

# Video Essays and Their Public Dissemination

Stewart Hicks

This portfolio documents an ongoing body of work that treats the video essay as a form of creative architectural scholarship. The project began during the COVID-19 lockdown as recorded lectures for students and has since developed into a widely viewed YouTube channel that publishes 12–16 minute essays on architecture and the built environment. These works combine research, writing, narration, editing, and animation into arguments that are rigorous while broadly accessible.

## ESSAYS AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

The media landscape has stretched as attention spans contract. The film essay was once an obscure format when confined to theater screens, but has since become one of the most popular ways people consume ideas today. On YouTube especially, the genre has flourished, driven by both the platform's reach and the accessibility of production tools. Like all essays, these are an indeterminate admixture of personal insight and expert critique that becomes a potent brew of “polemical thinking-in-public.” This project takes up the architectural possibilities of the video (or film) essay: its communicative capacities, its role in public engagement, and its potential place in academic pedagogy.

Video essays are already architecturally inclined. Their building blocks are time, motion, and sound. They allow arguments to unfold through language and image, rhythm and tone. Words, visuals, and music can align or deliberately clash, operating on both emotional and intellectual registers. Unlike other formats, video essays also build human connection by incorporating voiceover or on-screen presentation. Practicing these techniques develops skills in embodied communication, something architects are constantly asked to perform in reviews, critiques, client meetings, and lectures. Yet architectural discourse rarely acknowledges the gap between abstract concepts and live communication. Instead, we repeat clichés: “Your buildings need to stand on their own because you won't be there to explain them.” But speech is central to how architecture is conveyed, understood, and valued.

Research supports the effectiveness of this format. A recent study by Christopher Elmendorf, for instance, found informational video essays to be two to three times more effective than other economic-information or political-messaging treatments. In other words, they work.

## ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

This project began in 2020 as an offshoot of recording online lectures. At first, I posted lecture segments for students stuck at home during lockdowns. Then I made them public, open to anyone with an internet connection. Once I started recording and editing, however, it was clear the videos were becoming something other than just recorded lectures. They needed a new definition. Although “film essay” was common, a senior colleague insisted these were not “films,” so “video essays” they became. That was fine with me. I began releasing one a week, which was roughly the pace of a lecture course. Then every two weeks. Now, one every three. Somehow, as more time was available, the workload only increased.

The videos run 12 to 16 minutes each, built around scripts of about 2,000 words (I speak quickly). They integrate research, narration, editing, animation, and storytelling. The channel functions as an independent publisher, exploring diverse topics much like podcasts tend to do. You might think of Roman Mars's 99% *Invisible*, but with video. The variety is intentional to draw audiences in through one topic and open them to others. Someone interested in engineering details might stumble into political history or formal analysis. Someone curious about a fire code might find themselves learning about social housing. In this way, the channel reaches audiences well beyond the circles where architectural thought usually circulates.

I tend to think of the videos less in categories grouped by topic, than patterns of cause and effect. One group, for instance, traces disasters that led to changes in building codes, like the Station Nightclub Fire or the Our Lady of the Angels School Fire. Another highlights inventions

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with disproportionate spatial influence, like the gang-nail plate — an unassuming piece of steel invented by Calvin Jureit, sometimes called the Henry Ford of architecture. Or another example might be the La-Z-Boy chair as a reflection of changing notions of lounging and health.

Many episodes focus on Chicago, which serves as both laboratory and stage. I've noticed that architectural discourse often privileges the exceptional — famous architects, singular buildings — while ignoring the rule or everyday. Yet without the rule, the exception loses its meaning. Chicago, it seems, is really good at being both. On YouTube, the rule, or the broadly familiar, often becomes a stronger starting point. It's where you find the audience. From there, the framing matters most, with a good hook and the right thread to link and sequence examples.

## DISCIPLINE AND PEDAGOGY

If this project generates new knowledge, I think it lies in communicating architectural ideas to broad audiences through the grammar of video. Few others are working in this particular space. Some architects, like Liam Young, make artistic films as technical explorations; Forensic Architecture, make them as courtroom evidence turned gallery exploitation. My approach mixes critique, comedy, and cultural theory. The goal is to bridge academia and the algorithm, producing essays that make architecture feel urgent, strange, and at times funny. Architecture is a lens for understanding how the world works, while the essays search for the hidden stories inside the built world.

Medium specificity remains key. The form of the video essay resists easy translation into conventional academic formats. The frameworks academia uses to evaluate scholarship are still shaped by print. Portfolios, like this one, tend to catalog the work merely as a record of the activity, rather than demonstrate the work itself. In a video essay, the argument often lives in montage, rhythm, and juxtaposition. Treating the work as interchangeable with a transcript or a set of metrics risks missing where the intellectual substance really

## QR CODES

Point your phone's camera and tap to watch the videos or click the associated underlined links in the pdf file. This one will take you to the [Stewart Hicks YouTube Channel](#). The others are video specific.



resides. If universities want to take public scholarship seriously, then they need to acknowledge the platforms where knowledge is now produced and circulated. Few written architectural essays find readership in the millions these days, while this channel averages a few million views per month. That is yet another way it might be comparable to the 99% *Invisible* podcast — it has similar reach...but with video.

Architecture has always worked through media such as drawings, photographs, models, and exhibitions where each offers a partial stand-in for buildings themselves. The video essay extends that lineage but adds motion, voice, and distribution at scale. It is less like an illustration than a performance. Unlike a lecture, though, the work persists, circulates, and accrues audiences long after it is first delivered. No institution invited the production of these videos. Instead, thousands or millions opened them with a click. It's not peer review, but it's not-not peer review. The channel is the publisher with editorial standards, the algorithm is the bookstore, or is it a library, or an archive?

These works show that architectural thought can be produced, performed, and tested in video form to reach audiences far beyond the academy, while also pressing institutions to reconsider how scholarship is defined. This portfolio presents four videos chosen from over one hundred fifty five produced to date. Please peruse them via the QR code above and consider them part of this submission as well. The featured four, however, each get four pages with a brief description, 6 still frames (chosen from ~24,000/video), select sources, and a few comments plucked from the video's comment section, which demonstrate how they become new public forums where architecture is debated and discussed. This segues into the final chapter of bringing this work back into the academy with a graduate seminar on the final two pages.



# How This Invention Accidentally Created McMansions

## VIDEO ESSAY #134

Technology That Shaped the Built Environment  
<https://youtu.be/3oleLGkSCMA>

This video examines the transformative impact of the gang-nail plate, a metal connector invented by civil engineer John Calvin Jureit in response to hurricane-related roof failures in 1950s Miami. The analysis traces how this seemingly modest innovation enabled the mass production of wooden trusses, fundamentally altering residential construction practices and architectural possibilities. By facilitating stronger, more economical roof systems that could span greater distances without interior support walls, the gang-nail plate enabled open floor plans, cathedral ceilings, and complex roof geometries to be built more cheaply and quickly became hallmarks of suburban development from the 1970s onward. It demonstrates how construction components can have far-reaching socio-economic consequences, contributing to suburban sprawl, the McMansion phenomenon, and ultimately influencing housing market dynamics leading up to the 2008 financial crisis. The research illustrates the complex relationship between engineering solutions and unintended societal outcomes, highlighting the importance of considering broader systemic impacts when evaluating technological innovations in the built environment.

