



Features

THE ANGLE OF SUSPENSE

How one modernist building in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* changed cinema forever

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Illustrations by THE RED DRESS

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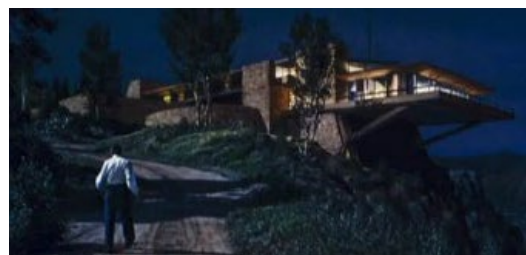


Today's movie audiences readily indulge in the Hollywood trope that murderers, spies, and monsters hide out in high-style modernist homes that embody a sense of elevated separateness. Evil adversaries, from Dr. No in the James Bond series to the vampires in *Twilight*, spurned decrepit castles and instead took up residence in glass-walled, minimalist buildings. These cinematic structures, whether cantilevered confidently over a precipice or hiding within a dense forest, are cast as incredibly beautiful characters. Yet, the screen sensation generated by these enigmatic houses is cold and unyielding, a physical manifestation of the inhabitant's wicked psyche.

Alfred Hitchcock was one of the first major directors to leverage this architectural zeitgeist, co-opting the essential features of modernist design and turning those characteristics into totems representing the calculated fervor of a malevolent genius. Drawing from early films such as *Metropolis*, Hitchcock also reconstructed the essential character of the screen villain, abandoning the crazed henchmen of the 1920s and instead casting dashing, charismatic people who wielded wit and charm as their weapons. In *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock's team revealed these two new archetypes fully fledged for contemporary moviegoers, pairing a modern villain with a mid-20th-century modern building. This cinematic-architectural marriage of patron and design was so successful that it has been fully typecast as a storytelling device. In the years afterward, production designers, screenwriters, and directors recruited actual houses to play the part of the villain's lair, drawing from a proliferation of modern designs in Southern California created by architects such as John Lautner, Richard Neutra, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Other creators designed fantastical modernist hideaways that existed only on film and in matte paintings.



The **VANDAMM HOUSE**, now a movie star itself, makes its first appearance almost two hours into *NORTH BY NORTHWEST* and is onscreen a mere **14 MINUTES**.



For decades, filmmakers followed literary and stage traditions in which the architectural environment matched the disposition of the character. In early productions a dysfunctional mastermind inhabited a ruined home on the moors or an agent of the undead hunkered down in his stone-walled fortress on the hill. This convention for architectural metaphor perfectly fit the visual nature of film narratives, creating an intellectual shortcut within the mind of the viewer: Bad things happen in scary places. Universal Pictures pioneered the horror genre and cemented this connection in the public eye with more than a dozen movies released in the 1920s and 1930s, many featuring iconic film villains Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff. Universal's resident art director, Charles D. Hall, created "an endless variety of cobwebbed halls, frightening stairs, and creepy cemeteries" for *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *The Invisible Man*. Hall, a mastermind of monster homes, also worked as art director on *The Black Cat*, notable for the inaugural screen pairing of horror stars Lugosi and Karloff.

The Black Cat stands out not only for this genius co-billing, but also as one of the first films to feature modernism as the home of the villain, a devious and deadly architect. For the character of Hjalmar Poelzig (Karloff), Hall created a sleek modernist house with glass-block walls, neon-tube accents, and bent-steel chairs, a marked departure from earlier Universal films in the horror genre. The flat exterior façades and polished interior materials recall the streamlined work of designer Raymond Loewy or the futuristic visions of Norman Bel Geddes (the father of *Vertigo* star Barbara Bel Geddes). The standard filmic visual cues indicating danger and villainy, such as gargoyles, turrets, and towers, are nowhere to be found. Instead, the designers surrounded the modern palace with lopsided gravestones and a neglected landscape to promote the impression of danger and impending terror.

The building that changed movies forever makes its first appearance almost two hours into *North by Northwest* and is onscreen a mere 14 minutes. Filmic structures are “evanescent as a flicker of light,” as noted by historian Alan Hess. Nonetheless, this design had a penetrating and lasting effect in the public consciousness. The Vandamm House itself is now a movie star with its own dedicated legion of fans. The high-quality production design of the film, and the hybrid mixing of recognizable locations with studio sets, led to many inquiries as to the “real” location of the home. Explorations in the area behind Mount Rushmore would prove futile, however, as the building is entirely conjectural, a set created by production designer Robert F. Boyle at the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios in Los Angeles.

The pioneering decision to feature a modern house as the villain’s lair in *North by Northwest* arose from both the practical needs of the script and the desire to explore innovation in architectural representation. The building had to frame key story elements while visually articulating the villain’s character. Boyle’s sketches for the overall look of the Vandamm House demonstrate a well-developed modernist sensibility, with an emphasis on horizontality and an intimate relationship between the building and the natural site. The house is created from stone, wood, and glass, much like the nearby visitor center at the Mount Rushmore national monument. The house plan is asymmetrical and accented by a series of interpenetrating roof planes. The entryway is formal, rectilinear, and enclosed, whereas the interior living area is expansive and transparent, contained in a glass box balanced on structural beams over the valley below. This combination of spaces is in line with the physical sensation of compression and release articulated by Wright. In his work, he promoted designs that pushed people through an entryway to heighten the effect of entering the larger volumes of the living area. Even on film, this feeling of architectural movement translates to the audience.

