



American Modern Architecture as Frame and Character in Hitchcock's Cinematic Spaces

by Christine Madrid French

Published in: Cunningham, Douglas A., ed., *Critical Insights: Alfred Hitchcock*. Ipswich, Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2016.

“To really appreciate architecture, you may even need to commit murder.” (Bernard Tschumi)

Architectural Storytelling: Form and Symbolism

With few exceptions, buildings played a pivotal role in each of Alfred Hitchcock's cinematic works, providing a structural diorama for the characters in the film and for the audience. The rise of American Modernism in the mid-twentieth century, however, presented the director with a newly formed array of both striking design masterpieces and everyday environments, critical spaces needed to frame the tension and suspense unique to his contemporary brand of storytelling. Whether produced on a sound stage or set on location at actual landmarks, Hitchcock's films invoked cultural and ideological interpretations of Modernism—such as perceptions of pervasive dehumanization, a ruthless dispensation of past traditions, and the optimistic embrace of an unknown future—to visually validate and convey complicated socio-cultural concerns in an age of anxiety. Indeed, in American Modernism Hitchcock popularized and established now long-standing film archetypes such as the “villain's lair,” utilizing material transparency, linear rigidity, and gravity-defying, bold designs to represent the clearly disciplined vision of the prototypical evil genius. Hitchcock was not the only filmmaker who brought architecture to life as a narrative character, but his mastery of the art heightened reality—and the cinematic experience—for the audience. Whether set at the downtrodden Bates Motel, representing the

end of one modern era, or within the long valleys between gleaming Manhattan skyscrapers, Hitchcock skillfully crafted narrative spaces utilizing modernist architectural form, symbolism, and identity.

Scholars have examined Hitchcock's oeuvre and identified within his films a "series of lucid interrogations of the totems of American life...and the institutions that celebrate, interpret, and patrol our cultural terrain: advertising, the judicial system, psychiatry, the police, [and] the movies themselves" (Freedman 6). Yet relatively few historians have examined the critical place of architecture in the director's movies. One exception is found in the comprehensive work of Steven Jacobs in *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock*. In the text, illustrated with a series of conjectural blueprints depicting the full-scope of the director's well-known buildings, the author asserts that "designing architecture is a Hitchcockian activity," critical to his art and observations (15). Jacobs states further that Hitchcock "based his screenplays on objects and places," rather than "plot or characters," constructing his storylines around buildings and spaces (both real and as stage sets) that represented a theoretical intersection of place and identity (41). But, how does the language of modernism affect the audience experience of Hitchcock's films? Is Hitchcock's cultural interpretation of modernism consistent with design theories of the period? In this essay I focus on the architectural history and critical reception of the modern structures and building types that the director selected as key "players" in his productions, to reveal more of the "complex relation between Hitchcock's movies and American ideology" and the cultural impact of design and the built environment on daily life in the second half of the 1900s (Freedman 10).

Studying architecture within popular films can serve as "a gateway to our understanding the interweaving of the multivariate histories," or better yet as a "Portal of the Past" that enhances our perceptions of both the story and the setting (Cunningham 286). Hitchcock utilizes architectural elements as essential to his "interwoven layers" of narrative throughout his epic film career (McGilligan

34). The manipulation of buildings and set spaces augment the movie experience and visually fill out the story concepts, allowing the audience members to break the material buffers between their own lives and the film itself. This realist function transforms the building into a critical participant in the narrative, as characters enter, live in, clamber on, and interact with the structure. In the most elementary interpretation of this concept, parts of the building function as scenic devices and as interactive areas to frame narrative exchanges and highlight critical passages. But the buildings can be employed to serve a sentient purpose as well—to capture and convey feelings, sensations, and moments that generate an emotive response from the viewer.

In his mid-twentieth century works, Hitchcock began to frame architecture in this manner, dissolving the mental and conceptual boundaries between the audience and the screen by using buildings as vehicles to express the character's innermost thoughts, or to represent the increasingly precarious situation of the players. Everything visual in this set of films, primarily dating from the 1950s through the 1960s, reinforces the underlying message and tone of the story. Hitchcock's film *The Wrong Man* (1956), for example, vividly demonstrates the director's use of buildings as more than set pieces. The main character Manny Balestrero, who is wrongfully accused as an armed robber and then caught in a grim spiral of accusations and imprisonment, "is constantly framed and visually incarcerated by architecture," and the visual/physical theme of entrapment runs throughout each scene, "not only in his own house, but also in the subway, in the corridor of the insurance company, at its barred office window, in the corridors of houses of possible witnesses, and in the robbed liquor shops and grocery stores" (Jacobs 115). The buildings, and the city itself, were elevated as characters essential to the interpretation of the story and indivisible from the narrative.

