

THE ARCHITECTURAL JUMPSCARE



Spatial Design Analysis of CONTROL by Ingo Redenius

CONTROL™



The game **CONTROL** by Remedy is renowned for its iconic world design, thrilling narrative and strange supernatural artefacts. Playing as Jesse Faden, a woman searching for her brother at the Federal Bureau of Control (FBC) in New York City, you must navigate the game's unique setting. This secret government agency's mission is to contain, study and control paranormal phenomena. They investigate strange events and otherworldly forces. Their headquarters, the Oldest House, has now been invaded by the Hiss, a supernatural hive mind, and you have become the new Director of the FBC by accident. **CONTROL** is a third-person action-adventure game released in 2019 on all major platforms.¹

While researching the spatial design of **CONTROL**, I listened to a talk by its World Design Director, Stuart McDonald, about the construction of the Oldest House and the role of simplistic brutalist architecture. He used the phrase 'architectural jump scare' in passing, and it didn't leave my mind. He used the phrase in the context of creating weirdness, pacing, and impact in the game, but did not elaborate further.² Despite my efforts, I was unable to find any more information. In this analysis, I will attempt to conceptualise the idea of architectural jump scares embedded in the spatial design of the game.

¹ Remedy Entertainment Plc, 2019

² DevGAMM, 2021

STARTLING ARCHITECTURE

To get closer to an answer, I first look at the meaning of a jump scare in films. It is described as a cinematic shock or startle. According to this, the verb 'startle' means 'to frighten or surprise suddenly and usually not seriously'.³ It is an automatic response to a sudden, unexpected threat that usually lasts only a few moments, but is highly intense.

For example, consider the scene in *Stranger Things* Season 1 in which the teenager Barbara Holland is sitting alone at the pool at night. She is alone, splashing the water with her feet. It's quiet, only the sounds of the water and a distant owl can be heard.

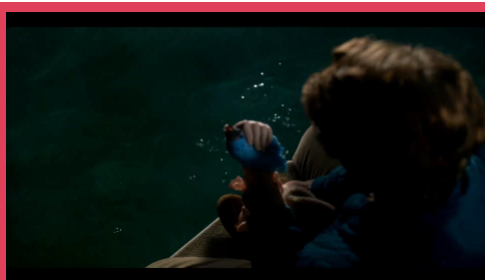
As the camera slowly and steadily moves closer to Barbara, we see a drop of blood falling into the water from a cut on her finger. Then she hears a deep growl behind her. Suddenly, a Demogorgon attacks her and literally jumps right into the viewer's face. The scene ends.⁴



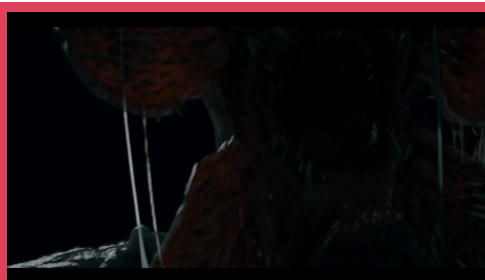
Screenshot of a jump scare from [Stranger Things - Season 1](#)



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Screenshot of a jump scare from [Stranger Things - Season 1](#)

Some argue that shock and surprise are similar. This is regarding the intentional unexpectedness and non-cognitive, reflex response. But surprises don't have to be frightening or suggest danger.

Some types and characteristics of shock are recognisable in the Spatial Design of CONTROL. For example, unexpected identity shock occurs when the identity of a common object, such as a light switch cord or the Oldest House itself, takes us by surprise by behaving differently or in an unstable way.⁵

Due to the office building's supernatural behaviour of repeatedly shifting its structure and dimensions, the nature of this space and architecture cannot be trusted, especially when corrupted by the Hiss.

³ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2026

⁴ Duffer & Duffer, 2016

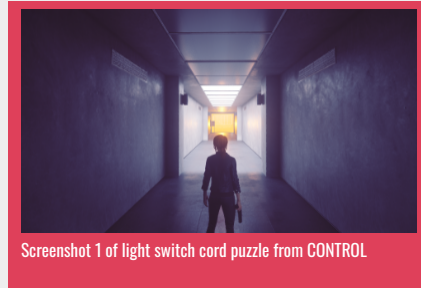
⁵ Hanich, 2011 pp. 127 ff.

Interacting with a light switch cord as an altered object of power can also be identified as a fake shock moment. At the end of the corridor, a huge gap prevents us from reaching our goal: the ringing red telephone.