## Numbers and Credits

Release: December 2024  
 Runtime: 14:14  
 Word Length: 2030  
 Views: 2,700,000  
 Research / Writing / Host: Stewart Hicks  
 Editing / Animation: Evan Montgomery  
 Production: Adobe Premiere, Adobe After Effects, Adobe Illustrator, Blender, Notion

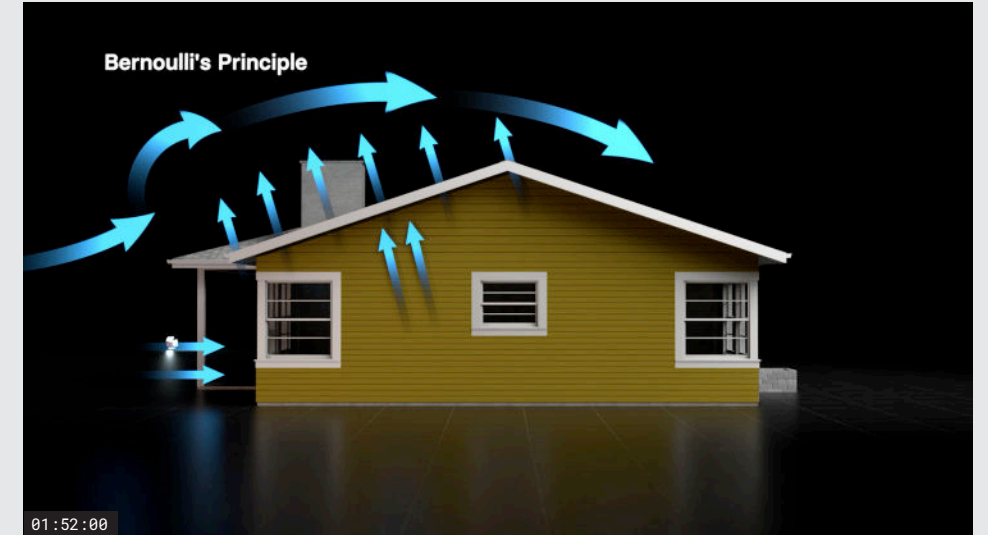
Attribution: Includes footage, music and SFX from Getty, Epidemic Sound, Storyblocks, Reuters, Shutterstock

## ABOVE: Video Thumbnail -- Suburban Homes 1980s-1990s

Comparative visualization illustrating the transformation in American suburban home design between the 1980s and 1990s. The left structure represents typical 1980s construction with modest scale and simple forms, while the right exemplifies the 1990s McMansion typology featuring increased square footage and complex rooflines. This evolution was facilitated by engineered truss systems enabled by gang-nail plate connectors, demonstrating the shift toward housing as investment commodity.

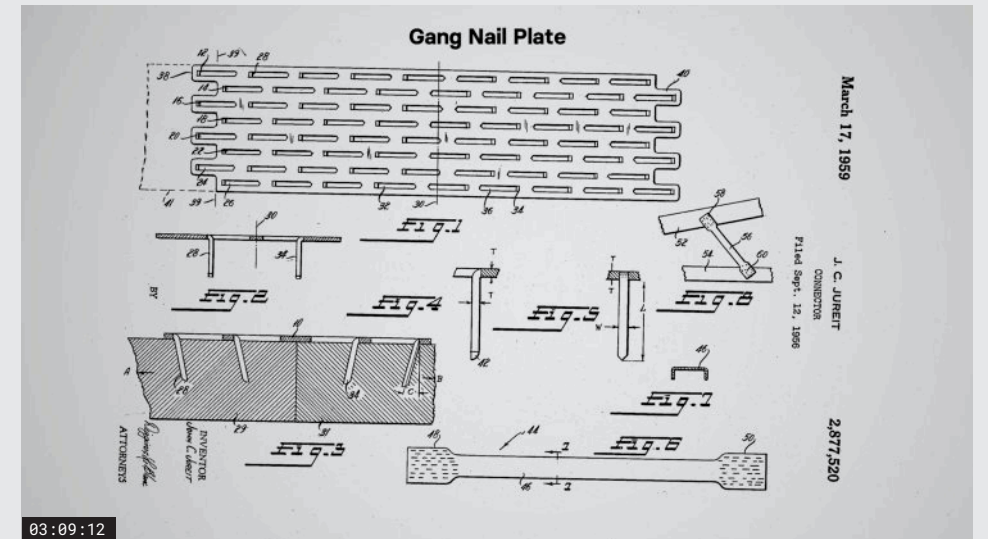
## Bernoulli's Principle and Hurricane-Induced Roof Uplift

Diagram illustrating aerodynamic forces acting on residential structures during high-wind events. High-velocity airflow over the roof creates a low-pressure zone above the structure, while higher atmospheric pressure within generates upward lift forces. This pressure differential transforms the roof into an airfoil susceptible to structural failure during hurricane conditions, demonstrating the engineering challenge that motivated improved connection systems.



## Original Patent for Gang-Nail Plate Connector

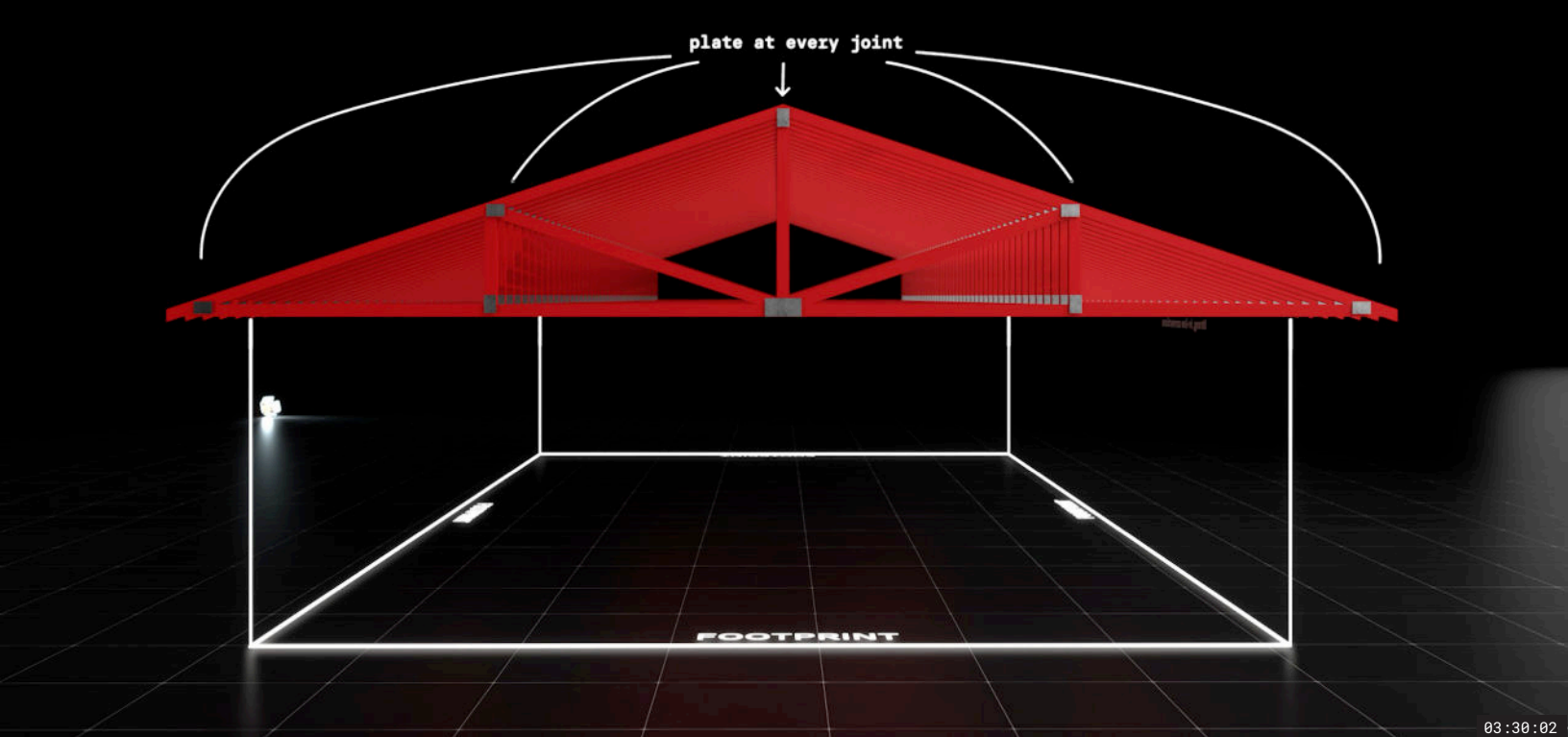
Technical patent illustration from U.S. Patent No. 2,877,520 (March 17, 1959) filed by J.C. Jureit, showing the detailed design specifications for the gang-nail plate connector. This foundational patent document established the technical parameters for the connector system that would revolutionize wood truss manufacturing and enable the structural innovations underlying modern suburban construction.



## Automated Gang-Nail Plate Installation

Industrial pneumatic press applying gang-nail plate connectors to wooden truss members in a manufacturing facility. The hydraulic system ensures precise pressure application for optimal penetration of galvanized steel teeth into lumber joints. This automated process exemplifies the evolution from hand-applied plates to modern factory production methods, enabling mass production of engineered trusses with consistent quality.





