

Schizoid Architecture: Bates House & Motel

15 miles from Fairvale, California

Psycho

Black-and-white
Paramount
1960

ART DIRECTION:
Joseph Hurley
Robert Clatworthy
SET DECORATION:
George Milo

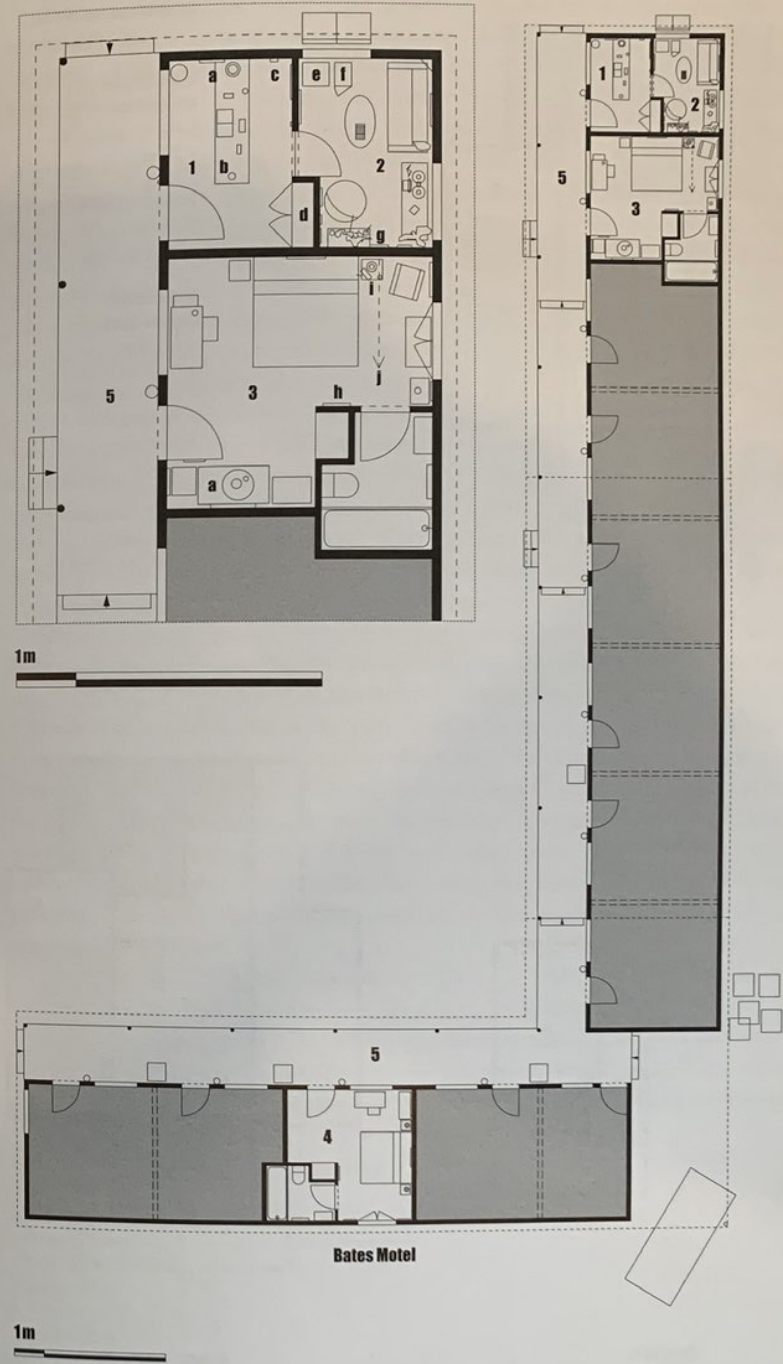
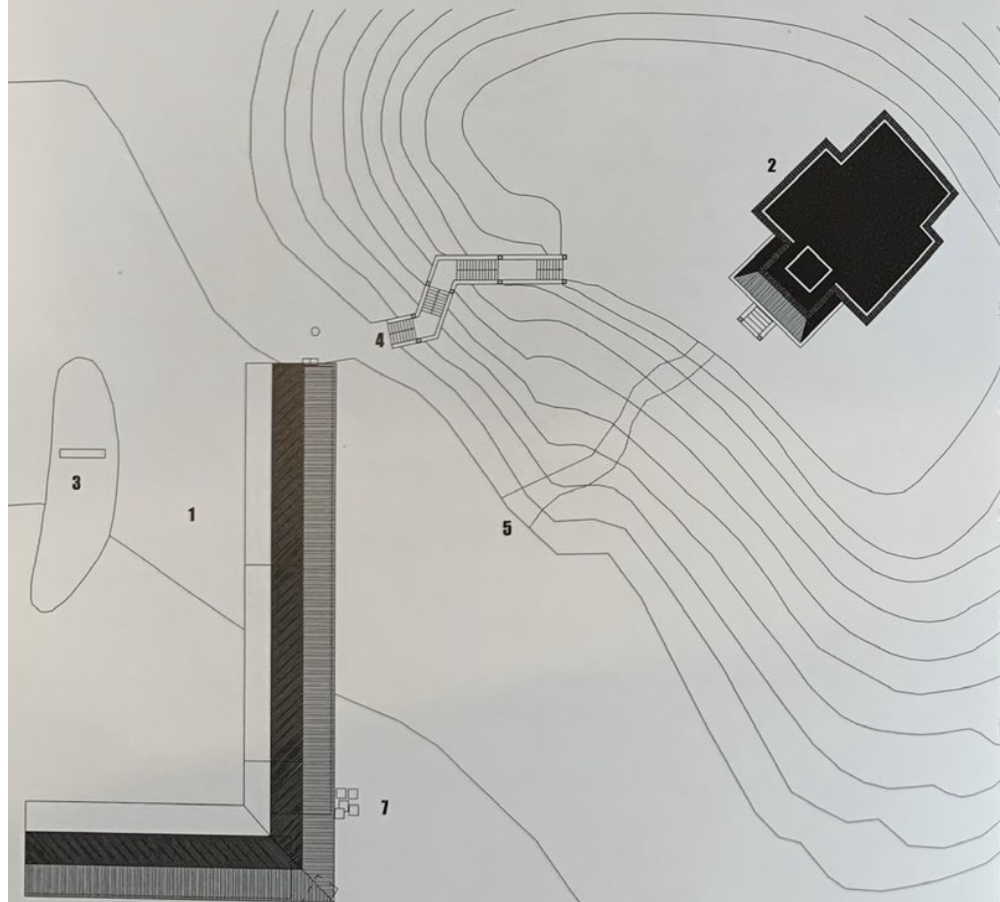
Site Plan

