



Perhaps aware of its place in the history of architecture and film, the house is not humble. It sits astride a Los Feliz hillside peering out over the Los Angeles basin, secure atop a massive restraining wall of geometrically patterned concrete blocks. Los Angeles is home to both abundant architectural landmarks and the film industry, so it seems unsurprising that the structures of the city are not strangers to film. Evaluating the relationship between the city's architecture and its most famous product, however, is difficult. But the Ennis-Brown residence (1925) is different, exceptional for two reasons: it is the crowning achievement of Frank Lloyd Wright's experimental "textile block" style of architecture, and it has been the backdrop for over sixty films, television shows, music videos, advertisements and magazine photo spreads. The residence's popularity with producers, directors, photographers and location scouts is tied to Frank Lloyd Wright's artistic impulses and architectural faculty, and its portrayal in media, like that of so many other Los Angeles landmarks, has affected its history. The Ennis-Brown house is a lesson in space for architects, but also for media scholars; the rooms, blocks, walls and windows—its spaces—have been manipulated to portray everything from a laboratory to a mansion, and have been transformed from a setting for high art to the Marla Maples Workout Video. Drawing upon this broad resume enables us to view the Ennis-Brown house as a touchstone to examine the relationship between film and architecture.

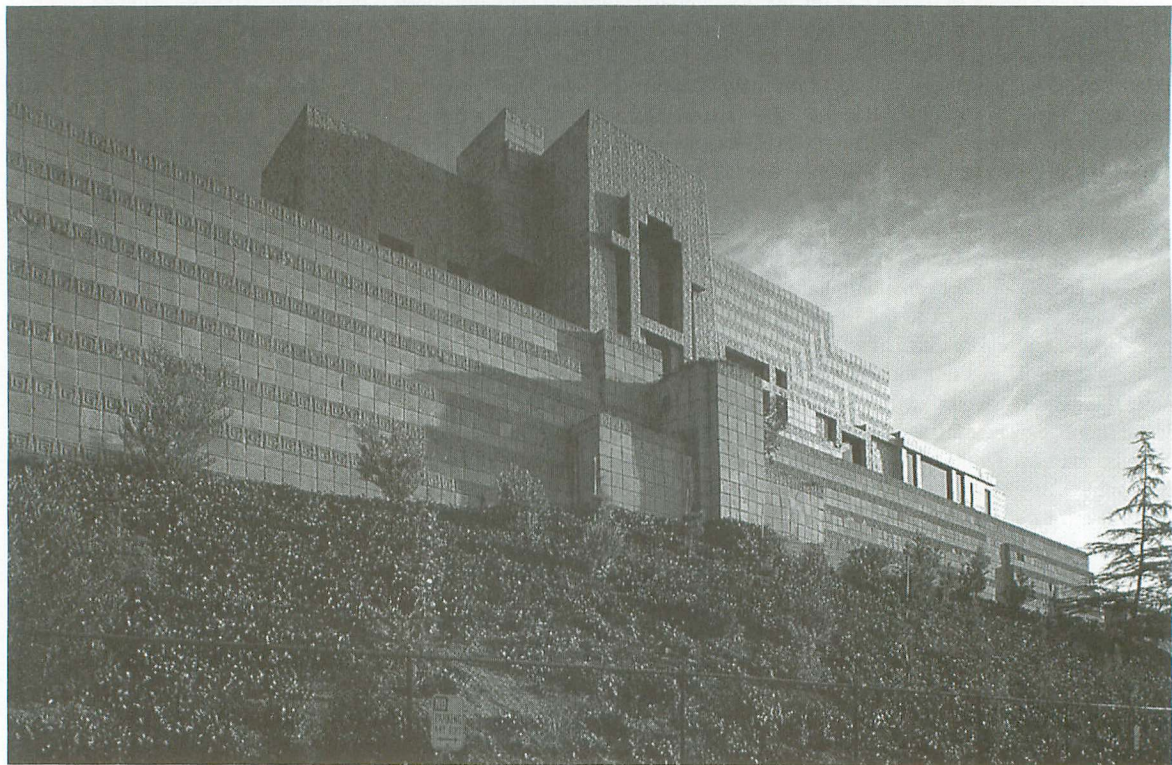
Measuring this relationship conventionally takes the form of placing a film's use of sets along a continuum of how loudly this setting "speaks" within the narrative: is it a relatively silent backdrop or does it participate more loudly, as in the case of more "expressionist" cinema where design exteriorizes emotional states? In the movies, architecture is most prevalently the somewhat mute background against which the story is set; though art direction seems largely ignored by the movie-going public¹ its impact on the "look" of the film, and thus the entirety of the experience of it is immense, from the gritty *noir* sensibilities of *The Big Sleep* (1946) and *Blade Runner* (1982) to the surrealistic oddity of *The 5,000 Fingers of Doctor T* (1953). In film sets evoke a mood, contribute to narrative, provide a context for action and often assign cultural values to certain spaces; in life, architecture does the same. What we could term a tripartite tension arises when architecture appears in film involving the constraints of the physical space, the contravening opportunities present for manipulation, and the necessities of the story. When used in film, real buildings rarely display both their "true" interiors and exteriors; sites are made to conform to a cinematic vision. Wright made the spaces of the Ennis-Brown house open to accommodate what he considered the "flow of life," but to suit their needs, other artists, directors, production designers and photographers have reinterpreted and refashioned those spaces over and over again, illustrating the plasticity of space and architecture as both are engaged in the pursuit of filmic vision. This essay sets out to explore the dialectic between architecture and film, using the Ennis-Brown house as a guinea pig for an analysis of the methods of spatial manipulation utilized by both art directors and architects. Despite obvious disparities, film and architecture display a surprising kinship at a number of levels: as frames for narrative, manipulators of space, creators of icons and objects of fantasy. Wright buildings, in particular, emblemize these interactions, from dramatizing space to establishing a roster of icons and auteurs.