- Save**  
up to 25% of lumber
- Reduce**  
waste up to 15%
- Reduce**  
construction time 1/2
- Save**  
15% - 25% less cost



03:30:02 05:13:16

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### ABOVE: Gang-Nail Plate Connections

Structural diagram of a prefabricated roof truss highlighting the strategic placement of gang-nail plates at critical joint locations. The triangulated geometry distributes loads efficiently across multiple smaller lumber members, enabling greater spans than traditional rafter systems while utilizing less material. Gray squares indicate connector plate positions where galvanized steel teeth penetrate adjoining wood members, creating robust connections that eliminated the need for complex carpentry joints.

### ABOVE RIGHT: Benefits of Truss Construction

Cutaway residential frame demonstrating prefabricated truss system integration. The quantified benefits illustrate gang-nail plate technology's impact: 25% reduction in lumber consumption, 15% decrease in material waste, 50% reduction in roof construction time, and 15-25% cost savings. This efficiency revolution enabled rapid suburban development by making larger homes economically viable while accelerating construction schedules.

## FORUM-MAKING

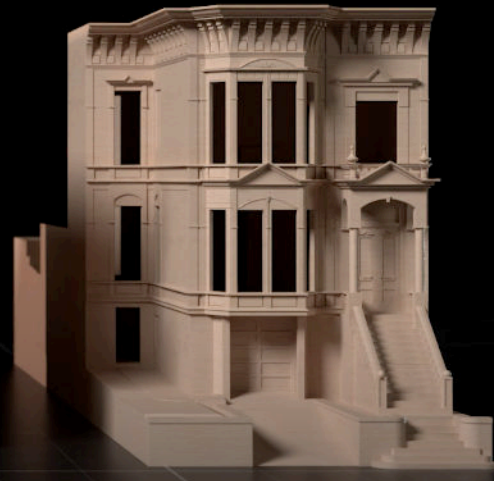
- @jameslick4790** 8 months ago  
My house is from the '70s (1875) It's a modest middle class rowhouse in the city with 3 occupied floors, and it's the opposite of "open floor plan". It has many small rooms and dozens of doors, For this I'm THANKFUL. Victorian architecture has been criticized for excess, but that's in mansions, not normal middle class homes. The architects then were not idiots, The high ceilings, tall windows and rooms that ALL have doors in my house. Read more  
1.3K likes 53 replies
- @MRegah** 8 months ago (edited)  
Super interesting, thank you! In case anyone's interested, this is in the domain of sustainability great example for what's referred to as a "rebound effect". Where an efficiency gain through innovation is eaten up by increased consumption. (think e.g. more energy efficient machines -> lower energy bills -> increased used of machines -> same energy bill as before)  
441 likes 6 replies
- @bobjoatmon1993** 8 months ago  
Banks had a big effect on house size, my mother was a very successful Realtor and one of her gripes was banks discouraging loans for smaller affordable homes and pushing people to buy bigger more expensive homes by convincing them they could afford it... Afford it by living paycheck to paycheck with no cushion though. Yes, she made more commission with a more expensive home but since after school id go to stay in her office break...  
4.5K likes 114 replies
- @craigiano3455** 8 months ago  
If you want an attic in a modern house, you can opt for "attic trusses", which are trusses with a central section that is open. A cross tie at the top becomes a way to easily install a roof. A beefy chord at the bottom gives you the floor joists. The sides can be drywalled. Instant finished attic.  
66 likes 5 replies
- @richardc751** 8 months ago  
As a retired volunteer firefighter home built with gusset plates in their roof structure is something you definitely have to be aware of and be cautious of. When he gets up into the attic and fire these plates get weak and tend to fail so the quicker you can get the fire out in the attic the safer everybody is.  
23 likes

- @adventurefuel5172** 8 months ago (edited)  
As a 60 year old builder I'm very familiar with these truss plates. I think they are fantastic, and this examination of the larger effects they had (or contributed to) is just fascinating. It's both educational and entertaining. Well done. This is the kind of content we need more of.  
729 likes 6 replies
- @Howard-Kevin** 8 months ago  
An unfortunate downside to gang nail plates is their contribution to sudden roof collapse in fire situations, making it more dangerous for firefighters to attempt on-the-roof operations. The large surface area of the plate conducts heat into the wood joint area, encouraging it to burn first and fail faster than one fastened with nails.  
8.5K likes 295 replies
- @DrCassette** 8 months ago  
Over here in Germany these prefabricated trusses held together with gang nail plates became known for being the central failure point of many standardized discount store buildings in case of fire. As I understood it, once the roof space has reached a certain temperature the gang nail plates (at least the ones used over here) tend to just let go, causing sudden and unpredictable roof collapse. This is why fire departments will not enter these...  
4.9K likes 138 replies
- @HijkLop** 8 months ago  
Fun fact: after ww2 The Levitt family (father and 2 sons) built most of the homes (cape cod style and ranchers) in Levittown PA and near Long Island NY. They built Over 140,000 homes. I do work on many of those Levittown homes today. Most of fascia boards on these homes aren't even wood, underneath the aluminum capping is like cardboard. When it's rotted it literally just breaks apart like a cookie.  
131 likes 3 replies
- @Whisper555** 8 months ago  
Thank you for providing non-clickbait content.  
You actually delivered on your premise, which is a refreshing change in this day and age.  
839 likes 9 replies

**Two-Flat**  
Chicago, IL

**Triple Decker**  
Boston, MA

**Painted Lady**  
San Francisco, CA



# Why Can't We Build 3-Flats Anymore?

00:00:00

**VIDEO ESSAY #140**

*PATTERNS OF LIVING*

<https://youtu.be/37VBK0rJKSs?si=8uJ1GXm1Excw36Di>

This video essay offers a comparative study of stacked multi-family residential buildings: Chicago's 2- and 3-flats, Boston's triple-deckers, and San Francisco's subdivided Victorian flats and examines how their shared typological framework diverged in form, construction, ownership patterns, and neighborhood impact across three distinct urban contexts. Built in the early 20th century and often aligned with the expansion of streetcar networks, these modest mid-density buildings facilitated housing access, wealth-building, and neighborhood stability for working-class families and immigrants. The essay situates each typology within its unique material and regulatory landscape: from Chicago's masonry-and-wood structures on gridded lots with alley garages, to Boston's wood-framed colonial revival triple-deckers shaped by fire codes and immigrant heterogeneity, to San Francisco's Italianate and Victorian single-family houses later retrofitted into multi-unit buildings amidst topographical constraints and preservationist sentiment. Through detailed architectural analysis and urban history, the video reveals how these structures were simultaneously shaped by, and now shape, zoning codes, generational wealth patterns, and contemporary debates over housing density and affordability. By unpacking how each building type reflects broader social, infrastructural, and economic dynamics, the project argues for the continued relevance of small multi-unit housing in addressing the complex urban housing challenges of today. This includes difficulties in financing construction today, including single-family zoning, as well as the relative ease of converting them into single-family homes, and compounding the problem of gentrification and low-density issues they were meant to alleviate.

**Numbers and Credits**

Release: January 2025

Runtime: 15:28

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Views: 1,500,000

Publishing Date: January 2025

Research / Writing / Host: Stewart Hicks

Editing / Animation: Evan Montgomery

Production: Adobe Premiere, Adobe After Effects, Adobe Illustrator, Blender, Notion

Attribution: Includes footage, music and SFX from Getty, Epidemic Sound, Storyblocks, Reuters, Shutterstock

**ABOVE: Urban Multi-Family Housing Types**

Comparative visualization highlighting three iconic residential forms in American cities during the early 1900s. Each typology reflects regional materials, planning traditions, and social histories — from Chicago's brick-and-stone pragmatism, to Boston's wood-frame porched triples, to San Francisco's ornate Victorian facades. Together, they illustrate how similar lot sizes and transit-driven growth produced distinct architectural responses across the U.S.