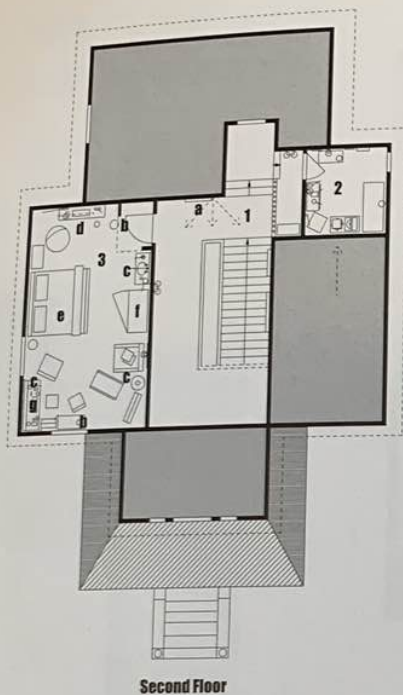
- 1 Motel
- 2 House
- 3 Neon Sign
- 4 Stone Staircase
- 5 Overgrown Path
- 6 Car Wreck
- 7 Rubbish

Bates Motel

- 1 Office
- 2 Office Parlor
- 3 Room No. 1
- 4 Room No. 10
- 5 Porch
- a Mirror
- b Counter
- c Room Keys
- d Linen Closet
- e Bookcase
- f Safe
- g Painting of *Susanna and the Elders*
- h Prints of Birds
- i Nightstand with Newspaper
- j Norman's Line of Sight

Drawings by David Claus





Second Floor

Bates House: Basement

- Chair with Mrs. Bates

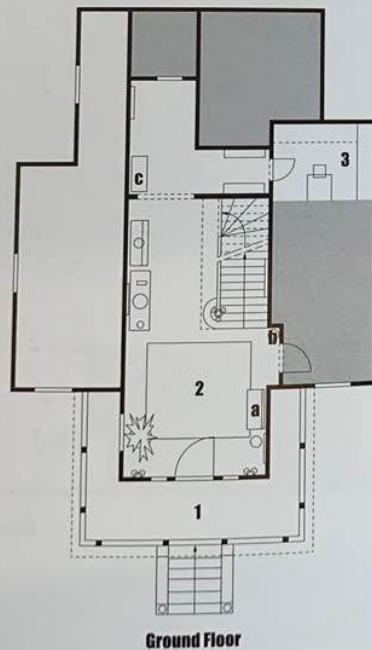
Bates House: Ground Floor

- 1 Porch
- 2 Foyer
- 3 Kitchen
- Cupboard with Mirror
- Statue
- Writing Desk

Bates House: Second Floor

- 1 Landing
- 2 Norman's Bedroom
- 3 Mother's Bedroom
- Painting
- Statue
- Mirror
- Fireplace
- Bed with Imprint
- Wardrobe
- Sculpture of Hands

Drawings by David Claus



Ground Floor

Basement

Made at a time when the tensions and dissatisfactions within the nuclear family – much celebrated in the American cinema of the 1950s – were increasingly discussed in both the social sciences and the popular media, *Psycho* is another Hitchcock meditation on the home and the house.¹ In addition, in film history, *Psycho* is considered the moment horror moved inside the home and the family. Consequently, its architecture is of primary importance and its sets became one of the most famous ever. The Bates estate is situated along a highway that connects Phoenix to California – the route Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) takes after having stolen forty thousand dollars from her employer. Marion's journey features the icons of the new American vernacular landscape of the 1950s and 1960s, which found its cinematic expression in the genre of the road movie: highway patrol cops, car dealers, roadside billboards, neon signs, and motels. Leland Poague has already noted the film's connection between money, cars, and madness and obsession: "only in a culture obsessed with speed and volume of traffic would a main road be moved."² In order to represent this drab, diluted, suburbanized landscape, Hitchcock documented himself extensively on the topography of Route 99 (including names, locations, and room rates of every motel).³ Assistant director Hilton Green later recalled that Hitchcock traced the route a woman might take to go from Phoenix to central California and he had pictures taken of every area along the way. On roadmaps hung on his office walls, Hitchcock traced with pushpins the heroine's exact route.⁴