Hitchcock and American Modernism

Modernism as a design movement began in the early twentieth century, championed first by architects Irving Gill, Frank Lloyd Wright, Rudolph Schindler, and Richard Neutra in the United States, and by Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus School in Germany. The early tenets of the style emphasized an entirely new approach to architecture “deriving form from productive method, material constraint, and programmatic necessity” (Frampton 128). This idea of “form ever follows function,” was first forwarded by American architect Louis Sullivan in the late nineteenth century, but was later translated to a pursuit of “social rather than aesthetic considerations” in design by the Bauhaus (Sullivan 408 and Frampton 129). European architects led the development of modernism overseas in an effort to bring well-designed, machine-made environments to the masses and improve daily life, whether in factories, at home, or in the functioning of government. The outbreak of World War II in the mid-twentieth century closed the Bauhaus and forced many designers to take refuge in America. There, corporate and moneyed interests co-opted the stylistic and technical prowess of modernism to create high-end buildings that celebrated wealth; architects moved away from the socialist ideals of the first-generation of designers and into a period of stunning growth and creative activity.

Hitchcock’s most productive decades in film and television coincided with this “great post-war flowering of architecture” in America. The Museum of Modern Art in New York highlighted the surge of innovation in design and acknowledged the renewed energy of the modern movement, declaring that “what used to be called ‘traditional’ architecture is dead if not buried” (Hitchcock and Drexler 8, 11). The modernists’ unflinching design vision heralded a nationwide building boom, resulting in the development of new materials, more efficient methods of construction and demolition, and the generation of a large labor pool. All of these causes impacted the visualization and interpretation of modern buildings within Hitchcock’s productions, but there was also another factor in play—his

proximity and access to major high-style works and massive urban redevelopments. After emigrating from England in 1939, Hitchcock found his artistic haven in Southern California, “one of the hotbeds of U.S. modern” (“What Will” 58). Designers such as Neutra, “one of the world’s half-dozen top modern architects,” lived nearby and created innovative buildings in the hills of Los Angeles next to landmark residences by Frank Lloyd Wright, Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, and Pierre Koenig (62). The modern architects of the era, many of whom had also emigrated from Europe like Hitchcock, imagined designs that spoke to the needs of an immediate age, absent any slavish devotion to the past.

As the movement progressed and grew, modernism inspired a backlash of fear in popular culture. In a 1949 cover story featuring architect Neutra, *Time* magazine asked, “What will the neighbors think?” of the new modernist lifestyle, stating that, “Like them or not, modern houses are here to stay” (“What Will” 60). As monolithic skyscrapers loomed ever taller and daily life became increasingly possessed by machines, there was a sense of unease and an attendant rise in anxiety about “people’s control over their own inventions” (Goldhagen 14). For his films, Hitchcock utilized modernism’s essential spirit as cultural shorthand to convey society’s views on anonymity and one’s place in increasingly complex urban environments. He leveraged this widespread apprehension to generate communal distress in the theater, saying in an interview that ““You have to make the audience suffer. Everybody has fear in him”” (qtd. in Boyle 26). Visualizing the contemporary built landscape provided the director with the most direct line to capturing American’s everyday experiences and illuminating people’s uncertain relationship with their environment and with each other.

The Urban Honey-Comb: Apartments and Skyscrapers

In the Cubist form of the tall office building, or the layered living quarters of an apartment house, Hitchcock identified and exploited existential questions of identity in the modern age. One

perspective held that these strictly urban buildings represented efficiency, ambition, and technological victory. But many people felt that the overpowering density inherent in these structures epitomized dehumanization and unmitigated industrialization. The director frequently revealed his fascination with this cultural duality, seen in the sexually charged, illicit opening scene at a rent-by-the-hour hotel in *Psycho* (1960), the spying neighbors with close yet strangely anonymous relationships in the apartment courtyards of *Rear Window* (1954), the murderous penthouse partners in *Rope* (1948), and the authoritarian oversight represented by the rigid lines and soaring profile of the Manhattan skyscrapers featured in *North by Northwest* (1959).