**Chicago Two-Flat Housing Model**

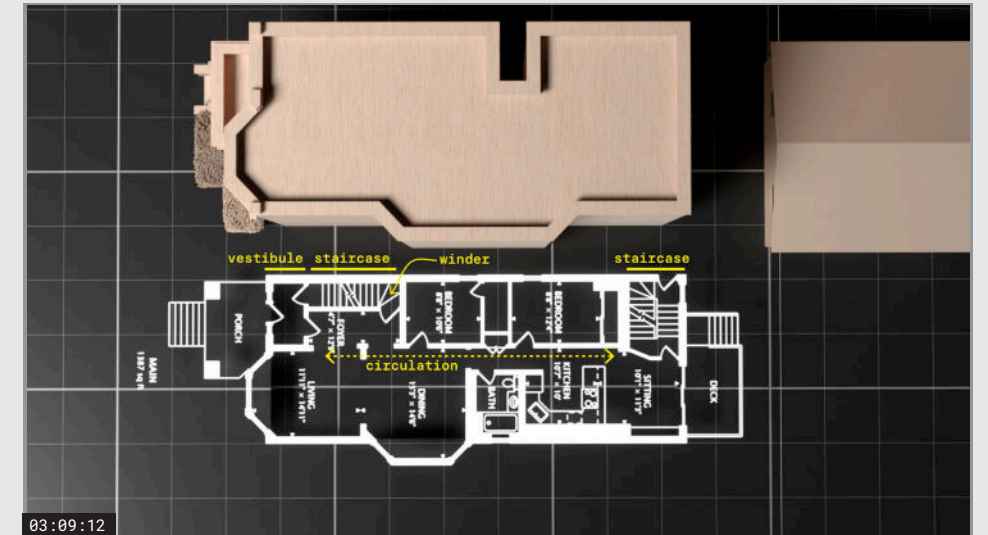
Diagrammatic visualization of a typical Chicago 2-Flat, highlighting its stacked configuration of two apartments within a single brick structure. Apartment 1 occupies the ground floor while Apartment 2 sits directly above, each following a near-identical layout. This arrangement offered families an affordable entry point into homeownership, often allowing rental income from one unit to subsidize the other. The model underscores the type's pragmatic mix of durability, density, and neighborhood cohesion that helped define Chicago's residential fabric in the early 20th century.



01:52:00

**Chicago Two-Flat Floor Plan and Circulation**

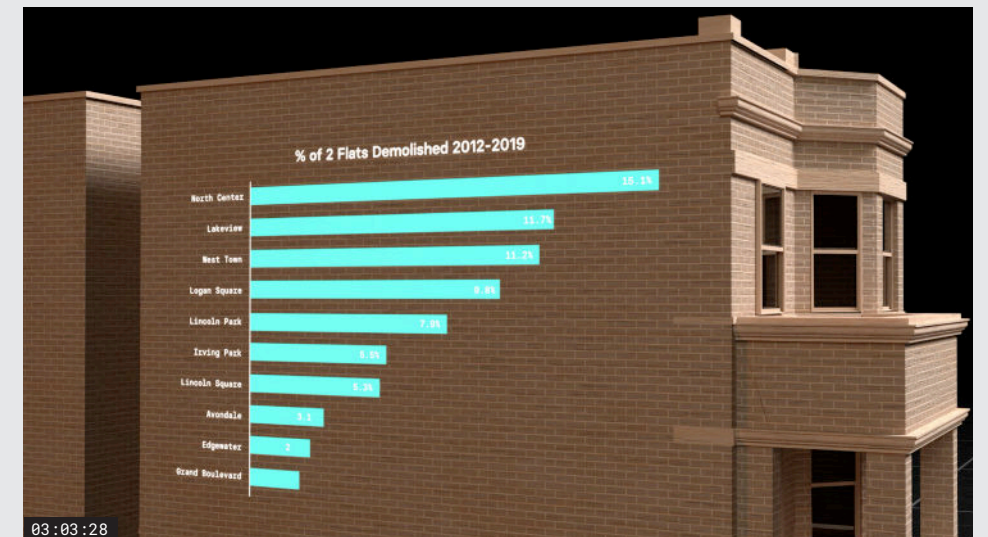
Analytical diagram pairing a model of a Chicago 2-Flat with its corresponding floor plan. The drawing highlights the vestibule entry, winder stair, and rear staircase, showing how circulation threads through the unit along a central spine. Public spaces like the living and dining rooms are oriented toward the street and bay window, while private bedrooms align along one side. This linear arrangement allowed for efficient load-bearing walls and compact plumbing stacks, demonstrating the systematic logic behind the type.



03:09:12

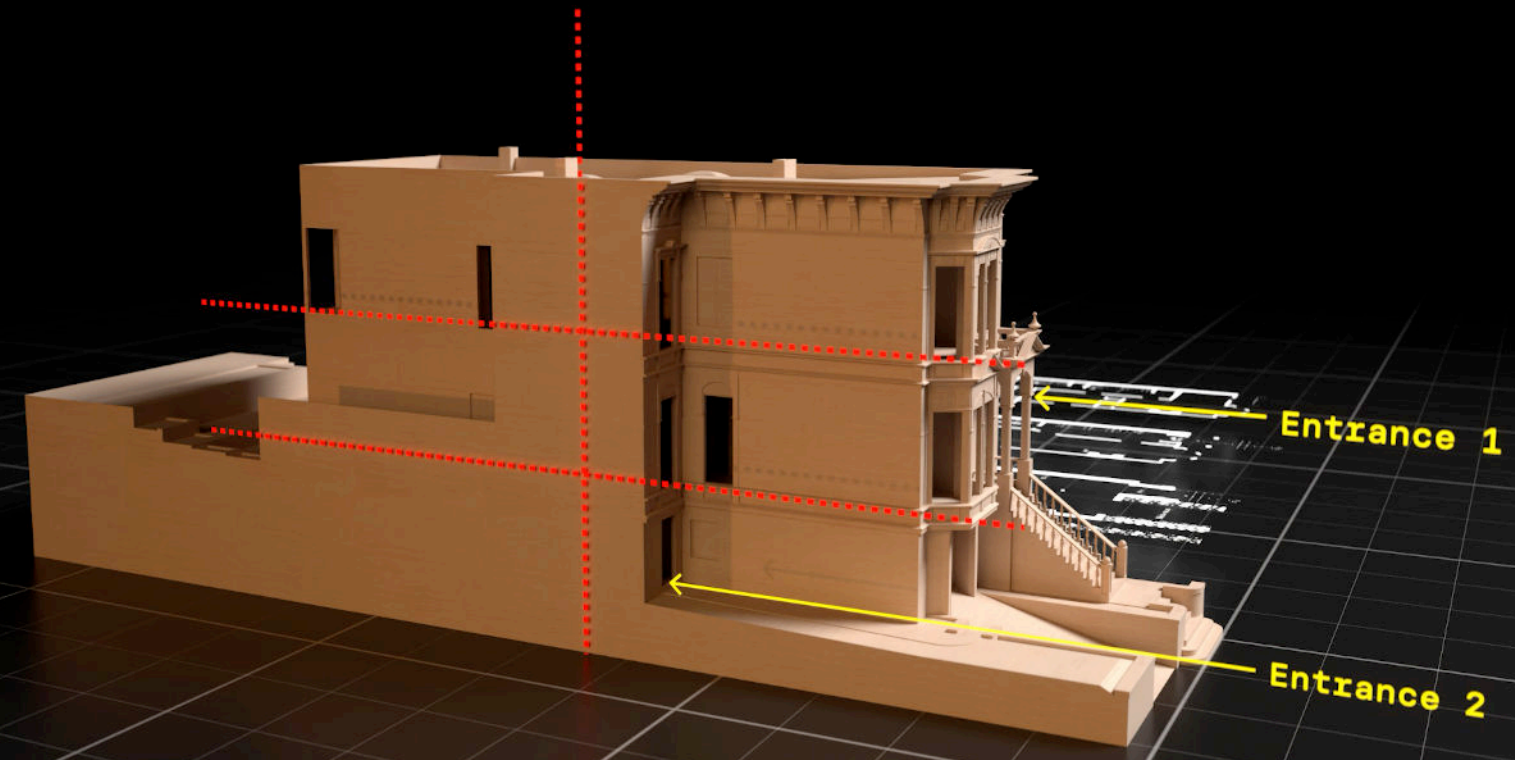
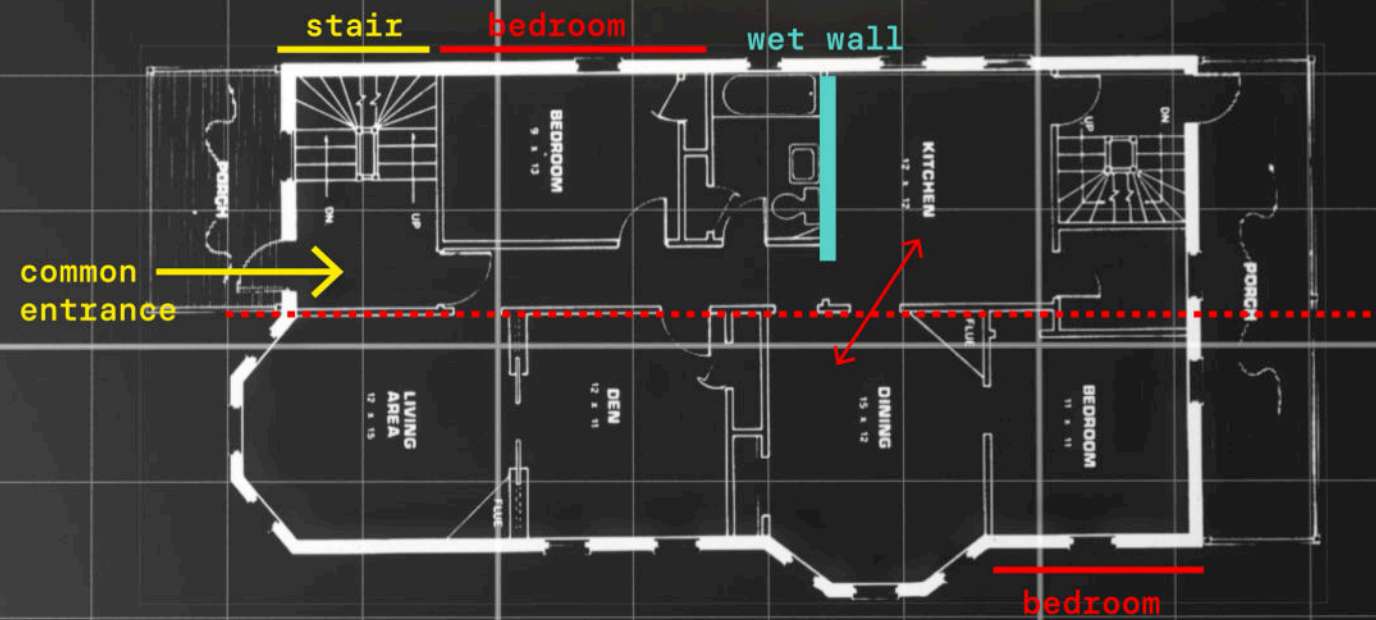
**Demolition of Chicago Two-Flats, 2012–2019**