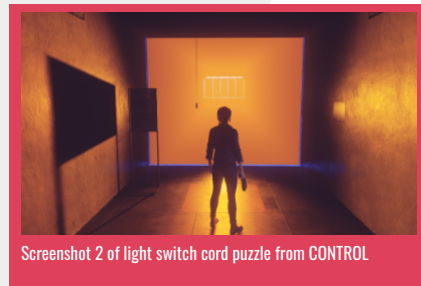
All we can see is a notice and the cord that we can pull. The first time we pull the cord, the lighting changes. The second time, we are transported to a motel. We find ourselves in a peaceful and simple puzzle situation. We ring the bell at reception to open the doors and find the right light switch to teleport us back. This time, we are able to reach the telephone.

Although there is no threat, being caught by surprise in a hostile environment can startle the player. It doesn't help that ringing the bell usually calls someone for service.

With our trust in the building lost, we are ready to confront the enemy behind every open door and at every corner.



Screenshot 1 of light switch cord puzzle from CONTROL



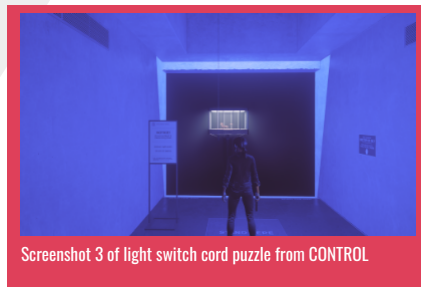
Screenshot 2 of light switch cord puzzle from CONTROL



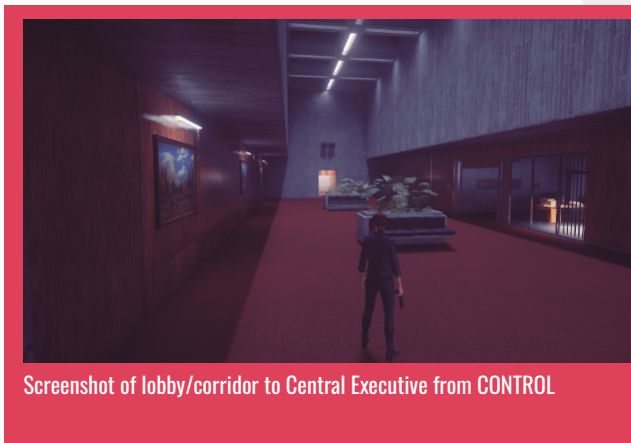
Screenshot 5 of light switch cord puzzle from CONTROL



Screenshot 4 of light switch cord puzzle from CONTROL - Ocean View Motel



Screenshot 3 of light switch cord puzzle from CONTROL



Screenshot of lobby/corridor to Central Executive from CONTROL



Screenshot of lobby/corridor to Central Executive from CONTROL

The architecture can also be used to create a slow and quiet setup. For example, players could run through a mundane, lit corridor or lobby with reduced sound effects and fewer interactive objects.

Then, when they turn around the corner, the light turns a dangerous red and they see an abstract, unsettling architectural structure in front of them.

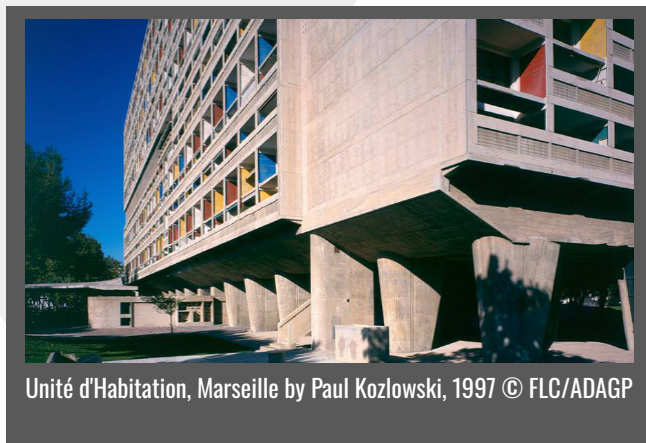
The players now know that something exciting lies ahead. They may slow down and move cautiously to evade surprise attacks, or rush towards it to engage in combat. The timing is up to them. Either way, there is an instant non-cognitive response to the architecture appearing ahead.

BE BRUTAL. BE WEIRD.

When Stuart McDonald started working on the world design, he had one essential task. Make it weird. The means of achieving this were unclear, but brutalist architecture played a significant role.⁶

The term 'brutalism' most likely originates from the French phrase 'béton brut', meaning 'raw concrete'. Although this cannot be proven, it is a widely accepted explanation. The French architect Le Corbusier had a defining influence on this movement, particularly with the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles (1946–52).⁷

Historically, brutalist buildings are closely associated with a utopian and socialist vision of providing affordable, functional housing. Cheap, sturdy concrete was easy to manufacture and process quickly.