During a heavy rainstorm – one of the many over-obvious horror clichés despite the fact that there are neither thunder nor lightning, only near-silence, rain, headlights, and windshield wipers – Marion is attracted by a neon sign showing "Bates Motel – Vacancy." The motel office is deserted, so she walks around the corner where she finds an old, grey, Victorian house at the top of a rise. She also notices the silhouette of a woman passing behind a bedroom window. Supposedly, this woman is the tyrannical mother of Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), the shy owner of the lonely and run-down motel. Marion's coming up to the Bates house in the rain recalls the second Mrs. De Winter's approach to Manderley in *Rebecca*.⁵ Both homes loom large and, as it turns out, are filled with the presence of an assassinated female/maternal figure since the woman in the window is Norman Bates himself.

The isolated and contrasting positions of both the horizontal motel and the vertical Gothic house are striking and make them seem quite menacing. Both buildings are disconnected from each other – something which was not the case in early versions of the screenplay⁶ – and from the rest of the world. Arbogast (Martin Balsam), the private investigator tracing Marion, states that "the past two days I have been in so many hotels

1 Cohen, *Alfred Hitchcock: The Legacy of Victorianism*, 144–45.

2 Poague, "Links in a Chain: *Psycho* and Film Classicism," 344.

3 Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, 42.

4 *Ibid.*, 56.

5 Samuels, "Epilogue: *Psycho* and the Horror of

the Bi-Textual Unconscious," 156.

6 Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, 35.

that my eyes are bleary with neon but this is the first place that looks like it's hiding from the world." Even the motel seems 'left behind' when the highway moved. This isolation, which seem to banish the Bates Motel to the past, is a product of the spatial organization of modern society, however. Since the 1940s, the new interstate highways had bypassed the older, more local, networks of roads, and the small rural towns they served. As a result, not only the Victorian house but also the modern motel has this feel of the once familiar that has been extracted from the flow of life – both the house and the motel, the ancient setting and contemporary road culture, breathe the atmosphere of an uncanny ruin. "This fella lives like a hermit," sheriff Chambers (John McIntire) tells us about Norman Bates."

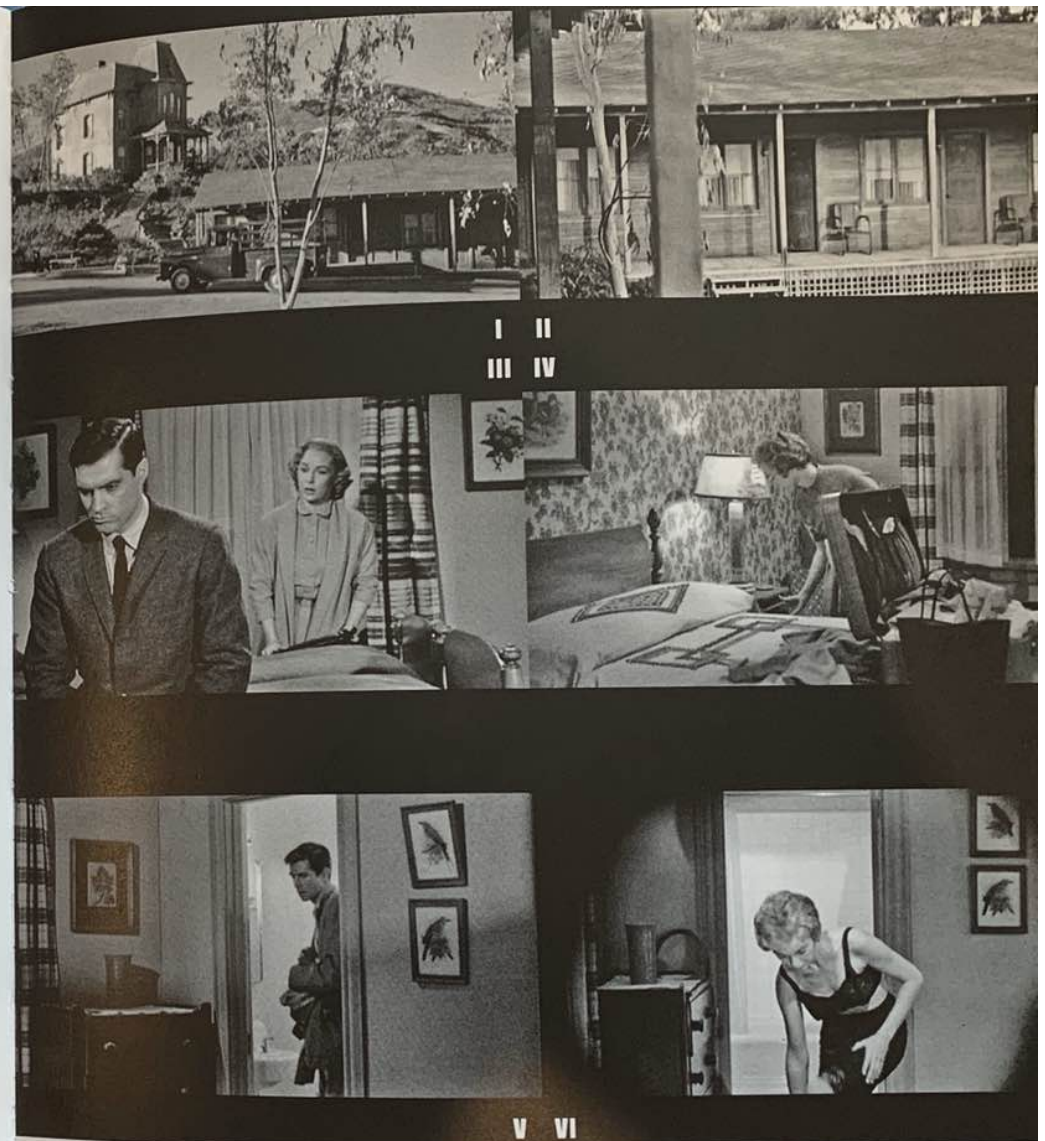
Moreover, the motel punctuates the isolation and loneliness of the main characters because, as a building type, it is inherently linked with the boring and the ordinary and because it presents itself as an impossible substitute for the home. Originated in the tourist campsite and the motor court, motels developed into rows of functional cabins, which give a minimal impression of homey lived-in domesticity. In his classic on American roadside architecture, Chester Liebs demonstrated that motels, although little more than a bedroom with a bathroom attached, place considerable emphasis on symbolic furnishings: heavy chenille bedspreads, an oak writing desk with a blotter, wall-to-wall carpeting, prints hung on the walls, closets lined with quilted satin paper, soap and shampoo, etc.⁷ Precisely because the emphasis is on an adequate set of functional articles charged with symbolic meaning, motels are particularly interesting architectural items in cinema.

