

Location, Location, Location: Behind Alfred Hitchcock's Fascination with Domestic Real Estate and Cinematic Architecture

Book Review: *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock* by Steven Jacobs. Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2013.

Take note, Hitchcock scholars: Steven Jacobs' *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock* belongs on your required reading list, if not in your permanent research collection. Who hasn't wanted to investigate the rest of that midtown Manhattan penthouse, the west wing of that castle beneath the fog, or (admit it) the underbelly of that creepy motel and mansion just off the highway? Jacobs' comprehensive treatment provides these opportunities and more in its survey of the production designs from over twenty Hitchcock films.

Of course there is nothing original in arguing that Hitchcock meticulously curated his sets according to a practice that "privileged visual presence over narration," yet *The Wrong House* ventures into far riskier territory by reconstructing the legendary auteur as an architect.¹ Ostensibly Jacobs has taken this premise quite literally, insofar as *The Wrong House* adopts the conventional layout of an architectural monograph: its opening chapters establish a theoretical foundation that finds an application in a portfolio of projects that follow.

However, there is much more to this text than the novelty of its format. This is owing to its definition of Hitchcock as more of an honorary architect—a visual artist who conflates architectural history with cinematic space—meditating on the meaning of house and home. For those who have the wherewithal to accept Hitchcock as an interdisciplinary filmmaker with architectural credibility, *The Wrong House* will prove itself to be a complex, satisfying conceit.

The monograph begins with "Space Fright" and "The Tourist Who Knew Too Much," essay treatments that contextualize Jacobs' theory concerning the use of architectural space across Hitchcock's filmography. While "Space Fright" covers the requisite discourse on doors, windows, and staircases as the

filmmaker's iconographic motifs, it finds its authoritative voice when it highlights the paradox of an uncompromising auteur that sought out creative collaborations with his art directors. Contrary to the perception that Hitchcock had to be in absolute control of every detail of production design, he more than occasionally deferred to his art directors during the scripting stage and retained them to assist in *mise-en-scène* considerations. Elevating the role of art directors such as Henry Bumstead (*The Man Who Knew Too Much* and *Vertigo*) and Alexander Golitzen (*Foreign Correspondent*) meant that Hitchcock entrusted them to co-create his characters through the nuances of set design. Referencing Vincent LoBrutto's *By Design: Interviews with Film Production Designers*, Jacobs reveals how Hitchcock's production designers were the chosen few who had permission to depart from the filmmaker's storyboards. Bumstead, for one, made the executive decision that Scottie Fergusson's apartment in *Vertigo* should reflect a fetishistic obsession with objects of beauty. He accomplished this by creating a tableau in one corner of Scottie's living room with a stamp collector's magazines and magnifying glass, much to Hitchcock's approval. Jacobs' attention to insightful stories from the set such as this one adds considerable depth to his analysis.

A noteworthy feature of *The Wrong House* is its appendix of the 72 art directors who worked alongside Hitchcock. Spanning his half-century of filmmaking, this biographical listing makes a statement by honoring the collaboration between the filmmaker and his art directors and serving as a coda to "Space Fright." In placing this listing before the filmography appendix, Jacobs, much like Hitchcock, has privileged the art director's role in a production. For those studying the auteur, this listing is sure to be an invaluable resource.

Since Hitchcock's set design was the locus of his characters' development, he preferred to shoot in the controlled environment of the studio versus on location—a fact that Jacobs carefully documents. As he asserts, the director maintained artistic control over his location shoots by constantly subverting the viewer's perceptions of museums (the British Museum in *Blackmail*), national monuments (Mount Rushmore in *North by Northwest*), cities (San Francisco in *Vertigo*), and entire countries (Morocco in the American version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*). "The Tourist Who Knew Too Much" elucidates the aim of this appropriation, which is to undermine the tourist gaze whereby the "monuments and famous places are turned into landscapes of terror."²² Jacobs takes pleasure in warning the reader that Hitchcock is this subversive travel agent: one who will have you witness the transformation of your favorite tourist attraction into a site of voyeurism, inhumanity, psychological ruin, or death without your consent. Clinging to or falling from

