed she was thinking about revenge. But could she climb those stairs on her own? Two nights in the hospital hadn't been enough time. Her legs had trouble lifting her feet off the bright marble floor. Her right arm still dangled at her side, practically useless. In every way, Madam Zane looked weak, and she sounded sickly frail, telling somebody, "No," and then taking a shallow gasp.

Then again, to nobody in particular, she said, "No."

The director expected a tantrum. If not today, then when her strength returned. And like a hundred times in the past, he promised himself that he would quit rather than endure that kind of humiliation again.

The tech-stallions braced for the worst but then exchanged smug little looks. Who would have believed it? A damned clever soul had used her phantom fingers to reprogram the digital schematic, fooling the Queen of Misery, causing her to come within a few microseconds of electrocuting herself.

The Lynches felt sad but defiant. Grammie Dawson had been defending herself, after all. And if pressed, they'd argue that she never intended to kill Madam Zane. Even if the saw cut into the line below the normal safety circuits, Grammie knew that the house's main computer would soon detect the surge, and with plenty of time to spare, it would cut all power to the nursery.

"Where are you?" Madam Zane whispered.

She was speaking to the dead woman; everyone knew it.

But then she turned, and with a wisp of a smile said, "Joshua." The right arm lifted, barely. Long limp fingers fell on the boy's shoulder, and then with obvious pain, she knelt, placing her face even with his.

"Would you do something for me, Joshua?"

Immune to the resident anxieties and the banal terrors, Joshua nodded happily. "If I can."

"Talk to the boy for me," she said.

"What boy?"

"The boy under the stairs," she said. "Go on now and call to him. He'll show himself to you, I'm sure." She looked up the long staircase again, just for a moment. "And ask him, will you? For me, will you ask him where he wants to be?"