

# **The Wrong House:** **The Architecture of** **Alfred Hitchcock**

**Steven Jacobs**

**010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 2007**

for Hilde

“Settings, of course, come into the preliminary plan, and usually I have fairly clear ideas about them; I was an art student before I took up with films. Sometimes I even think of backgrounds first.”

Alfred Hitchcock, *Direction* (1937)

“*Rope* contributed in no small way to freeing the filmmaker from his obsession with painting and making of him what he had been in the time of Griffith and the pioneers – an *architect*.”

Eric Rohmer & Claude Chabrol, *Hitchcock* (1957)

“I do not follow the geography of a set, I follow the geography of the screen.”

Alfred Hitchcock, in Peter Bogdanovich, *Who the Devil Made It* (1997)

“There is violence that all individuals inflict on spaces by their very presence, by their intrusion into the controlled order of architecture. Entering a building may be a delicate act, but it violates the balance of a precisely ordered geometry (do architectural photographs ever include runners, fighters, lovers?).”

Bernard Tschumi, *Violence of Architecture* (1981)

“If one would ask us what is the most precious benefaction of the house, we would say: the house accommodates dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows us to dream in peace.”

Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace* (1957)

“The uncanny might be characterized as the quintessential bourgeois kind of fear: one carefully bounded by the limits of real material security and the pleasure principle afforded by a terror that was, artistically at least, kept well under control. The uncanny was, in this first incarnation, a sensation best experienced in the privacy of the interior.”

Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992)

“If you rip the fronts off houses, you'd find swine.”

Uncle Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943)

“One of television's greatest contributions is that it brought murder back into the home where it belongs.”

Alfred Hitchcock, *After-Dinner Speech at the Screen Producers Guild Dinner* (1965)

# Contents

## Acknowledgments 8

## Introduction 10

### 1 Space Fright

The Art Director Vanishes: Hitchcock and Production Design 16

Pure Doorknob Cinema: Doors, Windows, and Stairs 24

Family Plots on Single Sets: Cinematic Confinement 28

Torn Curtains in Rear Windows: Uncanny Homes and Gothic Plots 32

### 2 The Tourist Who Knew Too Much

City Symphonies and Cameos in the Crowd: The Suspense of Urban Modernity 41

Montage of Tourist Attractions: Hitchcock's Creative Geography 45

Sightseeing Terror: Metatourism and National Monuments 48

The Trouble with Museums: Mausoleums of the Gaze 55

### 3 Selected Works: Hitchcock's Domestic Architecture

#### Houses

Under Glass Ceilings: Bunting House 66

The Old Dark House: House Number 17 78

Living Behind the Screen: Verloc House & Bijou Cinema 84

Bad Dream House: Newton House 92

A Comfortable Little Place: Wendice Apartment 102

Kitchen Sink Claustrophobia: Balestrero House 110

Schizoid Architecture: Bates House & Motel 118

Living in a Cage: Brenner House 136

Behind the Jungle Gym: Hayworth House 150

Childhood Memories: Edgar House 156

## **Country Houses and Mansions**

- Simple Family Life: Moat House 162  
Vitruvius Britannicus: Pengallan House 168  
Bluebeard's Castle: Manderley 174  
Design Before the Fact: Aysgarth House 194  
Building Above All Suspicion: McLaidlaw House 204  
Manhattan Manners: Sutton House 208  
Psycho-Building: Green Manors 216  
Nazi Hominess: Sebastian House 224  
Unfathomable Plans: Paradine House 230  
Bedroom of the Picturesque: Hindley Hall 236  
Warm, Cozy, and Protective: Keane House 242  
Tropical Classicism: Minyago Yugilla 248  
The Oedipal Bedroom: Anthony House 260

## **Modern Hide-Outs and Look-Outs**

- Long-Take Architecture: Brandon-Phillip Penthouse 266  
Architecture of the Gaze: Jeffries Apartment & Courtyard 278  
The Machine in the Garden: Vandamm House 296