an unforgiving structure, possibly your worst nightmare brought to life, is a memorable trope for which this chapter provides convincing case studies. The reader need look no further than the precipitous scenes in *Blackmail*, *Saboteur*, *Vertigo*, and *North by Northwest*. This chapter is adept at closely analyzing a broad cross-section of examples, all of which clarify how morbidity and trauma belie the urban architecture of the Hitchcockian universe. Jacobs shores up his point about the dark side of the tourist gaze with supporting theory from Leonard J. Leff, Alenka Zupancic, and Pascal Bonitzer, leaving the reader with a clear understanding of why location sequences must take precedence over the plots in Hitchcock productions.

It will come as no surprise that the focal point of *The Wrong House* lies in its visuals, especially given Steven Jacobs' background as an art historian and his reputation for publishing aesthetically-pleasing architectural texts. Although potentially an argument in their own right, these visuals lead the textual discourse to support the thesis rather than functioning as a supplementary feature. Jacobs unpacks 26 of Hitchcock's set designs through an imaginatively curated collection of site plans, floor plans, renderings, and black and white digital frames that represent something of an architectural portfolio. Everything from a rendering of Jefferies' courtyard in *Rear Window* and Robert Boyle's sketches of *North by Northwest's* Vandamm House to reimaged site and floor plans for Bates House and Motel are available in the project chapters. Organized under the banner of "Hitchcock's Domestic Architecture," these set designs are further categorized as "Houses," "Country Houses and Mansions," or "Modern Hide-Outs and Look-Outs" for ease of thematic reference. The organizational style of the monograph is ideal for those looking for an in-depth study of a particular Hitchcock film set.

A case in point would be "Schizoid Architecture: Bates House & Motel (*Psycho*)." A standout amongst the "Houses," this chapter offers a fascinating deconstruction of one of Hitchcock's most iconic sets through an investigation of its site and floor plans. Jacobs crafts an appealing analysis that illustrates how a menacing nature can be engendered when two architectural structures are at odds with one another. Erecting the Victorian house on the vertical above the mid-century motel on the horizontal was Hitchcock's way of manufacturing a dissonance that resituated horror in suburban architecture, as seen in Fig. 1's site plan.