In *Pretty Pictures* Charles Tashiro notes that the use of preexisting locations forces the filmmaker to make an interesting trade-off: it constrains the use of cameras and other equipment, but at the same time provides authenticity that a constructed set does not, a "presence that cannot be faked."² In its exploration of the relationship between film and architecture, this paper seeks to identify this aspect of the relationship between film, sets, design, and architecture by asking why exactly the Ennis-Brown residence is such a popular filming location. Key to this inquiry is asking whether the design philosophy of its spaces reinforce or contradict certain narrative meanings as the residence has been historically exploited. Is it merely easier to film there than build an appropriate set, or does the design of the house itself somehow evoke crucial atmospheres, emotions, or worlds that while desirable to filmmakers of the past six decades cannot be replicated on a backlot? Delving into the context of Wright's career and philosophy that were the background for the construction of the Ennis-Brown house can help pinpoint how this particular structure coincides with many levels of

THE FRAME OF LIFE:
MEDIATING FRANK LLOYD
WRIGHT'S ENNIS-BROWN RESIDENCE

by Scott Frank

< Textile block columns frame the Ennis-Brown house's interior spaces.



Wright's conception of California architecture: the vast horizontal majesty of the Ennis-Brown houses's siting.

the "cinematic." By exploring the building that rests at such a convergence of architectural and cinematic history we can hopefully then shed some light upon the relationship between two art forms that seem to engage in a privileged yet often difficult relationship with each other.

CONCEPTUALIZING CALIFORNIA ARCHITECTURE

The Ennis-Brown residence, so named for its original (Charles and Mabel Ennis) and current (Augustus Oliver Brown) residents, is one of four "textile block" houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the greater Los Angeles area. It was the last of the four to be constructed, and the largest, following the Millard house in Pasadena (1923), and the Storer (1924) and Freeman (1925) residences in Hollywood.³ The textile block construction system was an experiment by Wright, who had opened an office in Los Angeles in the early 1920s and was seeking to develop an indigenous architecture for the L.A. environment.

Wright devised a system of casting 16-inch square blocks of concrete, molded according to unique patterns he designed and made from stones and sand excavated from the building site.⁴ Wright liked concrete for its plasticity as a building material, but felt it was given short shrift on account of its unattractive, artificial nature. He was convinced he could "educate" it and render it beautiful. Running against the opinion of his contemporaries, Wright claimed that the machine age, rather than stifling craft and creativity, could be seized and used to create new forms of art.⁵ The purpose of the patterned concrete blocks was thus twofold: as art to prove that concrete, the "despised outcast" of the building world, could be made beautiful and as an example of Wright's attempts to contextualize architecture to exemplify a form of construction uniquely

suited to the Southern California environment—his much-publicized “organic architecture.”⁶ The phrase “textile block” comes not from the patterns of the bricks but rather the method of construction; instead of mortar, the blocks are held together by a “woven” lattice of interlocking steel bars that runs between the blocks. Wright theorized that this flexible system would resist earthquakes, and the concrete constructions would be cool and fireproof, reflections of the imagined greatest threats to California homes. Wright’s experiment was in one sense successful, as he proved the possibility of art in concrete. The blocks are beautiful not only for the designs themselves, but the depth that is a result of their high-relief, cast origins. This property is important to production designers, including Lawrence G. Paull of *Blade Runner*, who in an interview said “the advantage I had with the Frank Lloyd Wright architectural theme of the poured blocks is I had a design motif...when you saw Deckard’s apartment, you always saw broken surfaces that projected out.”⁷

In contrast, Wright’s hopes for a building form in synch with the environment was a more moderate success: the Storer, Millard, and Ennis-Brown residences have withstood a number of earthquakes, but the Ennis-Brown and Freeman houses both suffered extensive damage in the 1994 Northridge quake.⁸ Furthermore, Wright’s assumption that the Southern California rainfall was negligible was overly optimistic; the indigenous large-grained concrete has proven particularly susceptible to moisture, and all the buildings require massive investments of time and money to keep them whole.