Hitchcock was unmistakably interested in the banality of the building type. The Bates motel bears the same grey drabness of Marion's lower middle-class secretarial life with its crushed dreams. Its desolation and disconsolate character are unmistakably important to the mood of the entire picture, which was certainly emphasized by the canny production design by Joseph Hurley and Robert Clatworthy.⁸ Hurley was a production illustrator who had no previous credits in art direction whereas Clatworthy had assisted Robert Boyle on *Saboteur* and *Shadow of a Doubt*. Clatworthy had also been the art director of Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958), another picture featuring Janet Leigh in a seedy motel with a loony night man. Hurley and Clatworthy constructed the famous sets in the Universal studio: both buildings were erected on a hill off 'Laramie' Street, named for a western series, whereas the interiors were constructed on the sound stage.

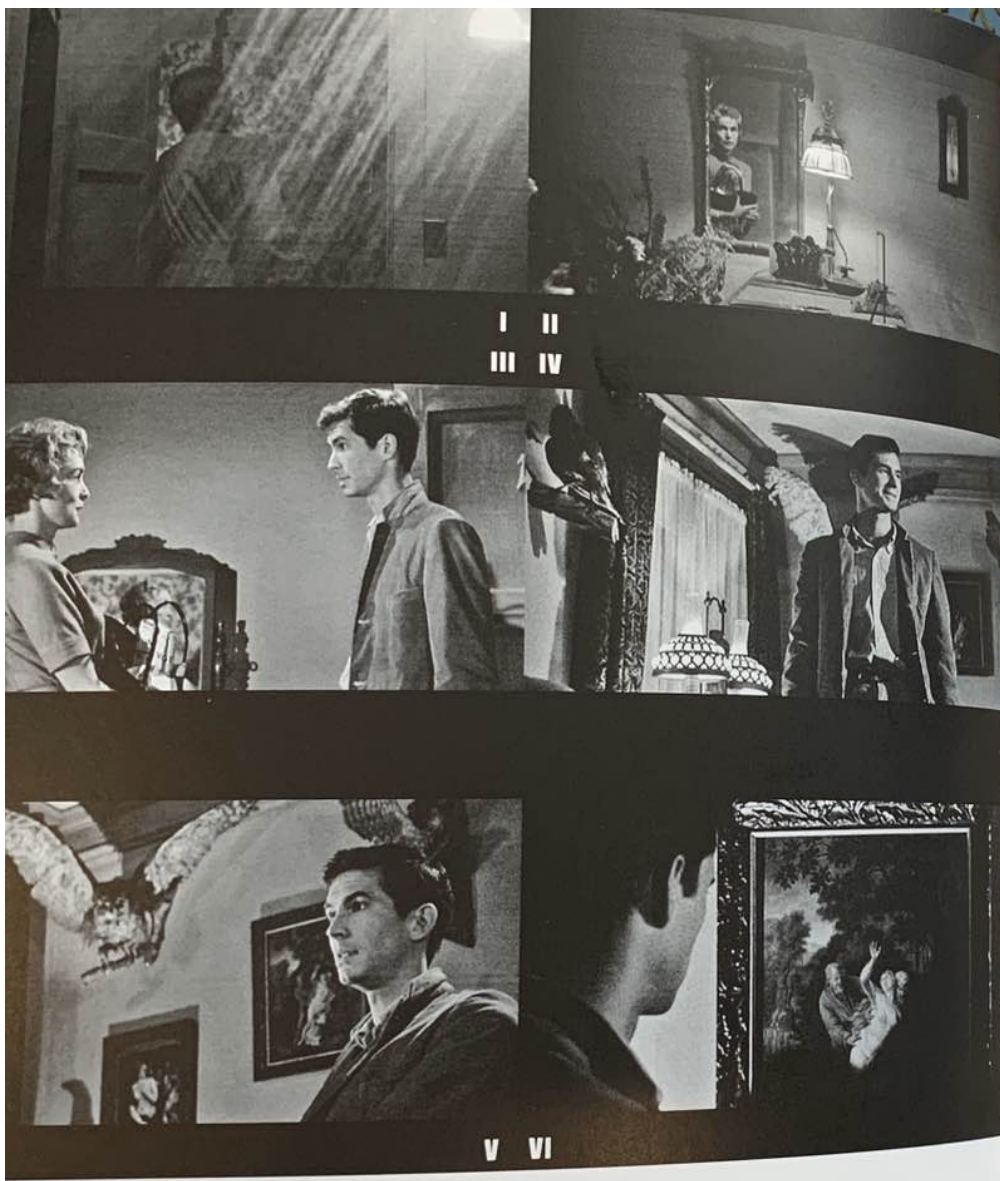
The layout of the motel is characterized by an L-shaped floor plan that consists of a tiny office with a parlor and a linear succession of twelve rooms – "twelve cabins, twelve