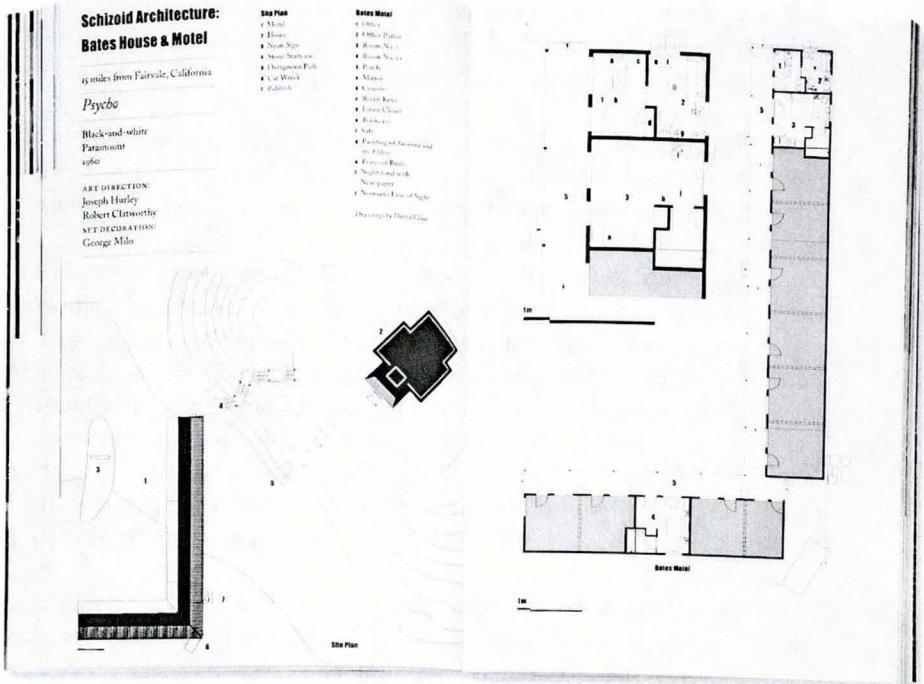


Figure 1: Architectural drawings of Bates Motel and house by David Claus (*The Wrong House*)

The aerial perspective of the site plan offers a new perspective on an iconic set by highlighting the tension between the two architectural structures—each isolated and separate from the other—while acknowledging their undeniable interconnectedness. This codependent structure, of course, metaphorically reflects Norman’s relationship with Mother Bates. With vivid illustrations from David Claus, Jacobs proves that set design can be instrumental in plot and character development.

“Schizoid Architecture” goes a long way to reveal the architectural unreality of Hitchcockian space. Jacobs’ attempt to reconstruct floor plans, which he apparently accomplished by multiple viewings of the film, produces drawings that “articulate the ‘negative,’ ‘absent,’ or invisible spaces in the plan—a feature that is also important in the Hitchcock narrative.”³ As seen in *Psycho*, for instance, Norman’s bedroom is accessible from a short flight of

stairs just off the second floor landing; however, since this arrangement means that the mansion's roof would have to be asymmetrical, Jacobs reasons that Norman's 'real' bedroom would have to share space with his mother's bedroom on the second floor or be part of an invisible third floor plan. He upholds his thesis that Hitchcock's films conflate architectural theory with cinematic space by having Claus situate Norman's bedroom exactly where it appeared in the film.

Despite the architectural impossibility of this placement, it serves the narrative to have Norman isolated from and too close to his mother at the same time. "Schizoid Architecture" perfectly exemplifies the imaginative nature of the build within cinematic space.

If there has to be a shortcoming in *The Wrong House*, it would be that it caters to a rather exclusive readership limited to Hitchcock scholars and a secondary audience of architecture scholars. Jacobs chooses not to concern himself with readers who aren't fully versed in the Hitchcockian oeuvre to maintain the integrity of his argument. In fact, he spoils the plots of all the films under analysis in the monograph by routinely revealing key twists in the narratives and even the names of the killers. Those who are acquainted with some but not all of Hitchcock's films will find this practice frustrating. However, *The Wrong House* remains true to its argument by not looking to expand its audience.

Overall, Jacobs' *The Wrong House* will satisfy Hitchcockian and architectural scholars in equal measure. By utilizing a monograph format, visually-driven discourse, and theoretical analysis, it immerses the reader in the art direction that has made Alfred Hitchcock the most celebrated auteur of film studies. Readers not only will appreciate the text's authoritative argument regarding domestic space in the Hitchcockian universe, but also will be impressed by how it deconstructs the majority of Hitchcock's set designs across his filmography. *The Wrong House* banks on the reader's desire to explore what lies within Hitchcock's sets; when Mrs. Danvers asks the Second Mrs. De Winter the rhetorical question, "You've always wanted to see this room, haven't you Madam?" we all know her answer and ours.⁴ Steven Jacobs takes us into that room—and into all the other rooms, hotels, bell towers, hideouts, and hidden spaces—for an unforgettable guided tour of the architecture of Alfred Hitchcock.

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Notes

1. Steven Jacobs, *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock*, 2nd ed.

- (Rotterdam: nai010, 2013), 12.
2. Jacobs, *The Wrong House*, 52.
3. Ibid., 15.
4. Qtd. in Jacobs, 191.

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