American architect Louis Sullivan was one of the first to utilize a steel-framework to support the structure of a building with an independent “curtain” wall on the exterior, a modern triumph (along with the introduction of the mechanized elevator) that allowed for the immense heights achieved in skyscrapers today. In his 1896 article, “A Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” Sullivan put forth that the chief characteristic of the early skyscraper was “loftiness,” incorporating the “force and power of altitude” with the “glory and pride of exaltation.” He prophesied that the modern office worker or apartment dweller could be accommodated in “an indefinite number of stories...piled tier upon tier, one tier just like another tier, one office just like all the other offices, an office being similar to a cell in a honey-comb, merely a compartment, nothing more” (404-06). Sullivan’s “honey-comb” analogy worked in Hitchcock’s favor more than sixty years later. In 1959, one of every ten employed American worker-bees reported to an office building, with New York City alone hosting more than 75-million square feet of office space (Shultz 275). The manifold levels of a modern building, populated by people both extraordinary and unremarkable, housed a proliferation of stories that attracted Hitchcock’s attention, not to mention that the format and form of the tall building had penetrated urban environments worldwide and could be understood by international film audiences, without translation.

In presenting his suspenseful narratives, Hitchcock relied on a popular interpretation of modernism as rigidly disciplined, depicting the buildings as tight, rectilinear enclosures in which human characters tried desperately to maintain autonomy and individualism against machine-age compartmentalization. Modern architecture critics agreed with this viewpoint, stating that the “conscious manipulation of space,” employed by modernist architects conveyed a “powerful sense of being caged in a pervasive geometry,” a concept explored both literally and metaphorically by Hitchcock in a number of his films (Banham 50-51). For instance, in *North by Northwest*, the director created a meta-identity spy thriller, in which the lead characters are mistaken for other people, assume secondary personalities, and purposefully double-cross each other to achieve their own ends. The narrative themes rely on duality and deception, highlighted by the buildings, landscapes, and structures depicted in the film. The sense of identity theft central to the story is perfectly captured in the mirrored urban anonymity of the United Nations headquarters (completed in 1952) in New York, a modern fortress designed by an international team of architects under the oversight of Wallace Harrison and his firm Harrison and Abramovitz. The absence of overt decoration is part of the absolute pursuit of worldwide neutrality at the site (which is independently administered by an extraterritorial treaty). Rather than the elaborate columns, sculptures, and domes representative of specific governments, the linear, modernist design of the United Nations instead emphasizes “light, location, and atmosphere,” to generate “emotional overtones as insistent as the hum of a dynamo” (Hitchcock and Drexler 20-21).

The building complex did not open to universal admiration. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright dismissed it as “a glorification of negation.” Or, in other words, a “deadpan box with no expression of the nature of what transpires within the building.” Yet, it is the hiding and secrecy of the interior that appealed to a visual artist such as Hitchcock, who imagined any number of scenarios taking place inside the mysterious “box” filled with individual destinies (qtd. in Newhouse 143). Other accounts of the new

building complex celebrated features that might have inspired graphic artist Saul Bass in his iconic title sequence for *North by Northwest*, noted for playing off the linear character of another mirrored tower in New York. Architectural historian and critic Lewis Mumford, not one to praise easily, noted these distinguishing features of the United Nations Secretariat, a soaring 39-story tower designed by Harrison with master modernists Le Corbusier and Oscar Neimeyer:

“No building in the city is more responsive to the constant play of light and shadow in the world beyond it; none varies more subtly with the time of day and the way the light strikes, now emphasizing the vertical metal window bars, now emphasizing the dark green of the spandrels and underlining the horizontality of the composition. No one had ever conceived of building a mirror on this scale before, and perhaps no one guessed what an endless series of pictures that mirror would reveal.” (qtd. in Newhouse 143)

The characteristic multiplicity of the skyscraper did indeed represent a microcosm of the metropolis at large. The essential hierarchy of the form also appealed to Hitchcock, who “was fascinated by systematic efforts to impose regularity upon the irregular...and the tendency of such systems to collapse” (Freedman 126). He had once expressed a desire to produce a film that depicted “twenty-four hours in the life of a city.” The director mentioned that he could ““see the whole picture from beginning to end. It’s full of incidents, full of backgrounds, a complete cyclic movement”” (qtd. in Truffaut 320). Hitchcock began this exploration in the individual compartments of the tall building, whether skyscraper or apartment complex, a storyline that was unfortunately never completed on the total urban scale and temporal structure that he had envisioned.