⁷ Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile*.

⁸ Heisner, *Hollywood Art*, 301-302.



I Bates motel and house (Digital Frame)
 II Bates motel (Digital Frame)
 III Room No. 10 (Digital Frame)
 IV Room No. 1 (Digital Frame)
 V, VI Room No. 1 with bathroom (Digital Frame)



I Bathroom of Room No. 1 (Digital Frame)

III, IV Motel office (Digital Frame)

V, VI Painting of *Susanna and the Elders* (Digital Frame)

vacancies," Norman says both to Marion and Arbogast. In a way, the motel can be interpreted as a graphic scheme of the entire film, which Raymond Bellour described as a story determined by a succession of bedrooms – the Phoenix hotel room, Marion's room in the Bates motel, Norman's room, and the mother's room.⁹ All bedrooms are linked to the film's theme of voyeurism: the penetration of the panoptic camera into the Phoenix hotel room after the couple's love-making, Norman spying on Marion undressing in her room bordering the office parlor, and the intrusion of the bedrooms in the house under the discovering look of Lila (Vera Miles), Marion's sister. The succession of bedrooms, each linked with a form of voyeurism, answers to what Barbara Klinger called the "move from a scenographic space to an obscenographic space" that marks the structure of the film.¹⁰ In addition, the series of cubicles also represent the spatial compactness and even compression that characterize the entire film, which opens with Saul Bass' abstract design concept of verticals and horizontals.¹¹ In *Psycho*, everything seems to engender entrapment – something that is also emphasized by the film's bird imagery (which cannot be found in Robert Bloch's source novel) and Norman's statement that "we're all in our private traps, clamped in them, and none of us can ever get out. We scratch and claw but only at the air, only at each other. And for all of it, we never budge an inch." The themes of voyeurism and entrapment are further connected by the imagery of (architectural) details structuring or blocking the view: opaque windows, closed Venetian blinds, shower curtains, dark reflecting glasses, windshields blurred by heavy rain, mirrors, peep holes, and swinging light bulbs.

Two of the twelve motel rooms are shown in the film: room number 1, the one Marion is allotted to, and number 10, which, much later in the film, is occupied by Sam Loomis (John Gavin) and Lila Crane, Marion's lover and sister, who register as man and wife in order to look for clues of the disappeared Marion. Both rooms contain undistinguished hotel furniture – a bed, a nightstand with a lamp, a wardrobe, a mirror, a little writing desk and a chair, curtains with a stripe pattern. The walls of room number 1 are decorated with floral wallpaper, a mirror framing Marion in several shots, and prints of birds – Norman sees Marion undressing in the proximity of these birds and one of the framed prints falls to the floor when the shocked Norman discovers the lifeless body of Marion in the bathroom. Strikingly, when Norman showed Marion the room, he was unable to say "bathroom," he simply points at the room that is one of the most important of the film. As in some of his earlier films, Hitchcock presents the bathroom as a place of revelation or menace. In his screenplay, Joseph Stefano writes that its "white brightness...is almost blinding."¹² Strikingly, the scene of the greatest horror of the film inverts the usual darkness of the haunted house. Hitchcock even

⁹ Bellour, "Psychosis, Neurosis, Perversion (on *Psycho*)," 252.