Data visualization projected onto a model of a Chicago 2-Flat, showing neighborhood-by-neighborhood rates of demolition. North Center, Lakeview, and West Town lead with the highest losses, exceeding 10% of existing stock, while areas like Edgewater and Grand Boulevard saw far fewer demolitions. The graphic underscores how market pressures and redevelopment trends have disproportionately threatened two-flats in high-demand neighborhoods, reducing affordable multi-family housing options and accelerating gentrification.



03:03:28

**SELECT KEY MOMENTS**



## SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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### ABOVE: Boston Triple Decker Plan Organization

Annotated floor plan illustrating the spatial logic of a typical Boston Triple Decker. Entry through a common vestibule leads into the central stair, with mirrored bedrooms arranged along the edges of the plan. A continuous wet wall stacks kitchens and bathrooms vertically for efficiency, while circulation runs laterally to separate public and private areas. This pragmatic layout, repeated floor over floor, allowed rapid, economical construction while still providing light, porches, and functional family living — making the triple decker a defining housing type of Boston's early 20th-century neighborhoods.

### ABOVE RIGHT: San Francisco Painted Lady

Perspective of a San Francisco Painted Lady highlighting its split access configuration. Unlike the standardized common vestibule of Chicago two-flats or Boston triple deckers, Painted Ladies often feature separate entrances for different units, as shown here with Entrance 1 and Entrance 2. This reflects their origins as single-family homes later subdivided into apartments, producing flexible but inconsistent layouts. The diagram emphasizes how San Francisco's Victorian housing stock adapted under pressures of densification, while preservation and architectural ornament remained central to the city's character.

## FORUM-MAKING

@tomdchi12 7 months ago

As a Chicago architect who is "in the trenches" helping homeowners (both well-off "Lincoln Park" and families building equity in lower income areas) work through the zoning, building code and economic issues, I appreciate that you are covering these issues. (I'm also the owner/resident of a classic three flat.) Here in Chicago, the problems, and strategies to overcome them, are more ...

Read more

97 likes, 1 comment, 1 reply

@therealCamoron 1 month ago

"Zoning codes don't usually allow for occupation of this bottom unit" lol, that never stopped my Chicago landlords. I've lived in at least two illegal garden units, usually they were against code because they didn't have two entrances/exits.

6 likes, 1 comment, 1 reply

@shahnauronas9697 7 months ago

Great analysis. I was the development manager on Park Boulevard Chicago (the redevelopment and shrinking by unit count - of Stateway Gardens).

I can tell you that our 3-flats were the best-selling units: 1-car garage and 360 degree views... what? ...

Read more

79 likes, 1 comment, 1 reply

1 reply

@peregrinolincoln 7 months ago

I grew up in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago. I had relatives living all over the city - Logan Square, Palmer Square, Wicker Park, Portage Park, etc. Many living in two flat and three flats. My mom grew up in a two flat in Logan Square - her grandparents on the top floor and her family on the first floor. Wonderful cohesive neighborhoods and a wonderful spirit of life.

64 likes, 1 comment, 1 reply

1 reply

@usa1mac 7 months ago

The improvements you keep making to your videos are impressive. The animations and drawings really added a lot to the video. Keep up the great work. Your content is always fascinating.

187 likes, 1 comment, 1 reply

@markrichards6863 7 months ago

I grew up in Boston, in a three decker, that dated back to the late Industrial Revolution. It was just the normal way people lived. There were some drawbacks. For one thing, it was rather noisy, three families stacked on top of each other. We lived on the second floor, got noise from both directions as well as noise complaints from above and below. Although, for the most part we all got along. ...

Read more

1.2K likes, 1 comment, 1 reply

35 replies

@user33housecats 7 months ago

I knew so many people who lived in 2 or 3 flats in Chicago and man those floors were spacious, those were wonderful

663 likes, 1 comment, 1 reply

6 replies

@reviewguy12 7 months ago

One advantage of 2-3 flats is the versatility of the design. When you're young and first buy one, you can live in one unit and rent out the other two units for a revenue stream. When you get married and have kids you can take over one of the units to create room for your kids and maybe in-laws. When you retire you can move into the lower floor unit and have your, now adult, children live in the upper ...

Read more

4.1K likes, 1 comment, 1 reply

104 replies

@MrX\_117 4 months ago

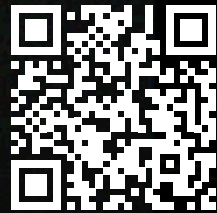
I lived in one of these building for years in Chicago north side. Just seeing the building gave me a rush of good memories. We have so many in Chicago I hope they last forever.

25 likes, 1 comment, 1 reply

@laken1804 7 months ago

In Boston the triple deckers are very valuable nowadays. They are getting converted into condos and sold by units for at least \$350,000 per floor. When I was growing up in the 80's it was cheaper to buy one than a single family homes. The banks were more likely to approve the loans because you can live in one unit and rent the other two. That ...

# Inside the Hyatt Regency Skywalk Collapse



00:54:22

## VIDEO ESSAY #144

Events That Shaped the Building Codes

<https://youtu.be/uekCFs-vNug>

This video essay examines the 1981 Hyatt Regency walkway collapse in Kansas City, which killed 114 people and became one of America's most significant structural engineering failures. Beginning with Hyatt's ambitious expansion strategy and their pursuit of spectacular lobby spaces designed to create the "J.C. Effect," the analysis traces how architectural ambition, fast-tracked construction schedules, and design modifications combined to create a deadly structural deficiency. Through detailed examination of construction documents and engineering drawings, the narrative reveals how a seemingly minor change of splitting a continuous support rod into two pieces reduced the walkway's load capacity from an already inadequate 60% to a catastrophic 30% of code requirements. The tragedy spawned investigations into the complex web of professional responsibilities, legal proceedings, and industry reforms that followed the disaster. Drawing from the National Bureau of Standards' exhaustive 349-page investigation and subsequent legal battles, the essay demonstrates how competing interests undermined both construction quality and post-disaster accountability. Despite \$140 million in insurance payouts, no criminal charges resulted from the tragedy. The video concludes by analyzing how the American Society of Civil Engineers restructured professional standards and educational requirements, establishing new protocols for design review and inter-professional communication that continue to influence engineering practice today.