The Villain’s Lair

Today’s movie audiences readily accept the convention that megalomaniacs reside in a minimalist modern house, a pared-down design that implies unyielding discipline and oversight. Previous to the twentieth century, however, storied villains preferred towering stone castles perched on a promontory, as in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, or rambling manor homes in the country, such as the one

featured in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Modern variations of the theme appeared in a few films, such as *Metropolis* (1927) and *The Black Cat* (1934), starring Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff, two actors who frequently played key roles as Hollywood villains. But, it was Hitchcock who popularized this new version of the villain's lair, co-opting the essential features of modernist architecture as narrative substitute to imply the cold, calculating fervor of an evil genius. In *North by Northwest* (1959), the director housed the nefarious Phillip Vandamm in a dramatically cantilevered modern house based on the designs of master architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Vandamm, a soulless character played by James Mason who steals, double-crosses, and murders colleagues without hesitation or regret, lives in this extraordinary glass house, supported by enormous wood beams that project over the edge of a cliff. Despite many inquiries as to the "real" location of the home—located near Mount Rushmore in the film—the building is entirely conjectural, a set created by production designer Robert Boyle, who trained as an architect before joining the film industry.

Hitchcock's creative team often included architects and architecturally savvy contributors. James Stewart, one of the director's favorite leading men, studied architecture at Princeton University and graduated in 1932 with a thesis design for an airport before he turned to acting as a profession (Maynard 132). Robert Boyle, production designer on a number of critically important Hitchcock films, also graduated in architecture from the University of Southern California in 1933. The USC architecture school emphasized a holistic education, with design, construction, and professional practice augmented by painting and sculpture. Boyle began as an architectural draftsman for films in the early 1930s and then rose to art director at Universal Studios in the 1940s. He collaborated with Hitchcock on several other mid-century films, including *Saboteur* (1942), *The Birds* (1963), and *Marnie* (1964).

In this Boyle-Hitchcock creation from *North by Northwest*, the home of the cliff-dwelling overlord projects solidity in its stone walls and foundation, while also managing to appear transparent

and ethereal through the prolific use of full-height window walls. Indeed, the building has two facades that display entirely separate personalities, much like the characters in the film. The entryway, accessed down a long driveway at ground level, is formal and rectilinear, while the interior living area is contained in a glass box, balanced precariously on structural beams that assertively double the building footprint by jutting above the rocky ground below. The position of the home, impossibly close to the carved stone faces of Mount Rushmore, “dominates” the nearby “devotional shrine of American democracy.” The character of the house is interpreted by British film critic Raymond Durgnat as “an alien, malign, disaffected intelligence.” Likewise, author Steven Jacobs conflates the style and location of the building with the power of the villain within, positing that this residence represents a “progressive quest for power and wealth,” a quality often attributed to capitalists, and likewise to criminals (302).

On closer examination, the Vandamm House does present a remarkable similarity to Frank Lloyd Wright’s iconic Falling Water, an “organic” concrete house cantilevered over a stream and intimately connected to the surrounding Southeastern Pennsylvania landscape. Designed in 1935 for businessman and philanthropist Edgar J. Kaufmann, the house revolutionized American domestic architecture by combining a high-end modernist approach (no applied decoration, a display of technical prowess) with expected Wrightian conventions, such as the amalgamation of natural materials with man-made structural elements and a liberal interpretation of traditional features like the fireplace. Peter Blake, a noted architect and architectural curator, recognized the house as one of Wright’s “most poetic statements,” and hailed it as “a structure of startling modernity” (380-81). Later critics concurred with this assessment, citing the bold design strokes and daring material juxtapositions of Falling Water. Kenneth Frampton, an internationally-acclaimed architectural historian of modernist works, observed that Wright’s “cantilevering gesture” (later approximated by Boyle at the Vandamm House), was considered “extravagant to the point of folly.” Frampton concluded that the whole design effected the

character of an “agglomeration of planes miraculously suspended in place” with an interior that evoked “the atmosphere of a cave rather than that of a house in the traditional sense” (189).