¹⁰ Klinger, "*Psycho*: The Institutionalization of Female Sexuality," 335.

¹¹ Kolker, "The Form, Structure, and Influence of *Psycho*," 211.

¹² Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, 70.

incited set decorator George Milo to make certain that the bathroom fixtures gleamed and created an eerily disorienting brightness – a partiality that harked back to bathroom scenes in *Murder and Spellbound*.¹³ Its bright, clean, and aseptic character is even more highlighted through Norman's careful cleaning after the bloody murder. Hitchcock's camera does not only show the shower, which supports the film's interlinked motifs of enclosure and voyeurism, but also the toilet. Marion tears up a piece of paper and flushes it down the toilet – something which had never been seen on-screen before. After Marion's stabbing, itself rendered in a famous sequence of hyperfragmented editing, Hitchcock explores the entire space by means of a single sweeping camera move. Opening on a screen-filling close-up of Marion's lifeless eye, the dolly glides low along the bathroom floor past the toilet, then into the motel room to end on the night table and, atop it, the newspaper in which the stolen money is hidden. As the camera holds the shot, the open window (actually a screen with projection) discloses Norman running down the stairs from the house toward the motel. Strikingly, the camera remains in a room that is temporarily deprived of any human presence. According to George Toles, its purpose in doing so is "to tranquilize this setting by invoking an aesthetic response to it. The fearful disarrangement of the bathroom space that horror has just visited is not simply curtailed, it is denied."¹⁴

In addition, in Hitchcockian topography, the bathroom is the stage of the voyeur and a site for the return of the repressed.¹⁵ Room number 1, after all, borders on the tiny motel office, containing a mirror that frames Marion immediately when she enters this room, and an adjacent parlor where Norman has made a peephole in the wall. When Marion retires to her room and prepares to take a shower, Norman takes a picture off its hook revealing this peephole. Strikingly, the picture Norman removes from the wall doubles the events of the narrative since it depicts Susanna and the Elders, the apocryphal story of three old men who spied on a naked woman as she prepared for her bath. Serving as a screen of sorts covering Norman's peephole, the story depicted in the painting also refers to themes central to *Psycho*: voyeurism, wrongful accusation, corrupted innocence, secrets, lust, and dead.¹⁶ In addition, the painting is part of the decoration of the parlor, which is filled with stuffed birds, one of them an enormous owl that seems to look down on Norman and Marion. Also the pictures on the walls are all of birds or winged angels. In his screenplay, Stefano describes the parlor as "a room of birds... The birds are of many varieties, beautiful, grand, horrible, preying."¹⁷ As a result, the parlor looks like a piece of the dark, Victorian mansion transferred to the motel. This also applies for the other side of the peephole. Raymond Durnat has noted that in a shot cut out of the film, the camera tracks very slowly in one of the rosebuds in the

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¹³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁴ Toles, "If Thine Eye Offended Thee," 127.

¹⁵ Walker, *Hitchcock's Motifs*, 113.

¹⁶ See Lunde & Noverr, "Saying It With Pictures," 101; and Peucker, "The Cut of Representation," 148.

¹⁷ Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, 69.

¹⁸ Durnat, *A Long Hard*

Look at 'Psycho', 107.

¹⁹ Heisner, *Hollywood Art*, 301-302.

²⁰ Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, 68.

²¹ Kraft & Leventhal, *Footsteps in the Fog*, 238-40.



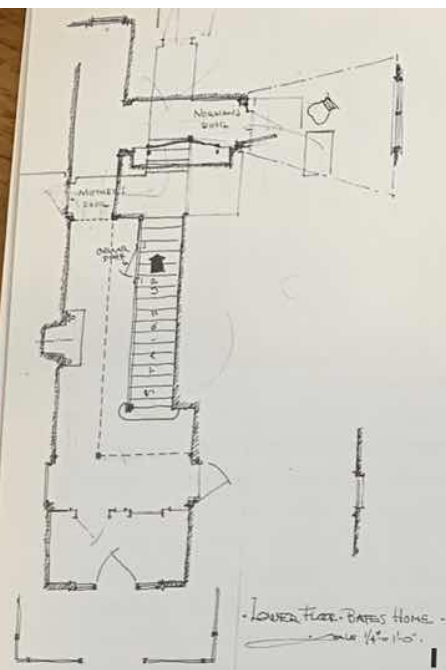
old-fashioned floral wallpaper to show that it camouflages Norman's peephole.¹⁸ Evoking the Victorian mansion, a patch of this wallpaper with a heavy, tight pattern of darkish blooms can be spotted in the mirror behind Marion.