Michael Webb notes that Wright’s dream was “noble structures created from humble materials.”⁹ The textile block system was an expression of Wright’s radical ideas for “organic architecture,” buildings that took into account their environment, the lifestyle of their owners, the integration of the interior and exterior spaces, and the notion that ornamentation should be part of the environment, “conceived of as the very ground plan” and integral to the structure itself.¹⁰ For the textile block houses, integration with the environment meant both the sites themselves—all are perched on hills or ravines around which the contours of the foundations flow—and the Southern California climate, lacking timber but rich in sand and grit, the ingredients for cement. In fact, the concrete used in construction of the four residences was mixed from granite found on site at each location. While this fulfilled the philosophical imperatives of Wright’s concepts of organic architecture, it also had the unexpected negative effect of producing deeply flawed concrete. The textile block houses were supposed to be uniquely Californian, built with the constraints and allowances of the local environment, cheap and spacious and modern, as Wright imagined California to be.

The Ennis-Brown residence is not the only one of the houses with media connections: Pasadena’s Millard residence, currently a private home, has appeared in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and a recent rap music video. The Storer residence is currently owned and has been extensively renovated by producer Joel Silver, a devoted fan of Wright’s architecture and owner of the Wright-designed South Carolina plantation “Auldbrass.”¹¹ However, none of the other Los Angeles buildings, in fact, none of Wright’s other buildings at all, can rival the sheer volume of appearances the Ennis-Brown residence has made since it’s first featured role in the film *Female* (1933).

The Ennis-Brown residence subsequently can be considered an architectural icon. Not only is it the largest of the textile block houses, it is Wright’s final use of his famous art glass windows.¹² Wright’s unorthodox design gives the building a number of unusual spatial properties, which have fortuitously lent themselves to the machinations of the media. Though the house has only ten rooms (thirteen including the separate but attached garage and servants’ quarters), it seems far more massive, in part due to its Mayan-influenced pyramidal design and in part to the truly impressive retaining wall upon which it sits, designed by Wright to hold the hill beneath the house stable.¹³ The dining room and living room are two of Wright’s largest interior rooms in any residence, unusual for an architect whose homes generally display a preference to utility over grandeur. A further extravagance of space is the hundred-foot long colonnade that links the main portion of the house to the master bedroom, a classically-patterned hallway bounded by block columns and floor-to-ceiling windows. Aligned along the colonnade, the rooms branch out as eddies from this stream of space, closely related and nearly interlocked at the core western end of the building, but clearly distinct, kept separate by columns, steps and a series of ceilings and floors of differing elevations.

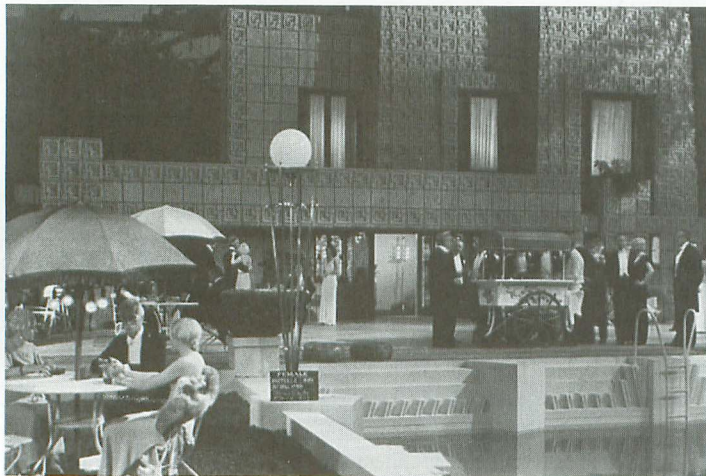
Evidence of any direct link between Wright and the film industry of the 1920s seems to be lacking; rather, his connections were with the performing arts world of L.A. through his clients Aline Barnsdall and Harriet Freeman. Nonetheless, the Ennis-Brown house seems laden with elements of an architecture branded with the cinematic, reflecting the glamorous world of the 1920s film industry: the vast spaces and historically-inspired architecture are reminiscent of the great movie houses, as is the monumental, dramatic nature of the house’s scale and siting. David Gebhard goes so far as to suggest that

Wright must have been thinking of the romance of a Hollywood set as he designed the long, corridor spaces.¹⁴ I find this claim dubious, but somehow apt; with architecture our sense of the dramatic is often oriented vertically; in the Ennis-Brown house, it rests in the vast horizontal interior spaces, the rooms placed physically together yet spatially apart through the cunning use of screening columns and elevated floors and the series of windows which flood the rooms with daylight while providing dramatically panoramic glimpses over the sprawl of the city below and the hills and canyons above. Subsequently, the house's framing of an extravagant and panoramic space evokes aspects of a cinematic dramatization of space.