The architectural places featured in Hitchcock’s movies—whether fantastical or down-to-earth—do not need to “tie back to ‘real’ locations with contribution histories” to be meaningful for the audience (Cunningham 293). Nevertheless, with the precedent set, later movie villains took up residence in actual modernist structures designed by architects such as John Lautner and Richard Neutra, both successful apprentices of Wright. In *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971), James Bond’s nemesis sets up a trap for him—complete with wrestling bikini warriors—in the Lautner-designed Elrod House (1968) in Palm Springs, California, while the criminals in *L.A. Confidential* (1997) hold court at the Neutra-designed Lovell House (1929) in Los Angeles, noted as one of the most significant residential commissions in the U.S. for its groundbreaking steel-frame and unwavering allegiance to the modernist idiom. All of these buildings, including the fictional Vandamm House, are characterized by cantilevered positions overlooking adjacent valleys and floor-to-ceiling windows that express “visual domination and panoptic control,” absolutist features that popularly denote the “archetypal dwelling of a rogue” (Jacobs 303).

In *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock also fulfilled a long-time desire to film a chase scene over and around the cultural landmark of Mount Rushmore, near the western boundary of South Dakota. American artists Gutzon and Lincoln Borglum were commissioned to sculpt 60-foot-high granite faces of U.S. Presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln, to promote tourism in the Black Hills area of the state. Construction began in 1927 and was not completed until late 1941, but the oversize sculpture immediately became a national site of reverence and a symbol of American democracy. Hitchcock’s plan to have the main characters scramble over the faces of the presidents did not, however, meet with widespread approval from the public. Even the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), which operates the federally-owned site as the Mount Rushmore

National Memorial, complained about the finished film, stating that “Hitchcock allowed acts of violence to be filmed around the sculptures and especially around a studio mock-up which shows in detail the features of Teddy Roosevelt, thereby ‘desecrating’ the monument” (Payne). Hitchcock and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer agreed to remove a “co-operation” credit in the introduction, upon the insistence of the DOI, rather than engage in a lengthy argument with the agency (Payne). No such criticisms were aimed at the filming of a murder scene in the national park’s actual cafeteria and adjacent visitor center, where Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) pretends to be shot dead by leading lady Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) in a set up intended to distract the villainous Vandamm.

The modernist visitor complex, set at the foot of the mountain, was designed by Harold Spitznagel and Associates (with architect Cecil Doty) in 1962 for the National Park Service (NPS) under a massive parks improvement program. That effort, called “Mission 66” and approved by President Eisenhower, ran for a decade in preparation for the 50th anniversary of the founding of the NPS in 1966. After World War II, the national parks were overwhelmed with millions of car-bound tourists, who arrived to find outdated facilities, poorly planned roads, cramped parking areas and no place to eat. To solve these pervasive nationwide problems, the NPS built more than 100 visitor centers (a new concept at the time) and other facilities as part of the ten-year, billion-dollar program. Mission 66 architects abandoned the rustic boulder-and-log aesthetic and embraced modernism in every aspect of the project, effectively capturing America’s ambitious spirit at midcentury and promising a new era for the national parks. The visitor centers were promoted as flagship structures for the program, designed in a style that complemented the mission, history, or context of each park site. Nonetheless, the modern buildings presented a stark contrast to the ranger stations of the past (French 234).

At Mount Rushmore, the Spitznagel-designed building was part of a larger visitor-centric complex, including a 1,000-seat amphitheater, intended to present “a tremendously moving patriotic

experience” and educate the one million tourists to the park who had “patriotism thrown at them...[and] love[d] it” (Moler). In the *North by Northwest* scene filmed here, Hitchcock again challenges the audience’s notions of safety and further questions the democratic process by manipulating the architectural setting. The family-friendly confines of the park cafeteria are penetrated by deception and violence during the shooting—creating chaos amongst the patrons—all beneath the stony gaze of the country’s most notable presidents, framed precisely within the modernist lines of the 20-foot-high window walls. Luckily for architecture fans, Hitchcock perfectly captured the visual and contextual relationship between the building and the monument; in 1994, the NPS demolished the complex and constructed a larger museum facility on the same site.

The Motel and the Mansion

The insatiable American desire to modernize propelled immense cultural changes throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; however, inherent in the consuming philosophy of “building up” is the twin impulse of tearing down. Thomas Jefferson, noted for repeatedly redesigning his own home on top of a mountain overlooking Charlottesville, Virginia, stated this compulsion succinctly in 1809, telling a visitor to Monticello that ““Architecture is my delight, and putting up and pulling down one of my favorite amusements”” (qtd. in Giordano 150). Hitchcock tapped into this seductive cycle of regeneration by leveraging feelings of fear and discomfort in association with buildings representing the past, which he presented in glaring contrast with the mesmerizing and inevitable pull of the future.