## Numbers and Credits

Release: April 2025

Runtime: 13:25

Word Length: 2105

Views: 900,000

Research / Writing / Host: Stewart Hicks

Editing / Animation: Evan Montgomery

Production: Adobe Premiere, Adobe After Effects, Adobe Illustrator, Blender, Notion

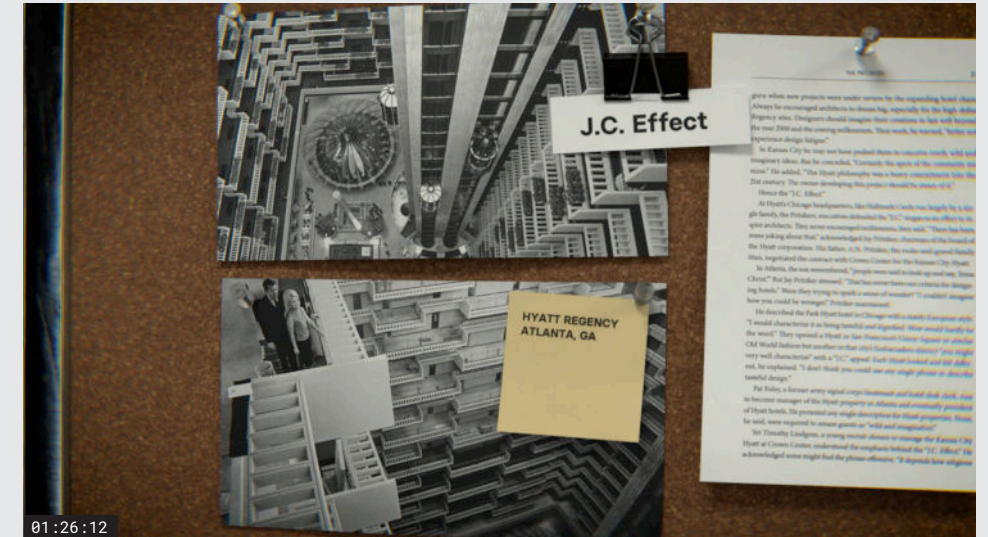
Attribution: Includes footage, music and SFX from Getty, Epidemic Sound, Storyblocks, Reuters, Shutterstock

## ABOVE: Hyatt Regency Kansas City Atrium

Sectional model of the Hyatt Regency Kansas City lobby, showing the multi-level atrium with suspended walkways, escalators, and gathering spaces. Conceived as the centerpiece of the hotel, the atrium embodied Hyatt's "J.C. Effect" strategy: height, light, and life, to impress visitors with grandeur and activity, while connecting amenities like lounges, restaurants, and ballrooms in a single dramatic interior space.

## The "J.C. Effect" at Hyatt Regency Atlanta

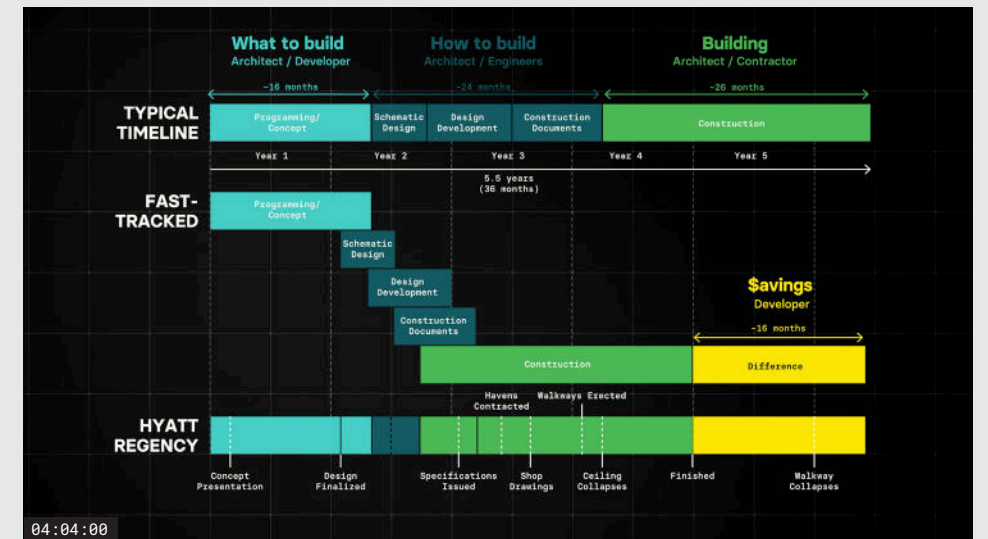
Archival photographs of the Hyatt Regency Atlanta atrium, illustrating the origins of Hyatt's so-called "J.C. Effect." The interior combined height, natural light, and active circulation through balconies, glass elevators, and open corridors that were designed to elicit awe from guests the moment they entered. This formula became the model for Hyatt's signature hotel lobbies across the country, influencing the design of Kansas City's atrium and its ill-fated skywalks.



01:26:12

## Fast-Tracked Construction Timeline

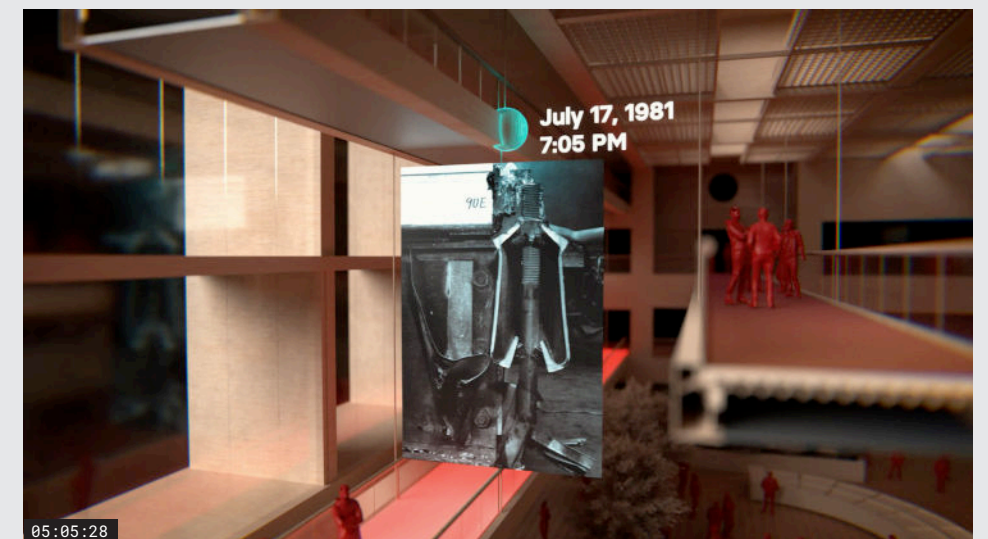
Comparative diagram showing a typical project schedule versus a fast-tracked timeline. Standard sequencing of design and construction would take about 5.5 years, but fast-tracking compressed the process by 16 months, overlapping design development with active construction. While this approach saved the developer significant costs, it left architects and engineers with little time to resolve critical details, contributing to the fatal design flaws in the hotel's suspended walkways.