## **Appendix: Hitchcock's Art Directors 314**

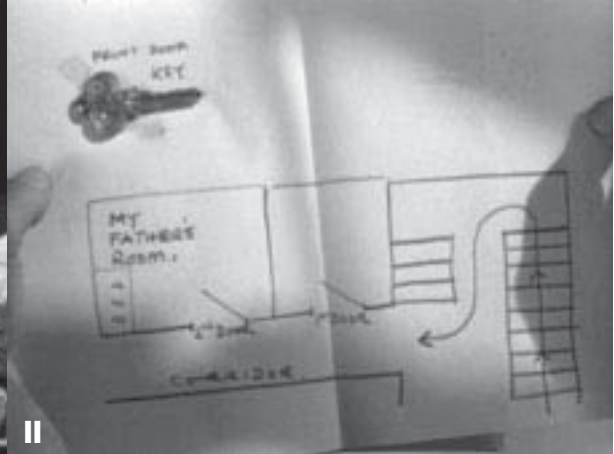
## **Filmography 324**

## **Bibliography 328**

## **Index 336**



I



II



III



IV

**I** *Plan and Plot*

The prosecutor holding the plans of the Paradine House  
*The Paradine Case* (1947) (Digital Frame)

**II** *Ways of Intruding*

Guy receiving the plan of the Anthony house  
*Strangers on a Train* (1951) (Digital Frame)

**III** *A House Walled With Stories*

Uncle Charlie building a paper house  
*Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) (Digital Frame)

**IV** *Architecture and the Gaze*

Scottie contemplating *Architecture* by Charles-André Van Loo (1753)  
*Vertigo* (1958) (Digital Frame)

## Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to thank my Publishers for believing in this project, which was realized thanks to some financial support provided by Sint Lukas College of Art Brussels and the Ghent Urban Studies Team (GUST) at the University of Ghent.

Large parts of my research were carried out in the Hitchcock Archive at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles. Members of the staff were of valuable assistance. In particular, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Barbara Hall and Faye Thompson. In addition, I would like to thank Ned Comstock and Noelle Carter at the Warner Brothers Archives at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles; Stefan Franck and Tim Van Der Poel of the Vlaamse Dienst voor Filmcultuur in the Royal Film Archive Brussels; and Nina Harding at the British Film Institute in London.

Many other people have been helpful. Eline Dehullu, Hilde D'haeyere, Bart Eeckhout, and Annelies Staessen were of valuable assistance in the logistical process. Rob King, Zoe Strother, Jonathan Reynolds, Anita Witek, and Gregor Neuerer offered me hospitality in Los Angeles and London and questioned me critically about my plans to make a book on the architecture of a non-existing architect.

No less deserving of my gratitude are David Claus and Linde Vertriest. A few years ago, I enjoyed supervising their master dissertation on Hitchcock at the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Ghent. Our exchange of ideas, no doubt, resonate in this volume. In addition, discussions and/or correspondences with Nandor Bokor, Edwin Carels, Dirk De Meyer, Hilde D'haeyere, Freddie Floré, Stefan Franck, Tina Gillen, Johan Lagae, Alan Marcus, Amy Murphy, Marie-Leen Ryckaert, Will Straw, Frank van der Kinderen, Yves Schoonjans, and Merrill Schleier allowed me to sharpen my ideas. Some of them proved critical readers of some parts of the rough copy.

Furthermore, some fragments of the text can be considered as (generally radical) revisions of earlier published material: essays on Hitchcock's monuments, the architecture in the Gothic Romance film, and set design in *The Birds* were published in Dutch in *De Witte Raaf*; an article on Hitchcock's museum scenes was published in a 2006 issue of *The Journal of Architecture*. Comments of the editors of these publications and, in some cases, readers as well, have been very useful. This also applies to organizers of lecture series, panel members, and chairs of conferences and workshops, at which I presented papers on Hitchcock's architecture: on set design in *Rear Window* and *The*

*Birds* (Royal Film Museum, Brussels), and on Hitchcock's preference for tourist sites (successively at the 2005 *Visualizing the City* conference at the University of Manchester, the Institute of Media and Representation at the University of Utrecht, and at the *Tourist Traps* symposium organized by GUST in Ghent).

In addition, I would like to thank Moritz Küng, curator at deSingel International Arts Centre Antwerp, who stimulated me to finalize this book and turn it into an exhibition made in collaboration with Michael Hofstätter & Wolfgang Pauzenberger of PauHof Architects Vienna. The opening of this Antwerp exhibition (Fall 2007) coincides with the publication of this volume.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Petra Van der Jeught, who provided indispensable linguistic and editorial assistance, and Wesley Aelbrecht, Anna Barborini, Bartel Bruneel, David Claus, Thomas De Keyser, Bruno Poelaert, Annelies Staessen, and Linde Vertriest, who drew the fascinating floor plan reconstructions included in this volume.