In the 1950s, the roadside motel and the Victorian-style mansion were swept aside by a nationwide tsunami of abandonment and demolition as interstate highways plowed across the country and urban areas spilled over the original borders of downtown into nearby residential districts. Whereas other stories selected by Hitchcock featured modern architecture as a metaphor for prosperity and

achievement, the motel and the mansion represented the inevitable downfall and decay of buildings that had once occupied the “modern” ranking many years ago. In *Psycho*—the convoluted tale of a murderous motel owner who lives in a dilapidated 1890s-era house—Hitchcock creates a palpable sense of dead-end despair for the audience by citing the dismal mid-twentieth-century history of these two fading architectural types.

The first motels built along America’s growing highway network in the 1920s were heralded as a welcome innovation for the traveling public. Milestone Interstate Corporation opened its namesake “Mo-Tel” in 1925 in San Luis Obispo, California, thus becoming the first motel in the world. Planned as one in a series of flagship sites, the complex contained corridors of rooms, an enclosed courtyard, easy parking, and modern bathroom facilities. One critic declared that the motel “breathe[d] an atmosphere of the old Spanish mission, of friendliness, warmth and comfort,” and was certain to “be known up and down the coast as...the most comfortable, economical and hospitable inn that can be found anywhere in the country” (“Motel 1”).

From that moment on, motels proliferated along the classic American highways, like Route 66 or Route 99. Each set about a day’s drive apart, modern motels accommodated tourists and their cars near scenic areas and along the outskirts of cities. The motels replaced inconvenient multi-story, downtown hotels as well as aging and unsafe car camps. The motels were also a step above “tourist homes,” frequently large, privately-owned Victorian-style residences with rooms to let (Margolies 29). Small businesses and entrepreneurial families built thousands of motels with kitschy names, flashing neon signs, and modern amenities—such as a swimming pool and private bathrooms—to attract car-bound tourists speeding from one destination to the next along the new roadways. Mom-and-pop establishments frequently set up shop adjacent to the highway, with the proprietors residing in homes set far back on the same lot. For economy and maintenance, motels very quickly began a transformation

from cabin camps (individual cottages set around a parking area), to connected cabins, and then to rows of individual rooms accessible by a common walkway. But, these hastily-erected, independent businesses soon became better known as places for illicit acts than for safe, family-style accommodations.

Shocking headlines announced the gradual fall of the motel, even before the new interstate highways signaled the end of the era in the mid-1960s. By 1940, the problem of hourly rentals and misconduct in motels and other roadside facilities had reached a peak. J. Edgar Hoover, chief of the Federal Bureau of Investigation from 1924 to 1972, declared in an article entitled “Camps of Crime,” that “a majority of the thirty-five thousand tourist camps” and motels throughout the U.S., “were “little more than camouflaged brothels,” from which “gangs of desperadoes prey upon the surrounding territory.” He besmirched roadside lodgings as “a new home of crime in America, a new home of disease, bribery, corruption, crookedness, rape, white slavery, thievery, and murder.” Hoover asserted that most of these motels engaged in “loose registration regulations,” with a long list of visitors using fake names of suspicious origin to sign in for an overnight stay. He recommended that anyone considering lodging at a motel or cabin camp first “make inquiries about available camps at...law-enforcement agencies along the route,” not easy to accomplish if one is lost and coming upon a rural motel on a rainy night as Marion Crane does in *Psycho* (Hoover 131).

A decline in tourism during World War II damaged the hospitality industry, but more people than ever took to the road for fun—and misadventure—after the conflict ended in 1945. More than 30,000 motels were built between 1948 and 1960, with a total of 61,000 motels serving more than 20 million vacationers (Margolies 90). The boom years skidded to a stop again when President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, which authorized the construction of thousands of miles of interstate freeways to aid commerce and assist in national defense. Establishments

such as Holiday Inn (started in 1952 near Memphis, Tennessee) and Howard Johnson's (with distinctive orange roofs and on-site restaurants) gained a foothold on the all-new superhighways, offering consistency, safety, and comfort. The once-modern "motel" of the 1920s through the 1940s, suffering from decades of deferred maintenance, became "a new primal scene for the American Gothic" (Freedman 5). American newspapers across the country printed increasingly desperate pleas to off-load motels before the end of the era: "Widow Sacrifices Modern Motel, Only \$5,000 Down...A real bargain at \$37,500 full price," read one classified advertisement in the 1958 *Seattle Daily Times*, followed immediately by other listings promoting a "\$26,000 Yr. Income," with your own "17 modern units," noting, of course, the tiled showers.