Contrary to information in sources that state that it was an existing building, the Gothic Bates mansion was also a new set designed by Joseph Hurley and Robert Clatworthy. Apart from utilizing cannibalized stock unit sections – parts of the rooftop were borrowed from the house built for *Harvey* (Henry Koster, 1950) and the impressive doors originally belonged to the Crocker House of San Francisco – Hurley and Clatworthy constructed an original house, which unmistakably referred to a rich tradition of Folk Victorian houses and their associations in art and popular culture.¹⁹ Several plausible sources have been mentioned. According to novelist James Michener, the Bates Mansion was based on a haunted house built in the early 1800s in Kent, Ohio. Other possible sources of inspiration that have been suggested are the eerie Addams Family residence familiar from the celebrated Charles Addams cartoons in the *New Yorker* and Edward Hopper's famous 1925 painting *House by the Railroad* showing a melancholy mansard-roofed house with cornices, pilasters, and an oculus window.²⁰ Jeff Kraft and Aaron Leventhal state that the Gothic Bates house was inspired by a dilapidated Santa Cruz hotel²¹ – an opinion in line with statements by Hitchcock himself. In his interview with François Truffaut, Hitchcock stated that "the actual locale of the events is in northern California, where that type of house is very common. They're either called 'California Gothic,' or, when they're particularly awful, they're called 'California Gingerbread.' I

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¹ Bates house (Still, Royal Film Archive, Brussels)

² Bates house (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)



I Lower floor - Bates Home -
Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences



II Bates house foyer: sketch
Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

III Bates house landing: sketch
Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

did not set out to reconstruct an old-fashioned Universal horror-picture atmosphere. I simply wanted to be accurate, and there is no question but that both the house and the motel are authentic reproductions of the real thing. I chose that house and motel because I realized that if I had taken an ordinary low bungalow the effect wouldn't have been the same. I felt that type of architecture would help the atmosphere of the yarn."²²

With its symmetrical façade, cornice-line brackets, simple window surrounds, and a porch with spindlework detailing, the Bates house is a good example of the Folk Victorian architecture that was popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the entire United States.²³ The ocular window in the high-pitched roof is perfectly in line with the film's voyeurist theme. In contrast with the ordinariness of the motel, the ornate Gothic Revival mansion is one of the long series of 'haunted houses' from Uni-

²² Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 269.
²³ Virginia & Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, 309-310.
²⁴ David Stove, quoted in Wilson, "Monsters and Monstrosities," 145.
²⁵ Toles, "If Thine Eye Offended Thee," 144.
²⁶ Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, 69.
²⁷ Benjamin, "Erfahrung

und Armut," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 11, 1, 217; and "Das Passagen-Werk: Aufzeichnungen und Materialien," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, v, 1, 291-92.

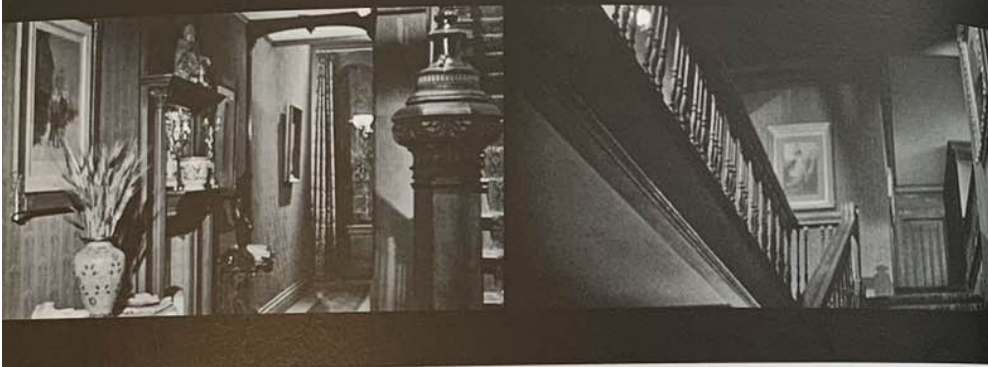
I Plan Bates house: preliminary sketch (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)
 II Bates house foyer: sketch (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)
 III Bates house landing: sketch (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

versal horror films, most of whose exteriors had only been seen in mattes. Norman Bates and his mother would certainly have felt at home in James Whale's *The Old Dark House* (1932) – Hitchcock himself corroborated this association with the horror tradition in the film's funny trailer, in which he poses as a veritable House of Horrors tour-guide stating that "even in daylight, this place looks a bit sinister." The ample porch leads unto an impressive foyer, which connects to a corridor showing the way to the kitchen. The foyer is dominated by a large stairway complete with intricate carved newels and stained-glass windows. The staircase leads to the upper floors with the bedrooms of Norman and his mother. Victorian paintings in ornate frames adorn the walls of the landing, which reveals the several levels of the large house. Hitchcock explores this space by means of impressive dolly shots ending in vertical top shots on the stairway.