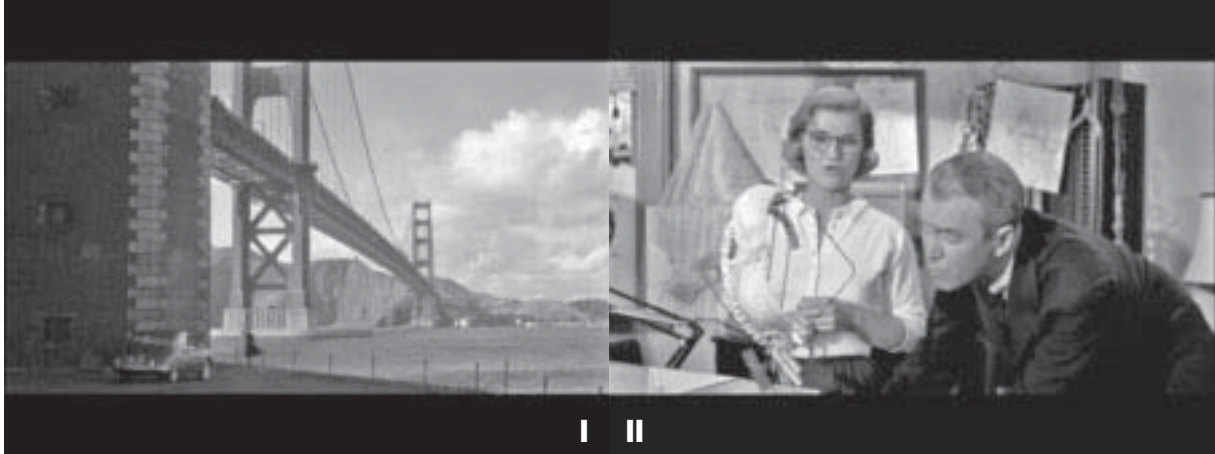
## Introduction

The history of architecture not only comprises the history of built constructions and unrealized projects designed by prominent architects but also the representations and evocations of architecture in the arts and popular culture. This is why the architectural historian should address the imaginary architecture of cinema. On the one hand, the medium of film has offered designers possibilities to create visionary buildings and utopian cities that could not be built in reality. On the other hand, all kinds of vernacular architecture represented on the screen express opinions and feelings that people nourished about small, big, beautiful, and ugly buildings. Screen architecture demonstrates the ways people have put meaning on the notions of the home, domestic culture, public spaces, landscapes, monuments, the difference between inside and outside, and so forth. Apart from a specialized group of high-style movies, in film architecture, use and meaning rather than form are given priority.<sup>1</sup> Creating a narrative space in the first place, cinema shows an architecture in use and, to a certain extent, an environment that answers to such notions as *lived space* (Henri Lefebvre) or *everyday space* (Mary McLeod), which have become important in recent architectural and urban debates.<sup>2</sup> The physical realm and abstract notions of space cannot be disconnected from our memories, dreams, fears, desires, and our everyday existence. In collaboration with directors and cinematographers, production designers and set decorators have created spaces that inspire the viewers to daydream in the way Gaston Bachelard wrote about places and spaces in his seminal *Poétique de l'espace* (1957). Cinematic spaces unmistakably play on the ways in which, for instance, attics, basements, and bedrooms hold different roles in our daily and imaginary lives. In relation to the film's plot and characters, cinematic spaces evoke the places where we all have lived, grown up, felt comfortable or alienated, and had a feeling of wonder or fear.

Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) was certainly aware of that. Space, in Hitchcock, is far from neutral and architecture plays an important role in his films. According to Camille Paglia, Hitchcock even expresses his partiality for architecture in his own peculiar world view and portrayal of mankind. As Paglia noted, "Hitchcock's vision of architecture as the grand but eternally provisional frame of human meaning is evident everywhere in his major films, from the glass-skinned towers of *North by Northwest* and the arched suspension bridge of *Vertigo* to the cantilevered brassieres designed by Barbara Bel Geddes in the same film."<sup>3</sup>

10

- 1 Wollen, "Architecture and Film," 211.      quoted in Lightman, "Hitchcock Talks About Lights, Camera, Action," 351.
- 2 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39-42; McLeod, "Everyday and 'Other' Spaces." See also Harris & Berke, *Architecture of the Everyday*.
- 3 Paglia, *The Birds*, 66.
- 4 Bonitzer, "Notorious," 152.
- 5 Alfred Hitchcock,



First and foremost, Hitchcock's architecture, of course, is an achievement of art direction or production design. Consequently, several famous Hitchcock sets, their construction, and their designers and decorators will be discussed in the following pages. According to Pascal Bonitzer, "the set in Hitchcock is more than just a mere set; rather, it is a labyrinth in which everyone – characters, director and audience – loses and finds themselves, in the intensity of their emotions."<sup>4</sup> Hitchcock himself stated that "a rule I've always followed is: Never use a setting simply as a background. Use it one hundred percent. (...) You've got to make the setting work dramatically. You can't use it just as a background. In other words, the locale must be functional."<sup>5</sup> Hitchcock's sets can be considered perfect examples of the way Robert Mallet-Stevens, the famous French architect who worked for the cinema, spoke of them in a seminal text on screen design: they tell you about the characters who inhabit them before they appear on screen.<sup>6</sup> However, screen buildings are not only constructed by the architectural practices of production design. The art of framing characters within diegetic architecture, cinema also creates architecture through the camera. In the process of creating cinematic space, phenomena such as lighting, sound, editing, camera positions, and camera movements can and should be interpreted as *architectonic* practices. As a result, this book not only deals with production design but also with the way Hitchcock creates cinematic space by means of cinematic devices.

Nonetheless, this book takes Hitchcock as an architect. It starts from the absurd premise that all the important buildings in his films are designed by one and the same architect whose *œuvre* includes a modernist villa in South Dakota, a Manhattan penthouse, a London apartment, a suburban house in a Californian small-town, numerous

11

I Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco (Joseph Strauss, 1937)

*Vertigo* (1958) (Digital Frame)

II "A brassiere... It works on the principle of the cantilever bridge."

*Vertigo* (1958) (Digital Frame)

Victorian mansions, and a colorful collection of other buildings. The resulting image would be that of a timeless, architectural chameleon who excelled in a wide variety of architectural styles. More than a study of the set design in Hitchcock's works, this book deals with the architectural imagery in his films. Apart from discussing the achievements of art directors, production designers, and set decorators, this book links these imaginary buildings to the history and theory of architecture.

There are many reasons why it is interesting to study Hitchcock's architecture – this book addresses five of them in particular.

First, having worked as a set designer in the early 1920s, Hitchcock remained intensely concerned with the art direction of the fifty odd films he directed between 1926 and 1976. In close collaboration with production designers, many of them prominent ones, Hitchcock created a series of memorable cinematic buildings that often play an important part in the narrative.

Second, Hitchcock has been regarded repeatedly as a director who privileged visual presence over narration. Architecture and set design contribute largely to this predominance of the visual and to the development of Hitchcock's idea of 'pure cinema.' Specific architectural motifs such as stairs and windows are closely connected to Hitchcockian narrative structures, such as suspense, or typical Hitchcock themes, such as voyeurism.

Third, throughout his career, Hitchcock made four remarkable single-set films. Three of them, *Rope*, *Dial M for Murder*, and *Rear Window* explicitly deal with the way the confines of the set relate to those of the architecture on screen.

Fourth, spaces of confinement also turn up in the 'Gothic plot' of a series of motion pictures Hitchcock made during the 1940s, such as *Rebecca*, *Suspicion*, *Shadow of a Doubt*, *The Paradine Case*, *Notorious*, and *Under Capricorn*, but also in later masterpieces such as *The Birds*. In these films, the house is presented as an uncanny labyrinth and a trap.

Fifth, it became a Hitchcock hallmark to use famous buildings or monuments, such as the National Gallery, the Statue of Liberty, or the Golden Gate Bridge, as the location for a climactic scene.

These topics are discussed in the following pages. The first chapter deals with Hitchcock's involvement in production design and it contains some general, introductory remarks on his visualizations of specific architectural forms, his experiments with single sets, and his preference for uncanny interiors and the 'Gothic' plot. The second chapter focuses on Hitchcock's use of public spaces such as cities, monuments, and museums.