Intriguingly, the Ennis-Brown house and most architectural masterworks fall prey to a strange architectural auteurist problematic: similar to auteurist theory that treats film as mostly the result one person's effort or vision and ignores the legions of other artists that contribute to any given work of art, the idea that Frank Lloyd Wright was the only guiding force behind the Ennis-Brown residence is misleading. Though it is clearly his vision that created the house and his theories that drive its form, aside from the multitude of workmen and artisans who physically built the house, Wright was constrained by the parameters of the original commission and the desires of the Ennis family, many of which he disagreed with. In fact, Wright was almost never present during the construction of "his" masterpiece, and after final conflicts over the use of marble over shale in the floors and flat ceilings over sloping ones, he quit the project and left supervision to his son Lloyd Wright.¹⁵ In later years, it has become clear that though Frank Lloyd Wright invented the textile block system it was his son who perfected it, building eleven structures using block construction within three years of the Ennis house's completion.¹⁶

Like any landmark, the house's history has been shaped by its owners, from the Ennis's conflict with Wright to the Browns who consecrated a nonprofit trust to preserve it. More than most buildings in Los Angeles, the house has found itself historically engaged with the media in which it has found such devoted fans: an early owner was 1940's television and radio personality John Nesbitt, who commissioned Wright to renovate the building, resulting in the addition of a swimming pool and additional bedroom.¹⁷ The level of decay into which the house fell before the Browns purchased it can be directly linked to the film *The House on Haunted Hill* (1958). The previous owner, who ignored the upkeep of the complex, was unable to sell for a number of years on account of the awesome but necessary task of renovating the crumbling building, and "because [due to] the film, dozens of youngsters came charging up the hill practically every night screaming at the top of their lungs."¹⁸ These two factors combined to make the house nearly unmarketable, and the longer it remained unoccupied the more dilapidated it became. The house also retains mementos of its countless film roles: a doghouse cast from molds used in the making of *Blade Runner* to mimic the house pattern, and near-permanent street signs on Glendower Way that read "No parking any time, Film and Television Vehicles excepted."

THE MANIPULATION OF FLUID SPACE AND THE MEDIA



The addition of a massive art deco swimming pool to Ennis-Brown's western facade in *Female* (1933).

The Ennis-Brown residence has been the setting for a variety of media appearances notable for both their volume (over sixty) and variety: from feature films to a Helmut Newton photo spread in *Playboy*, with music videos, advertisements, and catalogues filling in the gaps. In a BBC documentary, Diane Keaton noted "[the house] boasts more films to its credit than most actors have the privilege to make"¹⁹ The building's range is impressive; it has served as American and Japanese mansions, a futuristic apartment, psychiatric office, mad scientist's laboratory, haunted house, and in occasional documentaries, itself. More intriguing, however, are the methods through which different directors manipulate the spaces of the house to particular effect. Frank Lloyd Wright wanted to design a building that would be a solid monu-

ment to his ego, stating “the final result is going to stand on that hill a hundred years or more. Long after we are all gone it will be pointed out as the Ennis House and pilgrimages will be made to it by lovers of the beautiful—from everywhere.”²⁰ He might have been dismayed at the ease with which Ridley Scott, David Lynch, Lawrence Kasdan, and a legion of other directors and photographers were able to play with the mutability of “his” space. From its very first appearance in 1933, when *Female* production designer Jack Okey reconstructed the entire western facade of the house in order to install a massive art deco swimming pool in the driveway (or appear to, the same space is clearly later used as a carport in the film), the house as originally designed has not quite suited the needs of media artists, and they have shown little reticence in altering it to the needs of their vision.²¹ Subsequently, the house offers an extraordinary malleability, perhaps proving Wright’s thesis that concrete merely possess an illusion of immutability that serves to mask a true plasticity.

Tashiro notes the rampant excess of directors obsessed with restructuring existing environments to their artistic vision, for example, entire forests were “grown” and villages built for Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986).²² Because “found” environments are never ideally suited to the director’s vision, locations almost always need to be altered in some way before their appearance in a film. Examining the methods used by different directors showcases not only their cinematic skill but also their understanding of visual space and ability to create and manipulate it. Fortuitously, the Ennis-Brown house has escaped the blatant machinations of *Platoon*; instead it has fallen prey to more subtle and cunning visual trickery.