These were things that were needed after World War II. As well as housing, brutalist buildings are often public spaces such as town halls, libraries or universities, like the Boston Town Hall or the National Theatre in London.⁸

These unpretentious buildings provide a platform for people to speak, think and learn. However, their massive, rough appearance is often considered ugly and oppressive. This aspect is often used in movies to depict dystopian worlds, often as a threatening symbol of authoritarian power.



Despite the widespread aversion of the masses, some architects embraced the aesthetic potential of brutalism, leading us back to surprising, perhaps shocking architecture and the game CONTROL.

⁶ DevGAMM, 2021

⁷ The Architecture of the 20th Century, 2026

⁸ Park, 2024

For example, the Catholic churches “Christi Auferstehung” and “St. Johannes XXIII” have an unexpected architectural design. The massive grey concrete shapes in a sacred setting are very unusual compared to the Gothic or Baroque cathedrals we are used to. Similar elements appear for the player in CONTROL.

By contrast, brutalist buildings exhibit a high degree of symmetry, giving them a clear and organised appearance. Flat surfaces and walls are accompanied by beams and pillars, forming repetitive rectangular patterns.

Bearing this in mind, the corruption by the Hiss and the destructible blank canvas intensify the disturbing tension that could lead to a startle response.



Church Christi Auferstehung, Köln-Lindenthal, Architect: Gottfried Böhm by Christoph Seelbach



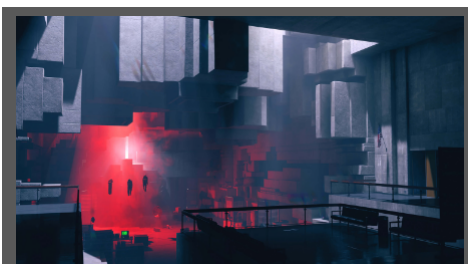
Church Johannes XXIII, Köln, Architect: Heinz Buchmann by Christoph Seelbach



Window of the church Christi Auferstehung, Köln-Lindenthal, Architect: Gottfried Böhm by Christoph Seelbach



Screenshot Archives by Miro Vesterinen, Head of Environment Art at Remedy Entertainment



Screenshot from CONTROL

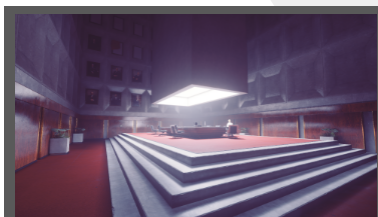


Boston City Hall, Massachusetts, USA - Photo: courtesy Utile, copyright Anton Grass/Esto

Additionally, the use of natural or artificial light can transform simplistic architecture into dramatic artwork, as seen in the Church of Light by the Japanese architect Tadao Ando. The interplay of light and shadow can guide or capture players' attention, much like the composition of a film scene.



Church of the Light, Ibaraki, Japan, Architect Tadao Ando (1989) - Photo by Purple Cloud



Screenshot of Board Room from CONTROL



Screenshot of Director's Office from CONTROL

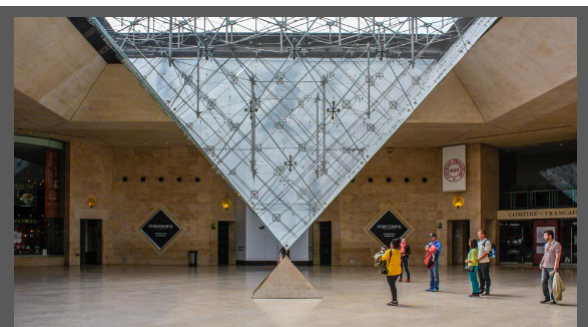


Screenshot Clock Threshold by Miro Vesterinen, Head of Environment Art at Remedy Entertainment

Another explicit reference in the game that challenges cognitive perception is the upside-down pyramid at the Louvre in Paris.



Screenshot of Central Executive from CONTROL



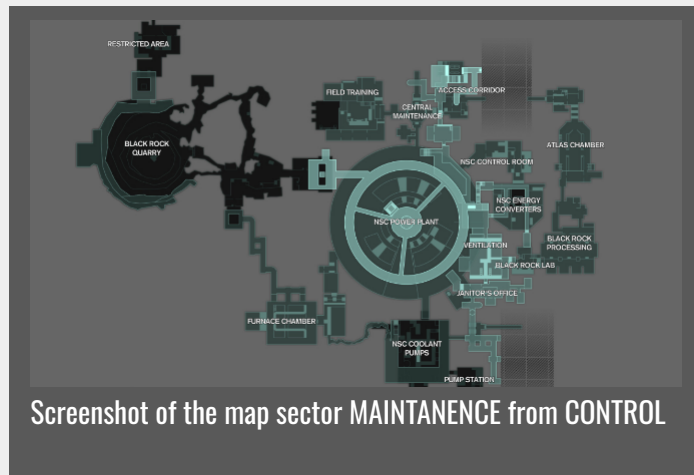
Inverted pyramid in the Carrousel du Louvre

If you look at the map, you will notice patterns of nucleated settlements. This means that houses were built around a focal point, often a church or pub. Then the settlement grows organically from that point onwards.⁹

In *CONTROL*, there are also points of interest with different areas to explore. The office does not have a typical efficient and functional layout.