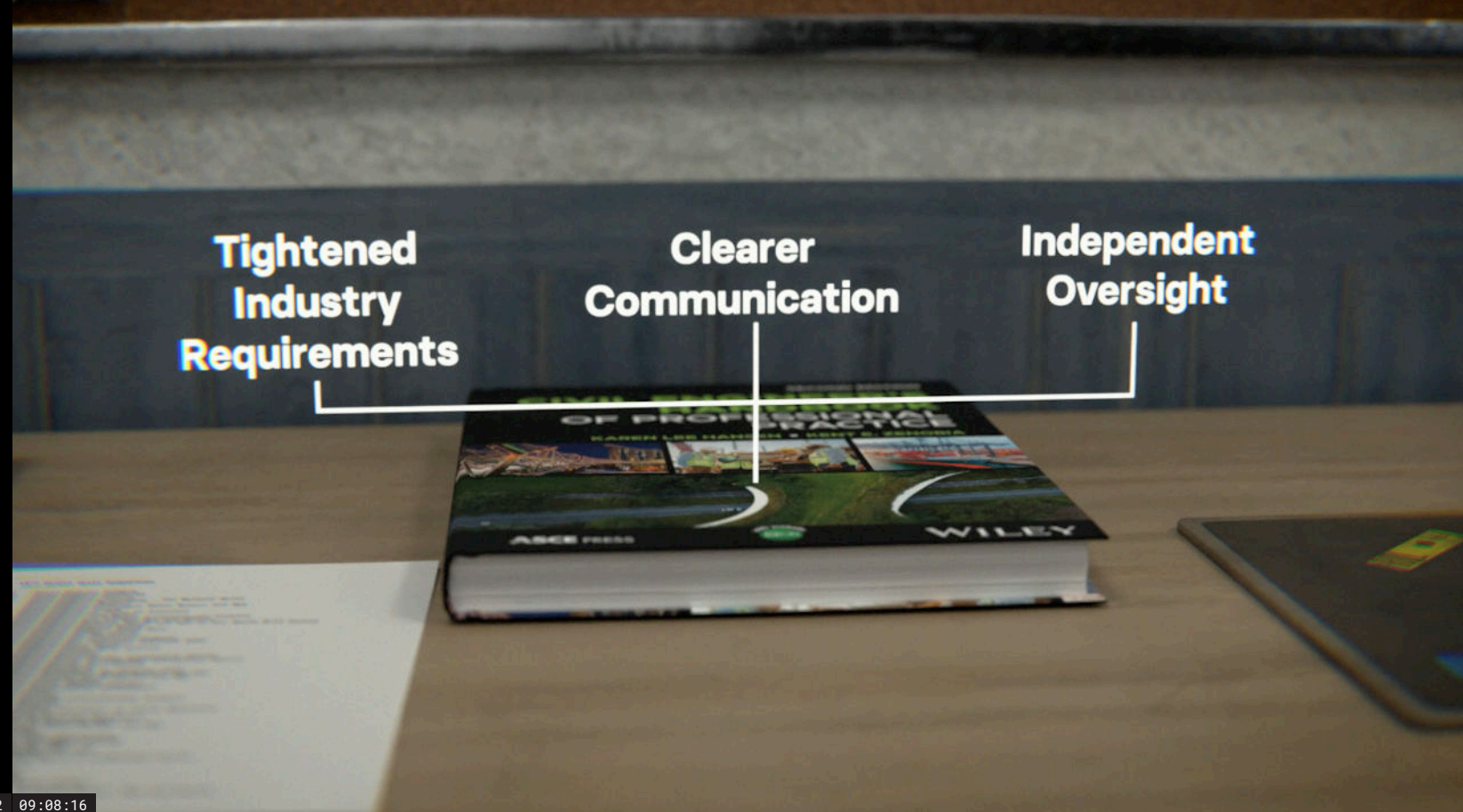
04:04:00

## Moment of Collapse

Visualization of the Hyatt Regency Kansas City skywalk at the instant of its collapse on July 17, 1981, at 7:05 PM. Projected is a forensic photo showing the failed box beam connection where washers tore through the steel under doubled loads. The catastrophic failure sent two suspended walkways crashing into the crowded atrium below, killing 114 and injuring over 200, marking one of the deadliest structural failures in U.S. history.



05:05:28



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### ABOVE: Havens Steel's Design Modification

Diagram highlighting the critical change proposed by Havens Steel to the Hyatt Regency skywalk suspension system. Instead of using a single continuous rod from the ceiling through both walkways, the fabricator split the rod into two sections joined at the upper walkway. This seemingly minor adjustment doubled the load on the middle box beam, reducing the structure's capacity from an already marginal 60% of code requirements to just 30%.

### ABOVE RIGHT: Engineering Reforms After the Hyatt Collapse

Image of the ASCE Manual of Professional Practice, the professional organization governing Engineers that codified stricter professional standards, emphasizing three key areas: tightened industry requirements, clearer communication between teams, and independent engineering oversight for design changes. These measures reshaped engineering education and practice, embedding accountability and ethics more firmly into the profession.

## FORUM-MAKING

@kwf92 4 months ago

In Canada, engineering students receive an Iron Ring when they graduate. The ring symbolizes your professional duty and responsibilities as an engineer. The iron ring is worn on the pinky of your dominant hand so that the grooves of the ring drag against paper while you're writing for a constant reminder of your commitment to professional ethics

138 Reply

2 replies

@x-- 4 months ago

They had a roof collapse that indicated a system failure AND an offer to review the rest of the building and they still said no? That does feel criminal and just crazy outrageous. I had heard this story before but never that there was a huge red flag that they ignored.

1.1K Reply

7 replies

@mbox314 4 months ago

You can't have an architecture or engineering channel on YouTube without covering the Hyatt regency hotel disaster.

3.8K Reply

23 replies

@ctransler 4 months ago

A family friend was one of the doctors who worked the scene after the collapse. For years he could not drive by the hotel. He didn't realize it, but if he were driving up the street the hotel was on, he'd turn down another street to avoid driving by the hotel. It was only after his wife pointed out that he did this several times, that he realized he was doing it. Horrible scene.

189 Reply

1 reply

@nicknasty6369 4 months ago

everyone always wants engineers to work faster but they never want to take the blame when your rushed work has errors

2.4K Reply

@christopherstephenjenksbgs4944 4 months ago

Excellent video Stewart. I remember when this happened, and within a day stories started going around that the crowds on the walkways were dancing to the music and that "sympathetic vibrations" caused the collapse. For reasons of their own, the news media repeated this claim ad nauseum. Of course, that had absolutely nothing to do with the collapse.

38 Reply

@loganv33 4 months ago

I was born in Kansas City 4 days after the collapse, and now I'm a licensed professional engineer in KC (electrical, not structural). I've sat in a presentation on what went wrong, not said in the video is that the lower walkway was rebuilt and, as it was described, you could drive a semi-truck across it and it wouldn't budge. ...

Read more

149 Reply

3 replies

@NimrodClover 4 months ago (edited)

Thanks Stewart for touching on the KC Hyatt Regency skywalk collapse. We studied this in depth back in University of Illinois Architecture school and then again in my graduate Civil Engineering classes. I am glad you put emphasis on the "fast-track" (at the time called telescoped) construction process and its contribution of shifting the burden of responsibility. 11:27 does a good job of ...

Read more

62 Reply

5 replies

@maxdhook 3 months ago (edited)

My grandfather was a first responder to this... he would shutter when I asked him about it.

Said it was one of the first times he saw humans in pieces but still alive.

20 Reply

1 reply

# How Reality TV Houses Are Built to Break People



00:09:13

## VIDEO ESSAY #135

Architectural Readings of Pop Culture

<https://youtu.be/HVsSppFuzv0>

This video essay analyzes the spatial design of reality television environments and their role in manufacturing psychological drama. Through detailed examination of floor plans, architectural elements, and production choices, the work traces the evolution from observational documentary (*An American Family*, 1973) to contemporary purpose-built reality TV sets. The analysis demonstrates how producers strategically manipulate physical space to influence contestant behavior and generate compelling content.

The research focuses on three case studies: *Big Brother*, *Love Is Blind*, and *The Circle* to illustrate distinct spatial strategies for psychological manipulation. A close reading of architectural elements, surveillance systems, and environmental controls, reveals how reality TV productions create extreme psychological conditions that serve both entertainment and cultural reflection. The essay contributes to media studies scholarship by examining the intersection of built environment and televised performance, arguing that spatial design functions as an under-examined narrative device in contemporary reality television.