7 Alfred Hitchcock, *Hollywood Art Direction*, 59. quoted in a *Strangers on a Train* press release, Warner Brothers Archives.

8 Kraft & Leventhal, *Footsteps in the Fog*, 262-69.

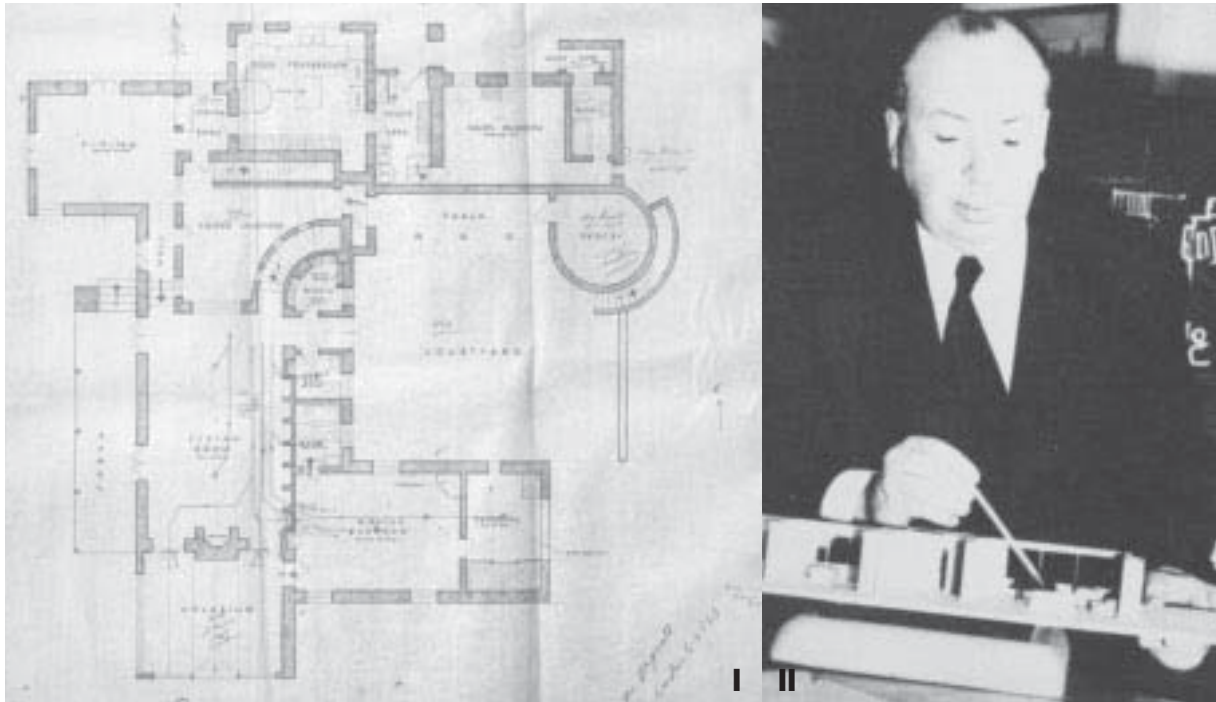
9 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 294 and 360.

10 Horton, *Henry Bumstead and the World of*

The third chapter, finally, comprises detailed reviews of a series of specific buildings. Discussing several bourgeois houses, grand mansions and country houses, and some modern dwellings, this chapter clarifies Hitchcock's peculiar visualization of domestic buildings.

