

Murder. Mayhem. Machine Shops.

Matthew Jaster, Senior Editor

Fear comes in many forms. Every October we exploit these fears—everything from spiders, zombies, and clowns to serial killers, puppets or twin girls standing in a hallway. A recent conversation with colleagues about Halloween attractions prompted a discussion on the role manufacturing/engineering plays in shocking the senses this time of year.

And believe me when I say that the “fear of manufacturing” is a real thing.

Exhibit number one is the Eastern State Penitentiary’s Halloween Festival in Philadelphia.

“Hidden away from the world is a long-forgotten machine shop. Evil pervades this space—an evil with one mind but with many bodies. Will you survive or will you become just another cog in the machine?”

This is the premise for one of 13 Halloween attractions at the massive festival that contains five haunted houses, as well as historic tours, themed bars, live entertainment and more. Eastern State Penitentiary was once the most famous prison in the world, but stands today in ruin, a lost world of crumbling cellblocks and empty guard towers. This gothic structure, with soaring 30-foot-high fortress walls, is intimidating enough during the day. At night, the cellblocks fall into darkness and the penitentiary takes on a different energy.

Halloween Nights brings visitors into the penitentiary’s cellblocks, exercise yards, workshops, outdoor courtyards, and hidden nooks. Nearly every inch of the penitentiary complex is activated for the event that takes place from late September to early November. The Machine Shop is just one of its shocking and alarming attractions where

“visitors walk a one-way path and encounter menacing shop workers, eager for you to join their crew.”

More worrisome is the popular feature to “opt in” for a more intense experience. If they choose, visitors can pick up a glow necklace at the entrance to the festival. Anyone wearing a glow necklace may be grabbed, sent into hidden passageways, and even temporarily separated from their group—all in the name of “Shocktober” thrills and chills.

It’s really the machine shop noises—the cutting, grinding, drilling, the hand tools, the scraping of metal as you turn a corner that makes me think this is equal parts fantastic and alarming. This is why characters like Freddy Krueger, Leatherface and Jigsaw continue to influence today.

Each season the Eastern State Penitentiary adds new content to the festival. It will be interesting to hear what horrors the Machine Shop conjures up in 2025.

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Editor’s Note: Although Halloween has come and gone, the evil, dark shadow lord known as Mariah Carey will soon cover the world in her “All I Want for Christmas Is You,” holiday sing-along. This diabolical earworm is significantly more terrifying than anything mentioned in this article—proceed through December with the upmost caution!