Psycho, Robert Bloch's 1959 book and Hitchcock's film adaptation, captured the tenor of the times as the formerly modern motels began to yield to a new wave of construction. Norman Bates, the manager of the motel his widowed "mother" owns, voiced his regret that the two of them never took "that advance tip that they were moving the highway.... We'd have had a new motel, a new house...." (Bloch 12). Yet it was Hitchcock and his production team that visually highlighted architectural features familiar to the public, and then injected subtle cues to reaffirm the danger signs cited in current news and magazine stories. In the film, a decrepit, wood-frame, L-shaped building, probably built in the mid to late 1930s, faces a gravel-covered parking area and the immediately adjacent highway. The rooms, referred to as cabins by Norman (harkening back to that first era of seedy roadside lodgings), are connected by a wood-plank walkway. A small neon sign out front—absent any claims of modernity, such as air-conditioning or television, and lacking corporate certification—caps the image of a place to be avoided, not one in which to take shelter.

The darkened family mansion on the hill cultivates similar emotions of apprehension in the public realm. The Bates House, described by Hitchcock as "'California Gothic,'" or when "'particularly

awful...California [G]ingerbread,” embodies the ongoing fate of thousands of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Victorian-style homes across the country, demeaned by the modernists as old, outdated, and ready for replacement by new, clean designs without the architectural baggage of the past (qtd. in Truffaut 269). In fact, at the moment that *Psycho* was being produced, the city of Los Angeles was demolishing dozens of dilapidated Queen Anne and Second Empire-style houses on Bunker Hill near downtown in a well-published urban renewal effort to modernize the city.

By the late 1950s, the American public had learned to distrust the worn-down roadside motel, with its quirky staff and rural, isolated locales. Writers and film directors captured and leveraged this fear by setting stories of heinous acts in small motels, both in *Psycho* and in *Touch of Evil* (1958), released two years earlier by Orson Welles. Even the name of Norman’s establishment, Bates Motel, conveys family ownership rather than corporate control and oversight. In the film, Norman twice refers to the near total absence of customers, jokingly telling his visitors that there are “twelve cabins, twelve vacancies.” And when the private detective, Mr. Arbogast, whose “eyes are blurry with neon,” arrives to investigate Marion’s whereabouts, Norman asks him “Are you out to buy a hotel?” Hitchcock relished re-creating this atmosphere for the audience, noting that ““there is no question but that both the house and the motel are authentic reproductions of the real thing...I felt that type of architecture would help the atmosphere of the yarn”” (qtd. in Truffaut 269).

Longevity of Vision

Writers, directors, and production designers direct audience emotions by employing different building types, styles, and designs on film, drawing from well-defined narrative precedents to convey human states of mind. Understanding the audience reaction to architecture, and the embrace or rejection of certain types of structures, can enhance how we interpret and understand buildings and their

intersections with this particular art. Further explication is found in the words of critic and theorist Reyner Banham, who writes that architecture “is more than a commentary on the human condition—along with war and peace and love and death and pestilence and birth, abundance, disasters and the air we breathe, it *is* the human condition” (Banham 3). Hitchcock arrived in America at the same time that modernism began to rise beyond experimental social projects and drive towards full capitalist expressions, a development that he utilized to enhance his cinematic interpretations. The director was also keen to capture the spirit of his adopted country, enthusiastically reporting that ““this continent is full of wonderful settings”” (qtd. in Boyle 26). Examining the range of Hitchcock films through this lens of architectural design and the identity of place exposes a “new way of thinking about the powers of visual representation at the moment of modernity,” key to understanding cultural values in the mid-twentieth century (Freedman 8).

When turned to architecture, Hitchcock’s “self-conscious, self-mocking camera,” reveals intimate details about design and structure that penetrates the two-dimensional boundaries of the screen and activates cultural cues and expectations for the audience (Freedman 3). But, have other directors followed Hitchcock in his use of modern architectural types as primary facilitators in the storyline? A couple of notable efforts do demonstrate this connection. Brian de Palma’s *Body Double* (1984), a murderous homage to both *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*, sets up the main characters in a pair of posh modernist works, including the cliff-hugging, space-age Chemosphere in Los Angeles (completed in 1960), another landmark building by Wright protégé John Lautner. A more contemporary example is Steven Spielberg’s *Poltergeist* (1982). The director plays upon abundant 1980s-era Cold War fears of unforeseen annihilation by situating the horrific events in the standard family home, a mass-produced modern tract house set amidst the anonymous sprawl of suburbia. Each of these buildings transcends the supporting position of scenic background and becomes critical to the narrative arc. In addition, the

ongoing use of modern buildings as the “villain’s lair” in film and television—including the vampire family’s home in the *Twilight* saga film series (2008-12) and the headquarters for one of British detective Holmes’s arch-enemies in the BBC-produced *Sherlock* (2010-2015)—also demonstrate the longevity of Hitchcock’s architectural visualizations.