Ridley Scott has filmed within the Ennis-Brown house’s walls twice, for scenes in *Blade Runner* and *Black Rain* (1989). In *Blade Runner* the house serves as the cramped apartment of Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), a single unit in a massive, hundred-story futuristic condominium. In *Black Rain*, it is the home of Ohasi (Shigeru Koyama), a Japanese *Oyabun* who interrogates American policeman Nick Conkin (Michael Douglas).²³ The transformation of the Ennis-Brown residence into these two ostensibly disparate locales was a requirement of the narrative setting as expressed through the production design mandates for a dystopian future vs. modern Japan, respectively. These transformations were accomplished through a complementary set of tricks including selective photography, props management, and matte painting. In *Blade Runner* Scott restricted the filming to the smallest rooms in the house: the kitchen and pantry served as Deckard’s entire apartment. The rooms were filled with clutter to simulate an unkempt bachelor pad and further restrict the space.²⁴ Scott’s requirements of the house for *Black Rain* were significantly different, demanding the space portray a delicately decorated, vast mansion. So Scott moved into the combined living/dining room area that Wright called the “Great Room,” removed all but a few pieces of rustic furniture, and shot his scene.

Wright viewed space itself as the primary building block of a house, insisting that “the reality of a building is the space within the building.”²⁵ Space in Wright’s houses is meant to flow, leading the resident or visitor from one room to another while providing a setting for the drama of individual lives; a perfect example is the entryway of the Ennis-Brown residence. The front door opens into a dank, cave-like entryway, with a pool of light ahead leading the visitor up a stairway to the Great Room’s vast expanse. Scott’s films took advantage of Wright’s peculiar mixture of the giant, high-ceilinged Great Room with the cramped kitchens and bedrooms. In addition, Scott also proved his expertise at the manipulation of the entire complex. To further situate the interior scenes, each is foreshadowed with an exterior shot of the house: in *Blade Runner*, we see Deckard drive up to the “house” and through the front gates, while in *Black Rain* Douglas’ Japanese partner Masahiro Matsumoto (Ken Takakura) sits outside in his car, awaiting Conkin’s release. The two sequences are filmed from a nearly identical location. In order to establish the house as a solitary mansion, Scott shoots the building southwards, over



Uses of the Ennis-Brown exterior in *Black Rain* (above) and *Blade Runner* (below).



Manipulating elevation in Ennis-Brown: interior shots in *Blade Runner* (above) and *Black Rain* (below).

sufficiently weird, while the interior of Wright's spacious yet sparse masterpiece was neither claustrophobic nor spooky enough to seem believably ensorcelled.

Comparison of Scott's treatment of the house in *Black Rain* and that by Joe Johnston in *The Rocketeer* (1991) exhibits another method for the manipulation of space. Both films utilize the residence as a mansion, that of *Oyabun* Ohasi and Errol Flynn-like movie star Neville Sinclair (Timothy Dalton) respectively. Each character's home is an open, spacious manse with high ceilings and classical fireplaces. Both scenes are interrogations: Nick Conkin by the *Oyabun* and Sinclair by crime boss Eddie Valentine (Paul Sorvino), and both take place in the dining room of the Ennis-Brown house. But in *The Rocketeer*, the room is Sinclair's sunken living room; the same room in *Black Rain* is raised *above* the rest of the house. While unremarkable in the films independently, when seen in succession, the transformation of the space is startling; though clearly the same room, it appears to undergo a fifteen foot vertical shift. The effect is achieved through blocking and camera placement. In actuality, the dining room itself is situated slightly above the adjoining living room, and slightly below the hallway leading to the kitchen. For *Black Rain*, Scott placed the camera to shoot through the dining room and over Michael Douglas' shoulder into the living room below. To emphasize the elevation difference, one of the *Oyabun*'s servants walks through the living room directly behind (below) Douglas, drawing attention to Conkin's seated but still raised position. In *The Rocketeer*, Dalton descends a staircase into the "sunken" dining room, then walks around Sorvino and his mob heavies, showcasing the elegance of his home. Despite the fact that Dalton meanders through nearly the entire room, Johnston is able to maintain the illusion that it is sunken with relation to the rest of the house. Shooting with the actually sunken living room behind the camera, Johnston films the dining room only in relation to the main hallway, which is above both the dining and living rooms. He then has Dalton descend the stairs into the dining room, once again using the actor's movement to draw attention to the spatial elevation of the room.