The uncanny interior of the Bates mansion is a perfect example of what David Stove has called *Victorianarum*: "that horror which even nowadays is felt, at least to a slight degree, by almost anyone who visits a display of stuffed birds under glass, for example, or of Victorian dolls and doll's clothes."²⁴ The plush rooms contain conspicuous carpets that contribute to the hushed, smothering atmosphere of the house, which is crammed with furniture and objects. These are often emphatically displayed. George Toles even claimed that "in no other Hitchcock film does the camera close in on so many objects that refuse to disclose their significance."²⁵ Production designer Robert Clatworthy recalls Hitchcock being far more finicky about odd, unsettling details of décor – such as the kitschy sculpture of the hands folded in prayer in Mother's room – than about the general architectural structure.²⁶ The crammed house full of charged objects answers perfectly to Walter Benjamin's observations of the packed, plush, Victorian bourgeois interior, in which everything is covered by drapes and upholsters.²⁷ According to Benjamin, the bourgeois interior does not only present itself as a mirror image of man's sojourn in the mother's womb, it also dazes its inhabitants. In the crammed interior, residents are turned into fossils whereas every object bears the traces of the inhabitants. The Bates house, like the houses in the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, is a reflection of its inhabitant's mind, its rooms carefully preserved. Norman's room, which has to be reached by ascending another flight of stairs, is that of a child with a record player and fluffy childhood toys, which are obviously still played with. Norman's room is never seen as a visual whole, just a succession of tight details, in contrast with his mother's room, which is visualized by wide shots. The bedroom of Mrs. Bates is crowded with Victorian furniture and artifacts: a cold white marble fireplace, a sumptuous armoire with old-fashioned dresses, the aforementioned sculpture of hands, black statues of winged



I II
III IV



V VI
VII VIII



angels that mirror the stuffed birds in the motel parlor. This sepulchral room even retains a bed which still bears the imprint of the body of Norman's mother. Another striking piece of furniture are the mirrors, which are omnipresent in *Psycho* – "Let's have lots of mirrors, old boy," Hitchcock told set decorator George Milo.²⁸ In mother's room, just before discovering the terrible secret, Lila is trapped between two facing mirrors. Conventional markers of both the need for introspection and the haunted double,²⁹ mirrors are also suitable props for the representation of a split personality.

This uncanny atmosphere is not only the result of the production design but also of John L. Russell's camerawork. Camera positions make the mammoth interior dwarf the characters. This is the case, for instance, in the hallway perspective of Norman seated at the kitchen table directly before the shower scene – as if the only spaces that he feels

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free to occupy in his own person are peripheral rooms behind the main living area.³⁰ Twisted dolly shots are not only used for narrative purposes (such as in the scene in which mother kills Arbogast or the one in which Norman carries his mother down the stairs) but also function as visual extensions of Norman Bates' trapdoor spider view of life.³¹ Camera movements enforce the feeling that the house is haunted, the space sentient, and that objects are charged. To keep the intruding Arbogast in view, for example, the camera pulls backwards up the stairs or, as Raymond Durgnat has noted, it seems more like a zoom lens on a camera outside diegetic space. The 'flattened-out' perspective then characteristic of zooms makes conspicuous the hallway below him (into which he will indeed fall).³²

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- I II Foyer with stairs (Digital Frame)
- III Foyer (Digital Frame)
- IV Stairs (Digital Frame)
- V Landing (Digital Frame)
- VI, VII, VIII Mother's bedroom (Digital Frame)

28 Rebello, "Psycho," 57.
 29 Rosenblatt, "Doubles and Doubt in Hitchcock," 37-63.
 30 Toles, "If Thine Eye Offended Thee," 136.
 31 Ringel, "Blackmail," 22.
 32 Durgnat, *A Long Hard Look at 'Psycho'*, 171.

Psycho does not only deal with an uncanny house but also with what's underneath. The climax, after all, is situated in the basement of the Bates house where the mommy/mummy is discovered. The uncanny house is literally connected with death and functions as a funerary monument. The discovery in the basement makes clear that the entire house, and the mother's room in particular, make up a tomb. Like an Egyptian pharaoh, mother has been mummified and buried with her household belongings. Given this perspective, the crammed Bates house incarnates the womb/tomb rhyme that preoccupies house-building in many cultures. The Bates mansion is such a powerful image since it is reminiscent of archetypal forms of early neolithic domestic architecture, in which the dead are buried under the floors or their bones incorporated into the substructure of the houses.³³

The scene situated in the cellar – a dark space where, according to Gaston Bachelard, fears are difficult to rationalize³⁴ – adds a third level to the house as a result of which Slavoj Žižek, in his *Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006), is able to read the tripartite structure of the Bates house as a representation of (Nor)man's mind: on the ground floor lives the ego; the second floor is the space of the (maternal) superego; whereas the *id* dwells in the basement. However, more important than the tripartite structure of the Victorian house is its juxtaposition to the motel. Žižek even goes so far as to trace Norman Bates' psychotic split to his inability to locate himself between the anonymous modernist box of the motel and his mother's Gothic house on the hill.³⁵ According to Žižek, it would take a deconstructivist architect such as Frank Gehry to mediate between such two opposites, which are often obfuscated in the postmodern architecture of *New Urbanism* characterized by a staging of the cosy atmosphere of small-town family life. "If the Bates Motel were to be built by Gehry," Žižek writes, "directly combining the old mother's house and the flat modern motel into a new hybrid entity, there would have been no need for Norman to kill his victims, since he would have been relieved of the unbearable tension that compels him to run between the two places – he would have a third place of mediation between the two extremes."³⁶

33 Rykwert, "One Way of Thinking About a House," 85-87.

34 Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace*, 35-36.

35 Žižek, "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin is Writ Large," 231-32.

36 Žižek, "Is There a Proper Way to Remake a Hitchcock Film?," 273.



Mother's chair (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)