The house and the home, after all, developed into major themes of the director who replied without hesitation "domestic tranquility at its most blissful" when asked to describe his own story. "My house hasn't a shadow in it," he declared.<sup>7</sup> Living in a house at Belagio Road in Bel-Air, "a fashionable residential section of Los Angeles given over to large homes and gardens," Hitchcock presented himself as a family man surrounded by his wife, daughter, pets, and pieces of modern art – photographs of his house became part of his public persona and were published in life-style magazines, such as in an August 1942 issue of *House and Garden*. In addition, in September 1940, Alfred and Alma Hitchcock purchased a Scotts Valley estate, near Santa Cruz in Northern California.<sup>8</sup> The floor plan of the building in the Monterey Spanish style shows an asymmetrical combination of volumes that constitute what Hitchcock – not Alfred, the filmmaker, but Henry-Russell, the prominent architectural historian – has called the "agglutinative plan,"<sup>9</sup> which is typical of the Victorian mansions that pervade in Alfred's oeuvre. Irregular rooms, rounded corners, inner courtyards, and staircases turn the house into one of the domestic labyrinths he loved to explore in his pictures. The interventions by Henry Bumstead, the art director of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *Vertigo*, *Topaz*, and *Family Plot*, confirmed the mansion's cinematic connotations. Bumstead also worked on one of the rooms in Hitchcock's Bel-Air house, which had also been redesigned by Emile Kuri, the set decorator of *Spellbound*, *The Paradine Case*, *Rope*, and *The Trouble with Harry*. For Hitchcock's Santa Cruz mountain residence, Bumstead designed some outdoor furniture and some iron gates and grilles.<sup>10</sup>

Since this book takes Hitchcock as an architect, it presents itself as an architectural monograph focusing on individual buildings. In order to do so, it uses conventional illustrations such as photographs and floor plans. However, the floor plans included in this book are not based on original plans of the sets found in archives. In only a few occasions was I able to localize and consult original drawings or blueprints. The Warner Brothers Archives contain fascinatingly detailed materials of Anthony House (*Strangers on a Train*) and Balestrero House (*The Wrong Man*). The Hitchcock Archive in the Margaret Herrick Library includes drawings of the Vandamm House (*North by Northwest*) and rough sketches of Manderley (*Rebecca*). Plans of the Bates House (*Psycho*) can be found on the Internet. However, complete plans of the domestic buildings discussed in this



book usually did not exist simply because these fictitious buildings were never built. Only parts of them were constructed in the studio. Studio shots of these partial buildings were carefully combined with location shots, shots of scale models, and matte shots. Consequently, the plans included in this book were made exclusively on the basis of repeated careful viewing sessions of the films. They are first and foremost *interpretations* of Hitchcock buildings. By taking into account perspectival distortions and by ‘simple’ (but complicated and labor-intensive) tricks such as counting footsteps or paving tiles, Hitchcock’s inherently fragmented cinematic spaces were translated – if possible – into spatially coherent architectural drawings.

In some cases, drawings exposed architectural inconsistencies: in *The Lodger*, for instance, the two rooms separated by a glass ceiling are not situated above one another at all and the protagonist’s room is situated on the second floor in one scene and on the third in another. A wall in Manderley’s library has a window in one scene and no window in another. At a certain moment, Manderley’s dining room seems to have turned 180 degrees. Often, rooms rendered in detail could not be matched with the rest of the floor plan, or only with great difficulty. Hence the oblique position of the study in

II Tschumi, *Architecture in Motion*, 21.

I Hitchcock Residence, Santa Cruz County, California First Floor Plan Bowman & Williams (1960) (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)  
 II Hitchcock with a scale model of the set of *Rope* (1948) (Warner Brothers Release Leaflet)

the Aysgarth House, which is highly implausible in a Georgian mansion. Norman Bates' room, isolated by a small flight of stairs, can be situated on the same floor as his mother's (this would imply that the mansion's roof would be asymmetrical) or on a higher floor. Some floor plans lack rooms that should be there: there are no whereabouts of Maxim De Winter's rooms in Manderley, Roger's bedroom in the Newton House, or Mitch' room in the Brenner House. Conversely, some plans contain large spaces that have no specific function other than shaping the mass of a building.

Some interpretations resulted in fairly complete drawings that resemble 'real' floor plans of 'real' buildings. Other drawings, however, contain rooms or outside spaces which could be indicated only partially. Such drawings articulate the 'negative,' 'absent,' or invisible spaces in the plan – a feature that is also important in the Hitchcock narrative. Not coincidentally, particularly in films characterized by extensive point-of-view cutting, the drawings show fragmented constructions highly determined by lines of sight. These drawings evoke the deconstructivist designs of Bernard Tschumi, who, in his *Screenplay Series* (1978-82), took a crossfade of *Psycho* as a point of departure to explore the relation between architectural space and its activation by the motions of bodies. Tschumi further stated that "architecture is about designing conditions, rather than conditioning designs" and that it is "about identifying, and ultimately, releasing potentialities hidden in a site."<sup>11</sup> Designing architecture is a Hitchcockian activity.