## Numbers and Credits

Release: October 2024

Runtime: 17:22

Word Length: 2119

Views: 3,000,000

Research / Writing / Host: Stewart Hicks

Editing / Animation: Evan Montgomery

Production: Adobe Premiere, Adobe After Effects, Adobe Illustrator, Blender, Notion

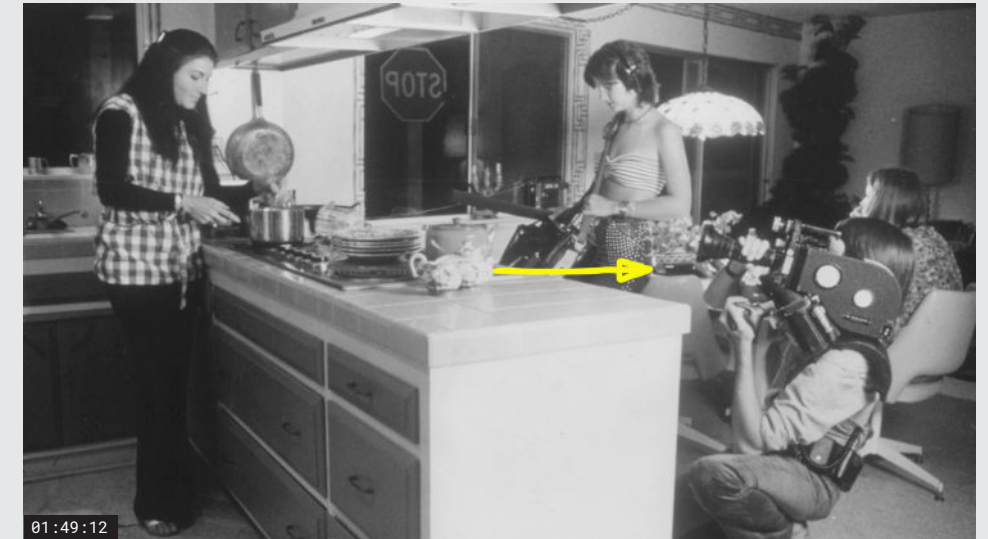
Attribution: Includes footage, music and SFX from Getty, Epidemic Sound, Storyblocks, Reuters, Shutterstock

## ABOVE: "An American Family" 1973, PBS.

This vintage television set displays intimate family moments from the groundbreaking 1973 reality show *"An American Family,"* which first brought private domestic life into the public eye. This image captures the moment when television evolved from fictional entertainment to psychological experimentation, using familiar domestic spaces to manipulate and examine human behavior.

## Behind the Making of An American Family

This behind-the-scenes footage from *"An American Family"* reveals the intrusive nature of 1970s documentary filmmaking, with camera crews and equipment cables visibly disrupted the supposedly "natural" family environment. The technological limitations of the era made it impossible to truly be a "fly on the wall," as heavy equipment and crew members became unavoidable participants in the family's daily life. No matter what, the attempt to document authentic behavior altered it just through the act of observation.



01:49:12

## Big Brother House

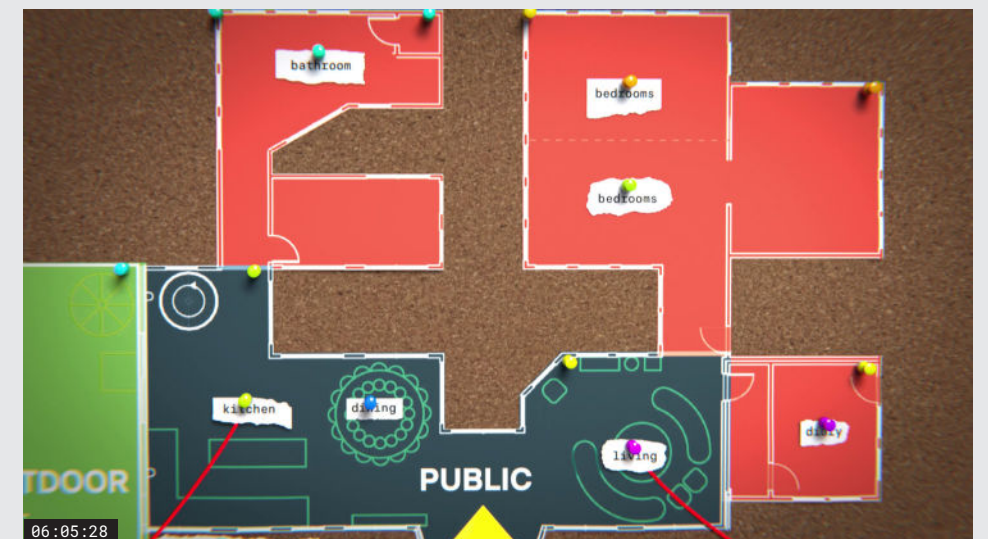
This aerial view of the *Big Brother* house reveals the calculated architectural manipulation designed to control contestant behavior, with open layouts that force interaction and eliminate privacy. The vibrant, discordant colors and artificial backyard setting create a contained environment that functions more like a psychological laboratory than a home. Surrounded by production facilities and completely isolated from the outside world, this specially-built studio demonstrates how reality TV uses spatial design as a tool for emotional manipulation and drama creation.



03:03:00

## Big Brother House Floor Plan Diagram

This floor plan of the *Big Brother* house exposes the deliberate architectural psychology behind reality TV manipulation, with completely open public spaces that eliminate privacy and force constant interaction among contestants. The diagram reveals how the brown areas represent hidden production spaces that surround the living areas, creating an atmosphere of constant surveillance and containment. The stark division between cramped red bedroom areas and expansive public zones demonstrates how spatial design is weaponized to create power imbalances, paranoia, and the psychological pressure that drives the show's drama.



06:05:28





# Looking Ahead



## ARCH 586: GRADUATE SEMINAR

As this portfolio closes, I want to point toward the beginning of a new phase. This work is starting to find formal adoption within our school's curriculum. In Spring 2024, I taught a graduate theory seminar devoted to architectural video essays including their study, their production, and their possibilities. It was exhilarating and rewarding in ways I hadn't anticipated, though it also exposed areas that need sharpening. That unfinished quality is what makes it promising, however. Fortunately, the course is scheduled to run again in Spring 2026.

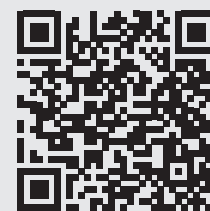
The first version of the seminar was structured around three increasingly complex assignments, each paired with readings, lectures, and guest contributions. Students began with close analyses of architectural documentary mini-series produced by PBS, supported by media theory texts on PBS's historical role in shaping the citizen subject. This phase included a dialogue with Geoffrey Baer, the longtime PBS producer and host. From there, students moved into production: analytical slideshow presentations on selected PBS episodes, accompanied by theoretical work on the video essay as a form. Penelope Haralambidou contributed her perspective from her practice and teaching at the Bartlett.

The seminar culminated in the creation of six-minute architectural video essays, with students moving through pre-production, production, and post-production while engaging with readings and discussions that tied theoretical questions to practical technique. Phil Edwards, formerly of Vox and now a YouTube essayist, joined us to speak about the narrative dimension of architectural storytelling. The course concluded with a public screening of four student works at an off-campus venue, followed by a Q&A in which students explained their concepts and processes.

## STUDENT WORK



*In Praise of Walking* by Daniela Osario Danudo  
<https://uofi.box.com/s/30qy0c0nbtX-1wldydp0qzdi72pj9aqe>



*Living in America* by Rosa Gaia Saunders  
<https://uofi.box.com/s/izc9mmjeaaf-0cxcgryp3c0j34d6vp6nw>

### ABOVE: Graduate Seminar Public Screening

Public screening of student video essays in MAS Context Reading Room 1564 North Damen Ave. Four students' videos were shown in succession followed by a Q&A discussion.



*Transient Space Waste* by Sean Conway  
<https://uofi.box.com/s/xlfmzkmeiy2X-a36r3u2n2coa6z9solh>



*Pulling Reality From a Hat* by Mario Pilego  
<https://uofi.box.com/s/w581htzl-ja30ke5h65acb5dksj68rtce>

To my knowledge, no other architecture program has attempted a seminar like this. Film and architecture are often brought together, and students sometimes produce narrated animations, but the video essay as a method of architectural analysis remains rare. The four student works selected for screening are included here.

Looking back, my main critique concerns the role of the PBS case studies. They anchored the course but ultimately distracted from deeper reflection on the video essay medium itself. For the next iteration, I plan to focus the seminar more directly on the formal and conceptual overlaps between architectural space and video. Core topics will include:

- Montage and Sequencing
- Narrative and Storytelling
- Framing
- Animation
- Voice
- Sound
- Video and Essays
- Layering

I'm excited about this new phase. In one sense, it has been a while coming, but in another, the multi-year gestation period has allowed my thoughts, technical capacities, and external connections to offer more fully-formed and unique contributions to the curriculum and discipline.