



Setting the scene

Production design is at the core of the filmmaking process. Production designers utilize imagination and technique, illusion and reality, to enhance the script and the director's vision by creating images out of ideas and purpose out of images.

By Peter Sobchak

Photos courtesy of Rhombus International, Think Film Company Inc. and Phillip Barker

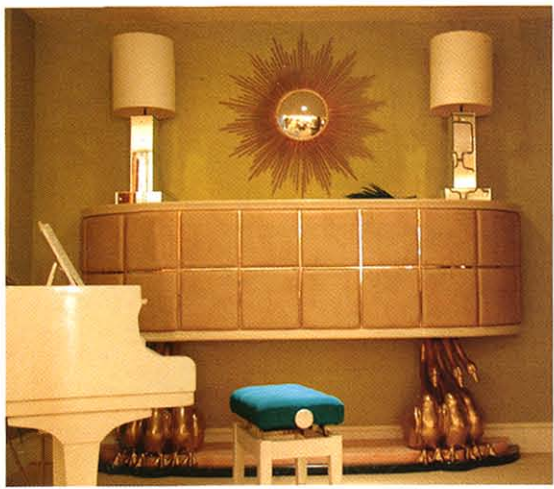
For most movies, the production designer is central to translating the written word into visual metaphors. But although he or she is one of the most important creative members of a film team, with work right up there on the screen for all to see, the job itself is little understood or appreciated by movie-going audiences.

In its broadest definition, a production designer is responsible for the visual “look” of the film. This includes creating a colour palette, establishing architectural and period details, selecting locations, designing and decorating sets, coordinating costumes, make-up and hair styles into a cohesive element, and collaborating with the director and cinematographer to define how the film should be conceived and photographed.

In the heyday of the Hollywood studio system era, each studio established a highly organized art department, headed by an art director, who maintained a consistent look for each of the studio's films, and in the process created some of the most memorable iconography in cinematic history. It wasn't until 1939 when producer David O. Selznick gave the title of “production designer” to William Cameron Menzies for his work on *Gone With The Wind* that the term came into use.

Until then, an art director was primarily responsible for the creation of sets. However Selznick recognized that Menzies did much more than just design the sets, he created a blueprint for shooting the picture by storyboarding the entire film. As Vincent LoBrutto says in his book *By Design*, “His detailed work incorporated colour and style, structured each scene, and encompassed the framing, composition and camera movement for each shot in the film. Menzies' contribution helped expand the function of the art director beyond the creation of sets and scenery to responsibility for the entire visualization of a motion picture.”

Three recent Canadian films exemplify the importance of quality production design, illustrating some of the key issues production designers must face.



This page and opposite_ Interior and exterior sets for the Atom Egoyan film *Where the Truth Lies*.



Where the Truth Lies

When an ambitious reporter (Alison Lohman) in the 1970s investigates the mysterious circumstances surrounding the dissolution of an immensely popular comedy duo (Kevin Bacon and Colin Firth) 15 years earlier, the tale becomes one of treachery, lust and buried secrets. Presenting this story was a massive undertaking for director Atom Egoyan and his production team, including production designer Phillip Barker.

The script called for major set pieces in two distinct time-periods and in diverse locations, including a network studio, a chic nightclub, a lavish mob-run casino and the presidential suite of a luxury hotel. Barker drew inspiration from several sources, particularly the work of architect Morris Lapidus, who designed such 1950s landmarks as Miami's Fountainbleu Hotel and the Eden Roc.

At London's Shepperton Studios, Barker built, as the setting for a tragic one-night stand, an extravagant, 3,000-square-foot presidential suite set, in the Miami Modern style of organic and curvilinear lines, split-level floors, hidden lighting, and windows overlooking a 180-foot painting of the ocean and the Fountainbleu. The ultra-swank set was decorated in pristine beige-on-beige tones, meant to intensify the sordid nature of the events to occur there. "We designed and built 90 per cent of the furniture in that suite ourselves because it couldn't be found anywhere," recalls Barker.

"Lapidus came out of window display and set design, and I thought his style would be appropriate for the film," observes Barker. "[Lapidus] felt that he could take average Americans and make them live like movie stars. It's a style that's all about façade, not substance, and that's what the film is about too – the whole entertainment industry and the fallacies we have about Hollywood."

In describing the look of these scenes, Barker says, "it's flamboyant, over the top, playful. There's no symmetry, no straight lines, and it's the perfect sort of happy playground in which all these horrible things can occur."

Another major location for scenes set in the 1970s was American architect Peter Koenig's iconic Stahl House (Case Study #22), a powerfully minimalist L-shaped glass and steel box built in 1960 on a cliff in the Hollywood Hills and boasting a 270-degree view over Los Angeles.

Used in the film, both for location shooting and partially recreated in a studio as the house of Colin Firth's character in the '70s, the Stahl House was a perfect environment to highlight conflicting facets of the character. "He's a proud Englishman with a lot to hide, who wants the world to think he has nothing to hide," says Barker. "All this glass conveys an open attitude, which just magnifies the fact that he still possesses horrible secrets."

Childstar

"Sixty sets in 28 days, yes, this is a locations-driven show," says production designer John Dondertman about the film, written, directed and starring Canadian indie-film favourite Don McKellar. *Childstar* explores the relationship between American sitcom icon Taylor Brandon Burns (Mark Rendall), an annoying child whose star is falling and who is sent to shoot an action-comedy film in Toronto, and his driver Rick (McKellar) who takes the young actor under his wing.

"I certainly feel that it's important for a film to have a 'look,' especially in this market where a distinctive look can differentiate you from other movies," says McKellar. "Design-wise, I feel that indie films in particular can benefit from trying to do different things. But what's in vogue right now, especially in indie films, is a hyper-naturalism, almost 'no design' concept. I think audiences are growing weary of it, at least I am."

"We had two distinct looks: Taylor's world, which was impersonal, and Rick's world, which was grittier," says Dondertman. "For Taylor's environment, it was important to convey that he's a kid in an adult world, he's alone and it's very impersonal." Everything had to contribute to his alienation, so the team used techniques like bold fields of primary colours con-