REGULAR STRANGENESS AND STYLISTIC DESIRE

The Ennis-Brown's resume is certainly prolific; few other private homes have been as extensively filmed and photographed. To what does the Ennis-Brown house owe this honor, why should it, above other Los Angeles landmarks, even among Wright's other houses, be so celebrated? As mentioned earlier, the location problematic for directors resonates around the location's iconicity and malleability. Filmmakers face certain constraints when they choose to shoot on location: with a constructed set, a director can literally move mountains to achieve the desired shot. On location, they can't even move

the Hollywood hills and lit from below, causing the double-story wall of the complex to shine against the night sky. Deckard is a low-paid government employee, and his apartment is supposedly a single unit of a hundred-story complex in the middle of Los Angeles. Relying on camerawork was insufficient for this transformation: a matte painting was created adding several hundred stories to the house, merging it into a mass of neighboring complexes that seem to crowd against the roof of the world.

In contrast to Scott's two films, the 1958 Vincent Price movie *The House on Haunted Hill* uses the house almost exclusively for exterior shots. While Scott uses the exterior of the house to presage what will be found inside, William Castle (*House*'s director) switches to Victorian-style interior sets to evoke the mood of a haunted house. Only one room in the film has any relation to the actual interior of the house, the cellar, and it is only obvious in the three scenes where a few blocks peek through the built set. Apparently, when casting, the house was marketed as "the only really haunted house in the world,"²⁶ Castle found the exterior

walls. Unless the location is fortuitously ideally matched to the story and characterization “as-is,” it will have to be modified in ways that may be unacceptable to the owner. Furthermore, locations in general and those using architectural landmarks in particular run the risk of the site overrunning the shots. There is a danger of using location shots to provide “too much” authenticity, overpowering the activity for which it is supposedly merely a backdrop.

On the other hand, shooting on location provides advantages; especially if the architectural space complements the film’s intended *mise-en-scène*. If the directors of *Female* wanted to use a shot where the camera pulls around a corner of the house, they couldn’t—the designer had only reconstructed the one facade. In fact, when they did desire that shot, they were forced to go on location, resulting in footage which is obviously different from that filmed on the studio lot. Locations also provide the previously mentioned sense of authenticity that is an agglomeration of the heft and weight of “real” architecture (both visual and physical). This may explain why directors use location shots; but not why they use *this* location, this house.

I would suggest that it is because of the peculiar beauty of the Ennis-Brown residence, which I would term it’s “regular strangeness,” a paradoxical amalgam of the familiar and comforting with the extravagant and alienating that is oddly compelling to the eye and apropos to Ennis’s narrative significations, ranging across dystopian futures, icy interrogations and mechanized beauty. The design reengineers ideas about familiar domestic spaces, and it is rare, the largest example of the building style that in all the world encompasses only Wright’s three other textile block structures. The geometric patterns of the blocks, the concrete construction, the mixture of vast and closed spaces link the house with an extravagant spatiality key to ideas about the cinematic. Unless the viewer is fortunate to live in one of the three other textile block houses, it is effectively unprecedented, machined and sterile, made in a way that familiar suburban homes simply are not. Despite Wright’s insistence that concrete could be a craftsman’s material, to contemporary eyes it is difficult to view as other than eerily antiseptic, akin to the romance of living in a cinderblock (albeit a beautiful one). And yet the house has fireplaces, wrought iron fixtures, and art deco windows, residential features closer to cultural symbols of comfort and the familiar in at least the imagination of domestic space.²⁷ It is both like and unlike any other home, a mixture of handmade craftsmanship and mechanical sterility. The photographers, videographers, directors, and designers who choose it for their productions exploit this paradox.

Charles and Mirella Affron suggest that “science fiction [film] narratives must, out of necessity, foreground their decors.”²⁸ The Ennis-Brown house seems chosen for film locations on the basis of three characteristics: grandiosity (suitable for portraying a mansion), strangeness (thus the predominance of sci-fi films among its credits), and austere beauty (for fashion and photo shoots).²⁹ Exhibited by the Ennis-Brown’s appearance in numerous science-fiction films and its companion Millard residence’s use in *Star Trek* and a recent “sci-fi” rap video, the house may invoke images appropriate to science fiction because it so strongly evokes the machine age—not the shiny chromed postindustrial information age that looks increasingly like the “real” future, but the future bathed in the past, what the Affrons refers to as “juxtapositions of the machine-age aesthetic, the Gothic, and the exotic”³⁰ that characterizes the set of *Metropolis* (1926) to the eclectic future-draped-in-the-1940s constructed in *Blade Runner*. The Millard house’s portrayal of the home of New World Order leader Frank Castiglione (Dennis Hopper) in a 1998 Puff Daddy video, wherein the frame encloses a column of Wright’s patterned



The machined Great Room reinforces the futuristic, “scientific” claims of an exercise machine manufacturer.

blocks with Hopper standing menacingly alongside, seems to confirm this and indicate that perhaps it is the machined regularity of the blocks themselves that create this particular imagined reality.