In fact, inspiration for the style and form of the Vandamm House traces directly back to the work of Wright, one of the most accomplished and popular American architects of the 20th century. Boyle and Hitchcock both referred to Wright's work as the design prototype for the house, and screenwriter Ernest Lehman confirmed this architectural legacy, describing it in the script as a "sprawling modern structure in the Frank Lloyd Wright tradition set on a rise in the land at the end of a long driveway." In an interview with fellow filmmaker Truffaut, Hitchcock mentioned that the building was "a miniature of a house by Frank Lloyd Wright that's shown from a distance." A popular anecdote holds that Hitchcock first inquired with Wright about designing the fictional house, but the director could not afford the master architect's costs of design and construction.

The Vandamm House is clearly inspired by Wright's iconic Fallingwater, best known for its astonishing projected porches cantilevered over a running stream. Designed in 1935 for businessman and philanthropist Edgar J. Kaufmann and his wife, Liliane, the Pennsylvania house revolutionized American domestic architecture by combining a modernist approach (no applied decoration and a display of technical prowess) with other Wrightian conventions, such as the amalgamation of natural materials with man-made structural elements and a liberal interpretation of traditional symbols of home such as the fireplace.



The pivotal scene of *North by Northwest* called for voyeuristic windows and thrusting support beams, features primarily found in high-end modernist residences. Boyle dismissed the notion of identifying an existing building for filming. “This was not a house we could find” in the field, he observed. Using Fallingwater as the inspiration, Boyle created a sophisticated lair that emerged boldly from the rugged landscape. As for the cantilevered beams, Boyle noted that he “really jutt[ed] it out” and rendered the house “more extravagant” than its real-life exemplar to provide a “kind of jungle gym for Cary Grant.”

In *North by Northwest*, the modernist design effectively merged the malevolent identities of the structure and the villain. Film critics such as Raymond Durgnat interpreted the Vandamm House as a sentient being; he described the building as “an alien, malign, disaffected intelligence.” Likewise, he interpreted the position of the home, on a plateau above the carved stone faces of Mount Rushmore, as one that “expresses visual domination and panoptic control” over the nearby “devotional shrine of American democracy.” Author Steven Jacobs, who created a set of blueprints of the house based on extensive archival research, observed that “both love of the arts and a predilection for modern architecture are persistent Hollywood signifiers of menace and malice.” Jacobs conflated the style and location of the building with the power of the villain within. He posited that this iconic residence ultimately represented a “progressive quest for power and wealth,” a quality attributed to capitalists and likewise to criminals.



Current *Vanity Fair* architectural critic Paul Goldberger agreed, writing that the Vandamm House's "very existence suggests tension and improbability." Goldberger linked modernism and villainy in his observation that "the stark modernity of the structure, and indeed the fact that it is itself so visibly a work of structure, underscores a sense of modern architecture as thrilling, dangerous, and exotic." The powerful design of the house not only changed architectural interpretations in film but affirmed the logic of the *North by Northwest* narrative that ultimately exposed Vandamm as a cold-blooded and deceitful killer. Goldberger believed that this climactic reveal "would have not been the same had the mountaintop contained a rustic cabin instead of this modernist extravaganza."

In the decades following the release of *North by Northwest*, filmmakers enthusiastically adopted Hitchcock's architectural precedent, crafting fictional modernist structures and rediscovering designs in Southern California that could host a score of film villains introduced in the 1960s and '70s. Architect John Lautner designed many houses during this period that later found fame as villain's lairs. His tactile, sensuously curved, concrete spaces exude power in their boldness and unorthodox approach. Filmic creators also appreciated the cinematic scale and the ambitiousness and improbability of the designs. Ken Adam, production designer for the James Bond series of films including *Dr. No*, *Goldfinger*, *Thunderball*, *The Spy Who Loved Me*, and *Moonraker*, featured the Lautner-designed Arthur Elrod House in Palm Springs in *Diamonds Are Forever*. Bond (played with finesse by Sean Connery) tracked billionaire Willard Whyte to his lair in the hills, protected by the acrobatic Bambi and Thumper. The women swing from the modern lighting, leap from the living room boulders, and attempt to drown Bond in the sky-high swimming pool. The perfect hideaway for a villain.

Director Brian De Palma selected the Chemosphere, another cliff-hanging Lautner design, for *Body Double*, a murderous homage to both *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*. The film, and the building, draw upon prevailing narratives of voyeurism, identity, and complicit shame explored by Hitchcock. Jeannine Oppewall, an Academy Award–nominated production designer for *L.A. Confidential* (featuring the Richard Neutra–designed Lovell House in its own villainous star turn), noted that in her line of work, “the best architecture [goes] to the film’s worst characters.”

Hitchcock manipulated our collective memory and the language of building design to create constructed expressions of human emotions, including love, envy, and the killer instinct. He was driven by an intense engagement with location and architectural form, picturing buildings not only as scenic devices but as interactive participants. For Hitchcock, the parts of a structure represent humanity and all its complications: Windows are the eyes into the soul, a stairway is a spine between the heart and mind, and a door permits entry into subliminal perceptions. His buildings—including the maternal Victorian mansion and naughty motel along the old highway in *Psycho*, the honeycomb of Greenwich Village apartments in *Rear Window*, the avian-infested Bodega Bay schoolhouse in *The Birds*, and the deadly skyscrapers and towers of *Vertigo*—illuminate the uncertain relationships we hold inside our own minds, with the built world around us, and between each other.

Adapted and excerpted from *The Architecture of Suspense: The Built World in the Films of Alfred Hitchcock*, by Christine Madrid French, published by UVA Press, 2022.