By navigating through the connecting corridors, the player is forced into a downtime where nothing exciting is happening.

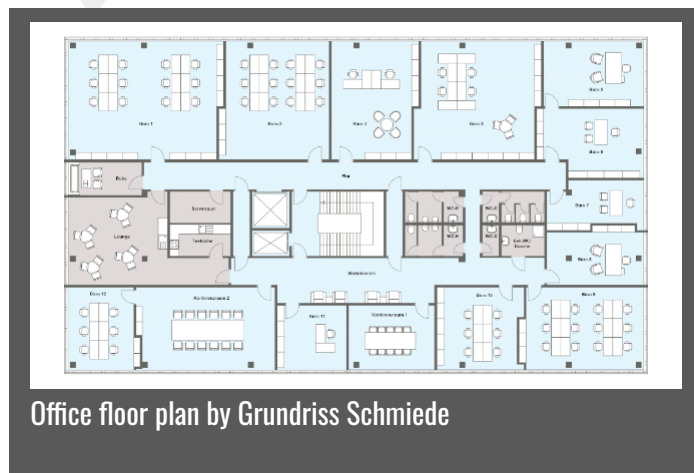
Additionally, the lack of a minimap can cause players to become confused by the simplistic architecture of the branches. Consequently, when the player encounters unexpected architecture, it has a greater impact.



Screenshot of the map sector MAINTENANCE from *CONTROL*



Nucleated settlement at Pepleton. Photo © Historic England



Office floor plan by Grundriss Schmiede

⁹ Research Frameworks, 2026

ARCHITECTURAL JUMP SCARE - MORE THAN A PHRASE?

In short, the architectural jump scare is probably not more than a phrase. At least, that's the case if you think threat and fear are essential for a jump scare. It is difficult to achieve the effect of a cinematic shock only with architecture and without a monster or person appearing suddenly.

Nevertheless, in terms of an automatic, non-cognitive reflex, architecture can startle the player in a surprising way. Understanding how spatial design creates intriguing 'what the fuck' moments for the player can be a powerful experiential tool.

In this sense, the architectural jump scare encourages and rewards the player for exploring and playing. Contrasts play an important role in achieving this stylistically. In *CONTROL*, brutalism seems to be a good choice because raw concrete is so versatile.

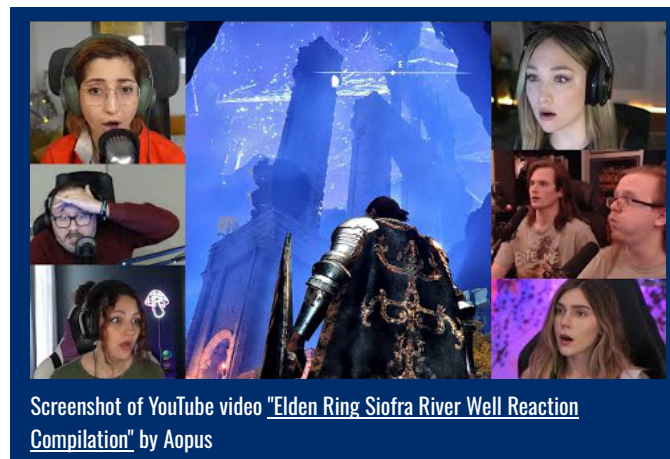
Its massive appearance can sometimes seem to jump out at you, but when used conservatively, it can also fade into the background. It can display structure and order, but it can also challenge with abstract perspectives.

As well as setting the atmosphere, spatial design can determine the timing and attention of the player in order to create startling moments. Surprising architecture requires a similar set-up to a jump scare in films. A gradual build-up of tension in an ordinary passage before the next disruptive appearance increases the startling response.

Another example, from a different game, would be Siofra Well in *ELDEN RING*. This open-world action RPG by FromSoftware features an ordinary-looking well in an otherwise uninteresting area. Players often discover this location by chance. The well contains a lift that takes an unusually long time to descend.

This waiting time is much longer than that for other elevators in the game, making players extremely suspicious and confused. Then, finally, the huge underground city is revealed, catching the player by surprise.¹⁰

As with the weirdness and supernatural elements in *CONTROL*, players get the intriguing feeling that the game is unpredictable and that anything could happen.



¹⁰ Aopus, 2022

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