At the time of its construction, Frank Lloyd Wright was on the cusp of a transformation from his "Prairie Style," which was influenced by the Arts and Crafts stylistic movement³¹ and featured handmade, rustic, and comfortable personal construction, to his "Usonian" style, which was partly inspired by industrialization and mass-production.³² The Ennis-Brown residence reflects this transformation. It is designed with classical features—tall columns, long hallways, tiled fireplaces—and at the same time, is constructed with an unmistakable mechanical air. While inside, the sense of uniformity is impossible to escape, comprised of hundreds of iterations of the same precise geometric pattern, arranged in perfect rows and columns, a fractal design in which each element reflects the whole, cast in cold concrete. The fully patterned slender columns of the living room are perfect for the icy classicalness of a recent appearance, in a Pantene hair care product commercial,³³ and the machined nature of the Great Room is a backdrop to support the futuristic "scientific" claims of an exercise machine manufacturer. The patterned tiles prove particularly apropos to the representation of patterned people (*Blade Runner*'s replicants) and perhaps reflect Wright's own paradoxical treatment of his buildings and clients. Designing houses for free and informal living,³⁴ Wright was merciless in his need to control the overall design for his projects, down to the color of the paint and placement of interior furniture. With a reputation as a minor megalomaniac, he was notorious for ignoring the needs of individual clients and building houses scaled to an "average" person he modeled after himself. If taller clients who commissioned his homes needed to pass through the doorways, he suggested that they duck.³⁵ It is not difficult to imagine that Wright sometimes reversed the roles of people and buildings. Rather than architecture being a setting for the living, people became an excuse to create a building. Here again is Wright's confluence with Hollywood and the cinematic: he demanded absolute control over his buildings, akin to the fantasy of complete mastery of space directors impose on their films.³⁶

Frank Lloyd Wright once said "architecture is the frame of life."³⁷ His intent as an artist was to provide a setting for the drama of life to unfold. Any drama needs appropriate sets or it appears artificial and forced. In the same way that Lang's *M* (1931) could not have been set at a sun-drenched beach, Wright felt that his Midwestern Prairie houses were inappropriate for Southern California. Ennis-Brown evokes certain images that draw other artists to it, ones who recognize that their visions are not identical to Wright's. So they mold the spaces he created and transform them, crafting the house anew in each incarnation and media portrayal. In every example we find the twofold importance of setting and action, mood and motion. Tracing the Ennis-Brown's history as a film location reveals the contribution a particular design space along with its manipulation by directors, cinematographers, production and designers offers to narrative meaning.

The melange of old and new that is the singular signature of the Ennis-Brown house is emblematic of Los Angeles, or more accurately, the soon-to-be everywhere Los Angeles threatens, of the threshold of modernity and postmodernity theorized from the L.A. landscape, the organic and the industrial, perhaps Donna Haraway's cyborg condition.³⁸ Ennis-Brown suggests a structural form of proto-postmodernity imbued with the cinematic, a building where Wright's vision of a Southern California architecture and an appropriate spatial mode of address for the twentieth century collides with the demands and visual ideals of media. Perhaps the strength of the Ennis-Brown house is that it resurrects comforting images of the past within a mechanized present. At the same time, the very blocks that make the residence distinctive serve as an obvious reminder of the interchangeability and facelessness of the individual within contemporary global capitalism. Its signature uniqueness is an odd property but an intriguing one, strong enough to draw nearly every form of media to bear at the house. With the sheer volume of film, television, and magazine credits on its resume, if it is not a household name it has at least become a household appearance, whether audiences explicitly recognize it or not.³⁹

The house is a fascinating place, a concrete lesson on the ability of film to reorganize and manipulate space, even when that space isn't on a backlot, and a revolutionary example of a type of architecture that, while inventive and beautiful in concept, proved problematic in execution. Icon, castle, home, or film set, the Ennis-Brown residence remains stunning. It can be viewed at 2655 Glendower Avenue in Los Angeles. Tours can be arranged through the Trust for Preservation of Cultural Heritage at (213) 668-0234.