Hitchcock highlighted the perceived inaccessibility and cold inhumanity of modern architecture as an interpretive pathway for the audience, the better to depict ““the isolated man who’s surrounded by all sorts of hostile elements, and perhaps without even meaning to, you enter the realm of the dream world...of solitude and danger”” in his films (qtd. in Truffaut 260). The director tapped into sensibilities and fears common to the people, drawing on our collective real-life experiences to invoke discomfort. For Hitchcock, modern buildings visually and metaphorically presented the unknown future in contrast with an idyllic past, in an era in which the public struggled to embrace the brave new world of the Space Age and Civil Rights. Within his television series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and his films, he “explored the dark side of the American Dream—the artificiality, hypocrisy, neuroses, violence and evil that lurked in boardrooms and bedrooms” (McGilligan 581). But, the real tragedy, Hitchcock maintained, was that ““the public accepts modernity without being awed by it”” (qtd. in Truffaut 320). Hitchcock synthesized his own fascination with modernism for an international audience at a peak period of production and creativity for the director, supported by the work of a corps of significant architects. His visual storytelling expressed the forward spirit of modernism tempered by the conflicting cultural acceptance of modern architecture, a cinematic screen capture that still resonates today.

Works Cited

- Banham, Reyner. *Age of the Masters: A Personal View of Modern Architecture*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962 (1975 reprint). Print.
- Blake, Peter. *The Master Builders: Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976. Print.
- Bloch, Robert. *Psycho*. New York: Overlook Press, 2010. Print.
- Boyle, Hal. "Hitchcock, Master of Film Suspense, Confesses Fear," *Sacramento Bee*. 13 March 1956: 26.
- Cunningham, Douglas A., "Mapping/Marking Cinephilia: The Case for a *Vertigo* Heritage Trail." *The San Francisco of Alfred Hitchcock's Vertigo: Place, Pilgrimage, and Commemoration*. Ed. Douglas A. Cunningham. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2011. Print.
- Frampton, Kenneth. *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1992. Print.
- Freedman, Jonathan and Richard H. Millington, eds. *Hitchcock's America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.
- French, Christine Madrid. "The Visitor Center as Monument: Recontextualizing Richard Neutra's 1962 Cyclorama Center within the Commemorative Landscape of the Gettysburg Battlefield." *Public Nature: Scenery, History, and Park Design*. Ethan Carr, Shaun Eyring, and Richard Guy Wilson, eds. Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2013. Print.
- Giordano, Ralph G. *The Architectural Ideology of Thomas Jefferson*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012. Print.
- Hitchcock, Henry-Russell and Arthur Drexler, eds. *Built in U.S.A.: Post-War Architecture*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952. Print.
- Hoover, J. Edgar and Courtney Ryley Cooper. "Camps of Crime." *American Magazine* 129:2 (February 1940): 14-15 and 130-132.
- Jacobs, Steven. *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock*. Rotterdam: Nai010 Publishers, 2013. Print.
- Maynard, W. Barksdale. *Princeton: America's Campus*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. Print.
- McGilligan, Patrick. *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light*. New York: Harper

Perennial, 2003. Print.

Moler, Murray M. "National Shrine is Explained to Its Visitors." *Marietta Daily Journal* (Marietta, Georgia). 26 September 1958: 7. Print.

"Motel Opens for Service to Motor Public." *Daily Telegram* (San Luis Obispo). 12 December 1925: 1+. Print.

Newhouse, Victoria. *Wallace K. Harrison, Architect*. New York: Rizzoli, 1989. Print.

Payne, William A. "Hitchcock—U.S. Tangle." *Dallas Morning News* (Dallas, Texas) 9 August 1959: Section 5, Page 1. Print.

Shultz, Earle and Walter Simmons. *Offices in the Sky*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1959. Print.

Sullivan, Louis H. "A Tall Office Building Artistically Considered." *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, March 1896. Print.

Truffaut, Francois. *Hitchcock*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983. Print.

"What Will the Neighbors Think?" *Time* LIV (1949). Print.