>>BOOK

THE WRONG HOUSE: THE ARCHITECTURE OF ALFRED HITCHCOCK

By Steven Jacobs
010 Publishers, £21.90
Review by Herbert Wright

Right: The villain's Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired lair in North by Northwest

Below: Still from Hitchcock's rear Window

In film studio speak, a MacGuffin is a device on which the plot hangs, but in itself is quite irrelevant. For example, in Hitchcock's 1959 spy thriller North by Northwest, the MacGuffin is a microfilm, and because of it, Cary Grant is projected into desperate adventures across the US – yet the microfilm's secrets are never revealed. One could say that in Steven Jacobs' book, the MacGuffin is Hitchcock as architect: in fact, he used buildings rather than designed them. Hitchcock bossed around an army of art directors and set designers in 56 films to create exactly the spaces he wanted, and used them to extraordinary dramatic effect. As Jacobs says, 'one should acknowledge Hitchcock as an art director in his own right'.

The range of built environments in Hitchcock's films is immense. On the studio set, everything from tight interiors to the art deco cityscape of Manhattan (in Rope) was created, and from the real world, busy streets became location shoots and vistas became backdrops to conjure up cities. Hitchcock was a master of claustrophobia. The foggy opening shot of the gothic Manderley mansion in Rebecca, for example, takes us into a world so smothering that Hitchcock is credited with reincarnating the legacy of the gothic novel.

By contrast, North by Northwest opens with the glass curtain wall on an International Style New York skyscraper, and the expansive thrill of modernism continues right through to the villain's Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired mountain-top house. Jacobs looks at Hitchcock's treatment of different scales from doors and windows to the entire city, and then he takes us into 26 individual houses and flats from different films.

Hitchcock himself is widely quoted, and there's a feast of pictures from the films, as well as building model photos and floorplans. Architects are accurately cited, but psychology rather than architecture is the frequent theme of Jacob's exploration. He constantly parades the names and observations of psychologists, other film-makers and critics. In his trawl of film commentaries, he finds some excellent suggestions. For example, according to Slavoj Zizek, Anthony Perkins' schizophrenia in Psycho results from the tension between the mundane modernity of the motel rooms and his mother's gothic house, which an integrated Frank Gehry redesign of the Bates Motel would have cured.

Gems like Dali's dreamscape in Spellbound and the cinematic technique exaggerating the fall in Vertigo are satisfyingly explained.

The overall result is not just a densely detailed dissection of the Hitchcock films, but an absorbing treatise on cinema's treatment of dramatic space. Architecture itself may be a MacGuffin, but Jacobs never loses the plot.

>>EXHIBITION

LIVING LONDON: GERRY FOX

31 January-20 April
176 Gallery, London
Review by Jamie Mitchell

Far right: Detail from Living London, showing Soho at night

Right: The installation of Fox's films

It is appropriate that Will Self – a compulsive nightwalker of the city streets – has written an introduction to Living London, Gerry Fox's first major art exhibition at the 176 Gallery in Chalk Farm. This is a flaneur's view of the city. Through a series of films shot from point-of-view perspective, Fox hopes to immerse the viewer 'in a total environment'. Multiple screens placed on the walls, ceiling and floor of the gallery allow you to look up to the sky above Soho or catch sight of a speeding taxi in the periphery of your vision. This is a lucid yet ethereal journey through London. Using a range of cinematic techniques – sometimes running with the camera while filming in slow-motion – Fox explores the sense of alienation one feels amongst the crowds of tourists in Leicester Square; he juxtaposes footage of a baby being pulled from the womb in a London hospital with the frenetic intensity of the Notting Hill Carnival.

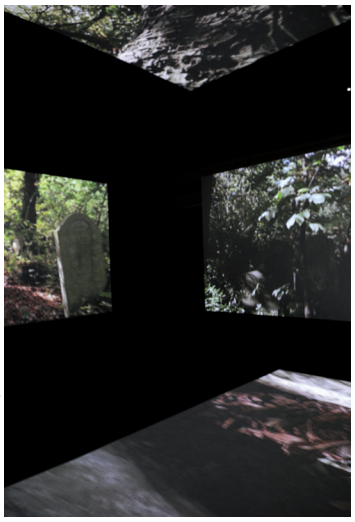

PHOTO BY JACK GOFFE, COURTESY OF THE ZABLUDOWICZ COLLECTION

This is a departure from the biopics of artists for which Gerry Fox is best known, and there are some beautiful moments. The camera's compulsive orbit of a snow-covered Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens, the artist's frozen breaths eerily audible, comes closest to realising his intention: 'to evoke the spatial dislocation experienced in dreams'.

The films are pleasingly music-free, and the careful use of sound reinforces the oscillation between the various tempos of the city – the tumult of the West End on a Friday night or the solitude of a snow-covered park. There are moments when the title seems unsuitable, as the camera plays among broken gravestones in a forgotten corner of Nunhead Cemetery, but even here, in the ivy creeping over the cracked monuments, life prevails.

COURTESY OF THE ZABLUDOWICZ COLLECTION

The films raise various issues of morality: a baby crawls with audible determination against a backdrop of anti-war protests outside the houses of parliament; shots of consumers at a food market are set against scenes of appalling waste at a landfill site. But these moments invite a personal reaction, rather than making any definite judgement – and the work is all the more powerful for it.

Fox talks about the power of film to induce 'a kinesthetic experience' a term used by the artist to describe 'the physiological sensation of movement through space'. The exhibition, however, is not successful in evoking this dream-like state as one is always too aware of the artist's honed technique and cinematic skill to be entirely immersed. Even so, this remains a powerful, accomplished and moving set of films by an artist in love with his subject.