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- ¹Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995) 6.
- ²C.S. Tashiro, *Pretty Pictures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998) 28.
- ³All home dates are from Robert L. Sweeney, *Wright in Hollywood: Visions of a New Architecture* (New York: Architectural History Foundation, 1994); they are taken from Notices of Completion filed with the County of Los Angeles. It should be noted that interior construction on the Ennis-Brown house continued into early 1926.
- ⁴"This was part of Wright's concept of "organic architecture," a method for making the buildings blend into their environment and become integrated into the site upon which they were built.
- ⁵Patrick Meeham, *Truth Against the World* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1987).
- ⁶Judith Dunham and Scott Zimmerman, *Details of Frank Lloyd Wright: The California Work, 1909-1974* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994) 10.
- ⁷Vicent LoBrutto, *By Design* (Westport: Praeger, 1992) 171.
- ⁸L.A. architecture writer Michael Webb lists the estimated cost of repair to the Freeman residence at \$3.6 million. This figure includes damage due to moisture and neglect as well as earthquakes. "Saving Wright's Legacy Before it Crumbles Away." *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday, September 21, 1997: M6.
- ⁹Michael Webb, "Saving Wright's Legacy Before it Crumbles Away" *Los Angeles Times* 21 September 1997: M6.
- ¹⁰Dunham and Zimmerman 16.
- ¹¹The Freeman residence has no direct ties to the media industries other than that it is owned by the University of Southern California.
- ¹²By the time of the Ennis-Brown project, Wright considered art glass windows to be relics of 19th century architecture, out of tune with his desire to find a current American architecture for the masses.
- ¹³Once again, Wright's design was only partially successful; runoff has damaged the retaining wall, and it is crumbling in some parts, bulging with the weight of the hill in others.
- ¹⁴David Gebhard and Scot Zimmerman, *Romanza: The California Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1988) 26.¹⁵ Dunham and Zimmerman 43.
- ¹⁶Robert L. Sweeney, *Wright in Hollywood: visions of a new architecture* (New York: The Architectural History Foundation, 1994) 205.
- ¹⁷Trust for Preservation of Cultural Heritage, *The Ennis-Brown House* (1988) 12.
- ¹⁸Trust 15. The link between this behavior and the film is unexplained.
- ¹⁹Trust for Preservation of Cultural Heritage, "Wright Now." (Winter, 1995) 1.
- ²⁰Trust for Preservation of Cultural Heritage, *The Ennis-Brown House* (1988) 1.
- ²¹Donald Albrecht, *Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) 126.
- ²²Tashiro 175.
- ²³*Oyabun* is the equivalent of a Don in the *Yakuza*, the "Japanese Mafia." The house fulfills a similar role in *The Replacement Killers* (1998).
- ²⁴Lawrence Kasdan used similar techniques in *Grand Canyon* by filling the living room with furnishings and using extremely tight camera work, the scene (the only appearance of the house in the film, with Mary McDonnell and Steve Martin) seems to take place in a much smaller room.
- ²⁵Dunham and Zimmerman 10.
- ²⁶Life imitates art: the house's current resident, Augustus Brown, recounts a visitor who claimed to be a parapsychologist from UCLA, who confirmed that there were "benign ghosts in this house." Trust for Preservation of Cultural Heritage, "Wright Now." (Winter, 1995) 2.
- ²⁷Though it should be noted that Wright also fought with the Ennis' over the inclusion of both the chandeliers and the windows, and they included the wrought-iron fixtures after Wright had left the project in his son's hands. Robert L. Sweeney, *Wright in Hollywood: visions of a new architecture* (New York: The Architectural History Foundation, 1994) 91-92.
- ²⁸Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995) 129.
- ²⁹It is a forgone conclusion that the house's proximity to Hollywood is another factor.
- ³⁰Affron 129.
- ³¹One of the world-recognized examples of Arts and Crafts architecture is the Gamble House in Pasadena, CA. It was used as Professor Brown's laboratory/home in *Back to the Future* (1985).
- ³²The Usonian style was to remain Wright's primary artistic mode for the remainder of his career; Usonian houses were to be Wright's great contribution to America, a uniquely American form of house that fit the so-called American life style, and could be cheaply manufactured in large numbers. Though over fifty were built, they generally proved expensive and difficult to construct; Wright's dreams again seemed to exceed the ability to fulfill them. John Sergeant, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses: Designs for Moderate Cost One-Family Homes* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1984) 23.
- ³³In one sequence from the commercial, the columns flank a supermodel with "perfect" hair, drawing a connection between precise beauty in the columns and the model (and by extension her hair care products).
- ³⁴John Sergeant, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses: Designs for Moderate Cost One-Family Homes* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1984) 14, 19.
- ³⁵Herber Jacobs, *Building With Frank Lloyd Wright: An Illustrated Memoir* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).
- ³⁶Tashiro 175.
- ³⁷Byron-Preiss Multimedia, *The Ultimate Frank Lloyd Wright: America's Greatest Architect*, (CD-ROM, 1995).
- ³⁸Haraway maintains that lives and activities of people in the late-twentieth century are so integrated with their use of technology that the population is composed of beings who are not merely humans but cyborgs, hybrid offspring of humans and machines. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 149.
- ³⁹A substantial list of the house's appearances, compiled by Marisol Luna of the Trust for Preservation of Cultural Heritage, is available by contacting the author. It is not complete, and there are certainly many more appearances that are unlisted, particularly from 1934-1970s, and much of the 1990s. It has been only partially verified by the author.